

This morning's snap decision to go to Lekir gumpa is made on discovering that the bus only goes on two days of the week and this is one of them – a Monday. After breakfast I foot it to the open-air bus station which, as I have anticipated, is quite chaotic. After some confusion I manage to buy a ticket. I receive a handful of sweets along with my change, no doubt because the seller does not have enough small coins. I find the bus and my seat, number one. This means sitting beside an unresponsive French couple who pay no attention to anyone. As I know that there will be a considerable wait, I take out my guide book and read it. A young Ladakhi man then begins to speak to me. He wears Western dress and speaks English exceptionally well. It turns out that he works for the government.

After a couple of false starts, the bus finally sets off, a good half hour late. Fortunately, as there are very few people on board, the journey is comfortable. The French couple and I are the only foreigners. There are a number of stops to pick up more people or collect crates of fruit and other produce. One Ladakhi couple has a sweet little daughter with huge brown eyes; she and I pass the time playing a game of peeping and making faces at one another.

Slowly we leave the ugly military environs of Leh and head westwards, back towards Kashmir. We drive through the wide, stark Indus valley, flanked on both sides by sandy-coloured jagged mountains, many of them topped with puffy white clouds. Above is the usual expanse of dark, clear blue sky. The more I see of this strange, bleak topography, the more fascinating it seems to become. Although I am conscious of being a tourist, I feel that I am settling into this environment and beginning to feel quite comfortable in it. I am now relishing the experience of using local transport and rubbing shoulders with the Ladakhis. Realizing that the bright sunshine, the blue skies and the heat are all contributing to my feeling of wellbeing, I wonder what it must be like living here during the winter, when the temperature plummets and the region is cut off, for the road to Leh can be closed for up to seven months. How, I wonder, do the people survive and live in their simple houses in such freezing conditions? This is another reminder of how pampered we are – by comparison – in the West.

The journey passes agreeably, though it is slow. At times we travel at a snail's pace as the engine roars and the old bus inches its way up what seems to be a very slight gradient. It takes us some time to leave the arid region around Leh and enter more rustic surroundings, where we begin to see villages, fields, cultivated valleys and fine scenery. At Nimmu, crates of fruit are taken on board, and some delicious fresh apricots are passed around.

By now I have moved to the very front of the bus, where I sit on a hard seat and enjoy a superb view from the front window. We now wind our way around hills and through valleys along a zigzag road, then stop at the next village, Basgo, where I catch a glimpse of an old, ruined gumpa.

After this we approach another spot of green in the otherwise sandy-coloured landscape: this is Saspul. Here we turn right and continue the journey along a dirt track that skirts the mountains and climbs towards a hill. On top of it is Lekir gumpa, looking just like (as my guidebook says) the Potala palace in Lhasa. Behind it, and peeping over the top, are snow-clad mountains in the distance.

After zigzagging our way upwards, we finally reach the monastery. Before we have time to disembark, a large group of monks, all shouting and laughing, descend on the bus, and so I am greeted by a sea of red robes and bare arms. I decide to check the time of departure for the return journey (officially 3.30 p.m.) and, much to my horror, am told by the conductor that he will wait for only one hour before driving back to Leh. This means that I will have to make do with a flying visit, for there will not be another bus until Thursday. Hitching a lift from here could be impossible as I have seen little or no traffic.



*Lekir gumpa*

Annoyed, I set off to see the gumpa. As it is now about one o'clock, I will have to skip lunch. As I climb a stone staircase, some monks shout directions from above. Up I go and find myself in the main courtyard and at the entrance of the *dukhang*. I pay for a ticket and am taken on a guided tour of the assembly hall, along with some other tourists, by a monk. According to my guide book, this is one of the most interesting gompas in Ladakh. The original buildings had been constructed some nine hundred years previously; there are now more modern additions. The *dukhang* contains the usual rows of seats for the monks, a seat for the Dalai Lama, seats for his cousins, and a seat for the Rinpoche or abbot. Here the monks of the Yellow Hat sect are called to prayer by the beating of a wooden beam. The monastery also houses a school for young recruits.

