



Heaven's Gate

AS THE GREAT CENTERS OF HIMALAYAN BUDDHISM — TIBET, NEPAL, BHUTAN — ARE SWEEPED BY THE WINDS OF CHANGE, IN THE INDIAN REGION OF LADAKH, ANCIENT TEMPLES STAND SOLITARY ON MOUNTAINTOPS AND THE TRADITIONAL WAYS STILL THRIVE.

BY PICO IYER

Photographs by Nadav Kander

I found myself, on the longest day of last year, in what was billed as “the highest motorable pass in the world,” though “motorable” seemed as open to question as “pass.” Icicles were hanging from the mountainside, and plaques around every hairpin turn recalled those fellow travelers, most of them soldiers, who had “left for their heavenly abode” after plunging over the precipice inches from the loose stones that made up the road. My driver, red-cheeked and indomitable, clambered out of our rickety Toyota to fiddle with a loose starter — not quite what I had ordered at 18,350 feet — and fluid the color of Pepto-Bismol began to leak out of the back of the truck in front of us.

I could hardly believe that we'd been in the Ladakhi capital of Leh only 90 minutes earlier (and 7,000 feet below). Now we were in what looked like snowfields, with ragged prayer flags hanging between great boulders. Indian soldiers were shivering in their white encampments. A few minutes earlier, a Sikh officer, checking my passport at 15,000 feet while a helicopter whirred above, had suddenly broken into impromptu song. I could only imagine that he was putting into practice a guiding principle of survival at high altitude, as outlined on a nearby board: “Always Have a Cheerful Attitude.”

Good cheer almost intact and the car nursed back to health, we began to edge down along a single-lane road toward the Nubra Valley. Marmots scrambled across our path and there were wild asses, or *kiang*, in the distance. Behind them appeared perhaps the most pristine and surreal landscape I have seen in 25 years of travel. A huge flat plain extended toward snowcaps on every side, and dry riverbeds bisected the emptiness like tears. In a few places, fortresslike, two-story white buildings were clustered together in patches of green, silent amid apricot trees and willows. Two-humped Bactrian camels foraged in the dunes. The sky was so blue it almost hurt to look at it. The rugged, faraway passes in the sand-colored desolation seemed to be waiting for the Taliban.

We rounded a turn in the road and there before us — as sudden and dramatic as every *gompa*, or temple, you come upon — was Diskit Gompa, rising above the slope as if on its way to the heavens. Clambering up to it, we found ourselves in a typically rich and aromatic Buddhist city on a hill, its chapels thick with the smell of centuries of melted yak butter, its white terraces looking out on miles and miles of noiseless valley. Finally, although the place was as unvisited as almost everywhere I'd been in Ladakh (even during the peak summer season), one other traveler appeared, a Tibetan who happened to live in Kabul.

“It's strange,” he said, confirming all my romantic suspicions, “the houses gathered along the valley, these barren mountains, the snowcaps: we could be in Afghanistan.”

I knew before I came to Ladakh — the high, dry region in northern India that borders Tibet and is often called “the world's last Shangri-La” — that I would see one of the planet's great centers of

Himalayan Buddhism, which arrived in the region, in fact, centuries before it got to Tibet. Books like Andrew Harvey's radiant "Journey in Ladakh" had told me that I would see people living as they might have several centuries ago, in whitewashed houses amid fields of barley and wheat irrigated by glacial snowmelt. And though I'd traveled to Bhutan, to Nepal, to the Indian Himalayas and to Tibet repeatedly over the past quarter-century, I'd heard that Ladakh, the "land of high passes," as its name means, was the one place where this pastoral existence was still preserved.

Yet what you find when you enter imagined romance is always reality. And surprise. Ladakh also borders Pakistan, I was reminded as soon as I got there — hence all the Indian soldiers in the snow. In official terms, Ladakh takes in the Muslim region of Kargil, so almost half its population is Islamic. And most of all, the place I'd always associated with blue-skied purity has for centuries been one of the most cosmopolitan trading posts in the Himalayas, through which traders transported silk, indigo, gold and opium to Kashmir, Kashgar, Yarkand and all the other great caravan stops of the Silk Road.

My first day in Leh I stepped onto Main Bazaar Road, as the town's crowded, noisy little central drag is called, and, among the women sitting quietly along the sidewalk selling vegetables, I saw faces that spoke of Lhasa, Herat, even Samarkand. Some of the people not far from the large mosque down the street were skullcapped Muslim elders and some, I learned, were Indo-Iranians, who trace their blue or green eyes to Alexander the Great.

