

LADAKH: GEM OF THE INDIAN HIMALAYA

with the Home of the Dalai Lama & Amritsar

13 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Delhi

Arrive in Delhi, India. Transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Delhi.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Delhi - Leh: Area Tour

Early this morning we transfer to the domestic terminal of the airport for the flight up to Leh. This surely is one of the most sensational scheduled flights in the world, taking you right over the top of the Greater Himalaya before dropping down to land at the small airport at Leh. We will be met on arrival and transfer to our hotel. Due to the effects of high altitude, the balance of the day is at leisure. A leisurely afternoon orientation walking tour will be arranged by your Tour Leader.

The Royal Palace which dominates the town is very reminiscent of the Potala in Lhasa and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, large chortens, prayer flags and mud brick houses with flat roofs are a dramatic culture change from the hot, teeming frenetic rush of Delhi.

Overnight in Leh (3500 m / 11,500 feet).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Leh Area: Gompas & Palaces

Today we will have a guided tour, visiting many of the important sites around town.

Leh is the ancient capital of Ladakh and its kings once commanded a huge civilisation stretching from Baltistan in the west, almost as far as Lhasa in Tibet. The old town is a maze of narrow streets, temples and bazaars and is a great place to explore.

We start our day with a visit to the Sankar Gompa (monastery), the one nearest to Leh town. This gompa belongs to the Gelukpa order and houses a beautiful impression of the Buddhist deity, Avolokiteshvara Padmahari with a thousand arms and heads. The hill offers excellent views of Leh, parts of the Indus River Valley and the imposing 6100m (20,100 ft) high peak of Stok Kangri that overlooks Leh.

We also visit the Leh Palace. This captivating building rises from the edge of a hill overlooking the town. Built in the 17th C, Leh Palace was occupied by the Ladakhi royal family until the 1830's. Today the palace is deserted and is being restored by UNESCO.

After a break for lunch, our sightseeing will begin with a stop at Shey Palace, the old 'summer palace' of the kings of Ladakh, built about 550 years ago by the first king of Ladakh. It stands next to the remains of a larger construction on the east side of a hill, which runs southeast towards the Indus. From the palace you can see over the fertile Indus plain northeast to Tikse Gompa and over the Indus to the Zanskar mountain range.

From Shey we continue to Thikse Gompa. This 500-year-old monastery, perched on a hill high above the Indus, has the largest contingent of monks in Ladakh. On the right of the entrance to the main courtyard a new chapel houses an enormous 15m (50 foot) high-seated Buddha figure. About 100 yellow-cap monks belong to the gompa.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

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Day 4 Leh & Alchi

A drive west on the arid and high plateau will take us to Alchi, one of the largest ancient monastic complexes and important Buddhist centre in all of Ladakh. Founded in the 11th century by Rinchen Zhangpo, one of the early Tibetan preachers who spread Lamaistic Buddhism to this part of the world, Alchi has recently undergone major restoration work under UN sponsorship. The 1000-year-old paintings inside the main temple are some of the oldest of their kind and quite distinct from the murals present in the later built gompas.

On our return to Leh we will stop to see the location where the grey waters of the Indus meet the blue waters of the Zanskar River flowing from the remote Zanskar region of the Greater Himalaya. We will also visit Likir Gompa set on an isolated ridge. This magnificent gompa, overlooking the village of Likir, was founded in the 14th century and belongs to the Yellow Hat Sect. The head lama here is the younger brother of the Dalai Lama.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 Khardung La Pass

Today we feature a half-day jeep tour up the hairpins of the Nubra Valley road to the Khardung La Pass (5470 m/18,400 feet) -- the highest vehicular accessible pass in the world. The views of the Zanskar Range and the Indus Valley on the way up are amazing as are occasional sightings of yaks on the high pastures below the pass. For most tour participants, this will perhaps be the highest point that they would have travelled to in their lifetime.

The road to the pass that crosses the Ladakh Range and provides access to the Nubra Valley and the Karakoram region was built at great human and financial cost by the Indian Army following frequent incursions into the area by the Chinese Army following the occupation of Tibet in the late 1950's.

