

Ladakh 2017 - Impressions

4 July - 16 September 2017



What is it that pulls me back to Ladakh, again and again? This year I went for the 9th time to Ladakh, the 'land of the passes'. In 1991, on my first trip to Ladakh, I was so deeply impressed and touched by its people and landscapes that I went back every few years. Each time I was accompanied by a number of friends with whom I could share my love for this very special place.

What amazes me, still after so many years, are the mighty mountains with their colourful rocks and incredible formations, the friendly and goodhearted people, the spaciousness, the deep blue sky, the silence, the uncountable stars at night, the wild pink roses in the middle of a barren landscape, or the tolerance and endurance of the Ladakhis.

There is always a moment of wonder and awe when I see, for example, white anemones greeting me near the top of a 5000 meter high pass, a mighty eagle flying over my head, or the fat marmots sitting on a rock nearby.



After getting acclimatized in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, we left for Western Ladakh. On the way, we visited the monastery of **Mangyu**. This monastery is one of the oldest monastery in Ladakh, besides Alchi and Sumdo Chungun, dating back to the early 13th century. It has similar standing Buddha statues as are found in Alchi monastery.



Mangyu Monastery



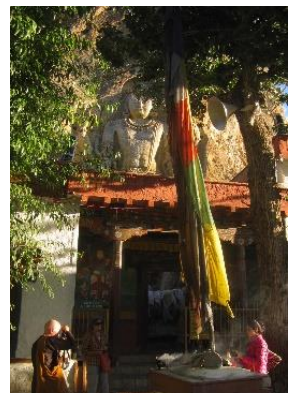
Maitreya Buddha (Future Buddha), Mangyu

In **Mulbekh**, we stayed with the family of Stanzin Dolkar. They took us to the big ‘Chamba’ (Maitreya) rock carving, to the monastery high above Mulbekh, to the cave monastery in Wakha, and also to a nearby nunnery.



Chamba (Maitreya Buddha), Mulbekh

Stanzin Dolkar had been among the first girls who were admitted at the Mahabodhi School in Choglamsar, near Leh. Ven. Sanghasena founded this school to allow girls from remote areas to get an education. Sponsors from around the world support the students. Doris wanted to support one of the girls and ‘got’ Stanzin Dolkar, an intelligent girl from Mulbekh whose father died when she was very young. Her mother remarried but her step-father rejected her. She grew up with the family of her uncle who sent her to the Mahabodhi school. After the 10th class she continued her studies in the south of India and finally became a dentist. Now Stanzin Dolkar is back at the Mahabodhi Centre where she works as a dentist in the hospital. The Mahabodhi Centre has expanded in the meantime and now includes a boarding school for girls and



Ven. Virañani & Stanzin Dolkar in front of the Chamba Shrine

boys, a hospital, an old-folk-home, a school for the blind, a nunnery, a monastery, a meditation centre, and a guest house.



Wakha Cave Monastery (above) and Wakha Village (below)



Wakha Monastery

On the way to Fokar we wanted to visit another cave monastery in **Shergol**. We climbed up the steep cliff but found the door locked. Our guide ran down into the village to find the person with the key, but they said that the monk had gone off with the key. As with so many other monasteries we visited in Ladakh it seems that the monasteries become more and more ‘museums’ with just one or a few monks being the caretakers and/or collecting the entry fees from the tourists. We encountered only a few monasteries with a substantial number of monks where we felt that the monastery was alive.



Shergol Monastery

In **Fokar** we started our first trek. It actually began with a day hike to Fokar Dzong, also called Ugyen Dzong. As our guide’s English was limited, we were not prepared to what lay ahead of us. All we knew was that it was a famous and special place with many caves and that a pilgrimage to this remote place was considered to be very auspicious. After gaining some height we realized that getting there was not so easy. We had to climb up over a rocky and steep path. The prospect of going down the same way was not very inviting. However, we were told that we would go down a different way. What a relief! Ugyen Dzong is situated in a basin between massive mountains. On one side of

the valley are numerous caves, some easily accessible, some others were difficult to get to unless one is a rock climber. Ugyen Dzong was and still is a perfect place for long-term meditation: remote, peaceful, and not easy to reach. There is also a small shrine and a bigger building which, unfortunately for us, we could not visit. We were told that three nuns were on retreat and that they did not want to be disturbed. Of course, I would have loved to see the meditation room but I was very happy to know that there were nuns on retreat!

