

THE INDUS VALLEY

Our guide Narput is just finishing his breakfast when I arrive at the Hotel Ibex. As there is time to spare, I pop around the corner to buy another souvenir: a *dorje* (a Buddhist ritual object), which the seller wants me to pay fifty rupees for. I manage to beat him down to thirty-five and run back to the hotel, triumphant.

The Exodus Expeditions truck is now parked outside and our bags are being loaded into it. One of the Indian waiters in the hotel draws me aside and asks me to organize a ten-rupee tip from everyone who has stayed there. Again, he obviously regards me as being the tour leader! After I have presented him with the money and shown Sheila the way to the clothes market (where she can buy herself a sun hat), the waiter reappears. This time he has a cup of coffee, which he presents to me by way of thanks.

We climb into the truck, wave goodbye to the hotel staff, and go bumping down the road. Goodbye Leh! For the last time I look down the main bazaar and up to the old palace perched on the hillock. The coloured banners welcoming the Dalai Lama are still fluttering in the breeze, and the Ladakhi women traders wearing their tall hats are squatting by the road, setting up their fruit stalls. The town is slowly coming to life and preparing itself for the tourists.

On we drive, heading back towards Kashmir. Gradually Leh diminishes in size until only the old palace can be seen in the distance. Will this be my last glimpse of it? For me, the journey home has begun, but for the excited members of our group the first of our two treks is about to start. This, a relatively short affair, is called the Indus Valley trek; the second, in Kashmir, will be the Kolahoi Glacier trek.



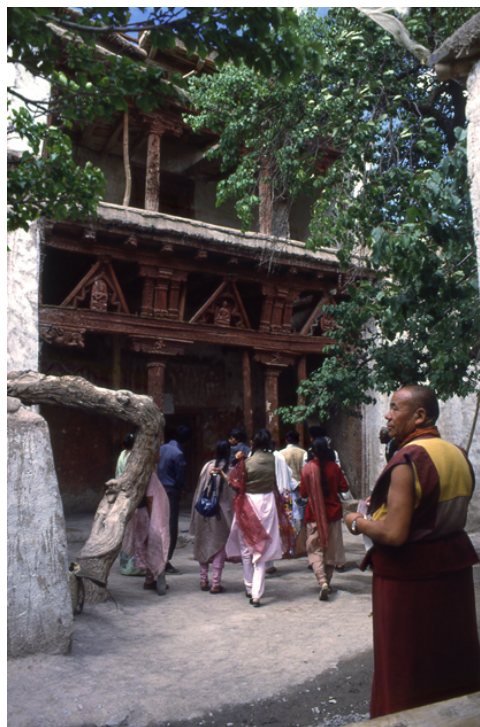
We drive through the military area, pass Spitok, and then turn northwards for Phyang. As I have already visited the gumpa here, I sit with Sheila in the shade of a *chörten* and write my diary. The others see around the monastery in less than an hour and we all climb back into the truck. Off it roars and we travel through some

scenery already familiar to me (though some spectacular views do take me by surprise). We pass the villages of Nimmu, Basgo and Saspol. The truck, although bumpy and a little too airy, is an ideal vehicle from which to view the scenery. Transfixed, I gaze at the ever-changing landscapes of mountains, rivers and villages basking in the morning sun.

When we reach the turn for Lekir just before Saspol, we go straight on and travel along the main road in a wide, winding arc, following the contours of the mountains and the river Indus. We then come to a stop at a permanent campsite and are informed that we have reached Saspol. The campsite is situated in a pleasant spot beside the river. When we clamber out of the truck, we are offered mugs of grapefruit juice. A little while later we are served an excellent lunch in a spacious dining tent. We eat well and relax by the river while tents and supplies are loaded into the truck.

Soon we are off again. We cross the Indus and take a short but spectacular road up to Alchi gompa. Some of the bends in the road are so sharp that the truck has to stop and reverse in order to negotiate them.

Eventually we come to a halt at the end of the road and, following our guide, walk up to the complex, which is built at ground level rather than on a hill. One of the very few Buddhist monasteries to be built in the Kashmiri style, it was founded in the eleventh century by Rinchen Zangpo, regarded as the father of Buddhism in Tibet. He translated Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and was said to have been responsible for the construction of 108 monasteries and shrines.