I need not have worried; because the gumpa is small, it does not take too long to see everything. The rooms, although brightly painted and elaborately decorated, are dark and dingy. I go up to the roof and come down to see the monks eating their lunch. They are being well fed with generous helpings of rice and vegetables – I could

do with some of their food! A Belgian chap and I are offered a cup of *solja*. I am grateful for some sustenance and gulp down the salty buttered tea. The Belgian, a tall chap with a beard, round spectacles and a bagful of photographic equipment, is amused at how his companion, a monk, has been following him around for a week. This monk, who is obviously familiar with the gompas, now shows us around. We duly admire a small but cosy meditation room and return to the roof so see a new room under construction. The workers are seated on the floor, eating lunch. I tell the monk that I have to return to the bus, thank him and shake hands.



*Monks at lunch, Lekir gumpa*

Just as I leave, the monk calls me back. He then leads the Belgian and me all round the place – neither of us can understand why. I am becoming anxious about the time, as I do not want to be stranded here. We are finally brought to a small room and requested to sit on the raised mats. The monk gives us to understand that we should eat something. The Belgian accepts but I point to my watch and say, ‘bus’. At last the monk understands. He, in fact, has to return to Leh also and therefore, as I prepare to leave, he wishes the Belgian goodbye. Together we run down to the bus. Apparently there would have been no problem regarding food and accommodation had I chosen to stay in the monastery; I would have loved to have done so if I had had the time, but my main concern was that transport from this out-of-the-way part of Ladakh could be a problem.

By now all the monks, the bus driver and conductor are waiting for us; as soon as we appear, everyone piles in. I manage to get to the front of the bus again, though this time squeezed between a young monk and the Belgian lad’s kind friend. It seems that the latter has no idea of time. I wonder if I had accepted his invitation to eat

something, would the bus have left without me? Fortunately the driver has been kind enough to wait for me.

The engine roars into life and off we go. The monks behave like schoolboys on a day's outing: excited, they talk and laugh loudly. An earthy bunch of men, they are extremely good humoured. They are of all ages, shapes and sizes, and all of them are grinning. They playfully push and shove each other like children.

Along the dusty road we bump. We stop again at Basgo, where some local people board the bus. Among them is an elderly lady in traditional dress and wearing a tall *perak* on her head. She makes a great show of greeting the monks in a most respectful manner and then, on discovering me, feels the new growth on my face and comments on it in her own language, which (of course) I cannot understand. Soon, more apricots are produced and handed around; I accept several, which I eat hungrily. I do not dare to take any food from my bag, as I have nothing to spare for my companions.

At Nimmu there is cause for mirth when the local wit – or fool – jumps on the bus. This is a wizened old man with only a couple of teeth, who begins joking with the monks. The monks all roar with laughter and give the old fellow as good as they get. While this goes on, more crates are loaded. At last, having managed to cadge a cigarette from the driver, the old fellow roars out a few more incomprehensible remarks – much to everyone's amusement – and is gone.

On we go. At last, as the bus heats up and a stench of diesel begins to fill the air, the monks begin to nod off, one by one. One chubby individual mouths prayers and fingers his beads, but soon falls asleep. I surmise that these monks are travelling in order to see the Dalai Lama, who, I have learned, will arrive in Leh in three days' time for some special ceremonies. With so many people squeezed into the old bus, it has now become uncomfortable, and the journey becomes tedious. When we eventually arrive in Leh, I wish the kind monk goodbye.

Although I am by now badly in need of a good wash after the journey, I decide to go with an Australian couple from the guesthouse to the Potala Restaurant near the polo ground for something to eat. I order a 'vegetable cutlet', which is quite tasty, and a glass of jasmine tea. This will keep me going until dinner time. There is an excellent view of the old palace from the window.