As I made my way around the only real settlement in the entire region — a scramble of dusty, mud-colored buildings a few blocks long, with an abandoned palace and temples protectively placed on the surrounding crags and hillside — I came to feel I was witnessing two trade routes overlapping. So much in Ladakh lives in a different century from the one we know. Workers in the best hotels boast of "24 hours, cold water," street lighting did not arrive in Leh until the third year of the Clinton administration, and even though there are Internet cafes on every corner, whenever a message came through to me, the screen said, "Sent to you 235,105,786 seconds ago" or some such. Because of its sensitive location between Pakistan and China, Ladakh was closed by India to foreign visitors until 1974, and even now some roads are shut off by snows for at least seven months of every year.

Yet at the same time, word has got out that here is a remote, unusually undeveloped "paradise," to which, of course, we bring our own, very different images of paradise. And so, these days you can learn "traditional Thai massage" on the streets of Leh, dine at a Korean restaurant called Amego or sign up for a "trekking meditation camp." You can have a video conference at LogIn Himalaya, hear a band from Athens, Ga., at the Christian-run Desert Rain coffeehouse and watch "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End" on a video screen in a garden restaurant only days after its premiere at Disneyland.

Compact, otherworldly and highly magical, Ladakh is the latest secret treasure to dramatize all the paradoxes of civilization and its discontents. Its temples that mock gravity, its khaki-colored stretches of emptiness with small white Buddhist stupas above them, even the tree-lined walks out of Leh were more beautiful than almost anything I'd seen in Bhutan or Tibet itself. And yet all of us eager to sample such wonders have brought a new restlessness to the people of Ladakh, who now fill Leh's narrow streets with construction cranes and revving Suzukis, and realize that their future lies in a packaging — or even an abandoning — of their past.

I went one cloudless morning to see the son of the last king of Ladakh, Choegyal Jigmed Wangchuk Namgyal, in his elegant apartments in Stok Palace, just outside town. "When you think in terms of development," the 40-something leader said, "development always happens with a plan. When I look at Leh at this moment, there is no individual thinking of a plan. It's all very chaotic."

The first reason to visit Ladakh is its silent valleys, its huge open spaces under brilliant skies lighted only in corners with small groups of houses linked by mud-brick walls, and by ties of community that we might these days call ancestral. The second is the solitary, commanding *gompas* situated on hills and mountaintops across the region — eight-story complexes of red and white terraces and altars and chapels and kitchens and schools, stretched across the dun-colored rock, the more improbable for the emptiness around them.

I drove one day to Likir Gompa, to take a typical example, and when I arrived there a monk came out dangling a huge key out of a fairy tale. For a handful of pennies, he led me from one massively padlocked prayer hall to another. Walking into a bare-floored chapel I saw shafts of sunlight streaming in from skylights, picking out dusty *thangkas*, or scrolls. Murals from many centuries before revealed a whole cosmology of Buddhas and demons and spirits, a map of the landscape within us. And when I stepped out again into the sun, as so often in this rooftop region all I could hear were prayer flags snapping in the breeze.

Some variation on that experience comes to you over and over as you travel around Ladakh. At Thiksey Gumpa, only 30 minutes by car from Leh, I came upon a settlement of monks whose chants you can attend if you drive out at dawn; at Hemis, the richest of the monasteries, farther down the road, were temples that seemed to have been carved out of the hillside. Driving in the other direction, you come to Alchi, a village whose temples are set in a garden, with frescoes that are nothing like typical Buddhist illustrations but look Kashmiri, sometimes Mughal, sometimes all but Central Asian.

Far past Alchi, along a zigzagging, one-lane road that winds up and up above a sheer drop, I recalled at every heart-stopping turn why the word “gumpa” means “solitary place,” until suddenly, as we rounded a corner, Lamayuru Gumpa was there before us, high up on a cliff. The signs said, aptly, “Welcome to Moon Land View,” and “Moon Palace Resort.”

Although I had thought myself hard to impress after traveling for decades across the Himalayas, I heard a gasp escape my jaded lips, and realized I was glimpsing a location even more unlikely than that of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, and a temple even older than that wonder of the world. Often, jouncing along these pebbled roads, passing a rundown “War Hero Filling Station” or a sign saying, “Better to Be Mr. Late Than Late Mr.,” my friendly, weathered driver communicating with nothing but smiles and some sweet Ladakhi folk songs wheezing out of a scratchy cassette, I felt that here was as grand a pleasure as the traveler’s life affords.

