

# LADAKH 'THE LAND OF HIGH PASSES'

(Crossroad of High Asia)



## ITINERARY:

Meet at Delhi Airport.

On this wonderful trip we cross beyond the Great Himalayan chain, into the northern flank's stunning barren landscapes. Here we explore hidden high altitude valleys intersecting the Indus River's main East - West axis. For millennia the isolated population has channeled scarce glacial melt to irrigate the dusty valley floors to turn them into veritable oases. Remote hamlets and villages are sited where water is available, often clustered at the base of great Buddhist monastic complexes. These, unlike the ones in Tibet, are original not having suffered the ravages of Chinese occupation.

Travelling along one of 'the World's highest and most scenic roads', we follow the upper Indus River as it flows westward from Tibet into India, before leaving it as it veers south into Pakistan (Creating the geographical divide between the Himalaya and the Karakoram ranges).

We experience the fascinating culture and traditions of Tibetan Buddhist Ladakh, literally 'Land of High Passes'; visit not only some of its largest and oldest monasteries but also some of its most hidden; sojourn in Dah Hanu, where the last Drokhpas people (An Aryan tribe) have sheltered for millennia, clinging to their language and animistic rites; and walk in some stunning valleys. In terms of high mountain scenery, culture and contrasts quite frankly it does not get better than this; it is a photographer's dream!

The trip runs in September to coincide with the barley and potato harvests and associated celebrations in Ladakh.

We travel in comfortable and roomy Toyota Innovas (Maximum of 3 people + driver per car), stay at 'best' available Heritage accommodation, and explore on foot every day.

## **Day 1**

Arrive in New Delhi, transfer to the unique Imperial Hotel (1 night) in time for lunch.

PM light 'city sightseeing'.

## **Day 2**

Early morning Delhi - Leh flight. After landing in Leh, Ladakh's 'capital' (3,500m altitude), we drive (1h) to Nimmu village (3,000m) and our Heritage 'boutique' accommodation. This converted former royal residence (3 nights) is surrounded by an extensive orchard garden strewn with huge luxury fixed tents. Rest and acclimatise! It is imperative at this altitude to take it easy for the first couple days. Later in the afternoon optional short stroll among the terraced fields and gardens of Nimmu village.

## **Day 3**

After breakfast we drive (45 mins) to the top of Basgo Valley to start a gentle downhill walk (2 hrs) through terraced cultivation and farmsteads to Basgo village and the remains of Basgo Palace, once the seat of the Ladakhi Royal family.



Afternoon resting and acclimatising but punctuated by a visit of the historical parts of Nimmu House.

## **Day 4**

A drive (1h) takes us to the top of Phyang valley. From here we walk down this large fertile area observing agricultural activity around the barley and potato harvests. On the way we shall stop at a local house

where, should you wish, you can sample butter tea and 'chang' -barley beer-.

Afternoon at leisure.

## **Day 5**

Depart by road for Uley Eco Resort, travelling west along the Indus (This drive offers a great range of landscapes). We stop to visit Likir monastery. We stay at Uley Eco Resort (Total of 2 nights: Day 5 & Day 8) in comfortable cottages set in a large apricot and apple orchard overlooking a bend in the Indus River.

PM Drive (45 mins) to the remote Mangyu village to visit its ancient monastery and then walk down its lush valley.

## **Day 6**

We continue by car along the Indus, through the villages of Nurla and Khaltse. Here we veer off the main Leh – Srinagar route to follow the increasingly narrower and deeper gorges cut by the Indus to the Drokhpas villages of Domkhar and Skurbuchan. The obviously Aryan inhabitants claim direct

descent from the soldiers of Alexander the Great's armies. Though sometimes caught in the waves of conquest that have characterised NW Frontier history, because of the inaccessibility of their villages they have survived here and in some remote valleys of NW Pakistan. In the latter they were converted to Islam but in Ladakh some still practice Bon, and ancient animistic religion, which Tibetan Buddhism tried to absorb as it spread north and west from India to Tibet. On the way we visit an archeological site where graffiti and drawings were left etched in rocks by travellers on the caravan route following the Indus river; some date back to 2,000 BC.

We arrive at our tented camp set in an orchard overlooking the Indus by late afternoon (2 nights).

