

Area: 97,000 sq kms out of which nearly 38,000 sq. kms are under Chinese Occupation since 1962.

Population: Approx. 2.40 lakh in the 2 districts of Leh & Kargil.

Languages: Ladakhi including Balti / Purgi, Shina or Dardic, Urdu / Hindi.

Ethnic composition: Mongoloid/Tibetan, Dardic and assorted Indo-Aryan elements.

Altitude: Leh 3505 m, Kargil 2750 m.

Geographical Introduction

Ladakh is a land abounding in awesome physical features, set in an enormous and spectacular environment. Bounded by two of the world's mightiest mountain ranges, the Karakoram in the north and the Great Himalaya in the south, it is traversed by two other parallel chains, the Ladakh Range and the Zaskar Range.

In geological terms, this is a young land, formed a few million years ago. Its basic contours, uplifted by tectonic movements, have been modified over the millennia by the process of erosion due to wind and water, sculpted into the form that we see today.

A Virtually Rainless Area

Today a high-altitude desert, sheltered from the rain-bearing clouds of the Indian monsoon by the barrier of the Great Himalaya, Ladakh was once covered by an extensive lake system, the vestiges of which still exist on its south-east plateaux of Rupshu and Chushul, in the drainage basins or lakes of Tso-moriri, Tso-kar and Pangong-tso. But the main source of water is winter snowfall.

For the rest of the region, the snow on the peaks is virtually the only source of water. As the crops grow, the villagers pray not for rain, but for sun to melt the glaciers and liberate their water. Usually their prayers are answered, for the skies are clear and the sun shines for over 300 days in the year.

Dras, Zaskar and the Suru Valley on the Himalaya's northern flanks receive heavy snow in winter, this feeds the glaciers from which melt water, carried down by streams, irrigates the fields in summer. For the rest of the region, the snow on the peaks is virtually the only source of water. As the crops grow, the villagers pray not for rain, but for sun to melt the glaciers and liberate their water.

Capital of Ladakh

Leh, the capital of Ladakh is situated at a height of 3505 meters. Leh is a beautiful destination with so many attractions and is the center of Tibeto-Buddhist Culture for ages. Its colorful gompas have attracted the devout Buddhists from all over the globe. Besides, it is also a favorite hiking locale and is known for some of the best hikes in the country.

As one approaches Leh for the first time, via the sloping seep of dust and pebbles that divide it from the floor of the Indus Valley, one will have little difficulty imagining how the old trans-Himalayan traders must have felt as they plodded in on the caravan routes from Yarkhand and Tibet: a mixture of relief at having crossed the mountains in one piece, and anticipation of a

relaxing spell in one of central Asia's most scenic and atmospheric towns.

Spilling out of a side valley that tapers north towards eroded snow-capped peaks, the Ladakhi capital sprawls from the foot of a ruined Tibetan style palace - a maze of mud-mud brick and concrete flanked on one side by cream-coloured desert, and on the other by a swathe of lush irrigated farmland

The Town Attractions

Leh has nonetheless retained a more tranquil side, and is a pleasant place to unwind after a long bus journey. Attractions in and around the town itself include the former Palace and Namgyal Tsemo Gompa, perched amid strings of prayer flags above the narrow dusty streets of the Old Quarter.

A short walk north across the fields, the small monastery of Sankar harbours accomplished modern Tantric murals and a thousand beaded Avalokitesvara (also spelt as Avalokiteshvara) deity.

Leh is also a good base for longer day trips out into the Indus Valley. Among the string of picturesque villages and Gompas within reach by bus are Shey, site of a derelict 17th century palace, and the Spectacular Tikse Gompa. Until one has adjusted to the altitude, however, the only sightseeing one will probably feel up to will be from a guesthouse roof terrace or garden, from where the snowy summits of the majestic Stok-Kangri massif (6,120m), magnified in the crystal clear Ladakhi sunshine, look close enough to touch

Sankar Gompa

This is small but more interesting place to visit than the Leh Gompa and can easily be visited on foot. The Sankar Gompa is an under Gompa of Spitok Gompa. At the most only 20 monks live here and few are permanently in residence although the monastery itself is fairly active. Thus the Gompa is only open to the public from 7.00 am to 10.00 am and from 5.00 to 7.00 pm. It is, however, well lit, so an evening visit is worthwhile. At these times the monks will welcome the visitors and may offer one yak butter tea, 'Tsampa' and boiled and spiced mustard plant.

Jami Masjid

When one had enough of the bazaar, head past the new green and white painted Jami Masjid at the top of the street, and follow one of the lanes that lead into the old town. Apart from the odd electric cable, nothing much has changed here since the warren of flat roofed houses, crumbling 'Chortens', 'Mani' Walls and narrow sandy streets was laid down late in the 16th century - least of all the plumbing.