As it turned out the way down was through a narrow gorge. It was about two meters wide and the ‘way’ was basically in the small river. We were stepping from rock to rock, where possible, and when the river dropped one or two meters we used the wooden or iron ladders placed in those difficult passages. Although I have never done ‘Canyoning’ by wearing a wetsuit and then ‘walking’ down a small river and occasionally jumping down small waterfalls (as they do in many places in Switzerland) it reminded me of such an adventure. There in Ladakh I got it for free and without being prepared for it!



Marlis, Ven. Virañani, Doris, Sonam, Stanzin



Impressions from Urgyen Dzong





Prayer flags near the Indus River

In the **Lower Indus Valley** (west of Khaltse, at an altitude of about 2800 meters above sea level), the people look and dress differently. The Brokpas are said to be descendants of an Indo-Aryan tribe having settled there some 2000 years ago. This year we spent more time in Ladakh and so we took the opportunity to visit some of the places where I have never been. We spent a couple of nights in Beema in a hotel right next to the Indus River. There



Drying apricots

were rapids and the noise of the turbulent water was almost deafening. In the village of Dha we encountered a couple of old ladies in their traditional clothes and headgear (with plastic flowers!) sitting under the trees. They sat there for the tourists – and for getting money for their picture being taken. A sad development!

This area is known for its mild climate; well, at least milder than the climate in Leh. In summer, the temperatures can rise up to 40 degrees Celsius! The people grow apricots (similar to the Hunza apricots grown in Pakistan), apples, grapes, and walnuts besides barley, peas, potatoes, cabbage, or onions.

Hanu Gongma and Hanu Yokma are two villages high up in a side valley of the Indus Valley. In these villages, many of the old houses are still intact. They are built very



Hanu Gongma

close together to have the flat space in the valley for their fields. Each little flat space



Skyurbuchan, Indus River

must be used for agriculture. These two villages look almost like a pueblo of Native Americans and the fields resemble a beautiful painting.



An ornate deer, Rock Art Sanctuary

On the way back to Leh we stopped at the **Rock Art Sanctuary** in Domkhar. After my last trip to Ladakh two years ago I got a book about petroglyphs in Ladakh. This ignited my interest in these old witnesses of civilization. Apparently, some of the petroglyphs in Ladakh date back to the Bronze Age. We had already spotted some petroglyphs near Alchi, and consequently, with a sharpened awareness, I spotted many more – also in unexpected places like Lingshed.

The rocks with the petroglyphs are situated on the bank of the Indus River. Over a stretch of about 500 meters the rocks depict animals like deer, ibex, or horses and human beings, some of them with arrows or riding an animal. In the Nubra Valley (in Murgu), we also saw a camel depicted on a rock at the biggest petroglyph site in Ladakh.



Man with axe (or ???)

Camel

Man riding a horse

Marlis

In July, we were lucky to be present at the **Dalai Lama's** birthday celebration (6 July) and at the three days of teaching at the end of July. As always on such occasions, thousands of Ladakhis flocked to the Shewatsel Teaching Ground in Choglamsar in their finest outfits. The atmosphere was joyful and relaxed.



The Dalai Lama at his 82nd birthday



Women wearing peraks



The Shewatsel Teaching Ground in Choglamsar





Lingshed

Lingshed is the village where my love for Ladakh definitely got firmly established. On each trip to Ladakh we have been to this remote village. During the first few visits, it took 5 days to walk to Lingshed. At that time there was no road. A few years ago they started to build a road and this year it took two days to walk to Lingshed. We stayed with our Ladakhi friend and horseman Tashi at the bottom of the village. It was the time of harvest, one of the busiest time in every village. Everything is done by hand, the Ladakhis do not have any machines to work their fields. Rigzin, Tashi's wife, was already on

the field by day break and would only return to the house after it was getting dark. Tashi who also worked on the field would come back to the house to prepare our breakfast and dinner. We



Marlis with a bundle of barley

we were happy to give them a hand by cutting grass and making bundles or by harvesting barley. They do not cut the barley plants but pull them out with the roots. Then they remove the earth by hitting the roots with a stick.