I finally find my way back to the guesthouse and have a welcome shower. Dinner this evening consists of dumplings (*momo*) and soup, followed by a pear that one of the Australian girls gives me. As she and her companions are talking non-stop, both loudly and excitedly, I am glad to learn that they will leave early tomorrow morning. Their language is foul and their grammar is appalling. I wonder what the two quiet, refined German girls from the Black Forest region think of them.

Finally I excuse myself and retire to bed. Undoubtedly the noisy Australians are keeping up our Ladakhi hosts, who, as I have discovered, have to make do with sleeping in the kitchen. They, of course, are too polite to order their rowdy guests to bed.

This morning I hear the Australians leaving early. When I go down for breakfast, the lady (who had gone to bed late and risen early) is understandably very sleepy. I feel sorry for her.

Today I have decided to go to Shey and Thikse gompas. As the two German girls, Bernadette and Rosemarie, are about to do the same, we plan to go together. I have been finding their company very agreeable. Bernadette, who teaches in a kindergarten, had been in Ladakh ten years previously and has noticed great changes since then. Rosemarie is an artist.

When we buy our tickets to Shey at the bus station, I am once again given sweets in lieu of change. We clamber aboard another boneshaker; soon it is packed. Some ravishingly beautiful girls, presumably sisters, join us, and the youngest sits beside me, sandwiched between a chubby monk and myself. The young ladies are fashionably dressed in the best of modern European clothes, have stylish hairdos and manicured, painted fingernails. I am dazzled by their beauty and carriage; they can easily be mistaken for Japanese girls. They obviously come from a wealthy or influential family. Bernadette has said that all the women here are beautiful. She is right, though some are really ravishing. I cannot help but notice the intimate physical contact between these sisters on the bus; now and then they hold hands or embrace each other. Like the Indian men whom I have seen embracing one another both here and in Kashmir, there seems to be nothing remarkable about this behaviour.

As we drive past the Tibetan refugee camp at Choglamsar, I look across to what appears to be a flat wall of mountains. Again, I find it strange the way they seem to lack depth. I now discover that a 'flat' valley that seems to slope upwards, and which is visible from the guesthouse, is the village of Stok, where we had begun our trek. I wonder if this curious sloping effect is also an optical illusion and conclude that it probably is.



*Shey gompa*

We soon reach Shey and tumble out of the old bus. I find myself in a picturesque spot, beside what looks like flooded land and a small group of hills, on which are situated the small tumbledown palace, fortress and gompa. Shey was once the

capital of the region; it had been founded in the tenth century and the palace had been built some five hundred and fifty years previously. It is now famous for its oracle, a resident layman who, while in a trance, prophesies the future.

I walk back a little of the way that we have come in order to look at the nearby village and scenery. My curiosity satisfied, I begin to climb up the steep path to the gumpa. Now out of condition, I am soon hot and out of breath. As the door of the lower *dukhang* is open, I go in with some tourists and look around in the gloom at the altar, *thangkas* and old books. The hall is deliciously cool. I then leave and climb up some rough steps to the ruined fortress, where a grand panoramic view of the Indus valley can be seen. It is very impressive; far below I can see fields, poplar trees, winding paths, an occasional stone house and, of course, the mighty mountains beyond. It is possible to climb higher, but I decide not to bother.



*The gumpa at Shey and the view from the top*



*The view from Shey*

Instead, I make my way down and join a group of tourists who are about to be shown into the upper storey of the *dukhang*, where a famous statue of the Buddha, once the largest in Ladakh, can be seen. It certainly is impressive. Made of gilded copper sheets, it stands twelve metres tall. The most important moment of the construction had been when the eyes were painted and the statue could 'see'. Inside the figure, sacrificial offerings, such as grains of corn, small stones or jewels, would have been placed. As the upper storey contains a gallery, only the massive head and shoulders are visible.

