

There is great excitement in the guesthouse early this morning because of the Dalai Lama's imminent arrival. Some relatives of the owners have arrived yesterday for the great occasion. When ready, Niall, the two German girls and I follow the family members into town.



Main bazaar, Leh

Although the main bazaar is already full of people who line the street, there is room to move around and see what is happening. There are long lines of Yellow and Red Hat monks with their drums and musical instruments at the ready, and all the local women are dressed in their finery. Many of the costumes, some made of high quality Chinese brocade, are very colourful and ornate. Most of the women wear the traditional *perak*, and others have elaborate headgear that includes rows of turquoise. There are people from other regions, such as Zaskar, with even more exotic costumes and features; there are well-scrubbed children and babies in their best clothes, bunches of brightly-coloured flowers, and across the street and over shop doorways hang banners of all colours bearing messages of goodwill, most of them in English; the word 'WEL COME' features in many of them. There is great hustle and bustle, together with a growing feeling of anticipation.

It is now just a matter of waiting. It has been said that the Dalai Lama will arrive at eight, though it later transpires that he will be arriving at the airport at eight – an entirely different matter altogether. Nothing daunted, everybody stays put and waits patiently. The Kashmiri officials stride up and down, making sure that people stay on

their own side of the street and keep the approach free. I take the opportunity to snap some photographs of the local people, using my zoom lens. Most of them are sitting on the edge of the pavement, talking animatedly.



Waiting for the Dalai Lama, main bazaar, Leh

Suddenly the monks pick up their instruments and the air is filled with an ear-splitting cacophony of shawms, trumpets, cymbals and drums. Everyone cranes forward and looks down the street, but nothing happens. Gradually the racket subsides – it has been a false alarm.

Later there is another burst of excitement and more music, but again nothing happens. Then, shortly after nine o'clock, jeeps appear and drive past, followed by

motorbikes, then men on horseback. Following this comes a procession of children, women and men, all beautifully attired and marching at a furious pace.

When another jeep whizzes by, I suddenly catch a fleeting glimpse of a figure in red, with spectacles, on the other side, next to the driver. I conclude that this must be the Dalai Lama. So that's it! I am disappointed, for I expected him to be driven slowly in an open vehicle, like the Pope. Very few of his followers will have seen him.

When everyone surges forward in pursuit of the jeep, I go with them in the hope of seeing more. I run a good distance along the road until we pass a large circular pond and stop in front of an official building. By now the Dalai Lama has gone indoors and is well out of sight.

I hang around for a while until the police tell us to be off, then wander back to the town centre. I find a crowd of people at the gateway of the Jokhang gompas, where music can be heard within. I join the mad scramble to get inside, and manage to do so successfully. The place is packed with people, and a group of Ladakhi women, all wearing elaborate *peraks*, are dancing slowly to the drum and shawm music. It is not easy to see what is happening, as all the best seats have been taken. Eventually a man kindly pulls me up to the top of a wall. I am now able to make my way behind the people and find a spot where I can see clearly. A long line of women slowly circle round a central flagpole, taking tiny steps and making small hand gestures. As there are dozens of drummers and shawm players, the music is louder and more raucous than ever.

The performance goes on for a while and finally peters out. An official thanks everyone and the crowd begins to leave. I wait until there is less of a crush at the gate and finally make my way into the street. I amble around until lunchtime, just watching the people and soaking up the festive atmosphere.

I now go in search of something to eat. As the Tibetan Restaurant is closed, I walk to the Potala Restaurant, where I find a table. I eat a hearty helping of fried rice with mutton and vegetables – meat at last! – washed down with tea and followed by a huge, filling pancake topped with slices of banana. As this is the first decent lunch that I have eaten during the last few days, I feel much better afterwards. I need to eat well from now on, in preparation for the next trek.

Afterwards I look at some Tibetan trinkets on sale and then return to the guesthouse, where I set about washing my sleeping sheet and some clothes. It is a long, tedious procedure, but at last I get it all done. I then return to my diary and finally bring it up to date. New guests arrive: some young men from Denmark and a girl from Sheffield. I chat to them while they smoke some evil-smelling concoction.

Dinner is served early this evening in a packed kitchen. We dine on noodles and vegetables; once again, the young girl piles a mountain of leftovers on to my plate.

By now, an Australian couple have arrived; as they have been in China and Tibet the previous year, they tell us about their experiences. Later they join the Danish lads for a joint of cannabis. I wonder what our tolerant hosts think about this. Their relatives later join us to watch television; together we watch a news bulletin in English – a very amateurish production. I finally excuse myself and retire to bed.