To those stuck inside this wonder world, of course, it seems the opposite of exhilarating. “Life is boring in Leh,” a campsite owner in the Nubra Valley assured me. But the rash of outsiders coming to Ladakh and bringing with them Shabbat services and signs for “Full-Moon Parties” — Ladakh is even growing fashionable among middle-class Indian families — has taught the locals that their life is something different. “In America,” the fast-talking entrepreneur went on, “I think, busy, busy, busy, 24/7. So much tension. Stress, stress, stress. So American people come here for peace, contentment. Weather is hot and cold, everything is boring — but life is good here.”

It’s hard to be the latest traveler coming into Ladakh and not wonder about your presence here. The 50,000 tourists who visited in 2007 may represent a smaller crowd than the one that pours into Shea Stadium for a single game, but in an area that is home to only five times that many locals, the influx is akin to 60 million foreigners arriving every year in the United States. We ascend in search of the quiet of a place where the airport is named after a high lama and the only newspaper on offer in my hotel (in 2007) was dated Nov. 8, 1999. But to the locals we are the modern century, and what we bring in our hunger for simplicity and silence looks a lot like complexity and noise.

I drove out early one morning to Hemis to witness one of the great events of the Ladakhi calendar, the Tse-Chu festival. When I arrived, I found a whole settlement set up around the temple, with sharp-cheeked men and girls selling necklaces and statues of the Buddha, mystical scrolls and even CD’s. This was how the traditional culture flourished, I decided — until a Ladakhi pointed out that such goods could be aimed only at the tourist market. The few Ladakhis in evidence were clustered around two homemade roulette wheels set among the trees.

Inside the temple’s great courtyard, masked lamas raised their feet up and down in a slow, colorful set of meditative movements and dances representing scenes from the life of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century Indian reformer who brought Tantric Buddhism to Tibet. At least 90 percent of the audience members were foreigners, unable to follow any of the symbolic action.

“It used to be that all us young boys would go to Tse-Chu and make a big party,” explained Tsewang Dorje, a young, urbane travel agency manager. “Now it’s only for the tourists.” Indeed, many of Ladakh’s festivals, traditionally held in the winter when Ladakhis don’t have to work in the fields, have now been moved to the summer so they can grab a foreign audience.

As a result, inevitably, Ladakh is something of a test case of what good as well as bad can be brought by travelers, who in Ladakh seem mostly committed to protecting the apparently self-sustaining traditional world they’ve discovered here. One of the first Europeans to settle in Leh, Helena Norberg-Hodge, arrived in 1975 and set up an ecology center, a women’s alliance and a number of other organizations to try to protect what is unique in Ladakh before it is gone. When I walked out to the compound that her women’s alliance maintains just outside Leh, I found its workers busy constructing what would be the first restaurant here to serve nothing but real, traditional Ladakhi food (a difficult task, I was told, because these days local ingredients cost more than imported ones).

Thanks to the efforts of people like Norberg-Hodge, you are faced with signs flying from the lampposts of Leh saying “Say No to Polythene,” and plastic bags are all but prohibited in town. The minute I arrived at the airport, I was greeted by a sign instructing me in the commandments of

“mindful” tourism, and pamphlets telling me to “avoid buying products from multinational corporations ... which are destroying local economies the world over.” Every day at the women’s alliance, discussions are held about development, and tourists are spoken of (by other tourists) almost as Mao Zedong’s People’s Liberation Army might be described in Tibet — as part of a mindless juggernaut intent on destroying a long-indigenous culture.

There can at times be a whiff of colonialism in the notion of foreigners trying to protect Ladakhis from themselves, and even discouraging Ladakhis from the very exposure to foreign cultures that foreigners enjoy by visiting them. And given that the Buddhism that pervades the area teaches that all transformation comes from within — and that few goods in themselves are inherently good or bad — such external efforts can seem a way of importing anger to a place that has mastered acceptance better than we have. Yet too much concern is certainly better than too little, and the people who support Norberg-Hodge have helped bring solar heaters and microhydraulic power plants and low-cost greenhouses to Ladakh. “We are not trying to tell the Ladakhis what they should do,” Nicolas Louchet, a young French volunteer who worked at the ecology center, assured me. “We only want to question, ‘What means progress, what means development?’”

Besides, almost everyone I talked to in Ladakh, foreign and local, told me that the Ladakhis’ interest in their own heritage, in Buddhism, in traditional medicine, has increased in recent times as they see how attractive these are to the outside world. And perhaps as they see how lucrative they are, too. One hundred years ago, the British soldier-explorer Frances Younghusband found Ladakhis “typical travelling merchant[s] of Central Asia ... intelligent, shrewd, full of information,” and to this day you can see how this resourceful and seasoned culture of traders has adjusted to all the latest visitors from afar, as it did to the traffickers in more tangible goods who came before them. (The very name of Ladakh was once Mang Yul, or “Country of Many People.”) Among the roughly 150 travel agencies that now fill Leh’s three or four main streets, you will notice an “eco” or “spiritual” or “Tibet” in every other name.

