

Ladakh 2025 - Impressions

25 June - 9 August 2025



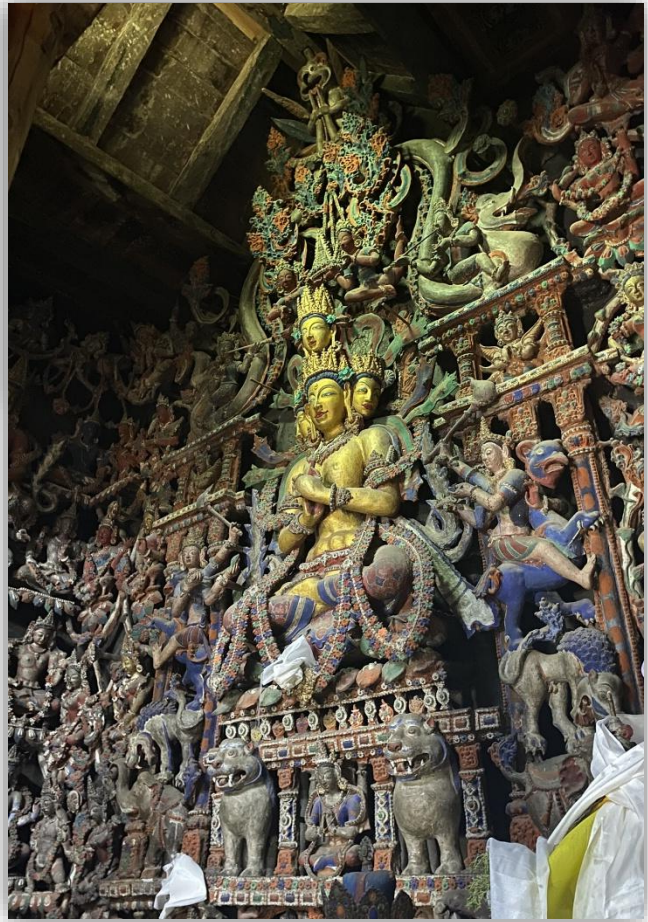
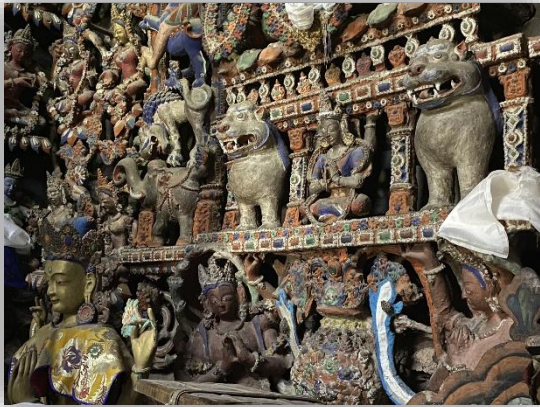
The Namgyal Tsemo Gonpa above Leh

Due to special circumstances, we travelled to Ladakh for the third year in a row. But unlike previous trips, no friends came along with Doris and me. In a way, this made it easier to cope with the many changes to the tentative programme that came our way. In the end, all fell in place and we could do what we had had in mind. The only exception was that fact that we missed the teachings of the Dalai Lama in the monastery in Karsha, Zanskar.

During our acclimatization days in **Leh** (the capital of Ladakh, 3500 meters above sea level) and meeting some of our Ladakhi friends, we made a day trip to the villages of **Sumdha Chun** and **Sumdha Chenmo** which are known for their ancient monastery and wooden Buddha statues, respectively.

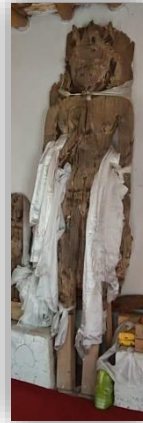
The monastery in Sumdha Chun dates from the same period as the monasteries in Alchi and Mangyu (10th century CE). The artwork of the temple is exquisite, and the shrine in the assembly hall houses the Vajradhatumaha Mandala, made of clay sculptures, which can be considered one of the finest in the Western Himalayas.





The exquisite artwork in the ancient monastery in Sumdha Chun





The ancient wooden Buddha Statues in Sumdha Chenmo

Then we travelled to the village of **Lingshed**, where I had first met Geshe Ngawang Jangchup in 1991. This was the beginning of our support of his projects in both Lingshed and Leh. Since 1993, it is actually Doris who is actively managing the correspondence and financial affairs of these projects.

