

Ladakh 2015 - Impressions

17 June - 1 August 2015



Prayer flags on Sisir-La, in the distance Singi-La and to the right of the pass ,Rinpoche's Hand'

Ladakh is such an amazing and unique place on this planet! Even after many previous visits I am still awestruck by the vastness of the mountains, the intensity of the blue sky or the green barley fields, the kindness and generosity of the people, the spectacular rock formations, the power of the natural elements, or the stillness of a remote valley.

This time I was especially grateful for the fact that I could go on this trip, for various reasons. First of all there is the fact that I am able to WALK and to go on hikes in the mountains! Since the amputation of the lower leg three years ago I have not only regained the ability to walk but even to do hiking tours in the mountains.

A month before leaving for Ladakh I caught a severe cold with a strong cough and pain in the chest. I had no energy and already walking up the stairs to the second floor at home made me feel exhausted. It was difficult, or at times impossible, to imagine climbing a pass of 5000 meters above sea level

As the pain in the chest did not disappear, even with medication, I had to go for a scan one day before departure. What would it show? It showed that I had five (yes, 5!!!) broken ribs.

Another thing that left me worrying was the fact that the prosthesis did not really fit in the weeks before the trip. This can happen because the form of the stump is always subject to

change. But I thought that it was so unfair to happen before this much anticipated trip. All the attempts to make the prosthesis fit were not successful. Finally, finally, finally – after much frustration – I came to terms with the fact that I might not join the two treks.



Flight over the Himalayas

Welcome at Leh airport

On June 18, my birthday, we landed in Leh – and Ladakh presented me with a very special birthday present: after two days in Leh the prosthesis was fitting well (all the pressure points had disappeared!) and I was full of energy. Even the pain of the broken ribs was minimal; my friends were very kind to lift heavy bags for me and carrying my daypack at times. My gratitude for this sudden change of conditions and joy about my good fortune were boundless – sometimes wonders simply happen!

What follows are some impressions from this trip. It is not a chronological revue of this trip.

Pangong Lake, one of the largest brackish lakes in Asia, is situated in the Changtang plateau in Eastern Ladakh at an altitude of about 4200 meters above sea level. About one third of the lake belongs to India, whereas the other two-thirds belong to Tibet (China). The lake has a length of 134 km and is 5 km wide at its broadest point. Pangong Lake means ‘long, narrow, enchanted lake’.

The lake acts as an important breeding ground for a variety of birds including a number of migratory birds. During summer, the Bar-headed goose and Brahmini ducks are commonly seen here. The region around the lake supports a number of species of wildlife including kiangs (wild ass) and marmots.

After staying in Leh for a few days (3500 meters above sea level) we made a three-day trip to this beautiful lake for further acclimatisation at a higher altitude. Already the first glimpse of the lake with its turquoise water is breath-taking and stunning – it seems as if entering a different world and remains etched in the memory.



Pangong Lake seen from Merak gompa

We drove along the lake to the village of Merag (this is as far as tourists are allowed to go) where we spent the night in a homestay. The following day we walked along the lake to the village of Man. The air is so clean at this altitude that the colours of the water, the mountains, and the sky are incredibly vivid. The colours of the lake are so varied: a constant change of all different shades of blue, turquoise, and emerald green. The sunlight and the water were dancing this joyful play of colours and forms all day long.



Tashi's dance at Pangong Lake

Also Tashi was dancing with joy after lifting a huge flat stone to make one of the uncountable cairns found all over in Ladakh. We had invited Tashi (our friend and horseman from Lingshed) and his daughters Stanzin and Lobsang for this trip.

For the second night we enjoyed the hospitality of the Yokma Homestay in Man. The rooms were clean and well-equipped with mattresses and blankets and the food

was tasty: rice, dal, vegetables, and chapati. They told us that after dinner there would be a Cultural Programme on a flat piece of land a bit below the homestay. Before it was getting dark the village ladies, dressed in the traditional clothes, started the local songs and dances. That a woman was playing the drum was a big surprise for me. During all my previous visits to Ladakh I had only seen men playing the drums, never women!

