

Culture Inspiration:

A synonym for serenity & solace – Ladakh

By: Megha S. Roy

A land like no other...bounded by world's two highest mountain ranges, the Karakoram and the Himalayas in their majesty, Ladakh is a land where the earth meets the sky.

Be an adventure seeker, or a fervent explorer or a devotee of Buddhism, you can find just the right thing for you in Ladakh. Legends state that several years ago, Ladakh was filled only with water. A saint named Dha Chomba Nomegung from Kashmir prayed for human existence. As an answer to his prayers, water in the region receded forming beautiful mountains and valleys. Then different races such as Mon, Tibetians, and Brokpa settled down here.

Ladakh is described by traveler Fa-hian as the land where snow never melts, and corn only ripens. Ladakh means the land of passes; 'La' meaning pass and 'Dakh' meaning land. It is also called as 'Little Tibet' due to the strong influence of Tibetan culture.



Additionally, it is known as 'Hermit Kingdom' 'Broken Moon', and 'Last Shangri-La'. The country presents a mesmerizing blend of Buddhist and Muslim cultures. Kashmiri influence can be seen in the wood carvings in the monasteries. Buddhist bronze statues are seen in several Ladakh monasteries.



The climate and weather of Ladakh is very unique. Summer temperature ranges around 27 degrees, while in winter, the mercury drops up to minus 20 degrees. Its thin air makes the sun's heat, stronger than at lower altitudes. It is said that only in Ladakh, a man can suffer sunstroke and frostbite at the same time!

Buddhism is predominantly followed here, and Ladakh has its own fascinating version of the religion. Buddhist monasteries here are rich repositories of ancient murals, wood carvings, fresco paintings, and the special golden image of Buddha. The Ladhaki's greet the visitors in their own special way with a "Julley"; meaning hello. Their warmth and friendliness makes the trip, a special one.

Wildlife:

Wild yak is found only in Ladakh. Docile marmot, mouse hare, and bharal are also seen. Bharal is a kind of sheep with brownish-gray color which gives them a protective camouflage. When they stand still in meadows, it is extremely difficult to spot them. Exotic birds such as black necked crane and bar-headed geese breed in the lakes. Watching the captivating grey tits, kestrel, bactrian magpies, turkoman rock pigeon, larks, desert wheat eaters, and finches can be rewarding for avid bird watchers. Goats known as ibex are seen here sporting fine, spiral horns looking distinct and beautiful. A main attraction of Ladakh is the snow leopard. In the Buddhist realm, stories exist that, great lamas make trips in the form of snow leopards in search of rare medicinal herbs.

Walking through the snow capped mountains of Ladakh one would feel that they are in the mythological Kailash, the dwelling of Lord Shiva. The unspoiled beauty of the Nubra valley stands apart from the rest, filled with wild flowers and gazing yak. Visit the Drogpas tribe and you will be greeted with a song and dance which indicates their philosophy of love and life.

Festivals:



The richness of centuries old culture, of the country is celebrated with pageantry during its festivals. They have an inherent social impact, facilitating people to interact and enjoy. In September, the moonscape of the country comes alive with a spectacular magic of its own. Ladhakis swarm the streets, adorned with dazzling ornaments, and turquoise headpieces. Monks wear colorful masks and dance to the entrancing music of flutes, trumpets, and cymbals. Archery competitions, horse polo, mock marriage, along with a mouth watering Lakadhi cuisine are the highlights of the festival.

Ladakhi Cuisine:

The Himalayan ecosystem has resulted in a different food system. Their food habits are based on the agricultural practices, and availability of crops in the high altitude land. They make around 60 traditional dishes representing the rough topography of the region. Thukpa is a thick soup made from vegetables made and wheat flour making their staple food. Sku, timok, Pava, Cholak, MokMok are few specialities. Mouth watering momos, a kind of steamed dumplings made with vegetables or meat are taken with fiery chili sauce.



Visiting a Ladhaki house, you might not miss out their Chang or gur-gur chai. Chang is one of the most popular beverages of the Ladhakis. Gur-gur chai made from fresh butter and salt is also popular. The tea is prepared in enormous quantities in big copper pots. Drinking up to 30-40 cups in a day is the normal quota for a Ladhaki. Their etiquettes demand that the host's cup should never be less than full. *Anybody for a (maybe 40) cup(s) of tea?* This ancient elixir could do more than just warm our bodies.

Enjoying the splendor of beautiful flowers at such a high altitude is one of the most delightful travel experiences in Ladakh. The majestic brilliance of the Siachen rose along the Nubra valley transforms the place into a relic of paradise. Hues of the valley are deep and striking due to the ultra violet rays of the sun at such high altitudes. Walking along the watercourses, amidst the picturesque panorama, one rarely feels lonely.

A place once explored by traders for better trading options, Ladakh challenges the world today; with rivers to negotiate, passes to cross and many more. One can immerse themselves in the Buddhist culture in the local villages, and monasteries. Travelling through the country, one can experience a peaceful tranquility, along with the rhythm of shrill calls from Ladakhi nomads herding their yaks and sheep. One experiences the eloquence of dharma and propagation of Buddhism. But what is really important is how much one is able to incorporate the lessons of this journey into their own life.



Things to do:

- Mingle with the local people in Ladakh
- Experience a cultural home stay in a traditional Ladhaki village
- Enjoy Buddhist ceremonies & visit monasteries
- Try sumptuous Ladhaki cuisine
- Go for a trekking