Zoe and Doris cutting grass

We were lucky that exactly during our 8-day stay in Lingshed the monks in the monastery made a **sand mandala**. Almost every day we walked up to the monastery (a one-hour walk!) to watch the sand mandala grow and to be part of the special pujas. As I know many of the monks since my first visit to Lingshed in 1991, we had more invitations for breakfast, lunch, or a cup of (butter) tea than possible opportunities. In the bigger monasteries, monks (and nuns) in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have their own little house where they can cook their own meals, if they so wish.





Above: Special puja, below: offerings made with butter



The Yamantaka Mandala



Details from the sand mandala

Unfortunately, we had to leave Lingshed before they threw the sand of the mandala into the creek, as is traditionally done. With Tashi as our guide, cook, and horseman and his friend Sonam as his assistant we left for **the trek over the Kanji-La pass**. For a long time we had wanted to do this trek. But because this trek involves crossing a couple of rivers many times (without bridges) it can only be done in late summer when the rivers have less water.

Day 1: Crossing the Barmi-La pass (4640 meters above sea level). Half way up to the pass we had a rest in the middle of a group of yaks. A couple of these enormous and impressive beasts came very close to inspect us and our snacks I must say that I always have a big respect of these sturdy animals and keep a safe distance from them.



Crossing the Oma Chu River

Day 2: Walking up the narrow valley that leads to the village of Dibling. We had to cross the river many times, but fortunately on a horse. Tashi who was holding the horse was in the ice-cold water up to his thighs.

Dibling: a small village with 15 houses/families and a monastery. Even more remote than Lingshed – a place where foxes and hares say ‘good night’ to each other (as we say in German). Well, in Dibling it would be the snow leopards saying ‘good night’ to the Himalayan hamsters. A warm welcome by the people, we got a

glimpse of the living conditions of a poor old couple. As part of our small social project for poor people in the Trans-Singhi-Area (Lingshed and its small neighbouring villages) we visited this old couple to give them a donation. We squished into the small kitchen and watched them making tea and later making their simple dinner (consisting of ‘papa’) while Tashi translated our questions. I was amazed and wondered how they manage to survive especially as the husband’s eyesight is very poor.



Camping in Dibling



A yak next to our tent

Day 3: Easy day, only going to the Larsa Yak Camp at the base of the next pass, the Puzdong-La. Camping in the middle of the yaks. It was there that I realized that these beasts are quite friendly and tame, and I lost my fearful respect I always had for them.

Day 4: Climbing up to the Puzdong-La (5020 meters). One of these passes where one thinks that one has made it soon, but then realizes that there is another little bit to go, then yet another little bit But finally, we made it! Going down a narrow valley over snow fields (avalanches from last winter), camping at a very scenic place with great views on the glacier-capped mountains in the side valley to the left.



Scenic camp site

Day 5: A relatively easy day, walking down the valley to the base camp of the Kanji-La pass.



Marlis climbing up to the Kanji-La pass

Day 6: Leaving early because of a long and not so easy climb up to the Kanji-La (5200 meters), navigating our way through a narrow gorge, then the path consisted of loose rocks. For me, such a terrain is difficult and very tiring for my prosthetic leg. But luckily, I could have a break for my leg by riding. I also used the riding horse for going down which is usually more difficult for me. Incredible happiness when we finally got to the top of Kanji-La. A perfect sunny day with a spectacular view: to the south the mountains of the main Himalayan range, to the north the mountains of the Karakorum range. For the descent: crossing a small glacier and then walking on the moraine. Before reaching the place for our camp we had to go down a very steep slope to reach the little river. By now, I was no longer afraid for the horses to go down such scary places because I already had seen many times how skilled and secure they walk in the most challenging places.

