



Bazaar **ESCAPE**



WINTER WONDERLAND

The cold months in Ladakh reveal a frozen paradise, untainted by crowds of tourists

By Charukesi Ramachari

Pangong Lake

THE YEAR WAS 1974. LADAKH WAS STILL INDIA'S SECRET SHANGRILA, cut off from the outside world. Few outsiders from other parts of India made their way to this land of high passes, and foreigners were not allowed entry. When Ladakh was finally opened to tourism, just over 500 people visited that year, most of them foreigners in search of new lands in which to seek nirvana. Ghulam Mohiuddin was then a wide-eyed teenager who played truant from school with friends to gawk at the first hippies (as locals called the foreign tourists) who arrived in town. "They were very tall, with yellow hair and blue eyes. We had never seen anything like that, so the whole town had come out onto the roads," he says. Two years later, he was fetching and carrying for such tourists, as his father set up what was perhaps Ladakh's first homestay.

What started as one room expanded to 30 and eventually became the Grand Dragon Hotel in Leh. All these years later, his family still lives on site, now refurbished and welcoming the likes of Shah Rukh Khan. I am sitting in the lobby of this very hotel one frigid Ladakhi evening in January, listening to Mr Mohiuddin's reminiscences.

Forty years later, the annual visitor count to Ladakh stands at over 2,15,000, most of whom visit in the pleasant tourist season between June and October. And this has translated into more guesthouses, more vehicles, and more cafés, each vying for the same tourist rupee.



Monks on the roof of Thiksey Monastery

narrow runway. Given that Buddhism is the chief religion of the region, monasteries have always served as centres for both culture and administration. Every monastery has its own annual festival when monks perform masked dances and sacred thangka paintings—secreted away for the rest of the year—are hung on the outer walls of the main gumpa.

Each of these monastery festivals attracts thousands of devout locals and curious visitors. I step into the site, fully expecting to be pushed and shoved. Instead, I easily manage to find a seat at a vantage point above the central courtyard where the dances are to take place. There are only a couple of hundred tourists and locals who have quietly found themselves convenient viewing spots.

No pushing, no shoving, only an expectant hush in the air. I pat myself on the back for my decision to

During my earlier visits to the region, I had found myself unable to hear my own thoughts given the noise of the honking taxis. And the shores of Pangong Lake—made famous by the last scene of the movie *3 Idiots*—had seemed like one long line of selfie-takers. Not so this time.

Life has frozen in Ladakh, literally, as I can see when we stop somewhere to look at a stray waterfall. It now seems like a collection of silvery, icy stalactites hanging from the hillside. Even the confluence point of the Zaskar and Indus, known locally as the Sangam, wears a white blanket, the rivers' aquamarine hues only a thin ribbon in the middle.

Elsewhere, a game of ice hockey is in progress on a frozen lake, while all over the town, small groups of adventure enthusiasts



Ice hockey in Ladakh



The Tsarap river

are getting ready for the formidable Chadar trek on the Zaskar. Most of the eateries serving Italian, Chinese, and Mexican food are now shut. And even the Kashmiri shop-owners inviting tourists to come in "just to see" their pashminas seem listless.

Most importantly, the usual crowds and chaos I have come to associate with Ladakh are missing.

Take the morning when I head to Spituk monastery for their annual Gustor festival. Spituk sits on a hillock close to Leh airport, casting a benevolent eye on visitors landing on that agonisingly

brave the punishing cold of January in Ladakh. It felt as if I had the scene almost to myself: The fascinating cham masked dances performed by the lamas, with the bright reds and blues of the thangka fluttering in the background.

Ditto the next day at Lamayuru monastery. The oldest in Ladakh and one of the most popular among tourists, Lamayuru is usually run over by tourists who flock to see the dramatic 'moonscape' in which it is perched. This morning is so clear that I can see the hills in the great distance, capped intermittently with snow. The willow and poplar trees have shed their leaves, now swaying as mere skeletons in the harsh breeze. The resounding silence makes even this bleak terrain seem beautiful (and unlocks the awful inner poet even in a city cynic like me).

The solitary young monk here poses for photos with a shy smile, his maroon robes providing the only rush of colour to that stark brown canvas. While I am shivering in all my layers of winterwear, he has only a scraggy sweater under that robe to keep the cold out.

His curious questions echo those of the toothless old lady at the Leh market the earlier day. "We have to live here, why have you come here during our *chile kalani*?" she had asked, referring to the 40 days of peak winter when even locals pare their activities down to a minimum, finding warmth in their homes and hearths.

Huddled in ponchos on the open verandah at the Grand Dragon, at minus 25 degrees, I discovered the simple joy of roasting marshmallows on a bonfire. I had experienced the warmth that chhang (fermented barley drink) can impart on such nights. I had savoured the unique taste of gur gur chai (yak butter tea) in the company of monks after the morning prayers at Thiksey Monastery.

How do I explain this to her? How do I describe how this utter quiet has led to a stillness in my mind, something I had sought in vain during my other travels? ■

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