“You will never see a homeless Ladakhi,” a British anthropologist who has been working in the region on and off for 10 years told me. “Relative to the rest of India, they’re very well-off.” And as soon as the tourist season ends, many Ladakhis go to work for the Indian Army, maintaining an uneasy peace at the glacier along the disputed Pakistani border. The army, along with tourism, is the country’s main source of revenue (and therefore of delight).

Sometimes, in fact, as I wondered what exactly I and my fellow travelers were bringing to a place that had been isolated for so long, I thought of my nomad driver, Phunchok Angchok, who showed up uncomplainingly every morning to take us on hazardous trips along unpaved roads. Until four years ago, he had never left his settlement and (as is still the case) was unable to read or write. Since he began working with a travel agency, though, he had been able to send his 17-year-old son to private school in Delhi.

One day the son joined us on our travels — dressed in a Nike shirt and baseball cap, and fluent in English — and I noticed how it was he, conversant with the outside world but also more conscious of his heritage, who made sure I circumambulated every temple in the right direction, who threw himself down on the ground in full prostrations before every Buddha, who insisted that we eat only in temple-sponsored restaurants. He was spending much of his summer vacation, he said, visiting the nomad camp of his ancestors.

For me, in any case, Ladakh seemed a beautifully unfallen place next to the blue-glass shopping malls of modern Lhasa, the global village of pizza joints and guesthouses that is urban Nepal, or long-isolated Bhutan with its chic new hotels. I couldn’t help smiling at the “He and She” shops scattered around Leh’s market, the prayer wheel in the main road that my driver drove around each morning to get blessings for our trip, the sign outside Pizza de Hut that said, “Thanks for the Visit. God Bless You. Take Care. Bye-Bye.” Even to get to the main sight in Leh, the ruined nine-story palace that stands on a hill above the town, you have to walk through a warren of filthy lanes and follow “Way 2 Palace” markers chalked up on oil drums and telephone poles.

Often, as I made such walks, I found myself pushed off the road by honking cars. When I went on a Saturday evening to the Desert Rain coffeehouse for an “open mic” night, it was to find myself the only foreigner among Ladakh’s fashion-conscious teenagers, all fluent in every verse of “Hotel California.”

Yet walk just 10 minutes out of town, and you come to shady rustic lanes where people with ancient faces are working in the fields or walking to the temple as if they’ve never heard of Paris (or Paris

Hilton). One day I found musicians sitting on the ground among the poplars, playing at intervals while a team of elegant men in black robes took on a team of elegant men in white in a traditional archery competition. The day's scores were chalked up on a blackboard, and each side danced before and during the competition.

In *The Magpie*, the area's weekly English-language newspaper, I read one day about a brave villager who had risked his life trying to save two calves and a lamb from a marauding snow leopard. And when finally I got to the end of the five-hour drive over the highest motorable pass in the world, it was to learn that the *gompa* in Hunder was closed. "During this time the head monk is not here," a local explained. "This season so many insects die, so they are making prayers for them in all the houses."

I remembered, as I listened to him, how just one year before in Dharamsala, I'd asked the Dalai Lama's senior private secretary where, in his more than 40 years of working with his leader, he had most been moved. He had been to the White House and the Vatican, had accompanied the Dalai Lama to Mongolia, Jerusalem, South Africa and Lapland. He'd traveled more than anyone I knew.

A faraway look came into his eyes and he remembered a moment in Ladakh. "Just looking out across the valley — the silence, the river in the distance, the temples," he said. For him, of course, Ladakh was probably the closest he could come now to the Tibet he had known as a boy and feared he might never see again. For me, though — and for all of the rest of us — Ladakh is a way to retrieve something lost and sustaining within us that, once experienced, comes to seem as contemporary, as invigorating, as tomorrow. ■



AT A CROSSROADS IN THE OTHERWORLDLY LANDSCAPE NEAR THIKSEY VILLAGE, SITE OF ONE OF THE REGION'S MANY COMMANDING *GOMPAS*, OR TEMPLES.



FIELD OF DREAMS DOGS DOZE ON THE POLO GROUNDS OF LEH, THE CAPITAL OF LADAKH AND THE REGION'S ONLY SIZABLE SETTLEMENT.