Alchi gompa

The monastery consists of several small buildings, which are opened for us by a monk. Inside them are elaborate murals, which are the main attraction here. Although dark, it is a particularly impressive place, mainly because of its great age. In one building is a large statue of Chenrezig.



The scenery near Alchi

After our tour, I stop to take photographs of the wonderful scenery and am the last to arrive back at the truck.

We now return to the main road at the other side of the roaring Indus and, passing through more breathtaking scenery, make our way to Temisgam, our campsite just a little north of the road. We follow the Indus for a good while, stop in a village, turn around and head back in the opposite direction. This is to facilitate a sharp turn up a steep, rough road. Immediately the scenery becomes more impressive as we climb upwards, and we find ourselves looking down into a green valley through which rushes a babbling stream. A few cottages clinging to the mountainside complete the scene. Again, we have to negotiate sharp hairpin bends.



Temisgam village

At last the road levels out and we approach the picturesque cluster of whitewashed houses that make up the village of Temisgam. This marks the end of our spectacular journey.

The local children all run down to watch the foreigners alight from the truck. I walk back down the road to take a dramatic photograph of the village and a man carrying a bale of straw on his back – a common sight in these parts. When I return to the truck, we set off walking through the village to the small campsite round the other side. The ground is littered with apricots that have fallen off the trees; I help myself and eat several. The children follow us, asking repeatedly for pens and bon-bons.

I wander off and explore the charming village. I observe a woman spreading out apricots to dry on a roof and photograph her. Around the other side of the village is a valley; I walk in it for a while, then turn back. While the tents are being set up and the others go off for a walk, I relax and write a little more of my diary. Passing locals stop to watch me writing. A tall Ladakhi man with a short pigtail greets me like a long-lost friend and shakes my hand. I wonder where I might have seen him before; perhaps he has mistaken me for somebody else.



Temisgam

Later I join my companions for afternoon tea and biscuits. I continue writing afterwards and, when the light begins to fade, move to the kitchen tent and avail of the kerosene light. By the time dinner is ready, the diary is up to date. We have an excellent meal – far better than what we have been given on the first trek. An enormous quantity of food has been prepared, and we even have a waiter. This time the dining tent is larger and of better quality.

After dinner I prepare for bed. A chap named Anthony, with whom I am sharing the tent, joins me later. He is full of energy, conversation and wise cracks; I envisage him being the fastest walker. I bid him goodnight and soon am in the land of dreams.

Back to the delights of camp life: I am awoken by the braying of a donkey and finally I come to life to the sound of voices at some ungodly hour. Shortly afterwards, tea and hot water are brought to us. A familiar breakfast is then served: porridge, tea, chapattis, fried eggs (with white yolks), and either apples or bananas.

Our trek begins at around eight o'clock. It is a bright, sunny morning, pleasantly fresh in the shade and warm in the sunshine. Again, nature treats us to some more superb scenery. As we leave the village along a rugged path, stepping over boulders and brooks, we are greeted with cries of '*Jullay!*' by young and old. It feels good to go trekking again, even though it is a little strenuous. Having lazed in Leh for so long, I am out of condition and am easily winded. Like the others, who are doing this for the first time, I take it slowly. Just as I have anticipated, Anthony strides ahead with an Indian guide, who leads the way. Both of them walk at a tremendous pace.

Leaving Temisgam behind, we cross the river by a bridge and sit down to take a rest. We now leave cultivated land behind as we slowly climb up through an arid moonscape of dust and stone towards what our brochure describes as a 'low pass'. We all have to stop at intervals to catch our breath and take swigs of water.

At last we make it to the top. *Lha gyalo!* The scene from the pass is truly stunning: a fantastic panorama of different coloured mountains folded and creased in strange patterns, with the snow-capped Zaskar range in the background. We take photos and examine some tiny plants that somehow manage to survive at this altitude and grow in the dry gravel.

Once we have rested, we begin the descent. As I have begun to run out of energy when we reach a valley after the pass, I have to rest again. We have been told that we must tackle another high ridge before reaching our campsite. The next ascent is a hard slog. We join forces (minus Anthony, of course) and slowly plod along. Finally, after much puffing and panting, we make it to the top and sit down to recover. Narput hands round apples and apricots.