I stay for a while, wander up to the roof to enjoy another spectacular view, and then poke around the rest of the crumbling structure. I finally go down to the road and begin my walk to Thikse gompa, which is not far away. I see some people setting off along a path that looks like a short cut, and having checked with a young boy, I follow them. The path leads to a delightful village. As most of the way is shaded by trees, it is pleasantly cool. Although I tend to lose the path and the people ahead, I do not mind as I have plenty of time on my hands. The villagers smile and salute me with cries of '*Jullay!*' At one stage, a little girl pushes a large radish into my hand. The path I am following turns out to be a detour rather than a short cut, but it is well worth exploring. It feels wonderful to get lost in such a peaceful, unspoilt stretch of countryside; streams gush across the path here and there, and the only sounds are the rushing of the water and distant voices within the houses. Whenever in doubt, I ask the way, and am pointed towards Thikse by the villagers. I soon discover that they are guiding me back to the main road.

No matter – I can now see Thikse straight ahead. As I approach the monastery from behind, I can hear the long trumpets calling the monks to prayer. I quicken my step and arrive at the main entrance, breathless. I pay ten rupees and head straight for the *dukhang*, where I find the hall full of monks and onlookers. The monks have just begun chanting. Behaving unashamedly like a tourist, I get my camera ready and decide to use the flash, even though I know that this will mean disturbing the monks.

I am ready for the start of the music, which comes in short, raucous bursts, complete with low, ominous groans from the *dongchen* or long trumpets. Many of the tourists present are astonished at the cacophony that punctuates the low, hypnotic chanting.



*Thikse gompa and monks on the roof*

Eventually most of the tourists leave and so I am free to move about with my camera. As I lean over to take a shot, a young monk beckons me to sit beside him. He is fascinated by my camera and asks me if he can use it. As he seems to know how to operate it, I hand it to him. He now faces the challenge of operating it without being spotted by a monk who is prowling around, watching everyone. Any time he appears, the monk quickly hides the camera under his robes and resumes his pious mumblings. A moment later he has it out again and is adjusting the focus. The situation is quite comical, and a couple of nearby onlookers are shaking with laughter.



*Dukhang, Thikse*

At last, flash goes the camera; the young monk quickly hands it back to me and thanks me profusely. It turns out that the flash is what he is really interested in. He has a camera but no flash unit. Do I have a second one? Can I sell him mine? I tell him how much I have paid for my flash and regret that I cannot part with it.

This rather worldly young man is quite friendly and speaks English excellently. From now on he pays no heed to the chanting and proceeds to chat to me about this and that. He, like all his fellow Yellow Hat monks, is celibate and has strong views on morals and marriage. He tells me that some female tourist once shocked him by a tactless, indecent remark that she had made. He is curious about two English words that are lacking in his vocabulary: a woman of the streets and the female equivalent of 'penice' (as he spells it). Although I feel rather uncomfortable about enlightening a monk on such delicate matters, I write the words 'prostitute' and 'vagina' on a piece of paper and make him pronounce the two words correctly. He seems genuinely grateful for my help. I suspect that he is just human at heart and, like so many of the other monks, enjoys behaving like a naughty schoolboy.

The *solja* now arrives and a little is poured into the monk's bowl. Taking a plastic bag from under his robes, he empties some *tsampa* into the salted butter tea and kneads it into a lump of soft dough. He passes me some, which I eat. It is quite palatable, albeit rather dry. It tastes a little like unsweetened marzipan and is slightly warm from the tea and the monk's hands.

Shortly afterwards he excuses himself and leaves. I stay until the ceremony has finished, then wander outside. Down in the yard I see a TV camera crew shooting pictures. Suddenly two yellow-hatted shawm players and a couple of young trumpeters set themselves up in front of the *dukhang* to be filmed. It is an excellent opportunity for us tourists, and I take the opportunity to snap several photos.

I then discover that another ceremony has begun in the courtyard. A group of monks, some playing percussion instruments, are seated on the ground, dressed in unusual and colourful costumes. The trumpet and shawm players come down and sit in a corner, in the shade. Ranged on a low table are plates containing various grains. A fire is lit before a monk of some importance (possibly a Rinpoche), who regulates it.

