

Handbook for Ladakh



Ladakh, renowned for its captivating landscapes, boasts serene Buddhist monasteries set against the backdrop of majestic mountain ranges. The region's altitude varies from 3,100 meters to an impressive 7,800 meters, offering a broad spectrum of experiences for travelers. Among the notable mountain ranges in Ladakh are the Ladakh Range, Zaskar Range, Shayok Range, and the Eastern Karakoram Range. Each of these ranges contributes to the unique charm of Ladakh, creating an awe-inspiring setting that entices nature lovers and adventure enthusiasts alike.

The towering peaks and high-altitude passes in Ladakh provide unparalleled opportunities for adventurers to test their limits and revel in the thrill of conquering some of nature's most formidable heights. Trekking, mountaineering, and exploring these rugged terrains offer a sense of accomplishment and connection with the pristine natural environment.

Since opening its doors to tourists in the 1970s, Ladakh has become a sanctuary for those seeking tranquility and spiritual solace amidst its breathtaking natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. The region's serene landscapes, dotted with ancient monasteries and vibrant cultural traditions, continue to attract visitors from all corners of the globe.

Ladakh's allure lies not only in its dramatic scenery but also in its cultural richness. The monasteries, festivals, and local traditions offer a glimpse into a way of life that has remained largely unchanged for centuries. This blend of natural splendor and cultural depth makes Ladakh a destination of choice for those in search of an unforgettable journey through the heart of the Himalayas.

History of Ladakh

In ancient times, Ladakh was part of the Kushan Empire, as shown by inscriptions found near the Khalste bridge. Around 634 CE, Chinese monk Xuanzang described a tough journey through mountains to reach Ladakh, known as Mar-yul. Ladakh was also known as Zhangzhung (Ancient Kingdom), acknowledged by Tibetans in the 7th century. A rebellion occurred in 677. This history suggests Ladakh's early connections with powerful empires and its role in trade routes through treacherous terrains.

In the 8th century, Ladakh was stuck between Tibetans coming from the east and Chinese influence from Central Asia. They did a population count in 719 and fixed up how things were run in 724. Tibet attacked Gilgit's king in 737, and he asked China for help but ended up bowing to Tibet. A monk from Korea, Hyecho, talked about three places near Kashmir controlled by Tibet. A Chinese leader tried to weaken Tibet in 747, but after losing in 751, Tibet got stronger. People traded a lot, shown by crosses and writing from different places. Tibet's power went down after their king fell in 842.

After the Tibetan Empire fell in 842, Nyima-Gon, from Tibet's old royal family, started Ladakh's first dynasty. His kingdom was far to the east of today's Ladakh. During this time, Ladakh became more like Tibet, with most people being Tibetan. But instead of looking to Tibet, the new rulers wanted Buddhism from northwest India, especially Kashmir. They wanted to make Buddhism strong in Ladakh.

Around the 13th century, due to Islamic invasions, India ceased having anything to offer from a Buddhist point of view, and Ladakh began to seek and accept guidance in religious matters from Tibet.

In the past, Ladakh faced frequent raids from Central Asian Muslim states, leading to its weakening and partial conversion. Ladakh was divided, with different kings ruling Lower and Upper Ladakh. Later, Lhachen Bhagan reunited Ladakh and founded a new dynasty called Namgyal. King Tashi Namgyal successfully defended Ladakh from most Central Asian raiders and built a fort on Namgyal Peak. Tsewang Namgyal briefly expanded his kingdom into Nepal. During Jamyang Namgyal's reign, Ladakh was invaded by Balti ruler Ali Sher Khan Anchan, damaging many Buddhist temples. Sengge Namgyal, known as the 'lion' king, rebuilt many temples and expanded Ladakh's territory. His son, Deldan Namgyal, had to build a mosque in Leh to appease the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Despite Muslim missionaries spreading Islam in Ladakh, the region retained its Buddhist heritage and culture.

In the early 19th century, the Mughal Empire crumbled, paving the way for Sikh dominance in Punjab and Kashmir. However, the Dogra region of Jammu remained under its Rajput rulers. Raja Gulab Singh, acting on behalf of the Sikh monarch Ranjit Singh, dispatched his general Zorawar Singh to annex Ladakh in 1834. As a result, King Tshespal Namgyal was deposed and sent into exile in Stok. Ladakh was subsequently incorporated into the Dogra territory and later merged into the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under British control, yet it retained significant autonomy and maintained close ties with Tibet. During the Dogra-Tibetan War of 1841-42, Tibet launched an invasion of Ladakh, and although the Ladakhis attempted to resist with Tibetan assistance, they were ultimately defeated. As a gesture of goodwill, the Namgyal family was granted the jagir (landed estate) of Stok, a possession they still nominally hold today. European influence began to permeate Ladakh in the 1850s, attracting geologists, sports enthusiasts, and tourists, while in 1885, Leh became the central hub for a mission of the Moravian Church. Under Dogra rule, Ladakh was administered as a wazarat (province) with a governor known as the wazir-e-wazarat. It was divided into three tehsils (administrative divisions) based in Leh, Skardu, and Kargil, with the wazarat's headquarters alternating between Leh and Skardu every six months.