Up late for an unhurried breakfast and chat with the German girls, Bernadette and Sylvia. Bernadette has been helping the lady of the house bake the delicious Ladakhi bread.

As the second trekking group is arriving today, I need to make contact with the guide. I am informed at the Hotel Ibex that the group is expected soon after midday. I lunch at the Tibetan Restaurant and when I return to the hotel, I discover that the group has indeed arrived but their Indian guide has left. I introduce myself to a small group of just eight English people. As we talk about our experiences, I discover that they have no group leader and, without the guide, they do not know exactly what to expect. I am told that he will call to the hotel between six and seven this evening.

I leave after a while and saunter to the library: a dark and dreary building containing mostly obscure tomes on Indian history. Most of the publications are out of date. However, there are a few surprises: Shakespeare, some classic English novels, and two volumes of James Boswell's letters. I wander back to the hotel, where I am told that there has been no sign of the guide and, as there is little else to do, I walk back to the guesthouse and read for a while. At six I return to the hotel, where I meet the two German girls, have a drink with them, and wait until well after seven, but again there is no sign of the elusive guide. I want to know if I have been booked into the hotel or not. The staff do not give away much information; they merely tell me that four rooms have been booked. It seems as though that excludes me.

My delightful German companions and I walk back to the guesthouse, where we dine on dumplings and soup. Niall does not join us as he has been ill in bed with a tummy upset. I order some simple food for him. When the others begin smoking (just cigarettes this evening, as far as I can tell), I retire to bed. It has been good to have a lazy day.

As the new group are to go on a tour of Shey, Thikse and Hemis gompas this morning and I want to catch the guide before they leave, I hurry to the hotel directly after breakfast. I find the group at their breakfast and accept a cup of tea. There are two jeep taxis outside – but still no sign of the guide. I think that this is in very bad form, for this is the second time that he has not shown up. As nobody appears by 8.30 a.m. and as it is time to go, the group beg me to come with them and act as their guide, as they know that I have already visited these monasteries. Ever since I had met them yesterday, they had looked up to me as their tour leader, and had fired a barrage of questions at me. Naturally, without any type of guide and being here for the very first time, they needed advice.

Feeling sorry for them, I decide to postpone what I have been planning to do, and join them. We pile into the two jeeps – one is driven by a surly Indian and the other by a young Ladakhi – and set off, bumping so violently that we are in danger of banging our heads off the metal struts on the roof. In the other jeep, the slogan, 'Oh. GOD HELP US' has been painted on the dashboard. Very appropriate.

Soon we arrive at Shey, now festooned with banners welcoming the Dalai Lama, and climb up to the palace and monastery. Having told everyone about the famous statue of the Buddha, I am disgusted to learn that the monk in charge has locked up the place and has gone off to pray. I try to find somebody else, but to no avail. All I can do is lead the group up to the fortress to admire the view and to show them around the rest of the monastery.

We go down and drift over towards another little gompa just up the road, where we can hear music. A festival is in progress, with people in costume. When we arrive,

some ladies, gorgeously attired in their colourful dresses and *peraks*, are performing one of the slow-moving dances to the usual brash accompaniment of drums and shawms. As the new group is fascinated by this unexpected treat, I encourage them to watch and take photographs.

However, as our bored taxi drivers are anxious to leave, I round everybody up and off we whizz to Thikse. I had been trying to delay things so that we might arrive by eleven, in time to see the monks at prayer. We arrive half an hour earlier and are told by the impatient Indian driver to take a quick look around and be back by eleven. The members of the group curse him, as they have been given to understand that this would be a day tour. At this rate, we will be back by lunchtime.



Buddha statue, Thikse

I lead the group inside and, to save time, buy nine tickets from the monk who decides that I must be the tour leader. We first look at the new temple and its large statue of the Buddha – bigger than the one at Shey – and move to the assembly hall. Somebody has discovered that as the head monk is not there, there will be no prayers today. Another fiasco. I show the group around and explain the various points of interest to the best of my abilities. I bring some of the members up to the roof. When we come down, I notice somebody talking to the young monk who had taken so much interest in my camera. He recognizes me immediately and shakes hands with me. Shortly afterwards I am told that either he or one of the other monks had led a lady in our group around by the hand, and that he had tried to put his arm around her waist. These holy men seem to be a rather raunchy bunch!