We will return to our hotel for lunch and free time to explore Leh on your own. This evening we will attend a cultural performance at the Leh Palace.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Leh - Hemis Festival

Early this morning we head east along the Indus Valley toward Hemis.

Hemis Gompa is dramatically hidden in a cleft the mountains. Here we find a gigantic thangka, one of the largest in the world, and the largest and one of the most important in Ladakh. It was founded about 350 years ago by Stagtshang Rinchen, who was invited to Ladakh by King Singe Namgyal, founded it about 350 years ago.

Our departure coincides with the 10th day of the Tibetan lunar month, celebrated as the birthday of Padmasambhava (Guru Rimpoche), the founder of Tibetan Buddhism. The Hemis Monastery celebrates this event in the form of a festival during which the resident Lamas perform sacred masked dances. The festival in Ladakh showcases the best of cultural heritage of the region. Splendid masked dances are performed to the accompaniment of cymbals, drums and long horns. A colourful fair, displaying some beautiful handicrafts, is the special highlight of the festival.

Return to Leh late afternoon.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Leh - Jammu - Dharamsala - McLeod Ganj

Early this morning we fly from Leh to Jammu and continue by road to McLeod Ganj. En route we'll visit Dharamsala (1500 m/4,800 ft).

Dharamsala lies on the spur of the Dhauladhar range and commands majestic views of the main range and the Kangra Valley below. After a late lunch upon arrival at the hotel we will have a tour of the Norbulinka Institute, a registered trust functioning under the Chairmanship of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan People. It is dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture in both its literary and artistic forms. Landmarks include the Seat of Happiness Temple and the Losel Doll Museum. During our visit we will witness statue making, applique needlework, woodcarving and carpentry.

Overnight in McLeod Ganj.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 McLeod Ganj Area

We have a morning visit to Kangra Fort and Temple Complex, built by Bhuma Chand the founder of the Katoch Dynasty. The fort is situated on a precipitous cliff overhanging the Ban Ganga and Manjhi rivers and still dominates the Kangra Valley. A saying goes, "He who holds the fort, holds the Kangra" that is why many invaders sacked it. It once used to be the seat of power of Katoch Rajas. Inaccessible cliffs surround the fort on three sides. In its highest part were the residences and temples of the old Katoch Kings.

This afternoon we take a trip to a tea estate outside of McLeod Ganj. We also visit the nearby Tibetan Children's Village. At this boarding school orphans are provided with a Tibetan education, clothes, food, and healthcare. Classes are conducted for students from kindergarten to grade 10. In India there are over 10,000 children under the care of the TCV (Tibetan Children's Village), and many of the students are those who have escaped from Tibet.

We also visit the Kangra Art Museum, a treasure trove of the Kangra Valley's arts and crafts.

Overnight in McLeod Ganj.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 McLeod Ganj Area

Today we visit the Dalai Lama's Palace and Tsuglakhang Buddhist Temple.

With the backdrop of the snow-draped Dhauladhar mountains, a sub-system of the Himalaya, the town is surrounded by woods of pine and deodar. Originally home of the seminomadic Gaddi tribe, McLeod Ganj is today the residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This mid 19th century place was developed as a British Garrison. The place was an important administrative point for the whole Kangra Valley. Today McLeod Ganj has developed as headquarters of the exiled Tibetan Government.

The large Tibetan population of the region and the presence of traditional architectural designs have enhanced the area. But the most important example of the Tibetan architecture is the Tsuglagkhang or the Dalai Lama's temple. The magnificent images -- a gilt statue of Shakyamuni; then facing Tibet is the Tibetan deity of compassion, Avalokitesvara and that of Padmasambhava who introduced Buddhism and tantric teachings to Tibet in 8th century. The house also has a collection of scared text called the Khagyur based on the teachings of Buddha. Also included in the temple is a collection of works on art, philosophy, literature, astrology and medicine.

We will also visit the Tibetan Medical Institute and Museum and Tibetan Library.