Gradually more tourists, mostly Indian, arrived from the Tent Accommodation near the lake. They were huddled in thick jackets and woollen hats as the temperature had dropped quite a bit after sunset and they sat very close to the smoky yak-dung fire.

The following day we walked along the lake for a couple of hours before driving back to Leh. The drive from Pangong Lake to Leh is about five hours and is in itself an unforgettable experience. The road crosses the Chang-La (5360 meters above sea level) said to be the third highest motorable mountain pass in the world.



Cultural Dances at Man

During our second trip by car we had to cross another high pass, the Khardong-La. It was long said to be the highest motorable road with 5600 meters above sea level, but then newer measurements revealed that the pass is 'only' 5359 meters high. This pass is situated to the north of Leh and the Indus Valley and is the gateway to the **Nubra Valley**. The road was built in 1976 and was opened for public vehicles in 1988.



'Alphorn serenade' at Khardong-La

Khardong-La was a historically important pass as it was situated on the major caravan route from Leh to Kashgar in Central Asia. About 10'000 horses and camels used to take the route annually, and a small population of Bactrian camels can still be seen at Hundar, in the area north of the pass.

Due to the harsh weather conditions in Ladakh the road is more a dirt track than anything else. The car ride is very bumpy and nothing for those who easily get car-sick! But again, the scenery is incredibly amazing and the pictures taken were incredibly many.....! Our driver was very patient and stopped as often as we requested.

When we finally got down to the **Nubra Valley** we were greeted by a very strong wind. This valley is about 500 meters lower than the Indus Valley around Leh and has many sand dunes. Whenever we got out of the car we got a ‘facial cleansing’ with the sand carried by the wind. Our first destination was the ‘Holy Lake’ near



Nubra Valley



Tashi and Karma at the Holy Lake near Panamik

Panamik. As we were driving through the small villages we noticed many colourful flags along the road and the local people in their best clothes. We wondered what was going on When we saw a banner across the road “Welcome to H. H. the Sakya Trizin”, we knew why everybody was out. We stopped in the village of Samur where a big crowd had gathered. Actually, we were looking for a restaurant because we were hungry. We learned that H. H. the Sakya Trizin was supposed to come to Samur by helicopter from Leh. But due to the bad weather condition the flight was delayed (and later completely cancelled). In a small restaurant we were lucky to get the last few plates of

fried noodles with the help of our driver who simply went into the kitchen and helped the cook.

The Holy Lake was ‘hidden’ in the depression of a big formation of rocks in the middle of a wide flat valley. We had to walk uphill for about 100 meters and then down to the lake. We were fortunate to be alone at the lake so that we could enjoy the stillness and serenity of this place. Well, after some time the stillness was broken by the sound of an Alphorn! Katharina, part of our group, had unpacked her ‘portable’ Alphorn and improvised holy melodies. She also played the Alphorn on many different occasions during our trip: often on top of a pass, at the camp sites on our second trek, or on the balcony of the hotel in Keylong to celebrate Virañani’s 60th birthday!

We spent the first night in the Nubra Valley in **Diskit** where the preparations for the teachings by H. H. the Sakya Trizin were in full progress. The organisers and the people still hoped that he would be able to come the following day. In the morning of the next day, we went up to the monastery perched high up on the mountain slope. A huge Buddha statue had been built a few



Diskit gompa and the huge Buddha statue



years ago not far from the monastery. This statue dominates the valley and can be seen from far away.

Then we went to the place where the teachings happened. A field as big as a football field was already packed with people. They sat in the sun, many with an umbrella to give them some shade. We also sat down and hoped that we would, at least, be present for the begin of the teachings. In the meantime, it had become clear that another monk would give the

The huge Buddha statue in Diskit

teachings because H. H. the Sakya Trizin was unable to come. As usual at such gatherings butter tea and local breads were distributed, and as usual one had to wait Finally, we left before the teachings started because we had a long drive to the village of Turtuk ahead of us.