In the monastery, the annual 3-day '**Reading the Scriptures**' ceremony was followed by the inauguration of the huge Buddha Statue next to the monastery. This happened on 6 July, which also marked the 90th anniversary of the Dalai Lama. The villagers appeared in their traditional clothes, speeches were given, dances were performed, presents were distributed, and food was prepared for everybody. Later in the afternoon, the villagers gathered below the monastery and continued the festivities with dances and chang, the local barley beer.



Lingshed Monastery - Reading the Scriptures Ceremony and local dances



Inauguration of the huge Buddha Statue - Lama Tsewang Jorgas is showered with katas - offerings made of butter

Almost daily, we also visited people/families in need to offer them financial assistance from the LADF (Lingshed Area Development Foundation) **Poor Relief Fund**. In each home, we had to sit down and drink tea or even eat something. This gave us a glimpse into their often very simple living conditions, which made me, once again, infinitely grateful for the amenities I have in Switzerland: things like running water in the house, an electric stove, or a chair to sit on.



People benefitting from the Poor Relief Fund



*The
Lingshed
Nunnery
with the
best
momos*



Our days in Lingshed passed too quickly, after one week we had to say good-bye to our Lingshed family and all our friends.



*Above: Tashi, Silvia, Nawang, Tsewang Dolma,
Doris, Ariya, Lama Tsepel. The women from
Ama Tsokspa. The members of the
neighborhood group. Lama Tsewang Jorgas.
Lobsang Angmo, her sister Dechen Angmo.*

In Ladakh, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hike in remote areas, off-road, in the stillness of nature. With the construction of roads, telephone and internet connections, and small hospitals, the romantic isolation that many Westerners seek in these barren mountains is rapidly disappearing. In recent years, Doris and I had to rely on the advice of our trekking agent, Dadul, to find a trek off the (new) roads.

This year, he proposed us a **6-day trek in the Changtang** area, the high plateau in eastern Ladakh. Although it was in a remote area and not an 'official' trekking route (his brother lives as a nomad in that area), we were a bit apprehensive as we had to cross 3 passes higher than 5000 meters and sleep 3 nights at an altitude of about 5000 meters. One of the passes was 5730 meters above sea level! Would we make it? This would be the highest spot on earth that Doris and I reached by foot.... Yes, we made it!

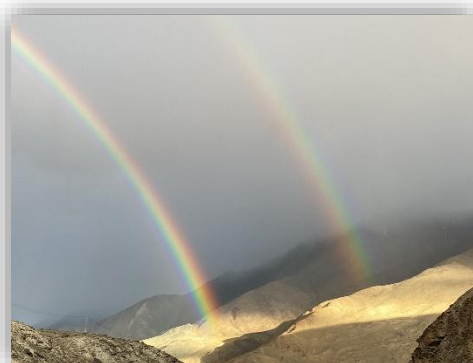
The trek started above the village of Skidmang and ended at Lake Kiung Tso (east of the famous Lake Tso Moriri). The weather was okay; we had some rain at night, but only once during the day. This trek was definitely an adventure with challenges, incredible scenery, great rewards, and plenty of satisfaction.



Towards the first pass: Shingdat La (5230 meters) – on the pass



Walking into the rain - campground near Sumdo Yogma – dinner – a rare double rainbow





Looking down the valley (left, middle), looking towards our second pass, Sumdo La (right)



We made it! Sumdo La (5730 meters – it does not look that high, does it?!)

From the pass, we saw the destination of our trek in the far distance: Lake Kiung Tso. As we approached, it transformed into a unique turquoise jewel amidst the barren mountains. But first, we had a long downhill which brought us to a lovely camping ground at Nidar Do.



*A well-deserved rest after a long and strenuous day.
Dorje was a gifted cook!*



The destination of our trek: **Lake Kiung Tso** (4990 meters above sea level)



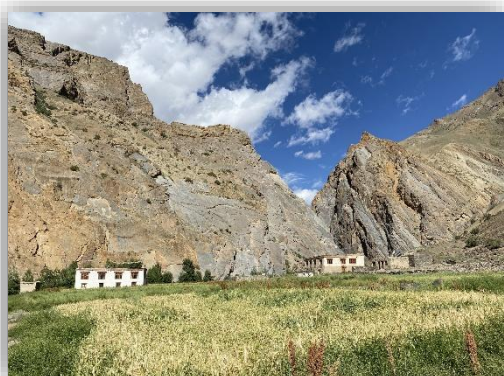
On July 20, we planned to attend the 25th anniversary of the Marpaling Lamdon Model School in Stongday, Zanskar. However, due to heavy rains, the road along the Zanskar River was closed, and we were stuck in Leh. Again, we had to adapt our itinerary to the circumstances. Instead of going to Stongday, we went to **Zinchen**, where Doris' god-daughter lives with her husband, their six-year-old daughter Dolma, and their three-month-old daughter Zadun. After our arrival in Ladakh, they had built a little trolley over the Oma Chu River so we could visit them. The old footpath had been destroyed during construction of a new road to Zinchen (and Ralakung).

