

A walk in the Himalayas



THE MAGIC OF THE MOUNTAINS

High in the Himalayas, Ladakh is one of the most remote places – and the highest inhabited – in the world. During the summer, a new tour offers the chance to live among villagers in comfort and style. **Janet Street-Porter** discovers her own personal Shangri-La. Photography by **Andrew Rowat**



On a high
Mineral-rich rocks by the
Zaskar River in Ladakh,
India; Tsering Chondol,
owner of the Gyabthago
Heritage House near
Stok (opposite)

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When I was a child, the magical Frank Capra film *Lost Horizon* made a huge impression on me. It showed a secret kingdom where the peaceful inhabitants seemed to live forever, surrounded by breathtaking mountains and beautiful scenery. Capra's film was inspired by James Hilton's popular novel, written in 1933 – the story of a diplomat whose plane crashes in the Himalayas and who stumbles on Shangri-La, where devotees are ruled by a mysterious spiritual leader. Ever since, explorers and writers have searched for Shangri-La.

Visiting the remote region of Ladakh, high in the Himalayas in the most northerly part of India, I think I discovered the modern version of Hilton's mythical paradise. The people might not live forever, but their lifestyle teaches us a huge amount about self-sufficiency and community spirit, the indomitable power of faith and spirituality. Ladakh is a popular destination for hard-core trekkers who follow long-distance trails in the summer months, often carrying their kit on ponies. All the treks involve high-level passes of over 4,267m, and acclimatisation is essential.

My plan was to spend a week walking from village to village along ancient footpaths and cattle trails through fields and pastures in the valley of the river Indus. I would walk for four to six hours a day and visit some of the many monasteries and historic buildings that are scattered throughout the valley. I would stay among the locals experiencing this lifestyle at close hand and, I hoped, getting a better understanding of it. My trip was organised by Shakti, an Indian company that has renovated traditional houses in three rural villages so guests can experience authentic Ladakh without



“THE LIFESTYLE OF THE PEOPLE OF LADAKH TEACHES US A LOT ABOUT THE POWER OF FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY”

scrimping on comfort. They have installed pure water, electricity and comfortable beds, using local materials and craftsmen.

My journey started in Delhi, where I spent 24 hours getting acclimatised, staying at the elegant Leela hotel in Gurgaon on the outskirts of the city, convenient for the airport and only 20 minutes by car from the manicured avenues and palatial homes of New Delhi, as well as the historic sites around the old city centre. The Leela has a glamorous entrance, and my room was cool, spacious and elegant – just what I needed after a day visiting the Red Fort, the India Gate and the tombs in the Lodi Gardens in sweltering heat. At dawn the next morning, a 90-minute flight north over the snow-capped Himalayas deposited me in a different world.

Ladakh means ‘land of high passes’ – lying between the Kunlun mountain range (including K2, which I was thrilled to spot from my plane window) in the north, and the main Himalayan range to the south. For centuries, Ladakh benefited from its location at the crossroads of the richest trading routes in Asia. The region's capital, Leh, sits above the wide valley of the river Indus, at 3,200m. As I stepped off the plane, the air was thin and, at 8am, crisply chilly, and the light was so dazzlingly clear I reached for dark glasses. The people looked different from those left behind in Delhi. A mixture of Chinese, Indian and Mongolian, they had high cheekbones, slanting eyes and long narrow noses, and were wrapped up in padded jackets with thick woollen scarves.

Ladakh is the highest inhabited place in the world, with altitudes from 2,740 to 7,670m. It's also one of the emptiest, with only eight inhabitants per square mile. The area was closed to tourists until the 1970s for security reasons, and even today the Indian army maintains a large garrison here. Culturally and geographically the region is part of Tibet but was absorbed into India in 1947, when Buddhist monasteries and temples became protected.

