

Ladakh 2024 - Impressions

4 July - 6 August 2024



This year, our trip to Ladakh was a 'short' one, only four weeks in total. Doris and I did not think that we would go again after we had been there the previous year. However, some circumstances arose which gave us the opportunity to visit the children from Ralaking in the newly opened boarding school in Stongday, Zaskar. More about this wonderful development later.

As usual Doris and I were greeted at the airport by Geshe Ngawang Jangchup. But unlike on our past trips, he did not greet us with a *kata*, the white ceremonial scarf. We later learned that the government has forbidden this ancient tradition to be practiced at the airport. Of course, we got the *kata* later in the guest house.



Ariya, Geshela, Doris



Mowing machine - Ladakhi style



Fantogs



With Nawang, Dolma, Lobsang

We spent three days at the lovely Chandan Guest House in **Leh**, situated in a quiet neighbourhood. These days were filled with visits to our Ladakhi friends.

Lobsang and her little daughter Dolma accompanied us to Lingshed. In the 1990ies it was a long journey with a day-long drive to Lamayuru and then a five-day trek over two very high passes. Today it is an eight-hour drive from Leh to Lingshed. Driving through the gorge between Phenjila and Honupatta is still an incredible and impressive experience, although less strenuous. The 'Hand of the Rinpoche' still towers at the end of the valley high above the Singi-La pass. The hanging glacier seems to be shrinking.



The gorge



Rinpoche's Hand (left)



Singi-La pass (right)

As usual in **Lingshed**, we stayed at the house of our long-term friends Tashi and Rigzin. Tashi, Lobsang's father, suffers from a lung disease and lives mainly in Neraks, down by the Zanskar River (lower than Lingshed), where he has a simple job related to the construction of the road along the Zanskar River. Lobsang looked after us because her stepmother Rigzin had to work in the fields.

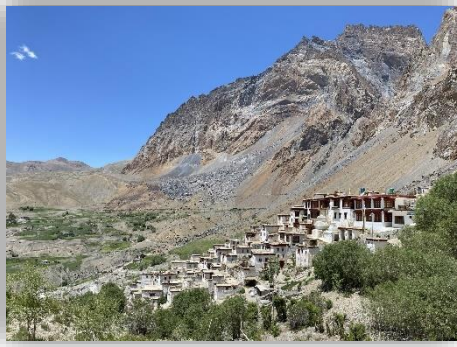


Our friends' house



Rigzin and her neighbour working in the field

Our days in Lingshed are always packed with visits to the monks and nuns in their monasteries, the school which demonstrated the newly introduced 'Buddhist Philosophy Class', and the families supported by our 'Poor People Fund'.



Monks Monastery



Nuns Monastery



Ani Tsering



Debating class for the students at Lingshed school, the two teachers (a monk and a nun)



*Bhoto Tsering with her new roof
(above)*

serving Thentuk (right)

making butter tea (far right)



Bhoto Tsering is an old woman who lives alone and has no family members to look after her. Last year, her roof leaked when it rained for several days, which was rather unusual until recently. Climate change is causing more rain in Ladakh. She had told us that she had to sit in the one dry corner of her room for two days and wait for the rain to stop. With the support of the ‘Poor People Fund’ we organized to have her roof repaired later in the summer.

This year she invited us to lunch and proudly showed us her new roof. Lobsang helped her with the cooking as she is quite old and frail. Once again, I was deeply touched and moved by the immense gratitude she expressed– and by all the other people from Lingshed who profit from our support. She has not much in the way of material possessions or money, but she has a big heart full of kindness, hospitality, and gratitude. Often accompanied by a big warm smile.

One day, almost the whole village gathered at a family’s house for the blessing ceremony of their baby. For the villagers, this is a welcome opportunity to get together, exchange news, drink salted butter tea and/or chang (the local barley beer), get food (papa: made from roasted barley and peas) and have a day off from working in the fields. Many of the women were knitting while chatting and drinking tea.





People in Lingshed

After six days in Lingshed, we travelled to **Zinchan**, the home of Lobsang and her husband Nawang. We drove down to the Zanskar River and on to Tsarak Do where the Oma Chu flows into the Zanskar River. We had to cross the Zanskar River on a trolley – what an adventure! On the other side we were greeted by Nawang’s father and brother who carried our luggage.