After we have rested, we descend and walk to the village of Hemis Shukpachan, which fortunately is not too far away. We stop in a field surrounded by stone walls, which overlooks a fine view. Exhausted, we collapse on to the campstools that have been left out for us and accept mugs of grapefruit juice. Soon afterwards a huge lunch is served in the dining tent.

When some locals come to have a look at us, I photograph a lovely young woman while Sheila sketches her. I spruce myself up at a nearby stream, find a tent, take a short siesta and return to my writing. Tea and biscuits are served later and afterwards we explore the village with Narput. Cutting across the fields, we approach a tiny, intimate gompa situated in the middle of a cluster of houses. A boy calls the monk and we are admitted. Although small and humble, the interior is quite lavishly decorated.

We then make our way to the head man's house. This is a large, imposing building with red arrow tops painted on the walls. As the ground floor is given over to animals, we climb a rickety wooden ladder to the roof. Here we are greeted by the head of the village, who is none other than the Ladakhi man who had saluted me in such a familiar manner yesterday. He shakes hands with Narput and me, but with none of the others. We are now invited into his special guest room, situated in a small structure built on the roof. The interior, which is decorated lavishly, has soft mats and low tables along two of the sides.

The head man's wife and members of the family now put in an appearance; the young women giggle nervously. We are shown an elaborate and heavy *perak* with five rows of turquoise, indicating that the wearer is of high rank. The wife obligingly puts it on her head and allows us to photograph her.

Refreshments are now brought: *chang*, *solja* and sweet tea. Most of us chose one of the first two; I accept a glass of *chang* that is topped up several times. It feels wonderful to be in a proper Ladakhi house, and to be offered such hospitality.

As the wife is suffering from a dry throat and bad cough, our advice is sought on some suitable medication. We then go out to the rooftop in order to photograph the entire family and say goodbye. This time the head man shakes hands with all of us. When we leave, I thank Narput for having organized this visit.

We arrive back at the campsite as dusk falls, in time for dinner. This is a vegetarian meal that does not seem to agree with me at all. I have been feeling a little off colour earlier and after the meal I feel even worse. After we have retired to bed, I have to jump up, run out, use the toilet tent and vomit. Feeling violently sick, I lie down and spend the rest of the night almost devoid of sleep. I have been perfectly well during my stay in Leh; now I am ill again. My indisposition is undoubtedly caused by my foolish decision to eat apricots picked off the ground the previous afternoon. I should have noticed that nobody else was doing this.

Having been sick again during the night, I am in poor shape the next morning. When I eventually struggle out of my sleeping bag, I can only stomach some tea and tablets for breakfast. When we set out, I am placed on a docile pony as I have no energy. It is a pleasant enough ride, despite a little queasiness caused by the swaying motion. Fortunately we do not have too far to walk today. As the weather is much hotter than yesterday, the Carters very kindly lend me their umbrella, which affords some welcome shade. At one of the stops I am given a couple of tablets to settle my stomach. These have been taken from the emergency medical cabinet, which has been brought up for me. Everybody is very considerate and helpful. We have to cross another pass; at the top I shout the obligatory '*Lha gyalol!*' and find enough energy to clamber up a small hill to photograph the dramatic view of the valley that lies ahead. This valley will lead us to the village of Yangtang. On the way downwards, I ask to stop at a *mani* wall so that I can photograph the valley.

Shortly afterwards we are stepping along a rough path, shaded by trees, following the course of a wide river. Here the scenery is alpine and extremely beautiful. Despite all the hardships we have to endure to get to these places, it is worth it; I feel that it will be very difficult for me to return home.

We finally arrive at our campsite and I dismount from the pony. I thank the Nepalese guide who has been so patient, and walk to the water's edge, where I lie in the shade and rest. Somebody fetches my daypack and a rug. I spend a lazy afternoon just lying down while the others eat their lunch. I still feel very queasy; when I try to drink something, I am unable to do so. Later I wash some soiled clothes, find a tent and sit down to write my diary. As usual, I attract a small group of onlookers: the head man from Hemis Shukpachan and a couple of porters. As one of my pens has finally given out, I hand it to one of the spectators, who seems to be fascinated by it.

As it turns cold later, I retreat to my tent. When tea and biscuits are served, I just drink a mug of hot, boiled water. At dinner time, one of the ladies comes with a bowl of soup, which I am able to stomach. Soon afterwards I fall into a deep sleep.

