



TRIPREVIEW

LADAKH

Trekking in the Land of the Ladakhis

By Ann (Steffeck) Allen, Spokane, Washington

The first day was a killer. We started walking at 8 in the morning and dragged into camp at a quarter to 5 in the afternoon. We had walked over two mountain passes, the highest of which was 12,500 feet. Between the steep terrain, the thinness of the air and the intense ultraviolet rays of the sun, we felt that we had just about reached our endurance levels.

The “we” in this adventure? Five American women who had gathered in New Delhi, India, on July 21 to begin a “Women’s Trek to the Himalayas.”

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(middle right) Most locals still wear traditional clothing. This young Ladakhi woman is wearing a traditional wedding dress with a perak headdress, which resembles the head of a cobra.

About Ladakh and the group

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There were two focuses for this trip: trekking the Indian Himalayas in very remote Ladakh and a woman-to-woman cultural exchange of American and Ladakhi women. Both experiences have left long-lasting memories in all of us.

Ladakh is located in northernmost India in the state of Jammu-Kashmir. Until 1947, Ladakh was an independent kingdom. Since 1947, it has been a part of the Indian union. Situated in the Indus River Valley on the eastern side of Kashmir, Ladakh is perched on the western edge of the very high and dry Tibetan Plateau. Rainfall is limited to three inches per year, similar to the Sahara. This part of the Himalayas is barren, stark and lifeless. Yet these mountains are incredibly beautiful, oftentimes

breathtaking. Many rise to a height of 20,000 feet, with the higher ones being covered with snow and glaciers.

The five Americans who agreed to this adventure were from one end of our country to the other. Well-educated professionals, we were really not a young group, our ages ranging from 31 to 60. And, as we were to come to find out about each other, we all were divorced. I’m not sure what that says, if anything.



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The Trek Leader

We began our trek on a beautiful morning from a little village called Themisgam. We simply walked out the door of the house in which we were staying, went to the edge of this small village and just kept walking. This was the beginning of six days of trekking. We walked from village to village to village with magical-sounding names such as Hemis, Yangthang, Likir, Themisgam and Ney. And along the way we visited gompas (monasteries).

With the exception of the first day, we ordinarily walked four to six hours. The highest summit we went over was 13,000 feet. As the Ladakhis are fond of saying, their mountains are “a little up and a little down.” Actually, I thought they were a lot up and a lot down. For most of us, it wasn’t easy, but it was doable. The incredible beauty of these barren mountains certainly made it worth the effort.

The gentleman in charge of this trek was a Ladakhi guide by the name of Wangchook. He was excellent. He was kind, patient and understanding and a true diplomat, always cheerful and smiling. He had been born and raised in this part of Ladakh, so he knew these mountains like the back of his hand. He had working for this tour company, Journeys International, for 12 years and for Exodus before that. We couldn’t have been in better hands.

Practicalities of the Trek

We soon found out how indispensable a really good pair of walking boots are. Much of the terrain we covered consisted of rocks and loose dirt and was very steep. If we had had a particularly rocky walk that day, our feet would be a little sore. But as far as I know, no one suffered from blisters. Besides our boots, we wore comfortable, lightweight long-sleeved cotton shirts, long pants and a good sun hat. Everyone had plenty of sunscreen. We were fortunate that we didn’t have to carry heavy packs on our backs. A team of donkeys plus two horses carried everything. The only thing we had to deal with was a day pack containing our water for the day, camera and whatever else we thought we’d need. It’s amazing how heavy water can be! But we didn’t dare venture out without it. At lower elevations there were streams, but we knew better than to drink from them and risk getting sick. However, our Ladakhi friends often refreshed themselves in the cold, glacier-fed water.

Food on trek was excellent. The cook and his helper had been trained by the tour company in both food preparation and sanitation. The menu was basically vegetarian, as there was no refrigeration to keep meats safely. A typical dinner began with a delicious, light, homemade soup. We often had rice, potatoes or chapatis, a type of flat bread similar to a flour tortilla. There were always four or five delicious vegetarian dishes followed by a light dessert which often was fruit. One night we even had a custard that was very tasty. And there was always plenty of tea.

Clean drinking water was not a problem. Every night the cooks would boil water and fill water bottles. Sometimes we even had cold water if there was a stream nearby in which to submerge out bottles. What a treat cold water was! We slept in tents barely large enough for two sleeping bags with a narrow pathway between them. We couldn’t stand upright, so we spent most of the time maneuvering around on the floor. With only flashlights for light, it took only one night to figure out that all preparations for sleeping needed to be done before the sun went down.

Washing facilities were basic, to say the least! If we wanted a bath or to wash out our socks, we headed for the stream. Since these were fed by glacier and snow melt, my first step in took my breath away. After that it was heaven. I remember being surprised at how much shampoo it took to wash my hair in such cold water. We had been asked to bring biodegradable soap so as not to pollute the water. We happily complied.