The drive on the relatively new road through **the Zanskar Gorge** is breathtaking: 500-meter-high cliffs rise on both sides of the river. The road is far from finished – in some places it is paved and finished, in others it is a very narrow dirt track.



*The road through the Zanskar Gorge.
A spring emerging from the rock face (right)*

Lobsang, Nawang, Dolma, and Zadun live with Nawang's parents in one of the two houses in **Zinchen**. Nawang's brother Gyurmet lives with his wife and three children in the other house. Since the parents and the other family attended the teachings at Karsha Monastery, where the Dalai Lama gave some talks, Lobsang and her family had to stay home to look after the fields and goats and sheep. Nawang's other brother Tundup came to help out during these days. Doris and I spent five very quiet days in this mini-village: no cars, no people passing by, and for me, no internet (the Indian government provides satellite internet to remote villages; however, it didn't work on my iPhone). Besides drinking the milk and using it for cooking, they made butter from the goats' milk. Cow's milk produces yellow butter; it takes two hours to churn. Goat's milk produces white butter; it takes three hours to churn. Lobsang said that churning the milk by hand, instead of using a water-powered mill (as used in Ralakung), produces a tastier butter.



The two houses of Zinchen - The family with Nawang's brother Tundup - Dolma is dancing



*Churning the goat milk for three hours – butter floating on the surface - taking out the butter
- cow butter (above), goat butter (below)*



A traditional Ladakhi kitchen – Traditional Ladakhi food



*Crossing the Zanskar and Oma Chu Rivers on the trolley (nothing for the faint-hearted!)
Walking along the Oma Chu River*

Two years ago, we visited the people in the extremely remote village **Ralakung** (Nawang's mother is from there). Despite having a small school building, they have no teacher – all the assigned teachers ran away after a few days! We were able to place some children at the Marpaling Lamdon Model School in Stongday. The parents were, and still are, incredibly grateful, and provided us with two riding horses for this year's visit.



On the way to Ralakung, a rare Blue Poppy



On the Ralakung La Pass, 5180 meters above sea level - Looking back at the pass

In **Ralakung Nangma**, we were welcomed by the villagers in the traditional way: we were given a white kata (ceremonial scarf) and then had to sit down, drink tea, and eat curd, cookies, and tsampa.



Approaching Ralakung Nangma - A traditional welcome

During the summer months, the people of Ralakung are extremely busy tending their cows, dimos (female yaks), goats, and sheep. Since the area around Ralakung is rich in good pastures, farmers from many villages send their animals to Ralakung for the summer. For the farmers, this involves milking the cows (the male cows and yaks can freely roam around) and making butter, curd, and churpe (dried cheese made from the leftovers from butter production). They also have to tend to their fields, where they grow barley and peas. Many people have a small vegetable garden with potatoes, spinach, lettuce, and carrots.



The animals dominate the village and the life of the villagers



The people from Ralakung Nangma – Six families live there



A goat stomach to store butter, cow dung and wood as fuel for cooking and heating in winter

After a rest day we walked over the Nangma La Pass to **Ralakung Phima** where four families live. We visited each family, two in the evening and the two others the following morning.



An old fortress above Ralakung Phima – the 2 lower houses – the 2 upper houses



The four families of Ralakung Phima. The Amchi (photo left) plays an important role for the people in both Ralakungs when they become ill. He learned the skills of traditional Tibetan medicine from his father. According to Ladakhi tradition, Amchis never ask for fees for their medicine and services: the patients offer whatever they wish or can afford. In return for their services, the villagers used to offer the Amchi's family crops during harvest-time as well as free labour.



