

# TOURISM UPDATE



▲ **Benign Sentinel:** The 32 metre tall Maitreya Buddha statue at Diskit, the largest and oldest monastery in Ladakh.

◀ **Enchanted Lake:** The Tibetan meaning of Pangong Tso is not far off the mark—it mesmerises visitors.

▼ **Bird Paradise:** Bar-headed goose, Brahmini ducks, seagulls and a variety of other wildlife come to roost at the highest saltwater lake.

## Paradise Found

Ladakh is a vacationer's delight offering a world of discoveries.

BY BINITA SINGH

Deep blue waters, clear blue sky and in the backdrop pale sand coloured mountains. There is stillness in the air, peace and tranquillity. A flock of snow-white seagulls suddenly takes to the sky breaking your reveries with their shrill cries. We are at Pangong Lake, Ladakh, which is the highest saltwater reservoir in the world, situated at an altitude of 14,270 ft. The whole picturesque setting is so unreal, something like a picture postcard that one tends to lose sense of time and space. The same goes for this entire mysterious and intriguing stretch of India called Ladakh that never fails to thrill. India's diversity is in full display in this small part of Kashmir, which exhibits a rich history and culture going back to Neolithic times. The erstwhile royal abode of Buddhist Kings witnessed several invasions which have been recorded in



the annals of various historical tracts. The journey of discovery of Ladakh is hence best begun on your way with a good reading of these historical and cultural accounts to understand the beauty of the destination and its fascinating people.

A perfect summer getaway, the best time to visit this cold desert is between June to October when most of India is waiting for cooling monsoon showers in the peak summer season. The variety of activities that the holiday destination packs is bewildering and promises to keep the thrill quotient up. From sightseeing trips to vari-

ous natural water bodies for families to trekking, biking and cycling trips for nature enthusiasts and adventure seekers, Ladakh offers it all. Take a flight to Ladakh from Delhi, Jammu, Srinagar, Shimla or Chandigarh or if you are so inclined, wait till August for all the motorable routes and passes to be open to before you decide to drive down to Leh, the capital of Ladakh. Biking up the highest motorable pass in the world, Khardung La, is an out of the world experience. If taking the road, you can either drive up to Leh from Srinagar between June to November or take the trip from Manali between July and October. For thrill seekers, the Leh-Manali route is the preferred one for the challenges it poses. Try it!

Nature in its entire natural splendour at the foothills of the mighty Himalayas and the Karakoram mountain ranges hits you as you lay your untrained eyes on all this beauty. Is it natural? You wonder. Till now, you may have seen this in technicolour on 70 mm screens, perhaps Pangong even looked a bit familiar. After all, it was the backdrop to the hit blockbuster 3 Idiots. You may have also seen such serene and captivating beauty of snow-capped mountains, endless valleys, unspoilt greenery, the deep blue above with its white cloud cover reflected in a deeper blue below, in various movie locales and wondered if these were the Swiss Alps or a high tech studio creation. Ladakh has that surrealistic quality that calls for a suspension of disbelief. It's real, it's here and now. Yet you feel as though you are in a magical land.

If Pangong had floored you, Tso Moriri, the fresh water lake situated at a height of 15,000 ft will leave you gasping. The trip from Leh to the lake itself is refreshing as the topography changes gradually from rugged mountainous to soothing green. The excitement and wonder is akin to that of a childhood train journey spent hanging out of the window watching the scenery changing rapidly as it flashes by. In Ladakh, it is a cinematic journey in slow motion. Lodge for the day at one of the guesthouses near the lake. You can spend the entire day watching the reflections of the clouds float by on the crystal blue surface of the clear lake water. The beauty is mesmerising and soulful.

Nubra Valley, about 150 km from Leh, is another picturesque spot in Ladakh. Khardung La pass, yes the highest motorable road in the world, takes you to Nubra, making the drive an adventurous and thrilling one. Situated 3,048 metres

#### FOUR KEY HIGHLIGHTS

##### 1. CARVED IN STONE



Some say it with words, some sing it with songs, some write it on parchment, in Ladakh they say good luck with stones.

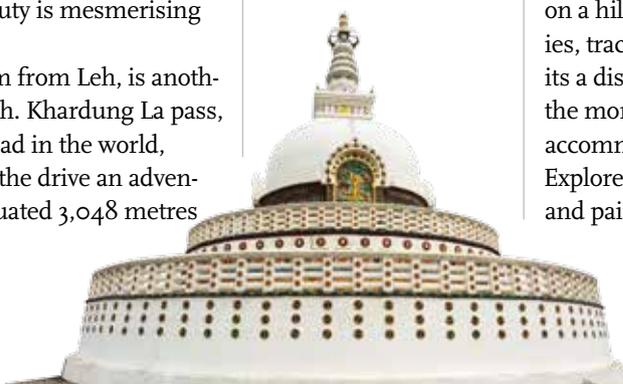
##### 2. ABOVE THE WORLD



The highest motorable pass in the world, Khardung La Pass, is a thrilling drive for adventurist in summers.

##### 3. PEACE MESSENGER

The majestic Shanti Stupa atop Chanspa, part of the Peace Pagoda mission, provides a magnificent view of sunset and sunrise.



