

# Ladakh: Where northern India's nouveau riche all go

By Mike Edwards  
special writer

"The money's pouring in," a man of Ladakh said. And then, revealing in his lingo the Western influence that accompanies the cash, he added: "Good Lord, it's pouring in."

Fourteen thousand tourists may not seem like many in a year, reports the National Geographic news service, but consider that before 1974 virtually none had traveled to Ladakh. This thinly populated region of northern India, sometimes called "Little Tibet," was isolated in the high fastness of the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges, its Buddhist and Moslem people scratching out a living on tiny farms or tending flocks on the sparse grass of the ridges.

Behold now, the new-rich: Jeep drivers, tour guides, hoteliers, and dealers in cloth, brassware, and (some say) stolen Buddhist antiques.

STENZIN TUNDUP, a bronze-skinned young man whose black hair seemed more chopped than trimmed,

probably would have cultivated a portion of his father's postage-stamp-size farm had India not opened his homeland to tourists. Instead, he bought a Jeep. He was my driver for a dozen days.

Ladakhis seem always happy, shrugging off relentless summer sun and winter's deep cold. Centuries of Buddhist teaching have imbued them with the spirit of nonviolence, murder and mayhem are rare.

Like his kin, Tundup met the world with a broad grin. When dirty fuel fouled the Jeep's gas line, he employed his favorite (and almost only) English phrase: "No problem." He put his mouth to the gas line and sucked it clean. When rutted trails cracked leaves of the Jeep's springs — "no problem." He clamped the loose pieces.

We started for Ladakh from Srinagar in the Vale of Kashmir, leaving that verdant region as we topped the pass called Zoji La at 11,880 feet. Lush pasture vanished, replaced by treeless, dun-colored slopes. Rain-shadowed by its southern mountain tier, Ladakh is a desert. Precipitation averages little

more than 3 inches a year.

We stopped overnight at the town of Kargil, where the International Hotel boasted three stars on its signboard. I took a cold shower by candlelight; nothing electric was working.

The next day we continued toward Leh, Ladakh's main city, zigzagging up ridges and descending into V-shaped valleys.

ONCE A MEETING place of caravans bound to and from India, Russia, and China, carrying silks, fine wool, spices, and tea, Leh began to stagnate after Communist China closed the border in 1949.

Ladakh was chopped up, Pakistan hitting off a chunk in the late 1940s. Then, the 1962 war between India and China brought the Indian army to the region, and when the fighting stopped, China held more than 11,000 square miles of Ladakh, still claimed by India.

After the conflict, the Indian army remained to guard the border, building

a paved road to Leh, and an airport.

Today, open to tourists again, the city throbs. The short main street echoes with French, English, and German. Leh appeals especially to young adventurers. Some adopt the area's religion as well as its dress — at least, for a summer.

Twenty-five miles south at Hemis, Ladakh's largest monastery, robed monks sat in a circle reciting from holy books, their sing-song paced by a cymbal. Passing through a doorway, I stood in front of a great gilded statue of Buddha. It was flanked by smaller statues, as well as silver chortens ornamented with precious stones. Such shrines are among Ladakh's major tourist attractions.

OTHERWISE, HEMIS is a plain, aging collection of buildings made of stone, mud, and wooden beams.

Like Leh, Tibetan Buddhism suffered when China closed its borders. This denied the lamas access to Tibet, their

spiritual mainspring, to which they journeyed for study or renewal.

Fate this region, which is in flux, there occasionally comes Gejeng Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Since fleeing Chinese-dominated Tibet in 1959, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists has made his headquarters in the Indian town of Dharmasala. On his journeys to Ladakh he seems a rudder for a wayward ship.

On his last visit, he bumped along in a Land Rover, following a crude track into the remote Zaskar Valley. In Tundup's doughy Jeep, crammed with gasoline cans and food, I followed. We plowed through sand, bounced over rock, and traversed valleys whose streams reached for the runoff of snowfields. Each hairpin turn brought a new vista: a long tongue of glacier or a herd of grazing yaks.

His Holiness occupied a building on a sandy valley floor near the village of Padam. Here he intended to preach, using an ancient Buddhist text that extolled such universal values as generosity and patience.

Magnetically, his presence drew Ladakhis from the mountains and valleys. Some walked for days. Others rode donkeys or horses. Some brought gifts of food.

Later I interviewed His Holiness, a bespectacled man of 45 years. Recently he accepted a Chinese invitation to send emissaries to Tibet to observe conditions. "The issue is the happiness of the people," he said. "If they are satisfied, why should I complain?" But he believes they are not satisfied and the Chinese rule of Tibetans has not reduced their traditional desire to be Tibetans.

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