


Ladakh: Paradise on Earth

**Kapil Krishan came back
from Ladakh enthralled by its
culture and natural beauty**

Photo: Kapil Krishan



It was in early June that we realised that the annual financial results were done with, and that it was a good time to take a holiday with our daughter before she flew away for higher studies.

Arriving at a consensus on a holiday destination is one of the most difficult bridges to cross for us: my daughter dislikes mountains, my wife likes historical places, and I prefer a seaside holiday. We usually end up doing a world tour just proposing and rejecting various destinations.

An overseas holiday looked difficult. We gathered that getting a European visa would take a month, and last-minute rates were not worth paying. Being the month of June, we also had to rule out many places in Western and Southern India, as well as much of Asia, where it would be raining. Goa is a destination we often end up agreeing on after discarding everything else, but this time, my daughter suggested Leh. Although my wife had earlier turned down the idea, I summoned up my self-presumed leadership role (mostly disputed by my family) and convinced her. I told her it's better to go there at a 'younger' age, and besides, that Ladakh is a place we must visit at least once in our lifetime.

Leh, here we come

Having made our decision, we began to hear scary stories from our friends about altitude sickness, and even having to return home mid-way. However, I for one was prepared to see it as an adventure holiday, and a test of my personal toughness.

We had a direct, early morning flight to Leh's Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Airport. In 3 hours, we had flown from sea level to 3,300 metres (11,000 feet). It was almost as if we hadn't landed, and were still in the clouds. The other hill-stations we have visited – Shimla, Mussoorie, Manali, and so on – were all at around 2,000 meters, so this was a big change. Suddenly, the air seemed light, and it was very easy to breathe – thank the lack of pollution, I guess. At the airport, we read signboards advising us on how to stay healthy at such heights ('Be careful if you feel any headache, etc.'). and my wife was quick to tell me, 'See, I told you it is risky going to Leh.'

Go slow and acclimatise

Checking into our hotel, we began to feel disoriented. Our lungs have reserves that kept us going for some time, but now the rarity of the air was hitting us. Breathing was suddenly not so easy. The hotel staff explained that we must spend the first 24-48 hours 'acclimatising'. This was a first for us, because as true '*baniya*' travellers, we like to hit the road the moment we land, preferring not to waste a single moment and making the most of our time. 48 hours was out of the question, so we somehow got attuned to the idea of doing nothing that entire day. We also drank garlic water, which is supposed to help the body acclimatise.

In any event, we did manage a city tour to Namgyal Monastery, from where we spotted Leh Palace.

It was difficult to make out the palace at first, because its brown walls are so well camouflaged into the mountains. We also took in a nice view of the town, which looks so calm and serene with its brown and white houses, and green Army camps at one end.

On a spiritual trail

Next day, we were off to the nearby monasteries. On the way, we stopped at Magnetic Hill – a place where, quite inexplicably, your car rolls on flat ground even when the engine is turned off. We also enjoyed a bit of mountain biking there.

Moving on, we arrived at the first of several remote monasteries clinging precariously to the mountain's edge. Quite unlike the many religious site I have visited, where one always runs into throngs

Photo: Kapil Krishan

of people, the monastery was serenely empty. With no one around to disturb the peace, we felt at one with the Almighty. Our next stop was the ancient Alchi Monastery, with its wooden buildings and an indoor statue so tall that the ceiling had to be built around it. Here, there were signs of life all over, with many shops along the way. Some of the older men and women we passed had such craggy, weathered-hardened faces, they looked as rugged as the mountains themselves. Here was living proof of the adage that we take on the appearance of our environment. What I also sensed around me was a certain stoicism – and it made me wonder why I am always in such a rush back home. The Lamas, in their crimson gear, stood out starkly against their surroundings.

Off to Pangong

We were very excited, the next day, to be visiting Pangong Lake, which was 'put on the map' by Aamir Khan's movie, *3 Idiots*. Since we were not making an overnight stay, and because the distances are large, we had to make an early start. Our driver, who we thought was oh-so relaxed the previous day, seemed to be in a rush right from the get-go. Soon, we realised that this was because he feared that the melting snow, which forms rivulets as it flows down the mountain, might end up blocking the road, especially by the afternoon. His foresight is what made our trip happen – vehicles that left later in the day were turned back because the road had become unsafe. I realised then why Ladakh is considered an adventure destination: with so much