The young monk who had shown such an interest in my camera now fetches the plates of grain, one by one, and hands them to the head monk, who throws small portions into the fire and signals for some music. Once again the trumpets moan, the shawms wail and the drums are beaten. In between times, the elaborately-clad monks chant prayers from sacred books. The object of all this, the young monk explains, is to offer food to the gods, as we on earth have ample for our needs. The different grains symbolically represent all earthly foods.



*Religious ceremony, Thikse*

As the ritual lasts a long time and becomes repetitive, I go off to explore the rest of the gompa, which, I have read, is about five hundred years old and houses some one hundred Gelugpa monks. It has a particularly fine library of hand-painted manuscripts and block-printed books. After I have climbed up to the various roofs and wandered around, I go into a new chapel and sit down to admire the fifteen-metre high statue of the Buddha. Being new, all the colours are brighter and gaudier than normal. No doubt these strong colours, which I have noticed are also used in traditional costumes, are chosen as a deliberate contrast to the muted greys and browns of the surrounding landscape.

As the bus is due to leave soon for Leh, I now wish the young monk goodbye and descend at a leisurely pace to the village beneath the monastery. In the distance I see a bus arrive and leave, but find some French people still waiting. The bus had been too full; there will be another 'in fifteen minutes'. We sit in the shade, in sight of the gompa, for a good half hour. I notice some filthy urchins playing with stones in the middle of the dusty road, and running to one side whenever a vehicle passes. As soon as it has passed, they scream, laugh and resume their game. These children do not need elaborate toys to keep themselves amused.

At last a bus arrives. We squeeze in, sit down, and off we bump. I recognize some of the people who were on the bus this morning. As usual, there are plenty of stops, shouts and cheers. Sandwiched between a couple of people on the front seat, I am

glad to surrender it to a mother and child. I am far happier to get out altogether when we finally arrive at Leh.

Hot, tired and dirty, I trudge back to the guesthouse. I am hungry, as once again I have gone without lunch. In the evening we eat generous portions of fried rice and vegetables, washed down with a pot of '*milik* tea' (as they pronounce it here). Afterwards, the children give me some fresh apricots.

This morning I take an early bus, driven by a burly Sikh, to the village of Phyang. Amazingly, the bus leaves on time. It follows the same route that we had taken yesterday morning, but leaves the main road to Srinagar at Spitok, where we turn right and travel along a straight road towards a patch of green tucked between the barren mountains. We stop within sight of the gompa but quite out in the middle of nowhere. I follow a group of locals along a path that serves as a short cut to the monastery. Behind me are some Indian teachers who are on their way to the local school. They show me the way to the gompa and I leave them.



*Phyang village*

At first the place looks a little disappointing, but I decide to make the best of it. Hearing the sound of children singing in the school nearby, I decide that it might be best to explore the village now, while it is still cool.

At the school, I peep in the window, much to the children's amusement. However, I discover that some young boys run away from me here – a possible sign that foreigners rarely frequent this village.

Much to my surprise, Phyang turns out to be the prettiest village I have visited so far. Two young boys who are walking home from school (why, I cannot discover) serve as guides and I follow them along a rough, shaded path lined by trees. Locals smile at me from windows and gardens and wish me '*Jullay!*' The path seems to go on forever, slowly climbing upwards. On my left are weather-beaten old houses, on my right the trees, and beyond them fields. Now and then I glimpse a snow-topped

mountain through gaps in the trees. Every so often we cross a stream and pass a *chörten* or a *mani* wall.

When one of the boys stops for a rest, I decide to return to the gompa. Slowly I make my way back, stopping frequently to admire the view. I pause at a particularly picturesque spot, where I can see a small garden bright with poppies and other flowers, an old stone house and, in the distance, a fine view overlooking the valley, the surrounding majestic mountains, and the gompa perched on its hill.

Back at the school, the young students are coming out and leaving for home, even though it is well before midday. I am greeted with a chorus of '*jullay!*', 'hello', 'one pen', 'one bon-bon', and 'one photo'.