When an animal is sick, it curls up in a ball and sleeps off the illness. *Homo sapiens*, when given the time and opportunity, can do the same. I wake the following morning completely refreshed and recovered. I have my bag packed before breakfast and attack two bowls of porridge with relish. I follow this with three chapattis, one with a little scrambled egg, and the other two with honey. I am ready for the road.

Fortunately it is easy going today, as our trek is mostly downhill. We leave the village and follow the Yangtang river down a twisting gorge. For much of the time we walk in the shade of the mountains or the trees. Although there is little to see here, it is a pleasant spot, especially at this hour of the morning.

We stop for a while in a shady grove and wait for one of our group, Peter, to catch up. It is now his turn to be sick. When he arrives, he has the misfortune of slipping in a patch of mud and falling into it. Mucky all over, he goes down to the river, where he washes himself and changes his clothes. Troubles never come singly.



Ridzong gompa

We now turn to the right by a small Buddhist shrine and begin the climb up to Ridzong gompa. Although not very steep or far away, the climb winds me. I put this down to a lack of energy after going without food for about twenty-four hours. The monastery suddenly appears in all its glory ahead of a V-shaped section of the gorge: quite a spectacular sight. The approach is via a *chörten* with a gateway through its base. A notice reads, 'No smoking, drinking of intoxicating liquor or eating of meat allowed.' It looks a fine, prosperous monastery. In the distance we can hear children chanting in a school. Slowly we clamber up steps and reach a veranda that overlooks

a spectacular view of the gorge, with a white peak in the Zaskar range just visible in the distance. Out come the cameras again.

A friendly monk appears and shows us around. We learn that the gompa was founded in 1829 and now houses some twenty or thirty Gelugpa monks, most of whom are out and about, teaching. In the first room we see two large statues of the Buddha and a small model *chörten*. The monk shows us one of the sacred books, which has been printed in the monastery. On a shelf in the cabinet from which he has taken the volume is a collection of the wood blocks that have been used to print the books.

We have a leisurely look at everything in the chapel, donate ten rupees and sign our names in the visitors' book. We then move on to the *dukhang*, where we see some old and important wall paintings. Here, as in other monasteries, there are representations of the Wheel of Life (held in the grip of Yama, the Lord of Death), the Six States of Existence and the Twelve *Nidānas* (links in the chain of causality). Another painting is of the Guardian of the East, who is playing a lute. There are also several photographs of the Dalai Lama.



The Wheel of Life, Ridzong gompa

Outside, the monk gives us a rather poor demonstration of how a long trumpet is played, which my companions photograph.

After a leisurely look around, we leave and continue our journey down the gorge. The going is so much easier now. Narput, having given us directions, leaves us and we make our way down to the river for lunch. We sit in the shade and open the packed lunches that we have been given this morning. As they are not very appetizing, we give our leftovers to a rather strange-looking shepherd who has been observing us from a safe distance.

Afterwards I walk back to a little shrine that we have passed and, copying the Tibetan characters, write down the mantra *ōm māni pādme hūm*. I have been meaning to do this ever since I arrived.

I join Peter, who by now is feeling much better, and together we walk to the end of the gorge, emerge at the Indus valley, and turn on to the main road. Just a short distance up, in the direction of Leh, is our campsite. We sit in the shade, drinking cool fruit juice, and chat to Narput about the region and its religion.

Peter and I then walk on a little farther and are rewarded with a fine view of the great river Indus as it sweeps around a bend. We go down to the water's edge and sit there for a considerable time, talking and admiring the scenery.

We return to the campsite for tea and biscuits. Jane, a young member of the group who has until now been too sick to join us, has just arrived in the Exodus Expeditions truck. The English driver, Spats (as he calls himself), had just driven her from Leh. However, because of a misunderstanding about food for the next part of our trek, he had to drive all the way back in order to collect it. Anthony, lively as a cricket and game for anything, had gone with him.

Following afternoon tea, I wash my feet in the stream and give my methylated spirits and talcum powder to Anne, one of my companions, who has developed blisters on her feet. I while away the rest of the afternoon writing. Just as some of us are about to leave for the restaurant across the road for a beer, dinner is announced. We have a good meal and afterwards I try a little of Spats's Indian whiskey – powerful stuff. He, Anthony and Peter go over to the restaurant for a drink and everyone else goes to bed. Because of so much resting yesterday, it takes me some time to fall asleep.

