LADAKH, A LAND LIKE NO OTHER

Tread lightly lest you hurt the fragile landscape of Ladakh but do go nevertheless to witness the majesty of the region and its humble people. While environmental conditions make it one of the most inhospitable regions on the planet, with certain health precautions and a lot of faith, Ladakh is a lesson in treating oneself and the land with respect. Be prepared to let Ladakh sweep you off your feet. You will be back for more.

by Jose Kunnappally
had heard so much about Ladakh. Many friends have travelled there and posted mesmerising pictures of the landscape in all its splendour. Not many places on Earth can offer such diversity in topography—snow clad mountains, rocky terrain, desert, plateaux, grasslands, lowlands, rivers and lakes. It has been on my bucket list for a very long time and so when the opportunity presented itself, courtesy Global Panorama Showcase – Educational Destination Workshop International (GPS-EDWIN), I was more than ready to pack my bags.

Ladakh is one of the most inhospitable tourist destinations in the world. At an altitude of 11,380 ft above mean sea level, travellers need to take a host of precautions to enjoy their visit to this place. There are many daily flights from Delhi to Leh’s Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Airport. Road routes from Manali and Srinagar are also popular.

Holidays in Ladakh come with its own set of unedited challenges. The weather can play spoilsport any time. A traveller’s health can give in too without no- mean precautions to enjoy their visit to this place. There are many daily flights from Delhi to Leh’s Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Airport. Road routes from Manali and Srinagar are also popular.

Most domestic tourists come in May-June for rest which is very important especially on day 1, says Harmandeep Singh Anand, MD, Overland Escape, the biggest DMC in the region. “Now we are looking at how to extend domest- ic season till September-October, so overcrowding can be avoided. We are trying to promote Ladakh in key markets for winter trekking, biking, rafting, mountaineering and other adventure activities among young tourists especially millennials.”

“GPS-EDWIN is a unique learning initiative to build destination awareness among travel trade, helping them sell better and ensure worthwhile experiences for their guests. Says Harmandeep Singh Anand, MD, GPS-EDWIN helps travel agents and tour operators become destination specialists who value sustain- able and responsible tourism, and hold themselves accountable for an exceptional guest experience.”

The Leh airport where we landed around noon when the mercury was at 13 degrees Celsius is operated by Ministry of Defence and so photography is strictly prohibited. Ladakh is one of the most mil- itarised areas in India owing to close proximity with hostile neighbours. Yet the biggest pillar of strength for the tourism industry and economy in general in Ladakh is the Indian Army. The best wayside amenities in Ladakh while travelling by road to Nubra and Pangong are built and managed by the defence forces. I was shocked to see open pit toilets else- where after paying Rs. 10. I wonder how women and children would manage. The 90 million toilets built by our Prime Minister do not seem to have made their way to Ladakh!”

Sustainability is the focus and main conversation now,” assures Dorje. “The travel trade has tied up with NGOs and in the next two years you will see excellent wayside amenities.” We stayed at Indus Valley, the newest boutique hotel in Leh with central heating, exceptionally well-appointed rooms, and just a short walk away from the main market. After lunch and sufficient rest which is very important especially on day 1, we visited Shanti Stupa, one of the most popular tourist sites, facing the Ladakh Palace and offering panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. The Shanti Stupa holds the relics of the Buddha at its base, enshrined by the 14th Dalai Lama. We watched the sunset from here and it offers ample scope for selfies. Dinner was finished early at Grand Himalaya, a museum hotel with lots of trinkets on display.

Former J&K tourism minister and sitting MLA of Ladakh, Nawang Rigzin Jora has been a great supporter of tourism to Ladakh. Aamir Khan-starrer
3 Idots was shot in his constituency when he was presiding over tourism. “It was my good fortune,” says Jora. During his time as minister he secured funding from Government of India for many projects in Leh with impact on tourism. He also revised the list of areas which are eligible for subsidy. “Now in the entire district, whoever wants to start a guest house or hotel gets the subsidy of Rs. 30 lakhs,” says the current MLA. “Tourism is the main pillar of Ladakh’s economy offering a means of livelihood for our people. Travel agents and tour operators promoting Ladakh and initiatives like GPS-EDWIN are delivering a national duty.” You are providing our people bread and butter.”

