

★WINNER★
 5th ANNIVERSARY
JOURNEYS OF A LIFETIME
 INDIA SPECIAL

TO LADAKH WITH LOVE

The winner of our Journeys of A Lifetime contest, **Veda Hrudya Nadendla**, travels to Ladakh to honour her father's memory, and makes some adorable little friends along the way. Photographs by **Jasper James**

Growing up as the daughter of a naval officer, travelling and adventure were second nature to me. Without any notice, my dad would pack our luggage, load the car and drive us off into the mountains of Himachal or Kashmir. Sometimes, we'd go off for three weeks, other times just for a weekend. When I think of my childhood, I think of milestones—real, physical milestones, on the sides of the roads we drove on, taking in pine trees, snow-capped peaks and babbling brooks, stopping at dhabas along the way and talking to the locals. We had been planning a trip to Ladakh for a long time and were looking forward to making it happen, when my dad suddenly passed away in a car accident five years ago. Since then, I've been aching to make this journey—for my dad, for my family, for myself.

Then, in April 2015, I entered *Condé Nast Traveler's Journeys of A Lifetime* contest. This, I thought, was my chance to make my dream come true, though the odds faded as hundreds of entries

piled up over my own. But before I knew it, I'd won! Over the next few weeks, *CNT* worked closely with me to create the perfect journey: we discussed my expectations, what I hoped to achieve and how they could ensure this really became a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me.

I'm a psychology graduate, with a Master's in Human Resource and Organisational Development. I've taught English to children at risk in shelter homes, and written for *Youth Ki Awaaz*. Along the way, I've realised that I really want to, in some way, give back to society the things I was lucky enough to have as a child.

Finally, in July, I went on a 12-day trip with 17000 ft Foundation, to teach English to local kids. Co-founded by Sujata and Sandeep Sahu, the organisation arranges volunteerism trips to schools in Ladakh's remotest villages. Temperatures here go down to -20 °C, some of the schools they work with are cut off from civilisation for up to six months every year.

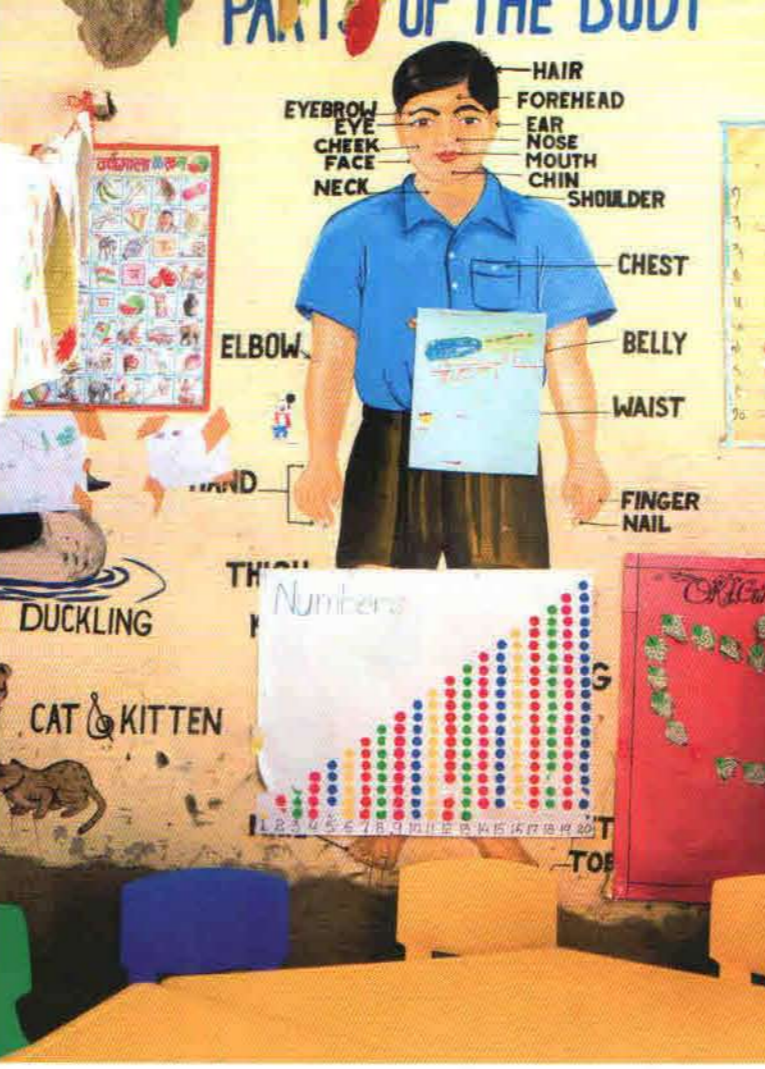
We arrived in Leh and spent the first couple of days acclimatising, training to teach and being tourists. I finally set my eyes on the famous Pangong Lake and Chang La Pass, at about 17600ft. The Chang La Baba temple is the only place in the world where I've not just seen the colourful Tibetan prayer flags fluttering in the wind, but felt their vibrations and energy flowing through the valleys, mountains, and myself. It was a sunlit day—excitedly, I dipped my toes in the icy water (I could almost hear Dad egging me on). Nearby, army men in jeeps were enjoying their time off, and tourists sat by the lake, listening to Bollywood music on their phones.