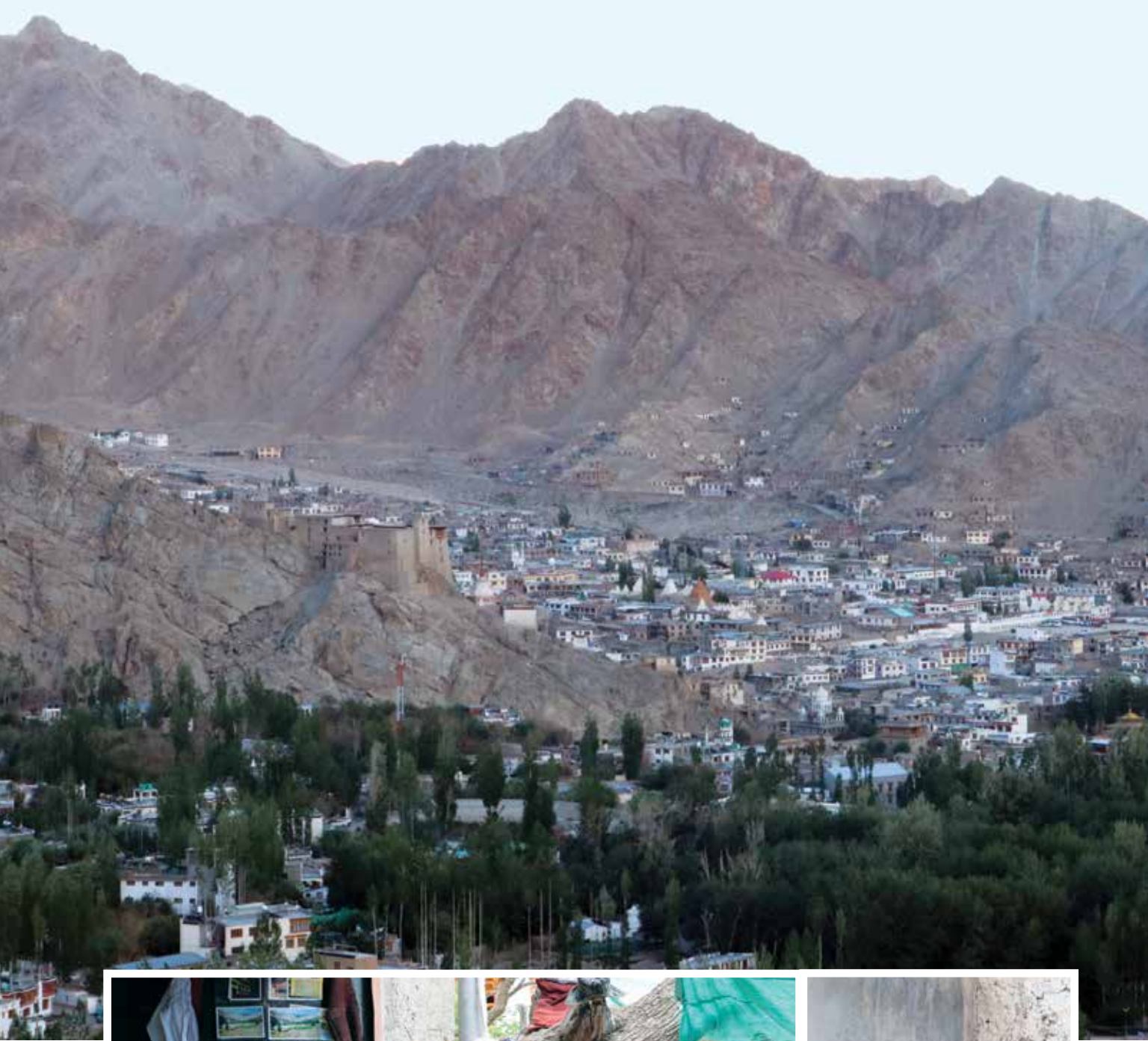
uncertainty, what you end up seeing depends mainly on the grace of the weather Gods.

As always, with anything where expectations run so high, there is a real risk of disappointment. While Pangong Lake is indeed vast in its expanse, it looked to us just like another lake. Also, all of the tea shops around it have taken their names from the movie – 'Ranchos Café' and the like. Its 'Bollywoodisation' may have put us off a bit.

Enthralled by nature

The highlight of our trip was to come the following day, when we visited the Nubra Valley. Until then, we had experienced nothing but the hot Ladakhi sun, and we were beginning to wonder why we had bothered to bring so many woollens along. That day, though,





Photos: Kapil Krishan



it was cloudy, and we were glad to experience what we thought was 'nice' weather. Our driver kept telling us that it is hot weather that is good, and we soon came to understand the wisdom of his words. In a single day, we experienced snow, rivers, and desert – one of the best possible combinations you can have in nature. We also saw sheep, yak, wild horses and mountain dogs, as well as small yellow, pink, and purple flowers.

Nubra is the sort of place I could never have imagined. It was as though a colossal, millennia-old

river had evaporated, and we were now travelling to the bottom of a dried-up ocean. Everyone should visit Ladakh just to experience this fascinating place. I felt humbled by the colossal mountains, and it is a place so unreal, it feels like a massive, abandoned movie set. Dotted along the mountains, at heights that seem impossible to reach, are numerous monasteries.

One of the highlights of visiting Nubra is to take a camel ride. The camels here originally came from Mongolia, left behind by travellers many years ago. When foreigners discovered the Valley in the 1990s, there were only about a dozen camels left. From 2005 onwards, though, and especially after *3 Idiots* was released in 2009, Ladakh became a very popular destination for Indian tourists. Expectedly, there has been a manifold increase in the camel population.

Different and unique – in so many ways

Across Ladakh, we drove past Army camps located in the middle of nowhere. One marvels at the tenacity of our defence personnel, who stay upbeat even in the most remote places, carrying on happily with their daily exercises. Many of these camps have unique names that sound like IPL teams – one was called 'Hyderabad Scorpions'. There are numerous occasions when melting snow blocks the road, causing miles-long car-lines that must wait for the army to clear the way. At such times, the arrival of the mighty Indian Army creates an immeasurable feeling of safety.

We also saw countless motorcyclists, especially on the 'world's highest motorable road', the Khardung La Pass. It was remarkable to see these enthusiasts crossing broken roads, weathering snow and rain. Another unique thing we noticed was how common the Magpie Robin – a beautiful black-and-white bird – is. You see them flying around freely everywhere,



much like crows do in our cities – only the Robins are so much prettier!

The people of Leh are some of the gentlest I have met. They speak in a soft, unhurried manner, with a timbre that seems to require less effort to generate. Their voices are so soft, in fact, that you do not want to interrupt them, and tend to listen to and agree with whatever they say. I would guess that speaking in low tones is a natural way to conserve energy in such rarefied heights.

Overall, Leh is not yet very 'commercialised', and the people remain quite simple. However, things are starting to change. One hotel owner was horrified to hear that a taxi had overcharged us, lamenting, 'See, this is happening even in Ladakh.' I would urge my readers to experience this stunning corner of India before it goes further down the road to commercialisation. ■



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