

LADAKH-

Touchdown, in the lap of the Himalayas. I let off a personal sigh after a crazy scramble- a while ago the in flight passengers had suddenly leaned to the left of the airborne bus peering through dazedly at the sun hinted snowy peaks, squealing and snapping away. Agreed, Himalayas have a way to amaze, but such an unexpected show made me cross my fingers lest the plane would tilt in the forsaken angle. In a certain way relieved to be getting out through the doors, we were caught unawares by the sudden gust of cold.

`Didn't the pilot greet over the flight's public address system...' I ask my wife `...that the temperature outside is -2 degree Celsius' looking at my watch `and the time's just seven-thirty'.

To conclude the leap over the Himalayas, the pilot wasn't joking, and the tarmac hostess greets us with a quiver `welcome to Ladakh'.

There are some who will always swear by the magical land of Ladakh.....

LEH

After a brief first half swooning to acclimatize in the rarefied air, mostly sleeping over and slurping sips of naturally chilled water (we were forewarned to intake lots of fluids), we take to the road post lunch for the first of the listed sightings- the Palace lording over Ladakh's capital, Leh. Fortunately, we were off the tourist season by about two weeks- the ticket counter was sealed. In spite of the free entry, we all were highly disappointed, for the derelict palace held no surprises- nothing more than an array of tightly-packed-low-height-once-royal-apartments with flaking murals, a small forecourt with a Buddhist temple, and a museum which could have been given a miss.

`No one particularly misses the Leh palace' Dehlex says. Perhaps it is the frontrunner of all Ladakh, like a textbook example of medieval Buddhist architecture and with nothing more to do on the day of arrival, lest tourists succumb to the high altitude sickness, it is *might-as-well-do-it* on the itinerary. In praise, the spectacular view of the town from the roof terrace was worth the climb. The main bazaar could be picked out from the perch streaking broadly through the jig-saw of houses and hotels.

Till about seventy years ago this once tree lined boulevard, was the busiest market between Kashmir and Yarkhand. Trans-Himalayan nomadic herdsman hauled yak loads of pashmina wool and raw silk from over the Karakoram crags, bartering with the traders from the plains. Now the main street is awash with curio shops and emporiums stocked with trinkets, prayer-wheels, bowls and carpets churned out by the Tibetan refugees.

Next day, Dehlex, our hotel manager charts out the day excursion to the south east of Leh- joining scattered dots on a piece of note paper. Leh-Stok-Hemis-Tikse-Shey-Leh goes the circuit, all of these monasteries, with one exception.

Stok Palace has been the official residence of the royal family since being ousted two hundred years back. The present *Gyalmo* (mother queen) lives here during the summer months. One wing of this extensive four-storied 77 roomed palace is converted into a museum showcasing the royal family's heirlooms. The exhibits worthy of an awe

are the queen's numerous *peraks*, headdresses encrusted in precious stones and still worn on important occasions. We could have spent all day counting the flawless turquoises, emeralds, lapis and corals embedded into the course embroidered cloth

A metalled road snakes up the side of the Manali-Leh highway to Ladakh's most photographed *gompa*, the Tikse monastery. The white and red washed temple complex sitting over the sun drenched bluff is like a scaled down version of Potala in Tibet. Springy clouds within the azure skies give it a fitting backdrop. Over the main courtyard is the recently added temple, housing a fourteen meter high gilded statue of Maitreya Buddha. The monk who opens the creaky doors to the dark and candle-lit interior says with a hush 'Maitreya is yet to come. He is the future Buddha'. Bright hand paintings depict Maitreya's life all around the temple walls. While Tikse sentinels over the highway, the equally famous Hemis gompa crouches at the foot of a ravine hidden from view until you are right there. This atmospheric seventeenth century monastery plays host to the *Hemis Tsechu* festival, held in summers, where locals and foreigners flock in large numbers to witness the colorful *Chaam* mask dances.

We were in time for the afternoon prayer. Being Ladakh's foremost religious institution, the courtyard at Hemis is constant activity of little monks and novices scuttling about in their trademark maroon robes. A chanting *lama*, high-priest, offers us butter tea from a large flask and then ushers us, sifting through the dragon-embroidered curtains into the dimly lit prayer hall. A shrill originates from the trumpet, joined by the clashing of cymbals and drumbeats, the walls echoing the drone of guttural chanting of the assembled monks, reminiscent of the music from the high barren mountains.