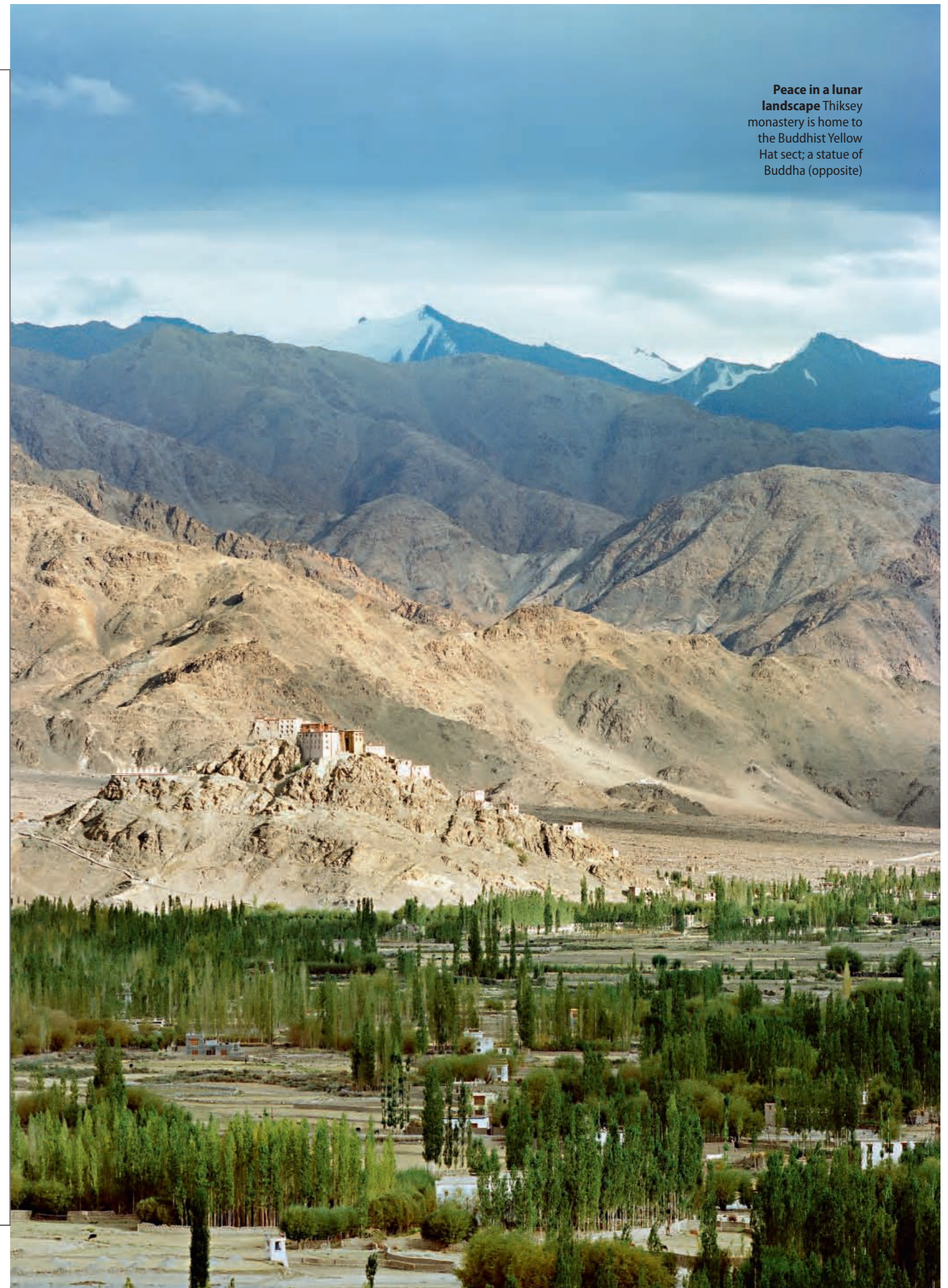
My first home-stay was a farmhouse in the village of Stok, in the shadow of the 6,153m Stok Kangri, a peak that dominates the Indus valley. The farmer and his wife greeted me warmly, while their small son played on the front steps of the charming whitewashed house, surrounded by barley fields and apricot trees. After a welcoming cup of ginger tea, they showed me to my bedroom, its large traditional wooden windows on two sides offering spectacular views over farmland to the mountains behind. I was given a tour of the house, which, like all the rest in the area, has been designed to take advantage of the extreme changes in weather throughout the year. During the winter, families live and sleep on the ground floor, where there's a large kitchen and a stove fuelled by dried dung collected during the summer months. A huge range fills one entire wall, adorned with copper cooking pots and utensils.

