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# TRAVEL

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A trek into northwest India unveils rarely visited ancient Himalayan kingdoms with authentic Tibetan culture

WALKING ON  
TOP OF THE

WORLD

gion, seeking and finding visual splendor in monasteries – some rarely visited by other travelers.

This region is one of startling contrast. The exterior world is stark, rugged, and austere: a high altitude desert. Inside the monasteries, however, is a world rich in color, imagery, and design. The walls spring to life beneath a profusion of brilliant, complex, fantastic paintings. As in Europe, where stained-glass windows and ecclesiastical frescoes tell the Christian story, the Tibetan world wears its faith on its walls, with murals that depict Buddhist deities and symbolize Buddhist concepts. Tibetans make almost no distinction between church and monastery, and both are signified by only one word, *gompa*, which means quietude. The ideal monastery is sited in a remote location, usually high on a hilltop – a place of contemplation. Meditation practice often includes the use of images, and highly trained and gifted artists once journeyed across the Buddhist world, decorating the prayer halls and chapels of even the most isolated of these temples.

Ladakh and Zaskar are the eastern, Buddhist side of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The western, Muslim part, was the site of clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces in 1999, but the Buddhist area is free of hostilities.

We followed the standard trekking route that traverses Ladakh and Zaskar but were free to make side trips that brought us to some of the most splendid temples; we spent 3½ weeks, a few days longer

## IF YOU GO . . .

The trekking season in Ladakh and Zaskar is short, July through early September, before snow closes off the region. Midday temperatures can be warm, but evenings are very cool, and it is cold at the higher altitude of the passes. A pair of trekking poles is invaluable.

Although rain is uncommon in summer it can occur, and trekkers should carry raingear in their day packs, as well as a warm garment and a water bottle.

Since there are no clinics along the route, antibiotics and a First Aid kit are essential. Take good sunglasses and sunblock.

Diamox (inadvisable for those who are allergic to sulfa medication) is a prescription

drug that facilitates adaptation to high altitude but requires that one drink plenty of fluids. Start taking it a few days before reaching altitude.

Our trip was arranged by Aquaterra Adventures, an Indian agency. Their e-mail address is [aquatera@vsnl.com](mailto:aquatera@vsnl.com), and their website is <http://www.trekraft.com>. The cost for a small party of two or three is about \$70 per person per day, less for a larger group, exclusive of transportation and hotel in New Delhi.

The flight from Delhi to Leh costs \$105, and from Manali to Delhi costs \$135. In Leh we stayed at the Lha-ri-mo and in Manali at the very pleasant Silmog Garden Hotel.

MARCIA R. LIEBERMAN

than the usual time. We began at the northern end of the route, in the town of Leh, at 11,000 feet.

There are daily flights from New Delhi to Leh, but as a rainy spell caused flight delays, we shared a rented car and driver with another trekker. Only two roads traverse this region, one of which passes through Srinagar on the Muslim side. We took the other road, which keeps well away from the contested area. The drive to Leh took three days, an adventurous journey over the second highest drivable road in the world (only Pakistan's Karakorum Highway is higher). Except for these two

roads, the only passage through the area is by foot trail.

Leh, in the Indus River valley, is the region's capital. Most of our trek would be at altitudes of 13,000 feet and higher, and a few days in Leh gave us some time to acclimate to higher altitude while we visited the great monasteries in the Leh valley, which can all be reached by road. The most notable is Alchi, which preserves some of the most magnificent art of the region, with wall paintings that date to the 11th century. Alchi, however, has little monastic life; the great monasteries of Thikse and Hemis give the

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*With the road behind us, we plunged into a different world, one of obscure mountain villages, populated by herdsmen and farmers, and remote monasteries.*



PHOTO / PHILIP UEBERMAN

The guide's family in their home.

## Trekking at heights above 16,000 feet

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visitor a chance to see fully active monastic communities, and the royal palace of Stok displays a superb collection of thangka, paintings on cloth.

At the hamlet of Wanla we met our crew: Dorje, our personable young guide, two Nepalis who shared the job of cooking and washing up, and three horsemen with nine ponies that carried our tents, sleeping bags, food, and gear. With the road behind us, we plunged into a different world, one of obscure mountain villages, populated by herdsmen and farmers, and remote monasteries.

The first week of the trek took us over a series of passes, some more than 16,000 feet high. The

landscape has a sculptural beauty: naked of trees, the bare slopes expose the forms of the earth. Ladakh and Zaskar are on the northern side of the Himalayas, in the rain shadow of the great mountains. The land is earth-toned, tawny under the midday sun, but shading to peach, orange, and mauve in the long shadows of early morning and late afternoon, or where mineral deposits color the land. Surprisingly, there are great rivers in this desert landscape.

Villages announce themselves from a distance by squares of emerald green: the fields of barley, watered by an elaborate system of irrigation channels. Houses are white-washed cubes, their flat roof

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PHOTOS / PHILIP LIEBERMAN

A view of the Zaskar River.

## A journey with no inns, little food

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filled with brushwood, a rare and precious commodity in this sparsely vegetated land, and bristling with the stalks of prayer flags. As in other parts of the Himalayas that are far from roads, this is a journey back in time. Dirt lanes run between the houses, which have neither electricity nor telephones. Most villages have no shops, but in a few places along the trail, enterprising people have set up little tent-shops (using old Indian Air Force parachutes) for trekkers, selling soft drinks, candy, and cookies. Although a very few trekkers travel on their own, finding lodging and food in the villages, there are almost no inns and little food: the people are subsistence farmers, able to feed themselves but with little to spare. Few travelers come to this region and virtually all who do travel as we did, using tents and bringing and cooking their own food.