Overnight in McLeod Ganj.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 McLeod Ganj Area

Today we will start with a visit to the Tibetan Museum, established with the aim of presenting Tibet's history and visions for the future through texts, photographs and videos. Afterwards we will visit St John's Church in the Wilderness. This charming stone church is home to the memorial for the British Viceroy, Lord Elgin, who died at Dharamsala in 1863.

In the afternoon we can drive along the ridge above McLeod Ganj for views of the Naddi Valley and surrounding environment. Nearby is another Tibetan Children's Village where we may be able to make a short visit. Time permitting, we finish with Bhagsu Nag waterfall and Shiva Temple.

Return to McLeod Ganj.

Overnight in McLeod Ganj.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 McLeod Ganj - Amritsar

We have an early departure for our drive to Amritsar (234m/770 ft), located in the northwest part of India in the state of Punjab. The city is dominated by the history of the Sikhs and many of their sacred shrines are found in and around the city. Amritsar is one of the most ancient and legendary sites in the Punjab, and is known for its Golden Temple, the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs.

In British India, before Independence, Amritsar was home to a large Muslim population of Kashmiri origin. Most of them migrated to Pakistan in 1947. Amritsar derives its name from Amrit-sarovar, literally meaning "Pool of Nectar", referring to the pool constructed at the sacred site of the Golden Temple in the 16th century.

Overnight in Amritsar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Amritsar: The Golden Temple

The highlight of today's sightseeing will be our visit to the Golden Temple. This is the most sacred temple of the Sikhs, built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Sikh devotees, for whom the temple is a symbol of freedom and spiritual independence, come to the temple from all over the world to enjoy its environs and offer their prayers.

A 15-minute walk from the Golden Temple, through the narrow alleys of the old city, brings us to the Hindu temple known as Durgiani. This small temple, dedicated to the goddess Durga, dates back to the 16th century. A larger temple, built like the Golden Temple in the centre of a lake, is dedicated to the Hindu deities Laxmi and Narayan. There are a number of mosques in the old city, including the mosque of Muhammad Jan with three white domes and slender minarets.

We will also visit Ram Bag, a beautiful garden consisting of the amazing summer palace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. There is a beautiful museum exhibiting unique oil paintings, miniatures, coins, weapons, and objects relating to the Sikh period.

Overnight in Amritsar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Amritsar - Delhi - Depart

This morning we fly to Delhi.

On arrival we will embark on some sightseeing of Delhi. The exact content of today's program depends on our morning flight time, but we

hope to drive north into Old Delhi, passing along the Rajpath (King's Way) and stopping for photos at the India Gate. The 42m high India Gate, an "Arc-de'Triomphe" like archway in the middle of a crossroad, commemorates the Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting for the British Army during WWI. This landmark also bears the names of British and Indian soldiers killed in the Northwestern frontier in the Afghan War of 1919.

Next we will make a visit to the Jamma Mosque. Located in the heart of Old Delhi, the largest mosque in India can accommodate as many as twenty-thousand worshippers. This imposing architectural monument, with it's three gateways and two minarets, took fourteen years to complete (1644-58). Time permitting we will enter to have a brief look inside.

After a stop for lunch we will continue with our sightseeing this afternoon. We will visit Humayan's Tomb, an excellent example of Mughal architecture, predating the Taj Mahal by almost 100 years. Persian in style, this is a beautiful red sandstone building inlaid with black and white marble. From here we will drive on to visit a recent architectural marvel, the Delhi Bahai Temple. Shaped like a half-opened lotus flower, this temple is mostly made of marble, and represents the youngest of the world's independent religions.

We will finish our day with a visit to the Qutub Minar. Few other monuments are as closely identified with Delhi as the Qutub Minar. This first monument of Muslim rule in India heralded the beginning of a new style of art and architecture which came to be known as the Indo-Islamic style.

Later we transfer to the airport for our international departures from Delhi.

NOTE: Most international flights tend to depart Delhi late in the evening. If you are booking your own flights, please pay attention to your departure time as you must take into account your arrival from Amritsar and Delhi City Tour.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast