

Ladakh 2023 - Impressions

20 June - 11 August 2023



Shanti Stupa in Leh

Once more I have succumbed to the fascination and beauty of Ladakh. Will I ever get bored & disinterested and stop going to Ladakh? I doubt it. This was my 11th trip to the former kingdom in the Indian Himalaya.

Although a lot of changes are taking place on many different levels, the mountains are still majestic, the air is still clear and the colours intensive, the people are still friendly, generous, and open-hearted with a smile on their face.

In recent years, there has been a lot of ‘development’ in this previously very remote area in northern India. Especially since Ladakh is no longer part of the state *Jammu & Kashmir* and in 2021 became a *Union Territory*, the changes are visible. Especially in the remote villages, it is surprising to see the difference: roads have been built or are under construction, telephone reception towers, or a teacher for each (little) school – however, this does not mean that the teacher then actually stays and teaches in the small village or hamlet – unfortunately!





Leh: museum, mosque & palace, women selling vegis, view from Shanti Stupa

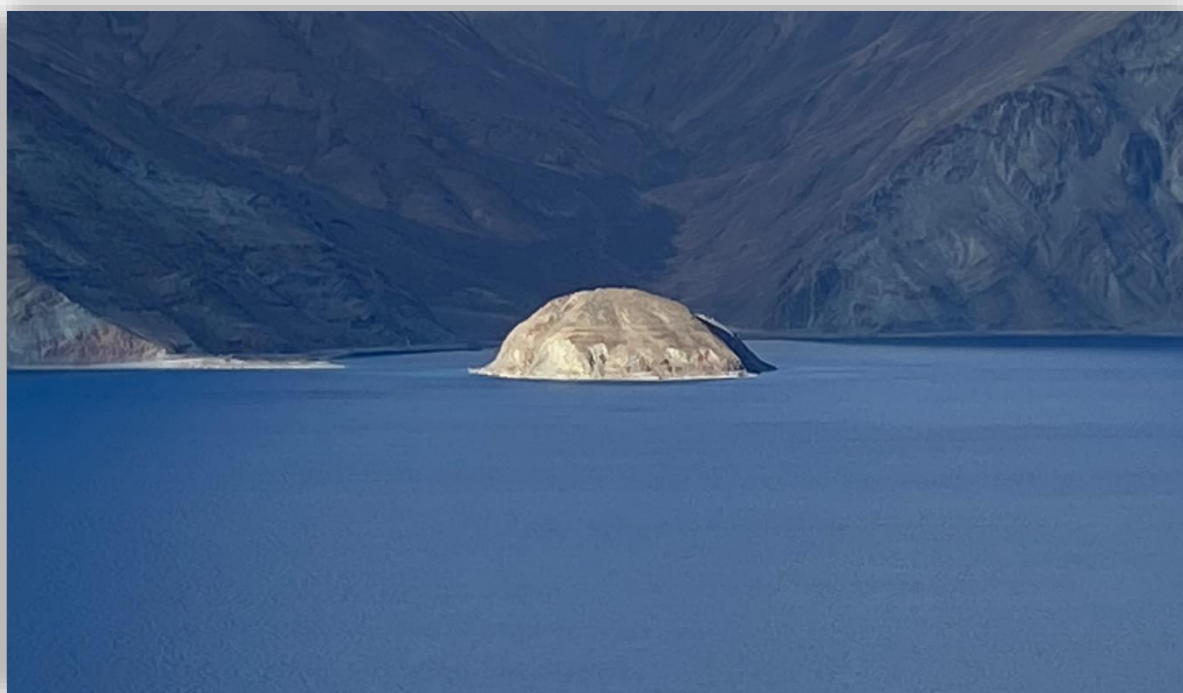


In **Leh**, the capital of Ladakh, I noticed an obvious increase of Indian tourists and new, modern (Western style) shops and restaurants. Doris and I took it easy for the first few days to get acclimatized: we visited Geshela and met with other Ladakhi friends, organized our first trip & trek, climbed up the 555 steps to the Shanti Stupa, or went to the Central Asian Museum which is a tapered four-storey stone tower built on the site of an old caravan camp. The museum looks at Leh's role in Silk Road trade, with rooms focused on Ladakh, Chinese Turkestan, and Tibet.