The recent JK focus of Union Ministry of Tourism (MoT) has not resulted in any gains for Ladakh. “No traveller has come to Ladakh because of anything JK Tourism or MoT did,” says Kamlesh Lalan of Ravine Trike, a Mumbai-based firm specialising in tours to the region. “Ladakh has grown due to word of mouth. JK Tourism has only been interested in promoting Kashmir. Unlike Kashmir, Ladakh has been peaceful so tourism grew organically.”

This journey, with over 100 travel trade partners from around India (57 cities and 16 states, to be precise) and the B2B session arranged on day 2 at Grand Dragon Hotel in Leh allowed them to meet and discuss business with 30 local suppliers operating across the region – hoteliers, tour operators, DMCs, cab operators and adventure tourism specialists.

The hall room where the B2B session was held is the only meeting space of its size and the biggest in Leh. It allows only small MICE events but the backdrop and experience once the other house is up can offer are unmatched,” affirms Harmandeep of GPS.

During the second half, the group visited Srangam located on National Highway 1 to Srinagar. Watching the confluence of the muddy Zanskar waters with the crystal-clear Indus is so breathtaking. Srangam is also the world’s highest rafting point. Again, we were here as the sun was going down and the setting turned surreal. On our return from Srangam, we visited Magnetic Hill, Gurudwara Sri Pathar Sahib and the Indian Army’s Hall of Fame Museum.

The Magnetic Hill on the Leh-Kargil-Balti National Highway teases you with its gravity-defying phenomenon. Park within the area marked in yellow on the road and witness the vehicle being pulled by an invisible force.

Gurudwara Sri Pathar Sahib was our next stop. “Everyone, especially tourists on bikes, pay a visit to the Gurudwara built, maintained and managed by the Indian Army. The walls are adorned with thanksgiving messages cast in stone after successful operations by the various units of the armed forces and police. The tea and snacks offered complimentary after the visit is simply yummy. There is decent toilet facility too.”

The Hall of Fame is a must-visit for every tourist to Ladakh and my favourite discovery on this trip. They maintain the ‘Amar Jyothi’ and perform ‘Beating the Retreat’ every day. The museum has a lot of interesting information on military award winners from the region, successful operations, a souvenir shop (selling dry fruits, fridge magnets and shawls) and the Arpora Café. The Light and Sound Show interesting information on military award winners and the ‘Scroll of Fame’ is an adjoining area where the names of hundreds of soldiers who have fought in the region and lost their lives in service of our nation are cast in stone as an everlasting tribute. Open from 9 am to 6 pm, there is a nominal entry fee and photography/videoography is allowed.

On day 3, our final destination was Nubra. Two hours from Leh is Khardung Pass, the highest motorable road in the world and another two hours from there is Nubra. The two options available on hire for road travel are the Toyota Innova and the IS-rover.

Recommended Travel Tips

**Best Period to visit Ladakh:** April – October

Via Srinagar Route: May – November

Via Manali Route: June – September

Via Zanskar Route: June – December

Opening/Operating of above routes depend on weather condition of high pass

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**“EDWIN helps travel agents and tour operators become destination specialists who value sustainable and responsible tourism”\n
HARMANDEEP SINGH ARAMD MD, GPS**

Tempo Traveller. The roads are winding and treacherous, and there are no safety railings along the way so I would insist self-driving only for those who are really good at the wheel. Having driven comfortably to any hill station in India is no befitting experience certificate to drive in Ladakh. Calling Ladakh a hill station is an insult. It’s like calling McLaren a car!

A proper road to Khardungla is under construction by the Indian Army. Who we travelled on is a mud road scooped out of ice! The landscape is awe-inspiring and majestic. Mobile phone memory is simply insufficient to capture it all. Co-travellers who have visited the Canadian Rockies, Switzerland and the Scandinavian mountains told me in no uncertain terms that Ladakh is even more beautiful and pristine.