Turtuk is a long way down the Shyok valley, only ten kilometres away from the Pakistani border. Before 1971 it had belonged to Baltistan but then it became Indian territory. Only five years ago this delicate area was opened for tourists.



Upper and lower Turtuk – in the far distance: a peak from the Karakorum range



The old mosque

The village of Turtuk has two parts: a lower part along the bank of the Shyok river and an upper part about 80 meters above the river. The access to the upper part is over a small bridge in a side valley where no cars can pass.

In this way, upper Turtuk has no vehicles, only foot paths. We spent the rest of the afternoon and the next morning exploring the village, the gumpa, and an old mosque situated just below the gumpa. The inhabitants of Turtuk are mostly Muslim and speak Baltistani. We found a nice and friendly homestay in the upper part of the village. It was still Ramadan (a month of fasting) and so we got a late dinner at 9 pm, only after the family had eaten.



Camel ride in the sand dunes of Hundar

On the way back we stopped in the village of Hundar which is situated near the sand dunes. We offered Tashi and his daughter Karma as well as ourselves a very touristy experience: a **ride on a camel** through the sand dunes! It was an enjoyable and unforgettable experience for ALL of us. We had so much fun on the camels.



Tashi on the camel

Although the car trips in Ladakh are often exciting and amazing, but at times also tiring, I am most happy when I can walk out in nature. And as I have written on the first page, this time I could not take it for granted to be trekking on this trip. For this reason, I was extremely grateful and happy that I *could* go trekking.

The first trek was a very familiar one: the trek to Lingshed. The second one was a trek not so well known and new to me: from Zinchan to Shang Sumdo (between the Indus and Marka Valley).



The road near the top of Singi-La, in the back 'Rinpoche's Hand' (mountain)

I have done the **trek to Lingshed** many times since my first time in Ladakh in 1991. Isn't it amazing that there are no hikes in the Swiss Alps that I have done more often than this trek to Lingshed?! Every climb to a pass and every descent into the valley is so familiar, I know where to cross the streams, where to get the spring water, and where the suitable camp sites are.

But now times are changing. Lingshed will get a road, and at present one can drive up to Singi-La, the second of the 5000 meters high passes one has to cross on the way to Lingshed.

For me, it felt a bit strange to drive all the way to Singi-La by car. Strange to climb up to Sisir-La in wide hairpin bends whereas the century-old foot path was much more in line with the slope. Strange to watch the down-hill path from an altogether different perspective. A nice surprise was the good (road) bridge over the big stream in Photoksar. The crossing of this stream had always been a big challenge and never easy.

wide hairpin bends whereas the century-old foot path was much more in line with the slope. Strange to watch the down-hill path from an altogether different perspective. A nice surprise was the good (road) bridge over the big stream in Photoksar. The crossing of this stream had always been a big challenge and never easy.

In Lingshed we camped next to Tashi's house which is nearly at the bottom of the village.



Tashi's house in Lingshed



Fields and houses in Lingshed

The difference in altitude between the houses in Lingshed is about 600 meters. The uppermost building in the village is the gompa, the monastery at about 4000 meters above sea level. From the lowest houses in Lingshed it takes a local, for example our horseman Rinchen, twenty minutes up to the gompa. For us it takes almost two hours

In Lingshed, the houses are scattered over a large area, they are distributed like dots in an open bowl.

We supported again [as we did four years ago] the five widows who lost their husbands in an avalanche a bit more than four years ago. We visited two of them in their homes, two came to Tashi's house, and we met the youngest of these widows en route in the village. She was carrying a basket on her back with a baby in it and was cheerful when we talked to her. It turned out that she had remarried the younger brother of her former husband – something that is not unusual in Ladakh. The other widows seemed to have, more or less, accepted their situation, although life is a constant struggle.