Along our route we passed through villages that maintain a rhythm of life that is hard to imagine in 2000. At one place where we sat down to rest beside the trail, we met a monk who had completed a heroic, solitary retreat of three years, three months, and three days. We encountered him again in the next village, to which he had

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Young monks assisting with lunch.

# Finally, a return to the modern world

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been summoned to perform a purification rite.

After a strenuous first week, in which we hiked over several passes, we reached the village of Lingshed and the first monastery of substantial size since we had left the Leh valley. Perched above the village is the great prayer hall, below which the monk's quarters resemble a set of white cubes tumbling down the slope. The monastery dates to about the 11th century; a few of the wall paintings are of that age, and others are nearly as old.

Under the aegis of its extraordinary high lama, Geshe Ngawang Jangchup, Lingshed Gompa serves multiple functions. The Geshe (his title is the highest academic degree of Buddhist training, equivalent to doctor of theology) not only holds classes to instruct his monks, but also runs summer seminars on Buddhism that foreign visitors may attend, and fosters various community activities. He has organized village committees for women's health, cultural preservation, traditional medicine, etc. The Geshe also accepts Western medicine, and has made friends with some American doctors who visit Lingshed for several days in the summer; in a makeshift clinic on a mud-brick porch, we found this volunteer group diagnosing ailments and dispensing medicine. In gratitude, the village cultural troupe donned their finest traditional dress and held an outdoor dance performance.

Continuing southward, we crossed the river that separates Zaskar from Ladakh, and headed down the broad and relatively level Zaskar valley toward the town of Padum, Zaskar's administrative center. A cluster of monasteries is found in this area, each reachable as a day trip from Padum. Most visitors head up to the largest and nearest one, Karsha, which we had visited on our previous trip and were happy to see again, but we were also searching out gompas off the beaten track.

Tsongde, one of the finest in

Zaskar, required only a half-day's detour from the town of Padum yet is not on the usual itinerary. Tsongde is perched atop a conical hill, offering a commanding view of the broad Zaskar valley, which culminates in a wall of snowcapped mountains. Padum is the only point along the entire trekking route reachable by road - hence there are vehicles in Padum.

Dorje, our excellent young guide, said that although the road does not extend to Tsongde, the terrain would permit jeep travel; he thought we could rent a jeep in Padum for the day and drive there instead of hiking. We had already been walking for almost two weeks and were delighted by his suggestion. Dorje found us a jeep and driver, a plump, jolly monk, who drove us to Tsongde village and then braved the steep track that spiraled the hill to the gompa above.

The monastery buildings are clustered around a central court-



yard, in the center of which was a small, well-tended garden dense with brilliant flowers. An elderly monk greeted us hospitably and escorted us through the prayer halls and a chapel. A special ceremony to

## Photos on view

An exhibit of Philip Lieberman's photographs, "The Tibetan World: Visions and Voices," will be on exhibit at the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Bristol, R.I., throughout the summer. For information, call 401-253-8388.



PHOTOS / PHILIP LIEBERMAN

In the distance is Zanskar (above) and a festival in the village of Lingshed (below).



like the great deity Mahakala in progress in the oldest prayer. We removed our shoes and sat flatly against a wall, listening to chant, accompanied at times by drums, cymbals and horns.

Afterward, as the monks filed out for their mid-day meal, we were permitted to examine the fine, very old wall paintings at our leisure. As we moved along the walls, illuminating them with the light of our headlamps, a whole world sprang to life; among the many figures, the goddess of compassion smiled down upon us, a cosmic Buddha sat in sublime meditation, and powerful

guardian deities danced in a frenzy, cloaked in the flames of their energy. The mundane world and the mythic one blended almost seamlessly, with painted deer and monkeys and portraits of high lamas,

donors and other ordinary people in period costumes among the flying goddesses and multi-limbed deities.

After visiting a few gompas reachable from Padum (Pipiting, Tagrimo, Dzongkhal and Sand), we resumed our southward march. We left the broad Zanskar valley and followed a series of river canyons. A side trail several hours off the main route brought us to Phugtar Gumpa, in the most dramatic setting of any monastery in Little Tibet. Following a narrow track high above a river, we came upon a breathtaking sight; a vertical stack of white-washed buildings that seem glued to a cliff.

This remote Himalayan region has one rare natural resource, over

which wars were fought. The frisky, fluffy little creatures we sometimes found skipping nimbly around our campsites resemble puppies, but were goats; this is the exclusive home of the fine, soft pashmina wool that was the source of the cashmere shawls once prized by Victorian ladies and now popular again. The shepherds we saw guarding them ranged from old women with lined, sun-blackened faces, wearing long, goatskin cloaks, to village children in rough homespun tunics. Considering the goats' stuffed-toy looks and mischievous behavior, as well as the harsh, rugged setting in which they live, it is odd to think of their wool gracing the shoulders of urban women.

One more high pass lay before us before we could leave Zanskar.

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Few travelers come to this region and virtually all who do travel as we did, using tents and bringing and cooking their own food.

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Another few days, and we were back in the modern world with roads, cars and electric lights. Reaching the north Indian resort town of Manali, glad that we were to jump into a shower and have a beer, our thoughts remained behind

in the austere beautiful country we had left; a quiet, spiritually-centered land of mountains and monasteries.

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