**Life Lessons:** The eight stupas that symbolise the major events in Lord Buddha's life at Jivey Tsal, Choglamsar-Shey.



**Divine Tranquility:** Gompas near Hemis Manastery that traces its origin beyond the 11th century.

above sea level, this spot of heaven on earth, as the Valley is popularly known, offers long leisurely walks amid its beautiful countryside. It's a great way to discover the many villages and learn the simple ways of the lives of valley folks. You can find accommodation in one of the guest houses at Diskit, the chief village in Nubra, and take trips down to the ancient gompas and palaces dotting the valley of flowers, another name for Nubra. A visit to the 32-metres tall golden statue of Buddha is one of the landmark experiences to carry back home. The Diskit monastery traces its history back to the 14th century and is the oldest monastery in Nubra Valley. It houses an imposing 106 metre tall statue of Maitrya Buddha. The monastery at Alchi village, around 70 km from Leh, presents a unique contrast in architectural style to other monasteries in Ladakh. Situated in the plains, it is perhaps the only one not located on a hill top. Alchi is one of the oldest monasteries, tracing its roots to the 11th century, and exhibits a distinct Indo-Himalayan influence. A trip to the monastery, which offers guests a modest accommodation, promises rich dividends. Explore its past and discover the murals, frescos and paintings belonging to another era.

A visit to the nearby Shey, Thiksey and Hemis monasteries is equally a compelling experience. Shey monastery, the former summer palace of the royal family, is 15 km from Leh. The 17.5 metres tall copper and brass statue of the blue haired Maitreya Buddha is captivating as is the pristine river Indus, on whose banks it is located. Visit the other stupas and shrines strewn across the banks. Hemis, the largest monastery in Ladakh, is one of the richest in India, housing a treasure trove of ancient collections of stupas and Thangkas, exquisitely carved and adorned and made from precious metals. Combine this visit with a trip to the wildlife park nearby and catch a sight of rare and exotic animals including snow leopards. The 12-storey Thiksey monastery is 18 km from Leh. The imposing architecture houses 10 temples and other buildings including a nunnery. Apart from the 40-foot high statue of Maitreya Buddha that the monastery possesses which is the main attraction for visitors; for more discerning travellers, the rare collection of artefacts, wall paintings, stupas, swords and murals, helps deconstruct the ancient legacy of Tibetan Buddhists. A little farther from Leh, at a distance of 127 km, lies the oldest Tibetan Buddhist monastery. Situated at a height of 3,510 meters above sea level, Lamayuru monastery belongs to the Red Hat sect of Buddhism. A must-stop stopover on the Kargil-Leh circuit, Lamayuru's landscape is famous for its topographical resemblance to lunar territory and is also known as moonland. Spend a day browsing through the rich history of the monastery which dates back to the 10th century. It houses some of the rarest treasures that are a delight to discover.

The outdoors beckon compellingly and yak and camel safaris are not be missed experiences when in Ladakh. Bothe, the double humped camel and the 6 feet tall, 1000 kg strong yak are unique to this region. The safari will take you at a leisurely pace through the pristine valleys giving an unhindered view of the snow-topped mountains, green valleys, blue water bodies and breathtaking views of nature at its best. The more adventurous can opt for river rafting down the rapids of the river Indus. It's a thrilling ride through gorges in the Ladakh and Zaskar ranges. Kayaking in the Zaskar river and motorbiking across Ladakh are other thrilling options for adventure seekers. Paragliding near Khardung La pass is an out of the world experience as you soar above the steep mountains in the calm cool

**FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

**1. VALLEY OF GODS**



Nubra Valley offers fascinating vistas, unforgettable views of sand dunes, sunrise, sunset and camel rides.

**2. PHOTO CALL**



The lush vegetation stands in stark contrast to the snowcapped peaks in the backdrop.

**3. WELCOME!**



A traditional ceremonial welcome for a senior monk at Lamayuru Gompa, a popular village stopover for tourists between the Kargil-Leh route in Ladakh.

**4. MANY HUED**



A trail of prayer flags flutter atop Khardung La pass, perhaps meant to keep motorists safe on this thrilling adventurous snow-bound ride on top of the world.



**▲ Up in the Clouds:** The captivating 12-storey Thiksey monastery.

breeze. Ladakh is also a popular destination for skiing. So please pack your gear for a thrilling run down the slopes! For nature enthusiasts who just want a date with the elements, cycling down the innumerable treks is a wonderful option. You can stopover at villages and even stay up with the local people, learning about Ladakh first hand—an experiential and sensory journey.

Back in Leh, once you have had your fill of adventures, do explore the capital of Ladakh before you depart. The place dates back to 1st century AD and is an explorer's delight with its rich monuments, stupas and monasteries. The famous Shanti Stupa constructed by the Japanese is a prime attraction here, Situated atop a hill at a height of 4,267 metres, the Stupa offers the best vantage point for a bird's eye view of Leh. Sunrise and sunset, viewed from the Shanti Stupa are unforgettable panoramic vignettes of nature's cinematic artistry. Do also visit the more than 800-year old Kali Mandir nearby that has a rich collection of exotic masks. Another stopover in Leh is the Royal Palace of Leh. The nine-storied, 17th century structure has a rich museum and also offers a picturesque view of the valley.

If you have time on hand and feel inclined, do visit Zaskar Valley. Inhabited by around a population of 14,000 that's mainly Buddhist, this isolated tip of Ladakh is closed to the world for about eight months in a year! Our story is about to end, but we have just covered the tip of Ladakh maybe. There much more to see like the Magnetic Valley, Kargil, Drass, Stok Kangri, Suru Valley...

Plan your trip today...a world of wonder awaits you in Ladakh! ■