Through a Frozen Frame

Somewhere between a kingdom and an adventure is Leh, locked in winter—it holds the best of all that is timeless in Ladakh.

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Situated on a hilltop overlooking all of Leh are Namgyal Tsemo Gompa dating back to the 15th century and 16th century Leh Palace.
now is a tricky pursuit; it keeps eluding the most seasoned of travellers. People may travel thousands of miles to witness the first snowfall of winter, only to miss it by hours. It is this unpredictability that draws us towards the dream of a sloping roof dressed in white, complete with snow-laden cedars and a giggly snowman in tow.

Leh, however, is an exception. The hard-hitting winter here is guaranteed. By November, almost immediately after all land routes leading into Ladakh are closed, the largest town of the region becomes a muffled winter-land. Leh is criss-crossed with flat roofs growing thicker with each layer of snow. Being a cold desert, most vegetation bids goodbye, leaving only leafless willows and poplars, their branches weighed down with snow. The ubiquitous white chortens or stupas that define high-altitude Buddhist landscapes merge with the greys, blues, and whites of the cold season. Leh’s spectacular setting ensures that it is beautiful even as one is toasting in the summer sun without anything to take shade under, but the beauty is intensified in winter, making the views worth frostbitten toes.

Ladakh has been beeping red on the tourism map for a while now. Like most other Indian tourist destinations, it resounds with the roar of Enfields and roadside Rajasthani bedsheet sales pitches during peak season. Come winter, its ancient rhythms are restored and a silence typical to the Himalayas descends on its streets. The uncluttered off-season makes it easier to imagine Leh’s historical significance as a medieval town where
several old trade routes intersected and where caravans would often pitch camp. The 17th century Leh Palace wears a quiet look in winter, much like Tibet’s Potala Palace with which the independent kingdom of Ladakh once held intricate links.

The Ladakhi winter is all about sub-zero temperatures, but that is what makes slow walks more fun. A saunter through its many neighbourhoods would not only reveal the town’s daily routines but also warm you up to an altitude frozen at minus 20 degrees Celsius. Parallel to the Main Bazaar is Old Town, which looks dilapidated but was once home to Leh’s nobility. Its labyrinthine pathways are a time warp—delicate tracery windows and low entrances with carved wooden beams can be seen amidst asymmetrical adobe houses.

The contrast between the past and the present becomes obvious if you walk away from Old Town and onto the Changspa road. Practically deserted in winter, this tourist ghetto’s rooftop cafes serving espresso shots in summer are now transformed into empty terraces with boarded-up entrances. Melting ice drips down travel agency offices and souvenir shop steps. The street culminates at the foot of the hill on which the iconic Shanti Stupa is built. High above both Old Town and Changspa, it is a great spot to climb up to for an afternoon with a history book. The bigger of the book shops remain closed until summer rolls around, but the Leh District Library is a friendly space with good literature to borrow.

By 5 pm, it is pack-up time. The chai stalls near A SAUNTER THROUGH ITS

many neighbourhoods would not only reveal the town’s daily routines but also warm you up to an altitude frozen at minus 20 degrees Celsius.
Main Bazaar pile up their benches, shops in Moti Market pull down shutters and pretty much everyone disappears from the streets. The scene shifts indoors and a new facet of winter unfolds. Winter is traditionally the time of the year when everyone gathers around a tandoor to listen to the elders narrate epics—they weave folklore and mythology, speaking of wise kings, gigantic warriors, monsters, and treasure hunters. Butter tea refills allow the stories to flow late into the night, stew and thukpa are served on chogtses (Ladakhi low tables), and there is always a jug of chhang (local barley brew) at hand. A typical snowy evening, when viewed from inside a Ladakhi home, resembles a folk tale with strong resilience to cold.

Winter is also the time dedicated to festivities, while summers are reserved for agricultural work. Ladakh’s recent fame has led to the shifting of several prominent festivals to summer for tourist convenience. Of the few that have survived the shuffle, Losar is the biggest. It marks the beginning of a new year as per the Ladakhi calendar and is usually in December. Prayer flags are tied from terrace to terrace and celebrations held in monasteries. On Losar eve, the smell of butter lamps diffuses through the town. Lamps are lit on each of the 500 steps that lead up to Shanti Stupa, as they are on every house terrace. For that one evening, it is easy to forget the numbing temperature outside, and to experience Leh in its harshest yet cosiest of seasons.

**Getting there:** Leh is accessible in winter only by air.

**Festivals:** Losar is coming up on December 19, and several monasteries such as Likir, Chemrey and Matho hold annual festivals between November and February. Ladakh Winter Sports Club organises events including coaching camps for ice skating and annual ice hockey championships. There are also archery games to look forward to.

**Walks and Treks:** The Chadar Trek in Zanskar is the prime reason for most tourists visiting Leh during winter. It is a difficult trek on a frozen river and should only be attempted under good health conditions. For easier walks, try Nimmu, Matho, Stok and other smaller villages situated at starting points of longer treks.