*Barley, peas, wild roses,
Edelweiss, Roseroot, Violet
Monkshood*

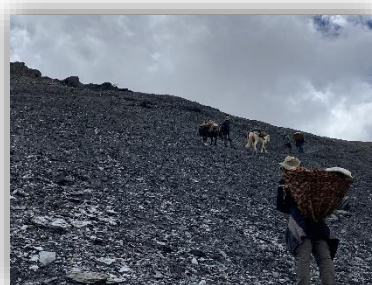
On the way back from Ralakung Phima to Phey, we met a group coming from Ralakung Nangma. It was the mother of the sick twins on her way to a doctor/hospital. The Amchi had told her the day before that she needed to see a doctor because the twins' condition was critical. The nearest doctor/hospital was in Padum, which meant a 10 to 12-hour walk to Phey (over the high Ralakung La Pass) and then a taxi to Padum. We met them at the foot of the Ralakung La where the mother was breastfeeding her two boys. She and a young man were carrying the babies in a traditional (baby) basket on their backs. The Amchi had joined them; he, or rather the donkeys, were carrying wooden sticks used for the roof of a Ladakhi house.



*The high pastures for the yaks - Towards the pass -
The mother with her twins - The donkeys with their
wooden load*

As we continued up the pass, our horseman took the mother's basket and carried it over the pass and a bit down

until we separated. The group was walking quite fast because the mother was eager to reach Padum as quickly as possible.



Shortly after crossing the pass, we met the mother's parents on their way back home; they had attended the Dalai Lama's teachings in Karsha. The mother gave the twins rehydration salts. Later at the Yak Camp, we had a late lunch together and then the group set off ahead of us. It greatly touched and even shocked me to witness the effort and time it took for the mother to take the twins to a doctor: a strenuous 10-hour hike over a nearly 5200-meter-high pass, a few



dangerous river crossings, and a taxi ride. The father was in Phey at the time with an older, sick daughter so he could not help his wife.

I became acutely aware that our healthcare system (in Switzerland) is a luxury that should not be taken for granted! I was, once again, deeply grateful for having such an excellent healthcare system.

The twins spent a couple of days in the hospital in Padum, but the doctors advised the parents to take them to the hospital in Leh. Back in Leh, Doris and I visited

them at the hospital and found the twins in a much better condition. I was greatly relieved to see them much healthier!

Before our departure from Leh, Geshela Ngawang Jangchup organized a large gathering to honour Doris and me for the help and support of his projects over the past 35 years. It also marked the end of his involvement and the completion of the new ‘Shopping & Appartement Complex’ next to the hostel in Choglamsar.

The income from renting out the shops and appartements will help finance the various projects supported by LADF (Lingshed Area Development Foundation), such as room and board for the students staying at the hostel, education, healthcare support, or the Poor Relief Fund.

At the gathering, many speeches were given outlining the development and improvements made over the past 35 years, as well as many words of THANK YOU!



The U-shaped part of the shopping & appartement complex



The hostel in Choglamsar



The speakers included the Trans-Singi-Area counsellor (MP), Tashi Gyaltsen, and the Leh District Agriculture Minister, Stanzin Chöspel. We received many katas as well as a thanka depicting the Four-Armed Chenrezig (Buddha of Compassion).

In my speech, I mentioned that in 1991, when I first happened to come to Lingshed, I simply fell in love with the place (a true Shangri-La!), the villagers, and the monks at the monastery, and I felt a deep connection. There must have been deep bonds

across space, continents, and lifetimes. Although the support and assistance for these people seems small and meagre compared to the great suffering throughout the world, it has been an essential and sometimes life-changing support for each individual. Doris and I have witnessed the impact of this support time and again over the last three decades, receiving countless small but heartfelt gifts and drinking countless cups of (salted butter) tea.



The press was also present

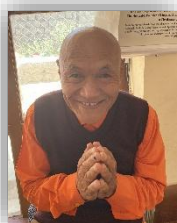
For example: the gifts received this year in Ralakung Nangma and Ralakung Phima amounted to a total of about 10 kg of butter and different kinds of churpe (dried cheese)!



In addition to these and other material gifts during our stay in Ladakh, we received so much kindness, hospitality, generosity, warmth, and affection from everyone we met. And not just this year, since my first visit to Ladakh, I have noticed this spirit of openness and compassion. To experience this is truly inspiring in a world where self-centered attitudes and hatred are becoming more and more dominant and rampant.

For Doris and me, going back to Ladakh, and especially to Lingshed, Zinchen, and Ralakung, 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 LADF projects (Lingshed Hostel in Choglamsar, winter school tuition, people in need, sponsorships for education, medical expenses).

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
August 2025

Geshela Ngawang Jangchup, Doris, Ariya