Recently, the eastern part of Ladakh (close to the Chinese border) was opened to tourists. So we organized a **trip to the Changtang**, the high altitude plateau that also stretches into Tibet. For this trip we invited Lobsang (Doris had sponsored her education for many years; she is the daughter of our long-standing friend and horseman Tashi), her husband Nawang, and their little daughter Dolma (see picture to the left). We stopped at

the Pangong Lake in Merak and climbed up to the hill with the little shrine (as we have done on previous trips) – and a new mobile phone reception tower (see photo on page 1)!



Pangong Lake - a symphony in blue

In **Hanle**, we had a moment of disappointment because the police woman at the check-post said that Doris and I – as Western tourists – were not allowed to stay the night in the village. But then a phone call to Dadul, our very able contact from the travel agency in Leh, settled things. The police woman was his niece, and so we could stay with his wife as planned. The observatory in Hanle is one of the highest observatories in the world. It was closed but we could look at the

moon, stars, and planets (the rings of Saturn)

through a smaller telescope. The lack of light pollution offered an amazing view of the night-sky! Of course, this is also true for other parts in Ladakh.



From Hanle we continued to Nyoma, then Korzok on the Tso Moriri Lake, and passing the Tso Kar Lake we drove over the Yar La pass to **Dadh/Karnak**.



Kyangs (wild horses)



Stupa - Tso Moriri



Gyalings

Dadh was the starting point for our first **trek: crossing the Zalung Karpo La pass** into the Markha Valley. For the first three days, we were in an uninhabited area and did not encounter any people, but we saw a big flock of Blue Sheep and on the ground the scratching marks of a bear. Once we reached Hangkar in the Markha Valley, we were back to ‘civilisation’.



On the trek





View from Zalung Karpo pass to the south (5197 meters above sea level)



Kang Yatse II (6175 meters) in the background



River crossing Ladakhi style



Kumar & Skalzang, cook & guide

Back in Leh, we welcomed Petra, Sophie, Christoph, and Louis, the family from Burgdorf. They arrived just in time for the **inauguration** of the new 'shopping complex' next to the Lingshed Hostel in Choglamsar. To ensure that the hostel for students from the Lingshed area can continue to function, Geshela had the vision of building shops and apartments in order to generate a steady income for the education and support of these students. This project is part of the Lingshed Area Development Foundation (LADF) which supports various projects. Since many years Doris is actively involved in collecting donations.

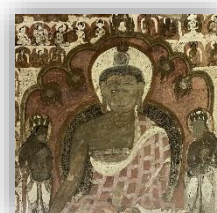


Shri Tashi Gyalson, the counsellor for the Lingshed, area was also at the inauguration ceremony.



Doris and Shri Tashi Gyalsen cut the ribbon, the shopping complex, the gift of a thanka with the 21 taras

We had heard of **ancient caves in Saspol** which have not yet become a tourist attraction, in contrast to the very famous monastery in Alchi. Here are some pictures of the caves:





Lingshed

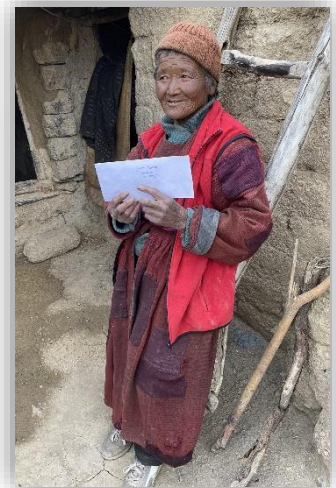
This time, we could drive all the way to Tashi's house in **Lingshed**! It felt so weird to me We spent our days in Lingshed with visiting friends, the nuns in the nunnery, attending two days of teachings given by Kundeling Rinpoche, following an invitation for a momo meal in the community hall, or distributing the LADF donations to the poor families/people. Botok Tsering, for example, is an old woman living on her own, neglected by her nephew who lives nearby. Usually, family members take care of elderly people, but unfortunately not in this case. She told us that not long ago when it rained (due to climate change it is no longer exceptional to get rain in summer!), the roof of her house was leaking. For two days, she was sitting in one corner in one of her rooms because that was the only dry place. The flat roofs are made with mud that is put on the small wooden sticks neatly placed next to each other.