We checked in to Nubra Organic Retreat, a quaint property comprising 20 Swiss deluxe tents with attached bathroom, each offering a grand view of the snow clad Himalayan peaks. Add to that an organic vegetable garden and fruit orchard for bringing excellent fare on to the dining table.

Just 10 minutes away is Sandunes, a sought-after tourist spot where one can ride the Bactrian camel. It is a highly endangered sub-species and known by the double hump on its back. This was one of the most crowded sites on our entire journey. Camel safaris can be undertaken for 15, 30 and 60 minutes and costs Rs. 600 for an hour.

Back at the retreat, we had a quiet campfire to beat the cold before we finished an early dinner and retired to our tents. While basic medical facilities are available across Ladakh, medical evacuation (air lifting) is only possible from Leh. If you drink like a fish and / or smoke like a chimney, Ladakh most likely will make you pay for your bad behaviour. You can experience and enjoy Ladakh whether you have diabetes, asthma, a heart ailment or high BP as long as you take the necessary precautions (see box on travel tips) and respect your body. Ladakh is a prayer. Don’t make it a penance. Many people think it’s not easy with kids but little ones generally have better tolerance for high altitude. Three of my co-travellers had to return from Nubra and miss Pangong, because of poor health and you know why.

On World Tourism Day (day 4) we checked out from Nubra Organic Retreat to travel to Pangong, the place made famous by 3 Idiots. Before leaving, we plucked a lot of apples from the organic orchard at our resort and believe me apples haven’t tasted so good. They are smaller than what we see in our-
Conduct, Attire and Grooming

- Avoid revealing attire and be modest in dressing; do not expose body to cold climate.
- Female travellers: No open hair, short skirts or revealing dresses allowed at gompa or any religious places.
- Male travellers: No short pants or sleeveless shirts allowed at gompa or any religious places.
- Avoid public smoking.
- Ladakh is litter-free. Do not throw garbage or any kind of dirt on the road or at passes.
- Avoid loud talk during visit to religious places, local homes or in public places.
- Please do not address any locals as Pakistani, Chinese, Chinki, Bihari or Nepali, as this will hurt their sentiments.

Do’s and Don’ts

- On landing in Leh, relax for first 24 hours. Do not rush into physical activities or stay awake.
- Do not take bath on day of arrival.
- Avoid smoking and consuming alcohol.
- Drink water throughout the day to remain hydrated.
- Do not hold urine; stop by at a wayside amenity centre.
- Do not suffocate yourself at night by wearing multiple layers of clothing during time of sleep.
- Ensure your feet are always covered.
- While returning from Leh, usual cabin baggage of 7 kg is not permitted due to J&K security protocol. However, you can check in extra 7 kg along with the usual 15 kg allowed.

Things to Carry

- Woollen clothing (Gloves, Cap, Socks, Sweater) / Muffler / Shawl / Scarf
- Inner clothing (Thermal wear recommended) / Sun Hat or Cap
- Light weight wind stopper jacket & base (Recommended)
- Sun Glasses with UV Protection (Highly recommended)
- Sun Screen Lotion with min SPF 40/50 & Cold Cream (Highly recommended)
- Sandals / Slippers and Proper Shoes (Avoid leather shoes)
- Hand Towels / Dry Fit Towels (Recommended)
- Cotton / Cargo Clothing for day journey
- Back pack for day journey
- Dry Fruits / Energy Bars
- Personal toiletries
- For senior citizens – adult diapers
- For female travellers – sanitary napkins

Recommended Medicines: Please consult a physician

- Avomine – Vomiting
- D’Cold – Common Cold
- Combiflam – Body Pain
- Vicks Vaporub or Inhaler – Nose Block / Cold
- Iodex Pan Relief Balm / Vicks Spray – Sprain
- Diamox – High Altitude Sickness
- Saridon – Headache
- Glucon D / Electoral Powder & Camphor
Sangam, the world’s highest rafting point

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