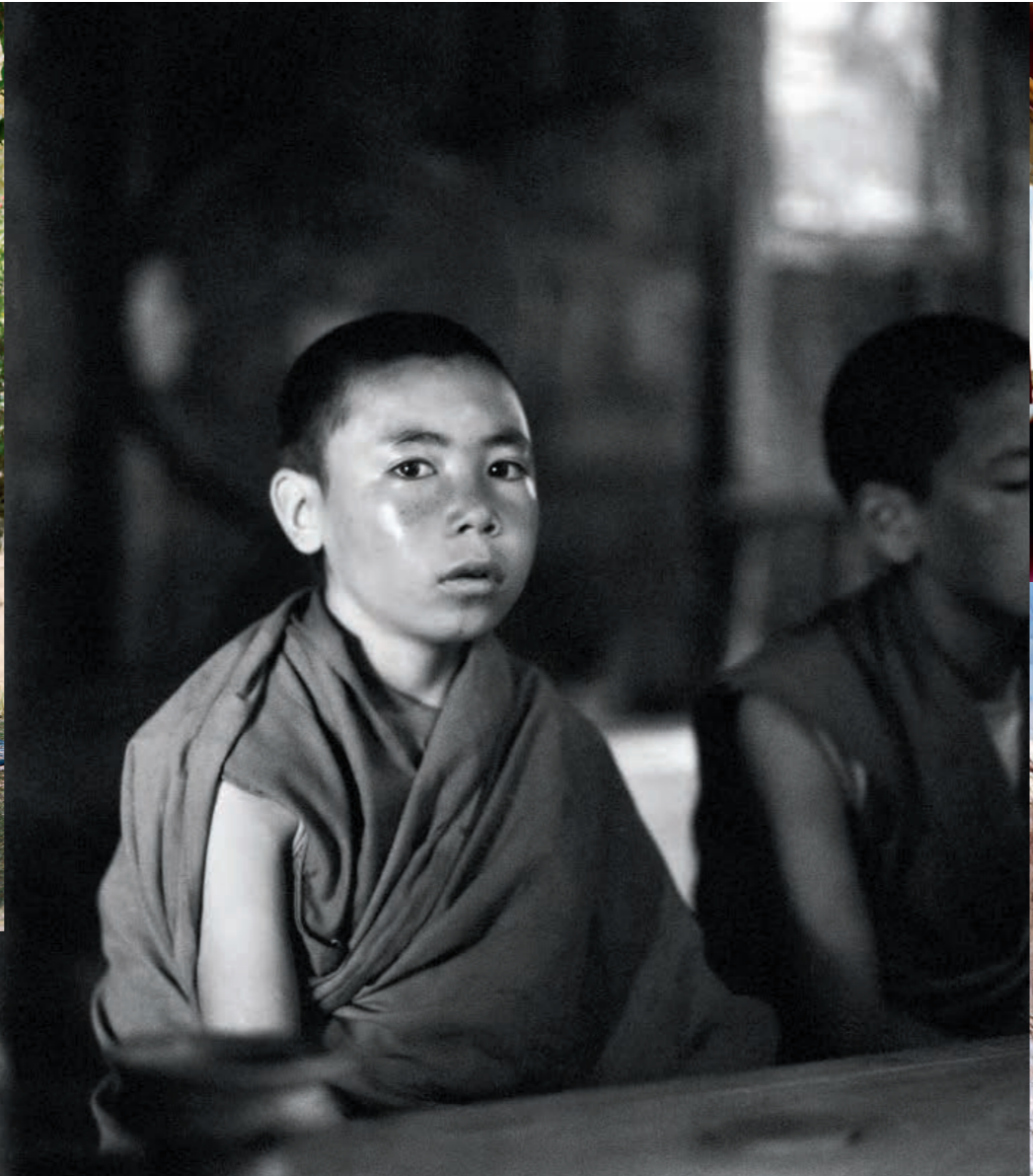
Family bedrooms were off the kitchen, along with storage rooms for dried meat, vegetables, and cellars housing pottery jars of home-brewed barley beer. My room was one of the summer bedrooms on the first floor, set around an open terrace, with a shady verandah. As well as the mountains, it looked on to the farm's vegetable garden, rows of huge cabbages, tomatoes and beans, with marigolds and asters blooming in among them.

Stok lies slightly above the river Indus at 3,649m. I certainly felt the change in altitude from Delhi and was happy to spend the first afternoon eating a delicious lunch prepared by our cook, drinking tea and watching the endless activity outside. Female shepherds herded goats up and down the narrow lanes, and everyone pitched in to help as barley was cut with scythes, tied in loose bundles, and then carried by hand and stacked to dry. The roof of the barn was already covered with a thick layer of alfalfa, drying for winter feed.

