

Ladakh 2019 - Impressions

22 June - 8 August 2019



Chörten in Gongma

Ladakh exerts a fascination for me that is hard to explain. Is it the majestic and impressive mountains? Is it the vast sky? Is it the kind and friendly people? The stillness of the mountains? The hardships of people's life? The intense colours and pure air? The remoteness? The poverty? The smile of the shepherd? The simplicity? It is all of this, and much more. That is why I went back to Ladakh for the 10th time.



Oma Chu Valley



Near Barmi La



Near Singi La



Pangong Lake

The flight from Delhi to Leh, the ‘capital’ of Ladakh, is a spectacular flight over the main range of the Himalaya. Once we left the plains and started to fly over the mountains my nose stuck to the window of the plane: the view of the glaciers and snow-capped mountains is amazing! Later on, the landscape changes and it becomes very arid, with the exception of the irrigated fields, as the plane is maneuvering its way down to the Leh airport.



*Left: the main Himalayan range, Nun & Kun in the distance.
Above: the village of Stok (near Leh)*

We spent some days in and around **Leh** to get acclimatized to the high altitude and to get over the jet lag; Leh is situated at 3500 meters above sea level. We visited the Lingshed Hostel in Choglamsar, met with Bhante Sanghasena at the Mahabodhi School, went to TCV (Tibetan Children Village), and connected with our Ladakhi friends at the Lingshed Labrang in Leh.





As part of our time to get acclimatized we made a three-day trip to **Pangong Lake** (4200 meters above sea level) which lies on the border to Tibet/China. It has become a very popular destination for Indian tourists because a Bollywood movie ('The Three Idiots') featured this beautiful lake. We spent a couple of nights in the village of Merak in a homestay right next to the lake. For two days, we walked along the lake, taking in the beauty and ever-changing colours of the water, mountains, and the sky. It is like a symphony of sense impressions that has no beginning and no end, a timeless presence.





Doris, Anne & Madlaina on the pass Sisir La (4800 meters above sea level)

In 1991, the first time I was in Ladakh, it took 5 days of trekking to reach the village of Lingshed, crossing two passes of nearly 5000 meters above sea level. About 15 years ago the government started to build a road. In this way, the start of the trek changed from Lamayuru to Wanla, then to Phenjila, then to Honupatta, later to Photoksar, and two years ago we could drive all the way to Skiupa La, the little pass just above the small village of Gongma. This year the **road** had almost reached Lingshed (and in the meantime, the road *has reached* the monastery in Lingshed), we only had a steep downhill walk to Tashi's house. What formerly took

five days of hard walking is now possible in about six hours of driving! Of course, the 'road' is a dirt track and in many places not in good shape Since it is possible to drive (part way, or now the whole way) I usually sit in the car and feel a bit weird and strange because there are so many memories of walking through this amazing landscape and camping in various places. I remember so vividly how many years ago we jokingly said, "When we are old ladies and unable to walk, we will make an excursion to Lingshed by bus!" Now, this has become reality – faster than we thought!

In **Gongma**, we stayed with a family we know for many years because Madlaina is supporting Angmo, one of their daughters. This gave us the opportunity to give the donations for each family in Skiumpata ourselves. Last year, there was a shortage of water (not enough snow during winter) in Skiumpata which meant that the families could not grow any barley! Somehow, with the help of relatives from other villages, they could manage – barely. In the evening, the women came to Gongma to pick up the donation.

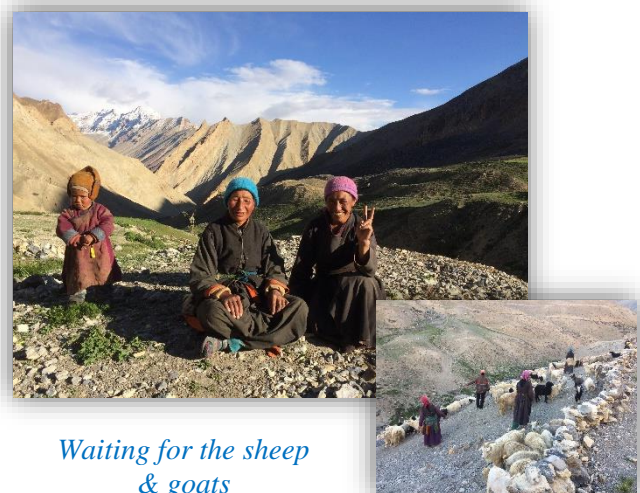


Anne, Doris, Madlaina - on a little stroll in the fields of Gongma



Some of the women from Skiumpata

This year, they can grow barley, there is enough water to irrigate their fields.