I climb up to the gompa, which houses about fifty Red Hat monks. I look around and meet a monk with a group of women who are wearing traditional tall hats. He opens the door of a small assembly room and we go inside. I pay him for a ticket and remove my shoes. The Ladakhi women make a quick prayerful circuit of the hall while I relax. I am then taken to a small room, full of fearsome statues of deities and demons with blue faces and human skulls in their hair, dancing masks (also fearsome) and a collection of old shields, spears and armoury. This is the gompa's small museum of weaponry. The room is said to be nine hundred years old.

Finally I am conducted to the main 650-year-old assembly hall, where I sit on one of the prayer-mats and then reverently walk around, examining the wall paintings, *thangkas* and statues. I notice that there are several ornate embroidered canopies hanging from the ceiling. Rolled up and also hanging just beneath the ceilings are huge *thangkas* – I have noticed this method of storing them in some of the other gompas.

Having looked around, I thank the monk and he locks the door. As there is nobody about, I conclude that the monks must have journeyed to Leh in order to see the Dalai Lama tomorrow. I wander around the old buildings and stop briefly to listen to some young monks chanting in what I suppose must be the monastery school. It sounds as though they are learning to memorize their sacred scriptures. The musical scale they are using for this unusual sing-song style of chanting sounds very odd. I then pause to watch a man making mud bricks on the roof of his house. The technique, although simple, is very effective; in a short time the bricks will dry and become hard under the scorching sun.

As I pick my way through the monastic village that clings to the hill beneath the gompa, I meet some young tourists who inform me that the local restaurant is closed. I am annoyed to hear this, as I have planned to eat here. It looks like another long wait for the bus without lunch. I now meet a Japanese lad who is in the same predicament as I am. He suggests that we walk to the main road and hitch a lift back to Leh. Sharing dried apricots, water, sweets and peanuts, we set off down the long, straight road, chatting as we go. It turns out that my new companion is a biology teacher from Kyoto. He is also interested in classical music and plays the 'biorin' in an orchestra. I have to think about this; what he means is the 'violin'.

We finally reach the main road to Leh an hour later and, after a long wait, are hauled up into a 'public carrier' – a big lorry full of people – by a crowd of laughing Ladakhis, who strive to make room for us. This is not easy, as the vehicle is already packed. A woman has just vomited in one corner and people are avoiding the spot. All the youngsters have clambered up the sides and are standing on a ledge, holding

on to and looking over the top. Osuke, my Japanese companion, holds on to one side and I hold on to him as the lorry bumps and sways violently. The locals, who are obviously used to this crazy form of transport, are good natured and cheer when we pass other lorries full of people.

We stop for a considerable time at a military checkpoint, during which some earth is thrown over the vomit, and we finally set off again – with another cheer. The journey, which is more of an endurance test, seems never-ending, but at last we reach Leh. By now the floor of the lorry is littered with apricot stones (they have been doing the rounds again), and curds have leaked out of a container. This does not seem to bother the Ladakhis in the slightest – they just continue to laugh. We clamber down from the back of the lorry feeling tired, hot, dirty and hungry.

Osuke suggests that we go to 'his' restaurant, the Chospa, and so I agree. According to him it is very clean, which indeed it is, for it is part of a good tourist hotel. We even have the luxury of being able to wash our hands before eating. Despite the lateness of the hour, we manage to order a meal of fried rice, egg and vegetables, accompanied by several cups of tea.

Back at the guesthouse, Niall offers me a couple of deliciously sweet plums; I eat one and save the other for later. I spruce myself up and, in the evening, go down for dinner, which is served late. Another couple of German girls have arrived, one of whom speaks English excellently and chats to me. This evening's meal is *skyu*; the young girl piles a huge helping of the pasta and vegetables on to my plate. She probably thinks that I am in need of a good feed – which I certainly am. Because of the heat, the walking, the skipped lunches and my low-protein diet, I undoubtedly have lost weight; now and then I have been feeling slightly lightheaded.