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Happy Marlis and Tashi on the way down from Kanji-La

Day 7: Again many river crossings, walking down the valley until we reached the village of Kanji situated at the ‘crossroads’ of four valleys. What a place! The first time in four days, since the yak camp, seeing other human beings. It was truly wonderful and nourishing to be ‘out there’ in the mountains, to be away from other human beings and from any sign of civilization (including internet connection). Such places have become rare in Switzerland.

Camping at the official camp ground in Kanji, exploring the village.



Approaching Kanji in the afternoon



Leaving Kanji in the morning



Rain and snow are coming

Day 8: Climbing up to the Yokma-La pass (4720 meters), clouds with rain and snow moving up the valley behind us – wow, it looked dramatic! On top of the pass: strong wind, putting up the traditional prayer flags and a white kata very quickly.

Camping at the entrance of the Shillakong valley: a long narrow gorge leading to Wanla. Locals say that one can only take this route in late summer because it involves crossing the river 21 times. I had walked through the Shillakong valley on my first trip to

Ladakh, and I remembered the river crossings (without a horse) as easy and unspectacular.

Day 9: Entering the gorge we soon realized that it would be impossible to walk down the gorge. The path often disappeared, the river crossings were difficult, even dangerous. After 1 ½ hours and covering only a short distance we decided to go back. Instead of going to Wanla we would cross the Snigitse-La pass and then go to Honupatta. That day we walked up towards the pass and found a lovely spot for camping. The mountains and rock formations were very special and unique, the setting sun bathed the rocks in a warm ochre light with the deep blue sky in stark contrast.



Camping at the entrance of the Shillakong Gorge



A very special sunset at the base of the Snigitse-La pass

Day 10: The water in the small creek was frozen, but it was a clear sunny day. It was Marlis' birthday! The climb was steep but not difficult. On the pass (5200 meters) we had a long break,



Doris, Tashi, Ariya, Marlis on Snigitse-La

sitting in the sun, eating lunch, enjoying the scenery. Very special for Marlis: who can celebrate their birthday at such an altitude?!

I remember: for my 40th birthday we had a cup of tea in the village of Kibber in the Spiti Valley. Kibber, situated at an altitude of 4000 meters,



Reaching the top of Snigitse-La, in the back: Yokma-La

is said to be one of the highest inhabited villages in the

world. The first part of going down from the pass was another highlight of this trek: the scenery was just so incredible and amazing! The last part was less exciting: for a couple of hours we had to walk on the dirt road to Honupatta. A bit of a drag after a long day of walking.



The descent from Snigitse-La

The following morning we had to part from Tashi and Sonam. We had organized a car to go back to Leh, and Tashi and Sonam started to go back to Lingshed. I was sad to say good-bye to these two men who lovingly cared for us while being on the trek. I was losing two dear friends.

There were many more adventures, many more places we visited, many more people we met, and many more impressions during the two and a half months we spent in Ladakh. As I write these lines I dive back into this world of mystery and wonder, but also into this world of hardships and deprivations (especially for the locals). I taste the salted butter tea, hear the wild river, feel my cold and clammy hands, smell the fragrance of the wild roses, listen to the Ladakhi songs, watch the eagle soaring in the sky, eat the tasty Thukpa, feel the rocks under my feet, or hear the joyous sound of the 'julays'.

I am immensely grateful to my friends Doris and Marlis who were such a lovely, caring, and supportive company during the whole trip, as well as to the dear friendship of Ven. Virañani and Zoe who spent six respectively two weeks with us. I greatly appreciate all the kindness, help, and support we got from so many people, among them are: Geshela Ngawang Changchub and Tashi, Lama Tsewang, the families of the homestays, the taxi drivers, the owners and staff of the Skyland Guest House in Leh and other guest houses, Dadul the incredible and reliable organizer, Tashi & Rigzin, the guides, cooks and horsemen from the two organized treks, the monks of Lingshed Monastery, Sonam Dorje, or the horses which carried me/us and our luggage. May all these people and living beings be healthy and well, happy and peaceful.

♪ ♪ ♪ Julay, julay, julay ♪ ♪ ♪

Ariya