Monks, Thikse

We manage to see everything in half an hour and are soon back in our taxis, bumping along the rough, dusty roads towards Hemis. We stop at the restaurant and I ask the Indian driver how much time we will have. He gives us a measly one and a quarter hours. I ask if we can stay for lunch and his terse response is, 'No lunch'. This is very unfair as some of the ladies have complained of feeling hungry. As a compromise, we pop in for a quick drink of fizzy lemonade and set off on a tour of the monastery. I lead the way and, once again, buy all the tickets. I show everyone where to go and tell them that the monks are at prayer.

When I have made sure that everyone has found their way up to one of the upper temples that has been opened, I set off with one of the members of the group, David, along the steep path to a higher monastery. I had wanted to go up to it as I had heard about it. We walk quickly, chatting, but have to turn back after a while as time is running out. We come down in about half the time and join the others at the bottom.

We now try to make arrangements to stay here for lunch and visit some other monasteries in the vicinity, but our Indian driver is stubborn and wants to charge too much money for more time. In the end we give up and decide to stick to our original plan: return to Leh and stop at the Tibetan refugee camp at Choglamsar.

We get back into the jeeps and head off. Sheila, a middle-aged lady in the group, had been writing to a young Tibetan boy at the camp, and now has a parcel that she wants to give him. The refugee camp looks a rather grim place on an arid patch of land near Leh. We stop at the handicraft centre and tumble out of the jeeps. While Sheila tries to find somebody to whom she can give the parcel, we look at the carpets that are being made in the weaving hall. Some of them are quite magnificent. The children are good fun and lively; several of them say 'hello' to us in English and solemnly shake hands with us.

At last an official arrives: a pleasant young Tibetan man, who shows us around. It transpires that Sheila's boy is a member of a dance troupe that has left earlier to perform for the Dalai Lama. We are shown the boy's little room, the school, and some other buildings. Wonders have been done with the land: flowers are growing

everywhere and the various buildings are pleasantly designed and well laid out. It is difficult for us to look interested and ask intelligent questions, for it has become very hot now and we have gone without food and drink since early this morning. Finally we are led back to the jeeps, where we thank our guide and wave goodbye to the delightfully cheerful children.

It is four o'clock by the time we return to the hotel. I stop with my new companions for a while and accept a cup of tea 'for being their guide'. I pop around to the tourist centre, where I obtain a reasonably legible bus timetable and jot down the price of taxis. This, hopefully, will help the group plan their day tomorrow. We discuss plans and ideas, and finally I leave them, promising to meet them later for a meal.

On my own again, I decide to do some souvenir shopping at last and go to a stall in the Tibetan market. I speak with a lady and, after some friendly bargaining, buy several presents for friends and family at home. The lady assures me that she has sold me what I had wanted at 'good' prices. Happy with my purchases, I march back to the guesthouse.

I rejoin the group in the evening at the hotel and, as the Dreamland Restaurant is full, I lead them round to the Potala Hill Top Restaurant, where I succeed in obtaining the large room. At first it looks as if we are about to have a candlelit supper, but the lights are switched on. We then get down to the serious – and complicated – business of ordering food. We all eat well, but as the members of the group had been denied lunch today and dinner yesterday evening, some are still hungry at the end of the meal. When we finally make a move to leave, the young Ladakhi waiter who had served us calls me over and takes me into his confidence. Mistaking me for the tour leader, he tells me that if any of my companions want to change American dollars into the local currency, he will be happy to oblige, and implies that the rate of exchange will be favourable. Although I sense an element of dodgy dealing, I thank him for his kind offer.

I leave the others at the market buying fruit and walk briskly back to the guesthouse. The batteries in my torch are just on the point of giving out, but fortunately I have enough light to find my way in the dark. I peep into the kitchen, wish everyone goodnight and retire to my room, where I read for a while. Although I know perfectly well that I am a tourist, I am now experiencing the temporary illusion that I am actually *living* in this fascinating part of the world for a short time. I have a feeling that I will be sorry to leave.

This morning I decide to walk to Sankar gumpa, situated above Leh in a pretty valley. It is pleasantly cool and I feel full of energy. From the town centre I make my way past the water channel and the infamous postcard shop, and repeat the walk that I took on my first day in Leh. However, I now walk on a narrow concrete path that follows a rushing stream and leads me across fields to the door of the tumbledown gumpa that is Sankar.

I push open the half door and step into a pleasantly tranquil courtyard, in which there is a little garden filled with bright yellow flowers. I go to the main entrance and am shown into the *dukhang* by a pleasant monk. I am not the only tourist here; there are several Japanese men taking photographs. I take one or two shots and am led upstairs to a room containing a statue of Chenrezig (the Lord of Compassion)

with a thousand hands and eleven heads. After looking around this delightful little gompa and peeping through doorways, I leave and explore the alleys around the building. Some local children ask to be photographed; as they are quite charming, I take some shots and they write their addresses in my notebook.