Stanzin Yangchen, the widow with her baby



Two of the widows at Tashi's home



Rigzing (Tashi's wife) and the neighbour with her baby

Tashi, Lobsang, Rigzin

On the last evening of our stay in Lingshed, we were invited by the 'Women's Group'. They had prepared delicious momos (dumplings) filled with locally grown spinach. Their activities include the preparation and distribution of butter tea at village festivals, knitting sessions during winter time, assistance for distressed women, or working on the fields of poor and needy families. They told us that they had started to build a 'Women's House' near the Government school to have a permanent place for their activities. We happily offered some financial support for the windows and doors of the building which are still missing.



A village lady with a knitted hat



The prayer hall at Lingshed nunnery

During our last two visits to Lingshed we had been staying at the **nunnery**, also because I was teaching meditation to all the nuns. This time, there were only four nuns in Lingshed, the other nuns were either in Leh for teachings or in other places for studies. We noticed that the nunnery looked somewhat abandoned..... After a nice lunch that the four nuns cooked for us we asked them about the situation at the nunnery. As it turned out: what they want and need most is a teacher and a strong leader.

In order to get a teacher from the Buddhist College in Leh they need to have young nuns at the nunnery. But young girls are not attracted to become nuns when there is no teacher and no charismatic and skilled head nun. They rather go to the Government School in Lingshed where they can get at least some education. This is a serious problem the nuns face!

However, there is also hope. One nun we met in Leh – where she is studying – told us that once she finishes her studies she wants to go back to the nunnery in Lingshed. Maybe after some years the situation will improve!

The **second trek** proved to be an experience of a very special and rare kind. During the six days we were on the trek we had rain every single day! This is very unusual for Ladakh during summer time when it is usually quite dry. I never experienced so much rain on my previous visits to Ladakh in the past 24 years.



Watching the rain from inside the tent



Impressions from Stok-La (5000 meters above sea level), its climb and descent

The trek started in Zinchan, only a couple of hours by car from Leh. We walked along the river in a narrow valley until it opened up to a high pasture. Turning to the left we walked past the village and fields of Rumbak until we stopped for the night. In the late afternoon we sat in front of our tents drinking tea and enjoying the scenery. Our guide and his helpers prepared an amazing dinner – complete with a mixed salad and olives!

At night it started to rain. Luckily, in the morning the rain had stopped and we could start walking without rain gear. The clouds were hanging low, but sometimes we got a bit of sun and a bit of a view. The same pattern repeated over the next five days, with some variations. Sometimes the rain set in early in the afternoon, sometimes there were thunderstorms, and one time, on the second last day, there was such a strong thunderstorm with hail and torrential rain that our tents got flooded.

On that day, Virañani and myself sat in the tent looking out and watching the rain/hail as we had already done the previous day – this was our ‘live entertainment’! All of a sudden Virañani exclaimed, “Look, water is coming in!” And yes, from the backside of the tent a little river started to find its way through our tent! Virañani went outside to deepen the ditch (we had learned from the previous days that a ditch was important), whereas I bailed



Our guide and cook Dalla

water that collected as a little lake on my side of the tent with a soap dish. The deluge lasted for about one hour, then it was over. For us, however, it had consequences: Virañani and I had to move our tent and the others also deepened their ditches. Furthermore, the stream had much more water than usual.

On the next and final day of our trek we had to cross the raging stream many times. Usually, the water level is so low that the crossings are not a problem at all. But in the afternoon of the deluge and the following day the stream had swollen enormously – the water was a menacing ‘chocolate brown’.

We used various methods to cross the streams (not only on this last day): hopping from stone to stone, barefoot, on horseback, or carried on the back of our guide Dalla.



left to right:
Margrit on Dallas back,
climbing down a gully,
Virañani on horseback,
Katharina walking through
the ice-cold stream

Because it was so unclear before the trip to Ladakh how well I could walk I had organised a ‘riding horse’ for the two treks. This riding horse proved to be very helpful in crossing difficult streams for all of us. At other times I used it to cross streams because I needed to make sure that my prosthesis would not get wet in case I would slip. And having a riding horse with us sometimes I simply enjoyed the scenery from the back of the horse. I found it a special privilege to be on the horse because I could *choose* to ride. It was not because I needed it badly (p. ex. unable to walk due to pain caused by the prosthesis). And the others also enjoyed the horse rides!