Waiting for the sheep & goats



On the left side: Tashi's house, surrounded by barley fields

Although we stayed in **Lingshed** for six days, in Tashi's house, we did not have enough time to accept all the invitations from the nuns, the monks, and many people. Our days were filled with: visiting the nuns (9 nuns are now living in the nunnery), visiting the monastery (the Reading-Scriptures-Festival was happening during these days), visiting the school, or visiting people in their home. Many of these people are very poor, so we gave them a donation in support of their livelihood. Geshela Nawang Changchup checks the situation of the people in Lingshed and the neighbouring villages every year and then decides who will get a donation. This support

is part of the various projects of **LADF** (Lingshed Area Development Foundation). Because the houses in Lingshed are spread over a huge valley, each day we had to walk quite a bit: up to the monastery it took us almost one hour, to get to the farther side of Lingshed and visit three families amounted to a day trip! However, this was a good training for our upcoming trek.

These are some of the people who received a donation; from left to right: Kunzang Dolma (lost her husband in an avalanche 8 years ago), Thundup Khaling (alone, no children to look after him), Phuntsok (alone), Tashi Yangskit (her husband is problematic), Tashi Yangchen (her husband had committed suicide some years ago; the photo was taken when she went up to the monastery for the festival).



The whole village of Lingshed is divided into seven neighbourhoods. The families of these neighbourhoods help each other on the fields, look after the sheep and goats, assist with other kinds of work, and organize activities during winter time. Two years ago, the people from Tashi's neighbourhood approached us and said that they would like to build a **community hall** for their neighbourhood. With the money we gave them, they built a nice house where they greeted us when we arrived in Lingshed. And on the following day, we were invited for momos, the delicious steamed dumplings filled with spinach! During the previous winter, they used the community hall for knitting sessions, English lessons for adults, tuition for the students (so that they do not forget what they have learnt), pujas, spinning wool, socializing, and – of course – drinking lots of butter tea!

This year we gave them a donation to build a winter garden – then they do not need to sit in a freezing cold room!



The community hall:



welcoming us with water, kata, and tsampa

Cholsang Tsokspa is a women's association with the main aim to preserve the culture in Lingshed (before it was called 'Ama Tsokspa'). 14 local women and 3 female teachers belong to this group of engaged women. Their activities include: doing pujas at monastery on the 8th, 15th, and last day of the month, alcohol control, collect old shoes (and other rubbish) and bury them, knitting together in winter, cooking at village festivals. As the customary response to our donation they invited us and served



The women of Cholsang Tsokspa

tea, curd, and chapatis at their meeting hall which is situated above the school. A young student acted as our translator. She said that the women would like to learn how to properly grow vegetables (in the green house that almost every house has). They also would like to have a big green house next to the meeting hall so that they can use these vegies for the meals they cook when they come together. It is heartening to know that there is a growing awareness about a healthy diet!



The annual **Reading-Scripture-Festival** at the monastery is a big event: for the monks, nuns, and novices as well as for the local people. For a week the monks, nuns, and novices sit in the courtyard of the monastery and read the scriptures. On the last three days the lay people are invited to take part of the festivities. The monastery offered them tea (salted butter tea), taki – local breads, and papa – a cooked ‘dough’ made from barley and pea flour. People came in their traditional dresses, of which the perak, studded with many turquoises, is a unique and beautiful (and heavy!) head wear.



This year we did **two treks**, both of them new to us. The first one was a 6-day round-trek from Lingshed over the pass Hanuma La, up the Oma Chu valley, and via the pass Barmi La back to Lingshed. This is not a trek one finds in the travel books or trekking guides because the path is not in good shape. Local people do not find it difficult, but for us foreigners it had its challenges. In a number of places, there was almost no path on very steep slopes with loose scree, and 300 meters below a rushing river! However, the scenery was gorgeous: wild and rugged mountains, yak pastures, wild roses, or adventurous creek crossings.