I walk a little in the valley, and when I lose the path, I turn back and head for the gompa above the palace. It is a steep climb up a rocky and dusty path, but it is worth it because of the excellent view that the location affords. Soon after I arrive at the little monastery, which unfortunately is closed at this hour, three members of the new group appear: the Carters and a lady named Margaret. We chat for a while and I leave them for the winding backstreets of Leh.

After lunch, I make my way to the Ladakhi Art Palace, where I have been told I can cash travellers' cheques. This shop (hardly a 'palace') is upstairs in a building beside the Potala Restaurant. Inside I find a man taking a siesta on a couch. He lethargically tells me that I can change \$40. The rate, I discover, is the same as in the hotel at Delhi; as I have no small change, I gain a little in the transaction.

Satisfied, I return to the guesthouse, where I pay my bill, and then wash some clothes and my hair. The two German girls and the lady of the house prepare to leave for the local hospital as Bernadette has been bitten by a dog this morning at Stok. As I will be leaving later for the Hotel Ibex (the Carters told me that they met the guide, who said that I should have been staying there), I wish the ladies goodbye. Bernadette gives me a long, warm handshake. I find her a lovely, sincere young lady, and regret that I may not see her again.

I sort my luggage, throw away anything that is unwanted, and begin to pack my bag. I feel upset at the thoughts of leaving Leh and this delightful guesthouse. I take in my washing (it is bone dry by now), put it into my bag and, having said goodbye to Niall, set off for the Hotel Ibex.

Once again I am faced with the difficulty of carrying my heavy bag such a distance; as before, I have to stop every now and then to rest. Fortunately I meet several people with whom I am able to talk. Bernadette and Sylvia appear; it transpires that as the vaccination fridge in the hospital is locked on a Sunday, nothing can be done for Bernadette. However, some cream has been applied to her bite and now she feels much better. Once again she gives me another long, sincere handshake by way of farewell.

I set off again with my heavy load. Although a couple of men offer to help, most people just stare at me. At last I reach the hotel, where I find the group seated in the courtyard. Exhausted, I collapse into a chair and accept a cup of tea. I finally meet the Indian guide, a pleasant young man named Narput.

I am now informed that a room has been kept for me over the last couple of days, but as I have not been told about this, the room has been given to somebody else today. What a mess! Narput apologizes for the inconvenience and offers to find a guesthouse for me. I decide to leave most of my luggage here and return to the Long Snon guesthouse.

I stay for a while, listening to the guide's introduction to the trek, set off again with a bag of essentials and foot it back to the guesthouse. Everyone is surprised to see me back again and I have to repeat my story several times. The husband greets me with a heartfelt cry of 'Welcome', waves me inside and says, 'No problem'. Fortunately, there is no problem about dinner either. We pile into the kitchen,

where we demolish plates of noodles and vegetables. Hungry as usual, I wolf them down.

Tonight, instead of conversation, we have music. Niall borrows the family's cassette tape recorder and plays a tape of music by the Beatles – a group I had greatly admired when a teenager. The kitchen is transformed into a disco. Much of the music is quite soothing and puts us into a nostalgic mood.

I finally leave and go to bed. The lady of the house has given me a couple of blankets, which I discover are infested with fleas. Soon my arms are covered in bites. I jump out of bed, reverse the blankets and put my clothes on. It takes me some time before I finally drift off to sleep.

My last morning in Leh. I wake early, write some of my diary and later go down to the quaint old kitchen, so full of happy memories for me, and have breakfast with Sylvia. I savour this simple meal and feel sad that it will be the last one of its kind that I will eat here in Ladakh.

I make ready to leave, pay the lady for the previous night and this morning's breakfast (fleas excluded), and once again thank her for her hospitality. It has been delightful staying with such a gracious, patient and kind-hearted host. I bid farewell to Sylvia, who, as Bernadette has done twice yesterday, gives me a long, heartfelt handshake. I clasp Niall's hand, wish him goodbye for a second time and prepare to leave. I feel as though I could stay here forever, among these likeable, good-humoured people, and surrounded by these extraordinary mountains and valleys. The scenery looks even more breathtaking this morning. Although I leave the homely Long Snon guesthouse with regret, I now march to the town centre with a spring in my step and a sense of jubilation. I have had the privilege of staying, at my leisure, in the place of my dreams for several days and am now about to embark on the next stage of this extraordinary adventure.