Margrit near Skiang



Renate above Skiumkata



Ariya near Gongma

On this trek we had to cross three passes, all of them nearly 5000 meters high. The first pass, Stok-La, had a very steep ascent and the first part of going down on the other side was also quite steep. The other two passes were more gradual in going up and down. Unlike on other treks, there were no villages on the way, only high pastures with a few huts for the shepherds and the animals (yaks, dzos, sheep, goats).

I really enjoyed the stillness of this almost untouched area, the vastness of the sky above, and the constant dance of the changing forms and colours. Although the trek is physically challenging, at the same time I find it invigorating, rejuvenating, and energizing the heart. It is always with mixed feelings that I go back to 'civilisation'. To have a warm shower is definitely a nice experience after washing myself for a week in cold mountain streams. But what I like about trekking is the simplicity of life: walking, eating, sleeping. No telephone, no computer, no internet, no newspaper, no TV, no food extravagances – the drastic reduction of the usual sense-inputs has such a calming and soothing effect. And not only this: the awareness of the senses gets heightened. The colours, sounds, smells, or tastes become more vivid, brighter, more luminous, or clearer. For me it is such a great gift to just be there in this vast theatre of nature: feeling totally alive, feeling held in a greater cosmic order, feeling humble and unimportant, feeling grateful for each step I can take on this trek – and in life.



The last adventure – and one that I wished to do for such a long time – was the **over-land drive from Leh to Manali**. This road has been built by the Indian Army to bring supplies into Ladakh. This road crosses five passes – the highest is 5328 meters and the lowest 3940 meters above sea level – and many different landscapes. Narrow valleys, the large and wide More Plain, amazing sand stone formations, large glaciers, huge waterfalls, or fast flowing rivers.

We planned three days to cover the 490 kilometers between Leh and Manali. For the first night we made a little side trip to Tso Kar, a salt lake near Dibring. We put up our tents near the shore of the lake, in the middle of nowhere. What an exquisite place to spend the night!



Tso Kar



Picknick at Tso Kar



Clouds over Tso Kar

The next day we got up early, packed our tents and hopped into the car as we had to cover quite some distance until Keylong not knowing what the condition of the road would be ! This is always a big question mark – a land slide or flooding of the road can considerably lengthen a trip.

We were lucky to not encounter any serious difficulties on the way to Keylong. Before Keylong the scenery started to change in a big and noticeable way: the mountain slopes started to get green with grass and trees. We were unmistakably no longer in Ladakh, we had definitely arrived in Himachal Pradesh.

We had a rest day in Keylong. It started with the birthday ‘Alphorn performance’ for Virañani at breakfast and continued with a walk up to the gompa high above the little town. It ended with a relaxing afternoon in the beautiful garden of the hotel and a nice dinner in the ‘best restaurant’ in town.



A vulture spreading its wings

On the third day of our drive to Manali we had to cross the famous Rotang Pass. The road up to the pass was in very poor condition, but then, to our big surprise, on the other side it was a smooth and well-built road! Shortly before Manali we spotted a vulture sitting on top of a tree. Once more we asked the driver to stop. When we got out of the car to take pictures, we discovered a baby vulture on another tree and soon more vultures in the air. These birds were big and majestic – it was so amazing to watch them from so near!

After spending two days in a small village near Manali we took the night bus to Delhi and from there we flew back to Switzerland.

I am so grateful to my friends for all the support during this trip. Without their kindness, patience, and circumspection I would have faced much more difficulties and challenges. Their presence contributed to a feeling of great ease and lightness.

A big THANK YOU to every one of you: Virañani, Doris, Margrit, Jyoti, Renate, Katharina, Werner, and Willi – as well as to my Ladakhi friends: Tashi, Rigzin, Stanzin, Lobsang, Lama Tsewang, Lama Tsephel, Karma, Rinchen.





Impressions from the drive over the high passes between Leh and Keylong



Ariya Baumann – Winterthur – 12 September 2015