As this is the end of our first trek, and as the second one will be in Kashmir, this is our last full day in Ladakh. With everything loaded into the truck, we leave our campsite early and hit the road. The first stretch is familiar as we had driven this way just a few days ago (we had been trekking in the opposite direction, back towards Leh). We now pass the turn for Temisgam and continue in the direction of Srinagar. The weather is perfect; we bump and sway in the back of the truck and cameras click in as my companions endeavour to capture the beauty of the scenery.



Lamayuru gompa

We now drive up the dramatic Langri Loops, the series of hairpin bends that mark the approach to Lamayuru. I remember coming down these when we had travelled by bus to Leh. When we swing around an extraordinary rock formation, we look down into the Lamayuru valley and see the famous monastery clinging to the side of a mountain. According to legend, the valley used to be a lake; the story goes that a famous holy man emptied it by supernatural force and prophesied that a monastery would be built. In the tenth century, Naropa (one of the eighty wise men of Tibet) visited the valley and spent many years meditating in a hut – the site of which is now a shrine. The first monastery was built under Rinchen Zangpo at the end of the tenth century. The gompa was important, especially in the sixteenth century, when criminals could seek sanctuary within its precincts. Formerly some four hundred monks had been housed here, but now there are only twenty or thirty.

The truck stops outside a café and we are given an hour and a half to visit the monastery. We step out into the blistering heat and climb down a dusty path to the series of old, weather-beaten buildings ahead of us. In the main courtyard we find the Lamayuru Hotel and Restaurant which, although they are old buildings that had once been part of the complex, look quite incongruous. After we have admired the various *chörtens*, paintings and outbuildings, we head for the main part of the gompa, where we buy entrance tickets. We ascend a dark staircase and emerge into a small courtyard. The *dukhang* is adorned with the usual colourful murals, statues and bookcases. Behind the main altar is another room containing statues. I am conducted by a monk to a smaller and older chapel upstairs, where I admire more statues and wall paintings.



Dukhang, Lamayuru gompa

When I enquire about the other chapels (I had been told by the Belgian lad that there are five), the monk instructs a young novice to bring me and two of my companions, Margaret and Anne, to them. We go down another staircase, leave the main building and go scrambling down the mountainside by a series of rough steps, corridors and pathways; occasionally I have to help the ladies. Finally we arrive at

two pitch-dark chapels, where we stop to look at some eerie-looking statues and morbid murals. In the second one, skeletons have been painted on the walls.



Lamayuru gompa

When I give the little novice five rupees for his services, he dances around with joy, holds my hand and leads us back up to the main building. The boy is a funny and pleasant little lad.

Back in the main courtyard, I linger for a while, drinking in the scene, and finally begin the slow climb back towards our truck. The heat, which is reflected off the bare, stony mountainside, is intense.



We set off, cross the Fatu-la and stop in the next valley for lunch; we finish eating just before it begins to rain. We drive on and pass the Himalayan Tea Stall where we had been forced to stop overnight on the way up. The scenery beyond the military

base is spectacular; we approach a beautiful, green valley and then drive through a bleak moonscape as we begin to approach the next pass, the Namika-la. In good form by now, we begin to sing rousing songs as we bump along. In our open-top truck we have a generous supply of fresh air – and dust. When we have tired of singing, we fall silent and began to doze.

Having crossed the Namika-la, we tumble down through more wonderful scenery and stop in Mulbekh, where we look at the stone Chamba statue. Then, as we begin to leave this Tibetan Buddhist region, the scenery gradually becomes fertile and begins to lose its unique character and dramatic quality. Valleys become narrower and everything begins to look more Indian. The cheerful Ladakhi people disappear from view and we notice more signs in English.

We eventually come to a halt at a bleak, cold and windy spot, where we will spend the night. I have to relieve myself urgently and discover that once again I am afflicted with the dreaded Delhi belly. In fact, when my symptoms are checked in a medical book, I am told that I have an intestinal infection known as giardiasis and am given some appropriate medication. Delightful.

Our journey on the following day continues on its way towards Srinigar. After a couple of delays – blasting on the road and a military checkpoint – we finally climb upwards via a series of hairpin bends offering dizzying views of the valleys, and cross the final pass, the Zoji-la. The downward journey on the other side returns us to the green and lush scenery of Kashmir. We have left Ladakh behind.