But this is the Ladakh we all know of: where I was headed next was a complete surprise. After driving four hours, we reached the village of Kanji. No tourists and a terrain that's rugged, moon-like, rocky and grey. The clouds cast shadows on the mountains like in an oil painting. Kanji has only about 50 houses, and I stayed in the home of Norbu Le and his wife. We spent →

our mornings drinking gurgur chai (butter tea), and our evenings sharing barley-based local alcohol called chhang. Ladakhis have this innate, welcoming nature that's somehow more intimate than in other tourist destinations. I wasn't just plied with momos; I was brought into the kitchen and told to dig right in and help out. Their hospitality makes you feel like you're at home; they even called me cho-cho, signifying that I am their little girl.

Soon, I started teaching at the Govt Middle School, Kanji, which has 49 students, ranging from four-year-olds to eighth-graders, all of whom spoke →

"I was reminded of my family road trips, how we'd stop on highways and share tea with the locals, managing to communicate despite speaking different languages"



A class in progress at the Govt Middle School, Kanji. Left: the wall of a classroom at the school in Skurbuchan. Previous pages: Nadendla at Pangong Lake



only Ladakhi. I was meant to break down difficult words and explain their meaning through visuals or kinesics (communication through action or gesture). These kids rarely meet anyone from outside the region, so they're shy around strangers. I would start each class with a physical activity—wiggling our fingers, shaking our shoulders, jogging in our spots—that got the kids laughing. Within minutes, they'd be talking at the top of their voices and the energy in the room would transform. They'd hang on to my every word, so curious about me, and repeat every word I'd say with a mixture of bashfulness and eagerness.

Truthfully, by the end of the week, I wasn't thinking about how rough

these adorable, pink-cheeked kids had it in remote, rural Ladakh. I was thinking about their amazing sense of community. The children all looked up for one another; if one of the little ones cried, another one would pacify them, and everything would go back to normal as if nothing had happened. These children practically run the school themselves—they know when to sit for classes, when to ring the bell for lunch, they set up the carpets themselves so they can all sit and eat together in a neat line. Their levels of responsibility and the care they take of their surroundings really made me question the system and value of the education we have back in our 'developed' cities.

One morning, after the daily assembly, about 30 kids gathered around me, to teach me Ladakhi. As I wrote every Ladakhi word in my book, they'd yell out the English equivalents. It was euphoric. I've never seen such willingness and desire to not just learn, but to share knowledge, experience, homes, worlds. I was reminded again of my family road trips, and how we'd stop on highways and share tea with the locals, managing to communicate despite speaking different languages →

Back in Leh, we spent the next two days at the gorgeous Grand Dragon Ladakh hotel (www.thegranddragonladakh.com), doubles from about ₹11,500, a family-run, eco-friendly luxury hotel. I was grateful for its hot, steamy showers and comfortable beds, but I missed my little muffins in their maroon sweaters. We reviewed the teaching programme in detail, before exploring the shops and the cafes full of tourists sharing stories over momos. It struck me how many times, in the last five years, I'd imagined being here, and each time, my heart would tighten. Ladakh was always that mystical land that my father said was one of his most cherished journeys.

Now, being there myself, I felt as if my heart was full, and open. Ladakh is no more a mystery. I know the land, its people and their ways, its sunrises and moods. Even a tiny bit of its language and dialects. Ladakh is home. In my mind, I could hear my father's favourite song playing:

"Far away, long ago
 Glowing dim as an ember
 Things my heart used to know
 Things it yearns to remember
 And a song someone sings
 Once upon a December"

I miss my father so much, and on every step of this journey, I felt he was next to me—in the snow, in the schools, jumping with the kids, telling me to step into the cold lake, reassuring me that I'd be a good teacher, that the kids would take to me and most of all, doing what he loved best—travelling India, and sharing its surprises and beauty with his family. In every possible way, this has truly been the journey of my lifetime.

17000 ft Foundation is a non-profit organisation with a focus on education for every child, at every school, in every village of Ladakh. To volunteer, or to learn more, visit www.17000ft.org.

Clockwise from bottom left: students at the school in Kanji; a student at the Skurbuchan school flaunting his cap; young locals in Kanji village



For a video of Veda Hrudya Nadendla's trip to Ladakh, visit cnavel.in