(above) Likir village in Ladakh.

Ladakh Home Visits

Throughout our journey we met the Ladakhis, who are amongst the friendliest and most gracious people anywhere in the world. Being a strong Buddhist society, they are a very gentle and accepting people. Their appearance is a combination of Tibetan and Mongolian features. Their faces and hands are deeply tanned from exposure to the strong rays of the sun at high elevations. This exposure also gives them a craggy, weathered look. They are quick to smile at travelers and friends alike, almost singing their favorite greeting, "Jullay." One of the most interesting parts of this trip was staying in several Ladakhi homes. Their buildings, including the houses, are made of large mud bricks that are then whitewashed. The roofs are flat and are used as additional rooms - at least in the summertime.

The center of the Ladakhi home is the kitchen. They gather around a low stove to prepare food, eat it, warm themselves, socialize and generally just live. The Ladakhis do everything on the floor. They sit on the floor, sleep on the floor, prepare food on it, eat on it, feed their children on it, conduct business, spin yarn - whatever needs to be done is done on the floor. And they move up and down from it effortlessly. They'll be just standing there and suddenly their legs fold and they quickly drop to the floor. They stand back up just as effortlessly, with no creaking or groaning. I wish I could say it was just as easy for us Americans, but it wasn't.

Acquired Tastes

The Ladakhi diet would not be considered wonderful by either American or general nutritional standards. Not much grows at such high elevations. Summertime does bring some vegetables from their gardens, so you'll see potatoes, turnips, carrots, peas and a green leafy vegetable similar to spinach. However, barley grows very well at high altitudes; consequently, a major staple in the Ladakhi diet is something called tsampa. Tsampa is made by roasting barley in a pan of sand, sieving out the roasted barley and then grinding it into a powder or flour in a water mill. It is then eaten in a variety of ways, including just plain. It also finds its way into soups, cakes, gruel and the ever-popular butter tea. Butter tea is made in a rather narrow wooden churn similar to a butter churn. A strong tea is poured into the churn along with salted dzo butter and a little tsampa. After it is churned, it comes out more like a broth than a tea and the Ladakhis love it, drinking it all day long. Not to be left unmentioned is their chang. It's often referred to as beer but in my opinion is more like home brew. It is made from barley and millet seasoned with pepper and sugar. Since it is not filtered before drinking, grains are found swimming in the mixture. Both their butter tea and their chang are what I would have to call "acquired tastes"! And the Ladakhis have certainly acquired them.

Traditional Dress

Although Western dress has found its way to Ladakh, most of the locals still wear their traditional clothing. Both men and women wear a thick, wraparound woolen robe tied at the waist with a colorful scarf. Even in the summertime you will see the women wear a goat skin across their shoulders which provides warmth as well as gives protec-



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(above) Ladakhi grandmother with her 4-month old granddaughter.

(left) Woman cooking chapatis in her kitchen in Likir village.



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tion from the large baskets they wear on their backs to carry sticks, pots and pans, babies and small children or whatever they need to carry. Occasionally, the goat skin is replaced by a brightly patterned shawl. On their heads they wear a very distinctive hat called a gonda. When new, the gonda resembles a small, colorful stovepipe hat with an upturned flap on each side made of goat or lamb fur. The gonda literally perches on the crown of one’s head; it is not pinned on, nor does it sit atop piled-up hair. It simply sits there. On their feet they wear thick-soled Tibetan-like boots made of felted wool. For very special occasions, such as religious festivals, weddings and celebrations, the family perak will be worn. This is a traditional headdress that resembles the head of a cobra. The top of the headdress is flat and extends down the back to the waist. It is covered with chunks of turquoise. The number and quantity of stones indicates the wealth of the family. When the woman dies, the perak is handed down to the oldest child in the family.

Lessons learned

There are many lessons to be learned from this kind of travel. Packing your duffel bag is just one of them - and not the first. Physical preparation is a must. I worked out three times a week for four months prior to leaving for India. And thank heavens I had done at least that much. Four years would have been much better. You learn about what kind of hiking boots to buy, how strong a sun screen you’ll need, what sleeping bags are available and which one will work the best for you. Along the way you learn that your cosmetics are not as important as you thought they were and that water is all important. More importantly, you learn some lessons about yourself. You learn that you can still do something that is very physically challenging. You learn that trekking, as is often the case in life, is a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. You learn that it’s okay to go at your own pace and to sit down and rest when you need to. You learn how much solace and satisfaction there is in being alone on a mountainside. And, perhaps most of all, you learn that you are indeed just one small entity in a very large world.



(above) Students and a teacher at school in Yangthang village.

(right) Our group [from left]: Ann Allen, Spokane, WA; Cindy Hamilton, Danville, CA; Lucinda Styne, San Ramon, CA; Arlene Young, Cranston, RI; and Wangchok, Ladakh.

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