The second trek was the well-known trek in the Changtang (the high plateau in the east of Ladakh), from Rumtse to Korzok/Tso Moriri. We did it in 9 days in order to have less strenuous days. Apart from the beginning of the trek (Rumtse: 4200 meters above sea level), we always walked/stayed at an altitude between 4500 and 5470 meters above sea level! The scenery was completely different: round soft 'hills', vast pastures for yaks, sheep, and (Pashmina) goats, the high passes seemed like low ridges, the salt lake Tso Kar. It was only lack of breath (especially going uphill) that kept us reminding that we were at such a high altitude!

The Lingshed round-trek:



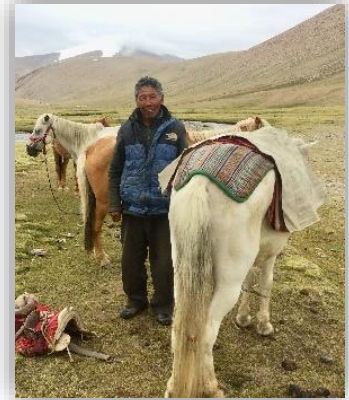
The Changtang Trek (Rumtse – Korzok/Tso Moriri):



On the first pass: Kyama La (5180 m)



Camping at Nalbu Khar Chu (4900 m)



Our horse man Norbu



The salt lake Tso Kar: in the distance, yaks grazing near the lake, having breakfast on its shore



Mani wall, near Kyama Barma, our cook Dorje, our team, on the highest pass of this trek: Yarlung Nyau La (5470 m)

Above: Campground & nomadic summer settlement at Raju Karu (4940 m), the pass Kyamayuri La (above the tent, a bit to the right) is 5430 meters
Right: our team: Norbu (horse man), Skarma (helper), Dorje (cook), Karma (guide)





Korzok



Rainbow over Tso Moriri

When we returned to Leh, we learned that at the monastery in Phyang **mask dances** would take place the following day. So, off we went!



The fascination that pulls me back to Ladakh every now and again must also have to do with a deep **heart-connection** to the people. Especially to the people in the Trans-Singi-Area in which Lingshed is the biggest village. During my first stay in Lingshed in 1991 (I had planned to stay for three days and ended up staying for three weeks!), I immediately felt at home and because there was no shop or guest house in the village, the monks and lay people very naturally provided me with food. But not only with food: they ‘gave’ so much kindness, openness, hospitality, and friendliness. For me, this was a profound experience which – as I know now – had far reaching effects. Going back to Ladakh and Lingshed is not merely a nice holiday trip, but a joyful opportunity to bring something back: be it a pair of warm winter shoes, a sweater, a good jacket, a woolen hat, or some financial support for various projects (Lingshed Hostel in Choglamsar, solar water heaters, winter school, people in need, sponsorships for education, medical expenses).

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all those who support these projects in whatever way this may be: with material things, with a donation, or with loving thoughts for the welfare and happiness of these people (and all living beings anywhere)!





Julley – julley – julley !!!
Ariya Baumann, August 2019

PS.



This year, the situation in Kashmir looked good enough to visit our **Kashmiri friends** in Pahalgam. We have not seen them for ten years and Doris and myself were looking forward to see them again. We had planned everything meticulously – but then, just on the day we were driving from Leh to Kashmir, the Indian government revoked the article 370 (*) of the Indian constitution that gave special rights to Kashmir. Not only this, but tourists

(Indian and foreign tourists) were no longer allowed to stay in the famous places like Pahalgam, Sonamarg, and Gulmarg. This meant that we got stuck in Srinagar, with no telephone or internet connection.

Our friends – Rahiti & Rehman, Imran (their son), Hudda (their grand-daughter) – managed to come to Srinagar, so we spent five days together on a houseboat. After a couple of days there was also a curfew which crushed our hope to go for a day-trip to Pahalgam. Though we managed to go for a shikara (boat) ride on the lake.



** Article 370 of the Indian constitution gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir – a state in India and a part of the larger region of Kashmir, which has been the subject of dispute between India, Pakistan, and China since 1947 – allowing it to have a separate constitution, a state flag, and autonomy over the internal administration of the state. The government of India revoked this special status in August 2019 through a Presidential Order and the passage of a resolution in Parliament.*