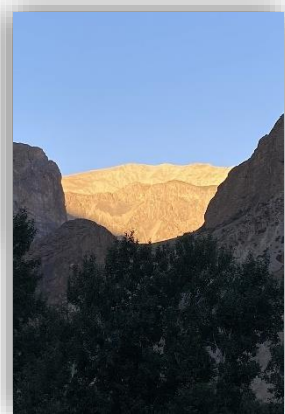
The trolley across the Zanskar River

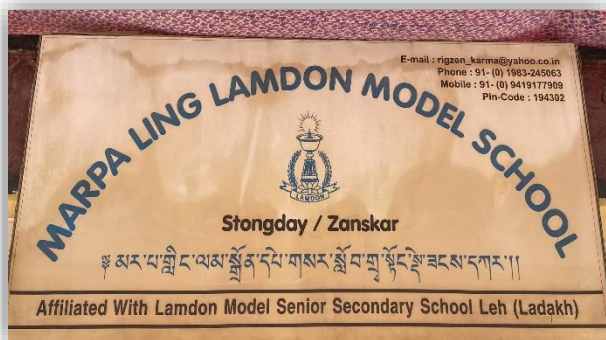


Along the Oma Chu

Without pack-horses we walked along the Oma Chu all the way to Zinchan. With the horses, it is not possible as there are a couple of passages along the river where one has to climb over steep rocks. The locals could master these passages in their sleep, we were grateful to have some help!

Zinchan is a small village, if you can even call it a village. It consists of two houses, one is for Nawang, Lobsang, her daughter Dolma, and the parents (-in-law), the other is for Nawang’s brother, his wife and three children. We stayed a couple of nights in this very remote and quiet place. The mother baked some fresh bread rolls in a locally made oven (see pictures). They were delicious and a real treat! We washed our bodies and clothes in a small and cold tributary of the Oma Chu – a beautiful open-air bath room.





From Zinchan we went to Stongday, in the Zanskar Valley, to visit the **Marpaling Lamdon School**. This is the school where we were able to place three children (two from Ralaking, one from Zinchan) in the newly opened hostel. We were lucky that we just happened to be there for the celebration of the school's 24th anniversary. It was a festive day with songs and dances performed by the students and a rich meal.

The school was founded by Rigzin (Ladakhi) and Pascal (Swiss) and is supported by the Swiss 'Association Rigzin Zanskar'. It provides education for children in the Zanskar Valley and scholarships for children from poor families. The school is very well equipped with teaching and sport materials, it has a computer room, a chemistry lab, a medical dispensary, a library, and a collection of traditional dresses for the dance performances. The newly built hostel has rooms for boys and girls with six children sharing a room.



Welcome !



there is a sun-room where the children can study and play.

The large skylight windows provide the warmth to the interior rooms. During the coldest winter months, December – February, all schools in Ladakh are closed, and the children from the hostel return to their families.

The elder students also receive training in local handicrafts such as sewing, weaving, or carpentry.



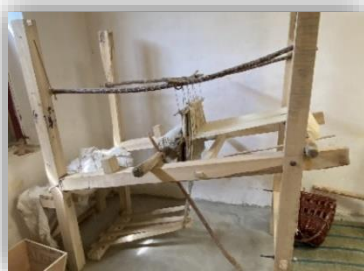
The sun room



The rooms



Tokdan (Zinchan), Diskit, Thuwang (Ralaking)



Weaving



Carpentry



Sewing

In **Sani**, we visited the old monastery and the **cave of Padmasambhava**, which is perched high above the valley. The strenuous climb up the mountain was rewarded with a powerful energy inside the cave and a fantastic view over the Zanskar Valley.



The view from the cave

Once again, we were lucky enough to be part of the famous monastery festival with the dances performed by the monks. On the first day, the monks danced in their regular robes, not with costumes and masks.

On our way back to Leh, we stopped at the old **palace at Zangla**, which stands high above the village. Alexander Csoma de Körös was a Hungarian pioneer of Tibetology who lived in this palace from 1823 – 1824. He compiled the first Tibetan-English dictionary.



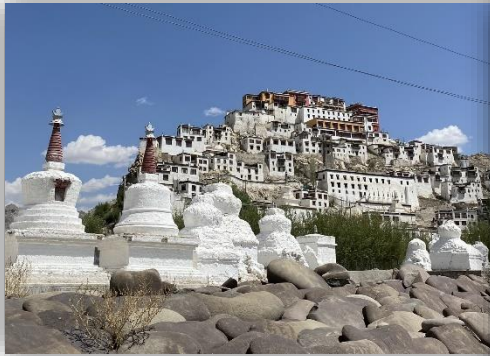
Zangla Palace - Alexander Csoma de Körös' room and dictionary

We also stopped in Neraks to meet our 'old' friend Tashi who was delighted to see us. The next day we stopped in **Honupatta** to visit our friend **Tashi Lhamo**. After having tea at her house, she took us up to the monastery where the annual celebration of a particular deity was taking place. More salted butter tea and tsampa!





