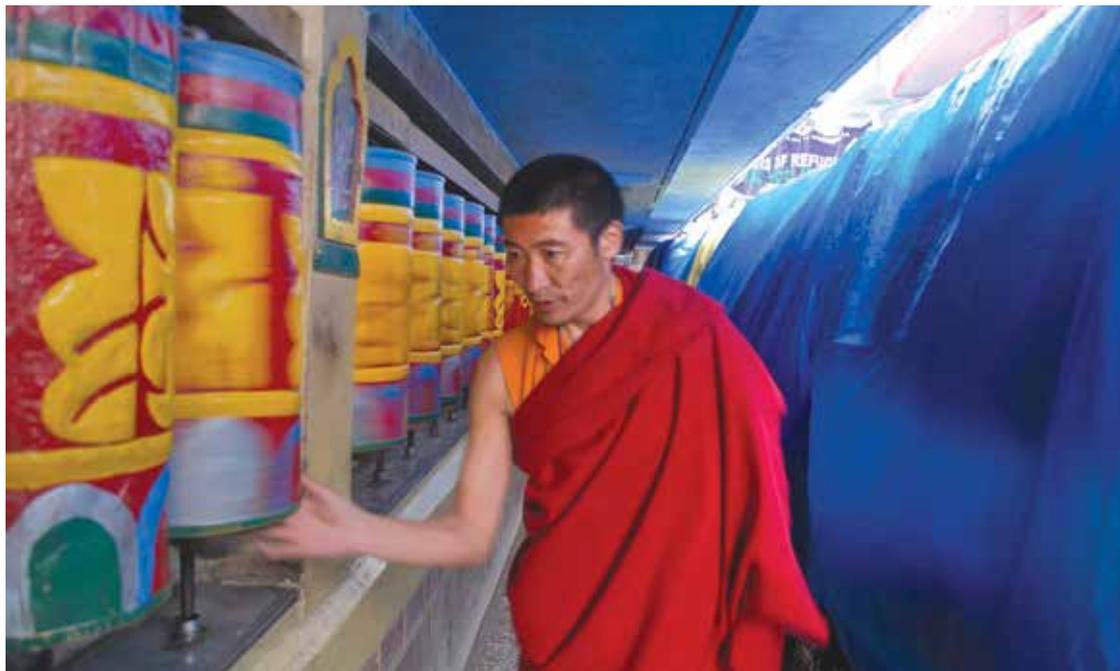


TOURISM UPDATE



MCLEOD GANJ



PHOTOS: ABHISHEK BALI

▲ **Colour Coordinated:** One of the newer Buddhist monasteries to add to the Tibetan cultural ambience at McLeod Ganj.

◀ **Prayer Notes:** Prayer wheels at McLeod Ganj monasteries are as a ritual turned daily by the monks.

▼ **Picture Perfect:** A view of one of the streets in McLeod Ganj that is among the many vantage points providing a picturesque view of the village.

Discovering Tibet!

A visit to Little Lhasa or McLeod Ganj is enriching. **BY BINITA SINGH**

As a little girl growing up in Gaya, home to the famous centre of Buddhism, Bodh Gaya, I was intrigued by the Anglo Indian population in missionary schools. They were from some place called McCluskieganj, a place I believed to be in Britain that was home to 'foreigners'.

Recently, when I met a gentleman from the US who has been living in India with his entire family for the past 14 years, it brought back a flash of childish memories when he mentioned his home was in McLeod Ganj, Dharamshala. The similarity in their names also set me on a journey of discovery—of McLeod Ganj. The bonus was the summer weekend getaway's proximity to Delhi.

Of course not much is in common between the two places except their obvious prefixes. While McCluskieganj, now in Jharkhand, was an Anglo Indian colony, McLeod Ganj, popularly known as Little Lhasa, a village in



the suburbs of Dharamshala, is situated in the hilly terrains of Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh and is a popular Tibetan colony.