Chamba Temple

One place definitely worth walking through the putrid smelling puddles to visit, however, is the Chamba temple. It's not easy to find on your own; ask at the second row of shops on the left after the big arch for the key keeper (gonyer), who will show you the way. Hemmed in by dilapidated medieval mansions, the one roomed shrine houses a colossal image of Maitreya,

the Buddha to come, and some wonderful old wall paintings.

Leh Palace

The old palace of the kings of Ladakh overlooks the town from the southwest slope of the Tsemo hill. It has eight storeys and was built by King Sengge Namgyal in the 16th century, at much the same time as the famed Potala of Lhasa - which it resembles. The damage to the palace, one side is gaping open, stems from the Kashmiri invasions of the last century. Like the Shey palace the Leh palace still belongs to the Ladakhi royal family, who now live in their palace in Stok.

Leh Gompa

The Leh Gompa stands high above the palace and also overlooks the ruins of the older palace of the King of Tagpebums. The Red Gompa also known as Namgyal Tsemo Gompa was built in 1430 by King Gvags-Pa-Bum-Ide and has a fine three-storey high seated Buddha figure flanked by Avalokitesvara on the right and Manjushri on the left. In all there are three Gompas at the top of the hill, the topmost one is in a very ruined condition but offers extremely fine views over Leh and the surrounding countryside. To the right of the palace one can see a Buddha painted on the rocks, a remnant of an earlier monastery.

Other Leh Gompas

There are a number of lesser Gompas in the old town of Leh - such as the Guru Lakhang to the left of the palace, beneath the large Chorten. The Chamba Lakhang, south of the palace, and the Chenrezig Lakhang, to the southeast, are similarly less famous since they contain little of interest compared to other more splendid Gompas around Leh. In the centre of Leh the Buddhist association of Ladakh in 1957 built the new monastery or Gompa Soma or Jokhang. It contains an image of the Buddha Sakyamuni that was brought from Tibet. Meetings of the Buddhist association are held in this monastery.

Leh Fort

The Leh fort, built by Zorawar Singh, contains three temples but cannot be visited because it is within the military camp area.

Shanti Stupa

A relatively new addition to the rocky skyline around Leh is the toothpaste white Shanti Stupa above Changspa village, 3-km west of the bazaar. Inaugurated in 1983 by the Dalai Lama, the "Peace Pagoda", whose sides are decorated with gilt panels depicting episodes from the life of the Buddha, is one of several such monuments erected around India by a "Peace Sect" of Japanese Buddhists.

The Ecology Centre

Five minutes' walk north of the main bazaar, the Ecology centre (Monday-Saturday 10.00 am -

5.00 pm) is the headquarters of LEDeG (the Ladakh Ecological Development Group) - a local non governmental organization that aims to counter the negative impact of western style "development" by fostering economic independence and respect for traditional culture. This involves promoting "appropriate" technologies such as solar energy, encouraging organic farming and cottage industries, and providing education on environmental and social issues through village drama, workshops and seminars.

The garden hosts an open-air exhibition of solar gadgets, hydraulic pumps, water mills and other ingenious energy saving devices that have proved successful throughout Ladakh. There's also a small library, and a handicraft shop, selling locally made clothes, 'Thangkas', T-shirts, books and postcards.

Secmol

Secmol (The Student's Educational And Cultural Movement Of Ladakh) was founded in 1988 by Ladakhi university students through a problematic educational system. At present the curriculum, devised in Srinagar and taught in Urdu and English, does not cover subjects of local relevance. In the hope of maintaining pride in Ladakh's traditions, SECMOL teaches local history and runs workshops on handicrafts, agriculture and technology. Volunteer help from TEFL qualified visitors is appreciated at the summer schools run just outside Leh. If one likes to help, or want to meet members of SECMOL, write in advance (To - SECMOL, Chubi Katpa, Leh), or drop into their office on the northern outskirts of town (Monday-Saturday 2.00-6.00 pm), ten minutes' walk up the hill from Ali Shah's Postcard Shop.

Weather of The Cold Desert

Ladakh lies at altitudes ranging from about 9,000 feet (2,750m) at Kargil to 25,170 feet (7,672m) at Saser Kangri in the Karakoram. Thus summer temperatures rarely exceed about 27°C in the shade, while in winter they may plummet to -20°C even in Leh. Surprisingly, though, the thin air makes the heat of the sun even more intense than at lower altitudes; it is said that only in Ladakh can a man sitting in the sun with his feet in the shade suffer from sunstroke and frostbite at the same time!