## **Day 7**

This morning a special access permit allows us to drive (1.5h) to the head of the 'protected' Hanu Valley where we continue exploring this fascinating area on foot. We descend through farmsteads and hamlets, chatting to friendly locals along the way.

Afternoon stroll through fields and orchards in the vicinity of our camp, exploring the area, learning about Drokhpas culture and meeting the locals. We walk to the Dalai Lama's private retreat, sited so as to offer the most wonderful views over the Indus Valley.

## **Day 8**

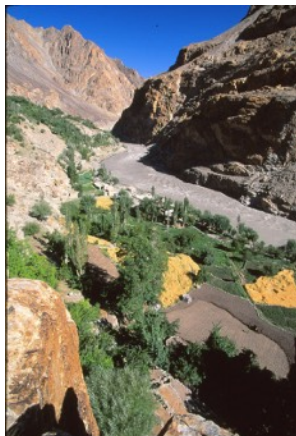
Drive to Lamayuru monastery through stunning scenery (2hrs). The monastery is perched on a hill overlooking the village and the verdant irrigated valley below where barley is grown. The site is a labyrinth of monk's cells, chapels and administrative buildings.

Lunch in Khaltse village before returning to Uley Eco Lodge for a further night.

Later in the afternoon we visit Rizong, 'Hidden monastery', seat of the Shas Rimpoche (The Dalai Lama's Religious Advisor). The monastery is tucked away at the end of a hidden valley from which we return on foot.







### **Day 9**

Drive to Alchi village, across the Indus River, where we visit the once abandoned monastery now looked after by monks from Likir.

It is unusually sited among residential dwellings and is rightly renowned for its world class Buddhist frescoes pre-dating Tibet's influence in the region. We lunch 'al fresco' under willow and poplar in a local garden restaurant.

In the afternoon we drive back towards Leh and beyond to the peaceful surroundings of Indus River Camp (3 nights). Our lovely riverside cottages are set among a 40 acre natural sanctuary and afford wonderful views of the Zaskar Range's snowy peaks.

### **Day 10**

After breakfast a 30 minutes drive takes us to Thiksey to visit Ladakh's largest monastery, built on a hill dominating the Indus valley. We then walk along an old caravan route past farms, barley fields and willow glades to Shey (5 km; 2hrs). Here the waters of the Indus River are channelled into irrigation channels to allow extensive agriculture. Shey village is dominated by the recently restored Shey Palace, Ladakh's oldest royal residence.

PM Drive to Leh town and to Tsemo Hill for a stunning bird's eye view of the Leh Valley. The huge nine floored royal palace below is framed by the Ladakh and Zaskar ranges, the latter crowned by the glaciers of the Stok Kangri peaks. We then have free time to stroll (and shop?!) in the bustling Leh Bazaar where until 1949 merchants from Yarkand, Kashgar, Kashmir, Tibet and Northern India gathered to trade goods, thus linking the Silk Route with India and Tibet.

### **Day 11**

This morning we head for Hemis monastery to visit this extensive monastic complex set in a hidden valley and above a farming village. It has the very best museum in Ladakh



with some truly rare and unusual exhibits. We shall be able to gain access to some 'closed' parts of the monastery before we stroll down through the village.

In the afternoon we get dropped off at the head of Saboo valley for a final stroll through farmland. This unusually fertile area is renowned for the flavour of its barley and potatoes, and the large local houses attest to the wealth of its inhabitants.



### **Day 12**

Morning flight from Leh to Delhi and check in at The Imperial (2 nights) in time for lunch. Free afternoon to relax.

### **Day 13**

This morning we visit Old Delhi's crowded and labyrinthine lanes on foot. We sample 'street chai'; visit every part of a Sikh Gurdwara, including the bustling kitchens preparing thousands of free meals every day; and end in the world's largest wholesale spice market. This is a 'full immersion' into historical Delhi and a huge contrast after quiet, peaceful Ladakh, but affords us a unique insight into one of the world's largest metropolises. It is also a unique photographic opportunity! Back at The Imperial for lunch.

PM At leisure. If possible (Not always available) later in the day we shall request a private 'Imperial Art Tour' where we are led through the hotel looking at some of the best and most important art on display.

### **Day 14**

Transfer to New Delhi's Indira Ghandi International Airport.