PANGONG

At 17500 above sea level and deep winters soon approaching what can be expected of dripping glacier melts? Ice- thin stalactites clinging to the mountain sides numbing our fingers with a mere touch! The steaming complementary tea from the Indian army's Chang La pass comes as renewing respite from the shocking cold. A green board says 'Do not halt for more than twenty minutes'. 'Why?' I make an imprudent enquiry - the army *Jawan* in full fatigues answers the obvious. Low oxygen! Even though the prescribed daily dose of Diamox did chart through the arteries, one among us complains of AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness). The army implants an SOS drug in her mouth, five minute rest, and we are asked to advance to Tangtse. Everything should be fine once you get to lower altitude, the medic said.

Beyond Tangtse, descending down the final stretch to Pangong, the road gives away and the tires ford over a stream screeching over jagged stones. 'This is the *pagal nala*' says our driver Sonam pointing right to the close by icy peaks 'the glacier melts in the summer as torrents pouring furiously into this flow, dubbed the Mad stream. It is a nightmare for the Army repairing this stretch of road every year.' A few kilometers beyond the angry gush we catch sight of the world famous Pangong Tso, one of the largest saltwater lakes in Asia. Of its 130 km length only one quarter is in India, the other three stretches into Tibet. At 14000, these unbelievably deep turquoise blue waters reflect dramatically the neighboring glaciated ranges. The prospects discourage a long linger as the cold becomes unbearable: a quick round of family pictures and we head back to Leh.

NUBRA

On day five we hit the road again with Sonam for an overnight excursion to Nubra Valley. There is a palpable excitement in the cab as we were soon to cross over the highest motorable road in the world- the Khardung La pass at 18380 feet. Frigid mountains swell before us stretching in all might. The road switchbacks and we drive straight and slow, wary over the snow strewn tar to Khardung La making a halt between fluttering Tibetan flags and an Army outpost cafeteria. For records, the café staff updates us about the outside temperature as -9 degree Celsius. It's nothing less than a conquest to be alive, breathing and sipping tea at this altitude.

Unfolding beyond the Khardung village is the stark and breathtaking terrain of Nubra Valley, capped majestically by the jagged Karakorams. The road runs a while along the blue waters of Shyok River and then descends into a long expanse of white sand towards Diskit. The first impression of Diskit comes as a beaten down town, but then the charm is slowly revealed with its cozy balconied low houses and bustling bazaar, where surprisingly we pick up handy souvenirs at prices cheaper than Leh.

We course north towards the high crags stumbling at the back of an army convoy headed for Siachen. Sonam says `Pakistan border is only about 100 kilometers, but beyond Hundur the roads are off bound'. Seven kilometers and we arrive at Hundur, a tiny village snuggled between wooded valleys. Apart from its laidback appeal where one can have choicest tea by flasks full, nestled under the mighty peaks, Hundur is sought for the lanky Bactrian camels. The safari, for a price, involves sitting in between the furry double-humps as the camel, indigenous to the cold altitudes, plods and pitches over the picturesque sand dunes.

Next day enroute to Leh we visit the sleepy hamlet of Sumur, an oasis of fertile green between honey colored mountains. Across the Shyok and vaguely in the direction of Khardung La-our only way out from the valley- the mountains are smudged by the rising dust storm. `Mausam kharab ho raha hai' - the weather's getting worse, remarks Sonam. Chances of a snow fall, too. Khardung La has the notoriety of snow piles of more than ten feet in a matter of few hours. At the Samsten *Gompa* up on a hillock over Sumur, we plead influence of the divine for his timely intervention, and the sun smilingly peeps over the clouds.

And then there was me..... swearing to return for more, to this enchanting land tucked in the far flung corner of India rubbing shoulders with old foes-China and Pakistan; described appropriately as the last Shangri La with landscapes so varied to delight every artist's soul: the Yak pastures, the purple-green eroded mountains, the mesmerizing Indus- the river which bred our civilization; surrounded by the compassions of Buddha and his present-day reincarnations; hospitable, yet treacherous when the temperatures plunge to -35 degree Celsius, and there are those who dare trek on the frozen Zaskar River for memories of a lifetime.