Choosing not to miss out on the scenic drive to Himachal Pradesh, we boarded the bus at Majnu ka Tila in North Campus, Delhi, which incidentally is a Tibetan hub. If inclined you may even board the twice daily flight from Delhi or catch the daily train. While the about 12 hours' bus ride took us directly to the tiny hamlet nestled in the lap of the Dhauladhar range, a ridge of southern

outer Himalayas, the air route leads to Daggal, a town near McLeod Ganj. There are more than 10 trains that will take you to Chakki Bank, a small station near Pathankot, from Delhi. This is the nearest point to the village via railroad.

McLeod Ganj is a suburb of Dharamshala, the main township of Kangra district. As we neared our destination, the sight of the picturesque snow clad peaks of the Dhauladhar ranges framed against the blue sky acted as the perfect antidote for our tired bodies and jaded urban eyes. Unbroken yards of green fields, tall rows of dense pine, thick deodar forests and white rivulets of numerous streams form a picture postcard scenario—the whole area exudes a dreamlike calm and freshness. Take a deep breath—can you feel the difference? The fresh mountain air is uniquely scintillating.

Situated in what is known as the upper Dharamshala (1,830m), McLeod Ganj is bustling with life yet serene and calm. In the upper recesses at 1,770m is the residence of His Holiness, The Dalai Lama. The lower Dharamshala (1,380 m), in contrast, is a busy commercial hub.

Make your way to one of the many budget hotels, homestays or guesthouses tucked into the narrow alleys depending on your purse and taste. Most offer clean, tastefully furnished accommodation with views to refresh the soul. Worth mentioning for a stay are the Tibetan themed ones that resonate with its culture. From décor to hospitality, all have a distinct flavour and bring Little Lhasa a little closer to the visitor in spirit.

For a short weekend jaunt, it's going to be a packed schedule. As the bus reaches early in the morning, you can make a head start after a bath and hearty breakfast or head out to the popular bakeries or cafés after freshening up, for a first luxurious look of the Kangra valley over a leisurely breakfast. You can take your pick from over 40 restaurants, cafés and bakeries that dot this place. While on food, and if you are a fan of the factory made *momos* that have become as natural to Delhi as its *dahi bhalle*, do try delicacies like *chetze*, *thukpa*, *kothe* and of course *momos* at one of the Tibetan eateries here for an authentic taste of Tibet.

If by now your interest in Tibet has been piqued further by the frequent sightings of maroon robes on the streets, you would be naturally inclined to drink in the peaceful ambience of the Buddhist culture that somehow seems so complementary to the serene natural surroundings. Your feet, of their own volition, lead

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. WELCOME ALL



McLeod Ganj has a place for everyone. Here, a foreign tourist plays the didgeridoo on a village street for some money.

2. NATURE'S BEST



The view of Mother Nature from any point in McLeod Ganj is of boundless beauty, pristine & pure.

3. KNICK KNACKS



Tibetan jewellery and garments can be bought at the local flea market.

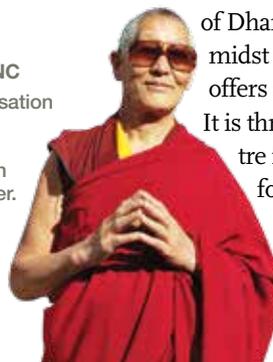
3. IN PARADISE



Dharampur is 2 km from McLeod Ganj.

5. IN SYNC

A conversation with the monks can be an eyeopener.



Festive Colours: The Dharamshala Film Festival at Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts is a big draw.

you down the hill from the main square to Tsug la Khang or The Dalai Lama's temple, which is central to the life of McLeod Ganj. A busy place throughout the day—the Namgyal Monastery and the shrine are situated within this complex—it defies logic as it exudes peace and calm while bursting at the seams with visitors, devotees, lamas, monks, nuns and the residents. Explore the temple, check out Ling Khor, the long meditation trail, and hang a prayer flag or two beside the thousands of colourful ones already swaying in the breeze on the hillside.