Tashi



Tashi Yanskit & her husband



Botok Tsering



Kundeling Rinpoche's teaching in Lingshed



From Lingshed we trekked over the **Hanuma La pass** to **Zinchen**, the home of Lobsang and Nawang, where we spent two nights. The ‘village’ consists of two houses and a few fields. Their nearest access to a road is walking along the Oma Chu River and at the confluence with the mighty Zanskar River crossing with a trolley to the other side. For them, this is an easy walk – for us it was challenging and adventurous. There were difficult passages on a steep slope, climbing over big rock boulders at the edge of the river, and finally crossing two wobbly wooden bridges. I crossed the second bridge on all fours because there were no ropes to hold on! And the ride on the trolley over the Zanskar River was adventurous – to say the least!



*Hanuma La pass – Evening at Langmar Thupshi – Oma Chu River & Barfi La pass
Camp at Langmar Thupshi – Zinchen – Zinchen
Spot the horses on the slope! – Bridge over Oma Chu River – Trolley over Zanskar River*

Ralakung is said to be one of the most remote villages in Ladakh. No road is going there; well, not yet ... Lobsang and Nawang have relatives in this village, so they organized the trek and took us there. Apparently, sometimes the locals walk from Phey (in the Zanskar Valley) to Ralakung in one day. For Westerners, four days are more appropriate. Doris and I did it in two days – although we were riding on a horse at times on the second day, we were kaput and exhausted when we finally arrived at Ralakung Nangma (outer Ralakung)!



All these pictures were taken in Ralaking Nangma.

During our rest day in Ralakung Nangma we explored the village which consists of six houses/families. We saw the water mill for making butter and the one grinding the roasted barley to make tsampa. We watched how they make fresh cheese over the open fire, and how they dry it in the sun. Early morning, a person gathered the yaks, dzos (a hybrid between yak and domestic cattle), sheep, and goats to bring them to their pastures for the day. Then the dung in the enclosures is collected and made into dung-cakes which dry in the sun and are used as fuel for cooking and heating. In the evening, the animals are milked. In the shade of his house, a man was weaving in the afternoon. Children went down to the river to collect a bit of wood (also for cooking & heating). On that day, nobody was working in the barley fields.

Life seems simple, just the basic activities to survive: growing, producing, and storing food to survive in the harsh conditions during winter, cooking & eating food, making sure the house is not crumbling and the roof not leaking, sleeping.

Life seems simple – but the living conditions are incredibly harsh and demanding. To me it seems quite astonishing that people have settled and lived there since so many years. Despite these hardships the villagers are very generous and open-hearted, treating us with so much kindness. In every house, we were offered at least butter tea and/or milk tea, sometimes also cookies, or getting a meal.

Impressions from Ralakung Phima:



We had some donations (from LADF) that we distributed to each family. We learned that one of the biggest problems in Ralakung Nangma and Ralakung Phima (inner Ralakung) is the fact that the children cannot go to school. The little school building is empty because the teacher has run away The fact that these kids have no access to education – although they would like to go to school – saddened me greatly. To see a bright and intelligent 10-year-old girl who is denied of education was heart-breaking.

Doris and I said that we would try to find possibilities for them to go to school (for example, to a boarding school in the Zaskar Valley).

In both villages, all the villagers came to say ‘good-bye’, when we left. In Ladakh, the leaving guests are honoured with katas (the white ceremonial scarf), and with other things such as butter tea, curd, and tsampa.



On the way back to Leh we drove on the new road through the impressive **Zanskar River Gorge**. Previously, it was only possible to use this route in winter when the river was frozen. People would walk on the Chaddar, the frozen river, for many days by temperatures of around minus 20 or 30 degrees Celsius. I was very curious to see this gorge – it was amazing to drive next to the river or a bit above it and look up the sheer rock faces, hundreds of meters high!



On our last trip to Ladakh four years ago, we could not visit our friends in **Pahalgam**, Kashmir, because we got stuck in Srinagar on a house boat (due to a political event). This year we were lucky that the political situation in Kashmir is relatively quiet and so we could stay five days in their lovely guest house right on the Lidder River. We did little walks around Pahalgam and a day-trip to various Mughal gardens. But most important of all was the time spent with the extended family of our friend and previous trekking guide Rehman.



Lidder River, Mughal Gardens, Temple



Julley – julley – julley !!!

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 the various projects of LADF (solar water heaters, winter school, people in need, sponsorships for education, medical expenses, Lingshed Hostel in Choglamsar,).



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!

Ariya Baumann, September 2023