The local farmers are ingenious. Willow and poplar are the only trees that grow, and tin cans are used to protect the trunks and stop cattle eating the bark. A system of channels ensures the >

Peace in a lunar landscape Thiksey monastery is home to the Buddhist Yellow Hat sect; a statue of Buddha (opposite)

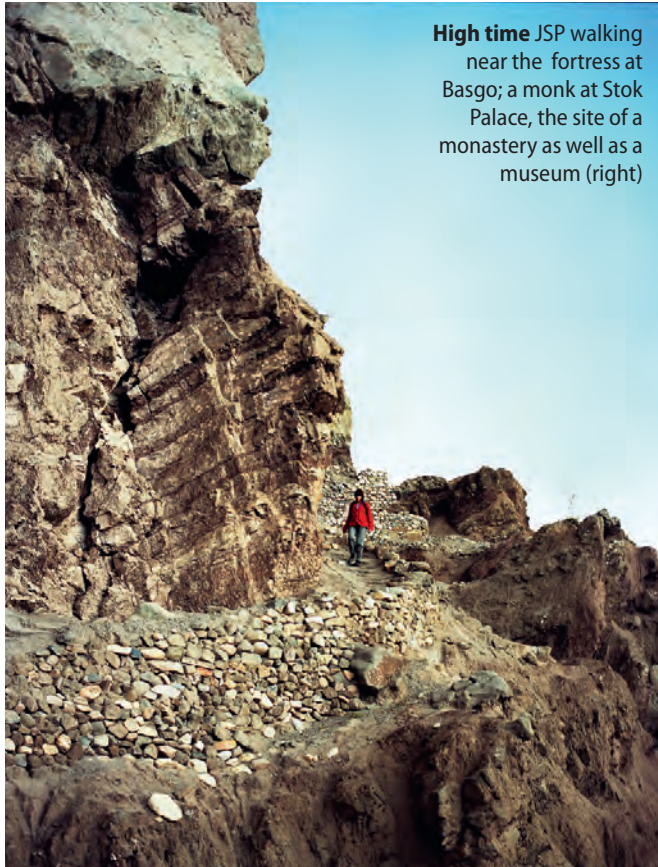




Clockwise from top left Janet Street-Porter lunching alfresco; monks at Thiksey; Likir Monastery; a watch tower at Basgo; milking a cow at Basgo; prayer flags at the Namgyal Tsemo monastery near Leh; artefacts at Stok Palace, once home to Ladakh's royal family; JSP walking in Basgo; Shakti village house in Stok with its ornate stove



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High time JSP walking near the fortress at Basgo; a monk at Stok Palace, the site of a monastery as well as a museum (right)



“ ALL YOU HEAR IS THE SOUND OF ANIMALS AND RUNNING WATER ”

fields in the village are irrigated in rotation. Nothing is wasted, and families live, work and farm together. Women mend roads, build houses and cut barley, as well as look after the children. In the summer, everyone helps to gather apricots and apples, move cattle to fresh pastures and bring in the harvest.

Pujan, my enthusiastic guide, had emphasised that the altitude takes getting used to, so next morning I set off on a stroll around the village, following tree-lined waterways and well-trodden footpaths. There are few roads and hardly any cars once you leave the main highway – all you hear is the sound of animals and running water. Ladakh is a kingdom, and although the king has no real power these days, he lives in an apartment in a traditional palace on the edge of the village. Part of the palace has been turned into a museum with photos of the royal family, wonderful jewellery and robes, as well as headdresses festooned with lumps of gold and hundreds of pieces of turquoise.

On my way back to my farmhouse, I passed women bent double carrying bundles of barley. They were wearing a huge number of layers – thick trousers, headscarves, long-sleeved sweaters, with quilted jackets over the top. It was windy but pretty hot – but the locals believe in wearing plenty, even when it's 37°C.

By this stage I couldn't believe how much food I was packing away: wonderful squash curry, a dish of goat's cheese and spinach, and spicy chicken by candlelight the night before, a carrot cake at teatime today, and local mutton stew with cabbage and lentils for supper. As I staggered upstairs at 9.30pm, the wind whistled outside, the temperature dropped (overnight it snowed on the high peaks), and I was grateful for my hot-water bottle.

Dozens of spectacular monasteries line the valley of the Indus, which flows from east to west. Usually built on high rocky bluffs, they are designed to blend into the lunar landscape to try to escape the attentions of unwelcome attackers, and each has its

own character. The following morning, monasteries were on the agenda as we left the house in semidarkness and drove for 30 minutes to Thiksey, built over 600 years ago and home to 100 monks of the Buddhist Yellow Hat sect.

