

# Business Line

TRAVEL

## Ladakh at sub-zero: What's a bit of icy weather when the hospitality is heart warming?

Tourism sector opening its doors in winter to break dependence on summer

CHITRA NARAYANAN

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Come winter and Ladakh usually downs its shutters, putting tourism in deep freeze as it dons a forbidding white costume.

But, a concerted effort is being made now by some travel and hospitality players to show the winter beauty of the land of high passes, when ice starts forming over the azure blue lakes and the mountains get dustings of snow.

The luxurious 82-room Grand Dragon Hotel in Leh, run by the Abdu family is leading the way in all-season hospitality, helped by promotional campaigns from GoAir, which operates flights 365 days to the roof of the world. Other hotels in Leh too are now opening their doors in winter, in a bid to break the tyranny of the dependence on the summer rush.

Even as Ladakh has seen an

upsurge in tourists in summers (this year it got 2 lakh visitors, compared to 1.7 lakh last year), in winters, typically, only adventure seekers and wildlife enthusiasts visit, says Gulam Mustafa, Director at the Grand Dragon. These visitors either do the Chadar trek or spot the elusive snow leopard.

But less energetic travellers can enjoy a customisable, comfortable winter experience put together by the hotel that not only showcases the lofty beauty of the cold desert but also gives a glimpse of life inside the monasteries and local Ladakhi culture. Even staying indoors has its attractions in this centrally heated hotel, as there are calligraphy classes in the Tibetan script, momo making lessons, dance tuitions from local folk dancers and an introduction to Ladakhi cuisine over an elab-



Picture postcard-perfect (Clockwise from above) Buddhist monks at a monastery; a welcoming dragon at a hotel; the Pangong Lake; and frozen River Chemdey

orate sit-down dinner.

It took us a day or two to get acclimatised to the rarefied air of 11,000 ft, and an acetazolamide tablet helped. Day one was spent indoors resting, sipping some hot garlic

soup, with the hotel allowing us to move around only after a doctor had checked oxygen and BP levels.

The way the itinerary was designed, we eased into outdoor activities gradually. Over

the next two days we made short sorties (in a heated SUV) to monasteries and markets. We discovered that most monasteries are perched on top of hills overlooking vil-

lages (the exception being Alchi, the oldest monastery in the region which is on flat land by the mighty Indus). Each monastery—be it Thiksey or Hemis—has its own unique charm, distinctive colours, motifs, glorious thanka paint-

ings and varied depictions of Buddha. The impish faces that the little monks made at us broke the formality of the prayer ceremony.

There is much to see in Leh city—palaces, shrines, markets—but it's sunset at the Shanti Stupa atop a hillock that held us spellbound. The peace pagoda to commemorate 2,500 years of Buddhism is a great spot to get a panoramic preview of the landscape.

The day trip options out of Leh are also plenty, but the hotel handpicked a drive to Khardungla pass, a visit to the confluence of Indus and Zaskar with a picnic lunch by the river and, of course, an excursion to the mysterious Pangong Lake.

If one were to put on canvas our journey to see the confluence of the Indus with the Zaskar, it would be painted in 50 shades of blue—the cerulean shades of the sky, the smokey hues of the mountains, the turquoise waters of the Indus intermingling with

the pale blue waters of the Zaskar.

**Blue motif**

Blue was the overarching motif again when we visited the surreally beautiful Pangong Tso lake—though the terrain we crossed was dramatically different, over high passes, down valleys cut by icy rivulets with yaks and gaddi dogs crossing us along the route. The lake itself was spellbinding, ringed by mysterious mountains. The snack shanties (most of them named after the movie *Three Idiots*) were shut during winter—but we had our lunch rations packed. By the time we were ready to descend from the Roof of the World, our impressions changed totally. The trans Himalayan region may look a forbidding fortress but the warmth of the Ladakhi hospitality can thaw through the bitterest of frost.

(The writer was in Ladakh at the invitation of The Grand Dragon Hotel.)