If you plan to do all things Tibet first in Little Lhasa, take a spiritual and educational tour to deepen your knowledge of their unique culture. Head to the Tibet Museum situated beside Tsug la Khang. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives is another treasure trove of Tibetan literary works, barely 20 minutes down the hill from Tsug la Khang. It is located at Gangchen Kyishong, right in the centre of McLeod Ganj and Kotwali Bazar. You can learn about the history of this land and its people from the ongoing exhibition or riffle through the stacks of reference books and photographs on the shelves that take you on a pictorial reconstruction of the history of Tibet. The library is a renowned destination for scholars, historians and students from across the world keen to discover Tibet.

For more detailed understanding of Buddhism, stop over at Tushita Meditation Centre, a little above McLeod Ganj, set amid the idyllic charms of Dharamakot village. The village is located in the midst of tall pine and rhododendron forests and offers a bountiful view of the Dhauladhar range. It is three km north of McLeod Ganj, and is a centre for the study and practice of the Mahayana form of Buddhism. Norbulingka Institute

▶ **Little Monks:** A delightful sight on McLeod Ganj roads are these little monks in distinctive attire.



▶ **Prayer Time:** For the elders of McLeod Ganj and its nearby villages, dusk is the time for community evening prayers. They sit together in groups and pray wherever they are at the time.



▶ **123...** That's the name of this popular café, a favourite haunt of tourists and locals alike.

should be your next stop for a detailed insight into Tibetan art and craft. It was established with the specific purpose of preserving and propagating Tibetan arts and crafts for posterity. You will need to spend a day here but it will be well worth the effort. The performing arts of Tibet are a sensorial delight. You can catch some rehearsals or even performances at Tibetan Institute for the Performing Arts which trains students in opera, folk dance and music. The institute was set up by the Dalai Lama in 1959.

You may want to pick up a few of the ancient Tibetan remedies from Tibetan Medical and Astro Institute or Men-Tsee-Khang, located just some distance down the road from Gangchen Kyishong. Don't forget to pay your respects to the martyrs at Namgyalma Stupa located in the heart of McLeod Ganj. After a leisurely lunch, you can spend the afternoon at Kangra Art Museum discovering the ancient history of Tibetan and Buddhist cultures since the 5th century.

Your journey of discovery does not end here though. About one-and-a-half hours' drive from McLeod Ganj is Masroor Temple. Located atop a hill, in its backdrop is the Dhauladhar range (snowcapped in winter) and on the campus a beautiful pond. The temple is a group of 15 monolithic rock-cut structures and is believed to have been built by the Pandavas in the epic *Mahabharata*. It dates back to the 8th century. Another temple that attracts visitors for its tranquil setting is three km from McLeod Ganj, in Bhagsu Village. The eponymous temple with pools around it is a tranquil paradise especially with the 30-foot high cascading Bhagsu waterfall as a backdrop during monsoon months. Pack a picnic brunch and stay the day enjoying nature's bounty. Amid the towering deodar forests some 3 km from McLeod Ganj is a small lake. This beautiful mid-altitude lake (1,775 m above sea level) is near a graphically named and idyllic village called Tota Ran. Do take a detour else you will miss out on one of the most attractive spots in Dharamshala.

From here head on to Naddi village for some time away from the hurly burly of McLeod Ganj and relax in the heart of the Dhauladhar mountains. Return rejuvenated for some trekking at Triund, a 9,000 foot ridge behind the Dhauladhar range. Triund is 11 km from McLeod Ganj, at an altitude of 2,827m. The snowline starts making an appearance just 5km from Triund. Take a deep breath and open your eyes to a world clad in snow above you and in green beneath you. It will leave you gasping.

There are other popular trekking routes, but we will take the one two kilometers from McLeod Ganj to just below it near Forsyth Ganj. It is here that Lord Elgin, the British Viceroy of India (1862–63) lies buried under the St. John Church in the Wilderness. The place, a little beauty amid the deodar groves, hides an important bit of the history of India beneath its soils. Discover it on your stroll.

There are many other treasures to be explored in this little village-town. But before you depart, remember to visit Nowrojee and Sons General Store. It has the history of McLeod Ganj running through its veins for the last five generations. Catch up with the history here. ■