It's a huge building on 12 levels overlooking the valley, and morning prayers had been under way since dawn. The young monks fidgeted, drank tea and occasionally burst into chanting, bouts of frenzied blowing on huge pipes and trumpets, and banging on drums. After a picnic breakfast in the village of Shey, I walked through the fields up to 16th-century Shey palace, once the home of the royal family, with the remains of an ornamental lake below. The villagers were not allowed to gaze at the king directly but had to look at his reflection in the water.

We moved on to Hemis, the largest monastery in the region, high up on the rocks at the eastern end of the valley. This remote settlement, built in 1630, is home to 300 monks of the Red Hat sect. In June and July it houses a series of impressive costumed parades and pageants, and thousands of locals (and tourists) travel miles to participate. Even though I'd missed the pageants, Hemis was well worth a visit as the museum holds a huge range of historic artefacts and embroideries.

Time for a spot of retail therapy. At dusk that evening I visited the bustling bazaars and markets of Leh, packed with a huge array of jewellery and locally woven pashminas (excellent quality and great buys), as well as tomatoes, potatoes and cabbages sold by women seated cross-legged on blankets at the roadside. I bought an old rug woven with a tiger design, made in the Nubra valley on the northern border of Tibet, for about £200, and a hat made from boiled wool, a bargain at £2.

Walking through the busy streets, I still felt a bit dizzy, particularly if I climbed any stairs, and was also still eating like a horse, so the next day I decided to see how I'd manage trekking up into >

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the mountains. I followed a track by the river above Stok village, leaving pastureland behind as the valley narrowed, with fantastic rock formations on either side. Wild goats were grazing high above us. I decided to stop after three hours, having reached around 4,000m. Descending, the views over the Indus valley were superb.

Next morning, I took one of the most memorable road journeys of my life: 17 miles up the gorge of the river Zaskar to the tiny settlement of Chilling, a collection of farms at a junction of streams, with fruit trees and tiny stone-walled fields. Jagged cliffs of turquoise rock cascaded into the tumbling water below, and rich mineral deposits glowed from deep pink and shiny damson to terracotta in the sunlight. In the winter, fearless hikers make a ten-day trek from Chilling, walking on the frozen river and sleeping in caves – the temperature drops to -30°C at night.

Now it was time to relocate to a different village and my base for the next couple of days, a restored house in Nimoo village, to the west of Leh at a slightly lower altitude. Once again, following footpaths through fields and orchards was a pleasant, not physically demanding experience, punctuated with friendly greetings from villagers digging up potatoes or herding cattle. Heading further west, I visited the remote monastery at Alchi, founded in the 11th century. It has a series of temples, each one packed with beautiful paintings and carvings – exquisitely drawn tigers and stags, fruit and game birds, in harmonious patterns.

On a windswept stony plateau high above the village, a group of immaculately dressed schoolchildren were having their lunch. They were from a private school that closes during the winter months, when most of the area is completely cut off by snow and temperatures can be -10°C during the day. However, winter is not a dead time in Ladakh. Instead, a rich cultural life emerges. Women weave, embroider and sew clothes. Men produce intricate metalwork and musical instruments. Archery is popular, although it has been recently overtaken by ice hockey.

Tucked away to the north of the river valley is the little hamlet

of Nyo, where I walked for a couple of hours in the late afternoon light to the ruined fortress high above the village at Basgo. Although it was sunny, the wind was icy – proof positive that summer was coming to an end and winter was imminent. I spent my final afternoon in Nimoo basking on my terrace in the sun's rays, tucked away out of the ever-present wind. I was so chilled out, I spent hours just staring at the view across the valley to the mountains beyond, soaking up the solitude and calm that sum up Ladakh. Bliss. ■

Rooms at The Leela Gurgaon, Delhi, start at £293, inclusive of taxes (+91 22 6000 2233, theleela.com). Shakti Ladakh is open 15 May-30 September. A seven-night package costs from £2,458pp based on two sharing and including accommodation, meals and drinks, taxes, sightseeing, river rafting, a guide, chef and car, but excluding flights (+44 (0)20 3151 5177, shaktihimalaya.com).

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Well met by moonlight

Shey Palace, once the summer residence of Ladakh's royal family

* World Traveller return, excluding taxes, fees and surcharges