The first two weeks went by in a blink of the eye. We were back in **Leh** to welcome our two friends Christine and Tara, who joined us for a couple of weeks. To acclimatize and get over the jet-lag we strolled around Leh, made a day trip to some monasteries, and visited the Lingshed Hostel in Choglamsar.



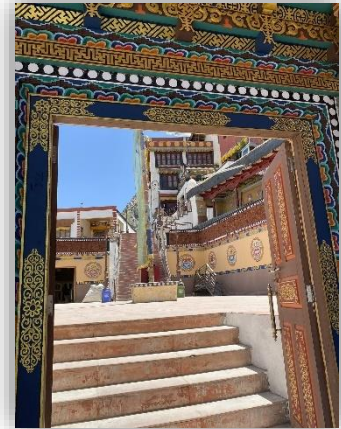
Tikse Monastery



Doris and I had organized a 7-day road trip by car to the Nubra Valley, Pangong Lake, Hanle, Umling La, Tso Moriri, and back to Leh. The climb up to the **Diskit monastery** turned out to be a bit of a fitness test.



Maitreya Buddha - Diskit Monastery



The road connecting Nubra Valley to Pangong Lake has only recently been opened to tourists. It is a beautiful, and in places, spectacular drive along the **Shyok River**. Due to the warm weather, the river was carrying a lot of water and flooded the road in some places. To get through, we had to leave very early before the water level was too high for a car.

After two days of many hours in the car, we had a rest day in **Merak**, a village on Pangong Lake. We stayed in a lovely guest house very close to the lake and enjoyed the turquoise jewel – the lake – in the barren landscape.



Shyok River – The road in and besides the river



Pangong Lake - The turquoise jewel



The next destination was **Hanle**, a village in the far east of the Changtang, the high plateau towards Tibet. Hanle is famous for its observatory, one of the highest in the world. We stayed with a local family who treated us to delicious Ladakhi food and warm hospitality.



Hanle: Observatory (on the hill) - Monastery - Black Necked Crane

The next day we made a day-trip to **Umling La**, the highest motorable pass in the world, 5795 meters above sea level. It was only open to Western tourists this year. I was surprised by the good – paved! – road leading up the pass. The scenery was breath-taking, we were lucky it was a sunny day. There are many nomads in this area with their herds of yaks, sheep, and goats (the Pashmina goats). The mountains are not rugged with steep rock faces, deep valleys, and covered by glaciers. Instead, these high mountains (between 5000 – 6000 meters above sea level) look like rolling hills with rounded peaks, they are barren and snowless in summer.

When we got out of the car at the pass, we felt the high altitude and the lack of oxygen. We walked around, took photos, hung up prayer flags, had a cup of tea in the lovely tea shop – and danced with a group of Indian motor bikers!

Everything seemed so surreal!

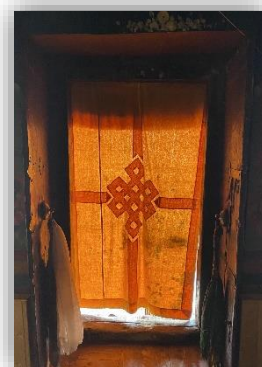


*Umling La Pass
5795 meters above sea level
tea shop*



Umling La Pass - A dance with Indian bikers

On the way back to Leh we spent a night in Korzok on **Lake Tso Moriri** and we had a short stop at the hot springs in **Chumathang**. Maybe a place to go when we get (even) older and can no longer go on trekking tours?!



*Yaks
Lake Tso Moriri
Chumathang
Korzok Monastery*

After a few of days in Leh we had to say **goodbye** to our Ladakhi friends, to Ladakh, and to Tara. Christine, Doris, and I travelled to Kerala, South India, for a three-week Ayurveda treatment.

As we boarded the plane in Leh, a large and clear halo appeared in the sky. I took this as a good omen – as a beautiful way to leave Ladakh – and hopefully return in the near future.



The first time I was in Lingshed in 1991, while trekking from Kashmir to Ladakh, I fell in love with this place and its people. For me, this extremely remote village and the extraordinary people who lived there were something special. I felt a deep connection to these people who manifested the basic human qualities of kindness, generosity, hospitality, or patience in a pure and open way – even though they led a very difficult and challenging life. From this deep connection arose my wish to give something back to these people. Through the LADF (Lingshed Area Development Foundation) founded by Geshela Ngawang Jangchup, Doris and I regularly support the various projects (see flyer).



I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who supports these projects in whatever way: with material things, with a donation, or with loving thoughts for the well-being and happiness of these people – and all living beings around the world!



Ariya Baumann, October 2024