In 1947, partition left Ladakh a part of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir and In August 2019 Ladakh separate from the rest of Jammu and Kashmir & became Union Territory of Ladakh, India



LEH TOWN

Leh, the main administrative town of the Union Territory of Ladakh, boasts a population of approximately 40,000 residents. It is steeped in history, with prominent landmarks such as the Tsemo Monastery and Leh Palace. The Tsemo Monastery holds a rich cultural heritage, dating back centuries, and offers breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. Similarly, Leh Palace stands as a testament to the region's royal past, serving as the former residence of Ladakh's monarchs. Today, Leh continues to serve as a bustling hub of activity, blending its ancient traditions with modern administrative functions in the heart of the Himalayas. Leh is connected to the rest of world by (Airplane/ Road) ,two vital road routes—one from Kashmir via Zojila Pass and the other from Himachal Pradesh. These roads, crucial for importing goods and connecting with neighbouring states, are open during the summer months. However, during the harsh winter season, heavy snowfall renders these routes impassable, isolating Leh from the outside world.



Shanti Stupa, Leh

Ladakh's culture is a rich tapestry woven from its unique geographic location, historical influences, and the predominance of Tibetan Buddhism. Here are key elements that define the cultural landscape of Ladakh.

Traditional Attire

Ladakhi traditional clothing is both functional and symbolic:

- Goncha**: A long robe made of wool, typically fastened with a bright sash called a *skerp*.
- Kuntop**: A woolen cloak worn over the goncha for added warmth.
- Perak**: A headdress adorned with turquoise, symbolizing wealth and status, worn by women during special occasions.

Cuisine

Ladakhi cuisine reflects the harsh climatic conditions and the need for high-energy foods:

- Thukpa**: A hearty noodle soup.
- Tsampa**: Roasted barley flour, a staple food.
- Butter Tea**: Known as **gur-gur cha*, made with tea leaves, yak butter, and salt.
- Momos**: Steamed dumplings filled with meat or vegetables.

Architecture

Ladakhi architecture is characterized by its adaptation to the environment:

- Monasteries and Stupas**: Often built on hilltops or mountain slopes, they feature large prayer halls, courtyards, and intricate murals and thankas (religious paintings).
- Traditional Houses**: Constructed from stone, mud, and wood, designed to retain heat during the cold winters. They often have flat roofs to collect rainwater and support solar panels.



Horse Racing is traditional sport of Ladakh

Arts and Crafts

Ladakh is renowned for its traditional arts and crafts, which include:

- Thangka Paintings***: Religious scroll paintings depicting Buddhist deities and mandalas.
- Wood Carving and Carpentry***: Seen in the intricate designs of monastery interiors and traditional furniture.

Pashmina Wool Products: High-quality shawls and garments made from the wool of the Changthang goat.

Language and Literature

- Languages***: Ladakhi, a Tibetic language, is the primary spoken language. However, Tibetan script is often used in written communication.
- Literature***: Buddhist texts and scriptures are central to Ladakhi literature, often housed in monasteries.

Performing Arts

- Music and Dance**: Traditional Ladakhi music includes religious chanting and instruments like the daman (drum) and surna (horn). Folk dances like the **Khatok Chenmo** and **Jabro** are performed during festivals and celebrations.

Social Structure and Community Life

- Agriculture and Pastoralism***: Most Ladakhis rely on agriculture and livestock herding. The harsh terrain and climate have fostered a strong sense of community and interdependence.
- Polyandry***: Traditionally, polyandry (one woman marrying multiple brothers) was practiced to keep land within the family and manage scarce resources. Ladakh's culture is a testament to its people's resilience, spiritual depth, and ability to adapt to one of the world's most challenging environments.



Playing Traditional Instrument



Roasting Barley

Wildlife of Ladakh

Ladakh, covering an area of 59,146 km², is home to unique Himalayan wildlife such as the bharal, yak, Himalayan brown bear, Himalayan wolf, and the iconic snow leopard. The region features protected areas including Hemis National Park, Changthang Cold Desert Wildlife Sanctuary, and Karakorum Wildlife Sanctuary. Organizations like the Mountain Institute, Ladakh Ecological Development Group, and Snow Leopard Conservancy promote ecotourism in rural Ladakh. Despite its elevated and arid terrain, Ladakh boasts a remarkable diversity of birds, with 318 species recorded, including 30 species rediscovered in the 21st century after not being seen since 1960. Many birds breed in high-altitude wetlands like Tso Moriri or near rivers.

The mammals, reptiles, and amphibians in Ladakh share more similarities with Central Asian and Tibetan Plateau fauna than with those of the greater Indian subcontinent. However, many bird species migrate seasonally from the warmer southern parts of India and beyond to escape the summer heat. As winter approaches, these migratory birds leave Ladakh to return south, illustrating the region's role as a vital seasonal habitat. Ladakh's unique ecosystem underscores its importance in global biodiversity, particularly for avian species.



Leh - East

Embarking on the journey from Leh towards the eastern direction unveils a mesmerizing tapestry of landscapes, from the serene waters of Scenic Pangong Lake to the tranquil expanse of Tsomoriri Lake, nestled amidst the rugged beauty of Ladakh's high-altitude plains. Beyond the breathtaking vistas lie a glimpse into the nomadic lifestyle, where communities thrive amidst the challenges of residing above 4000 meters above sea level.

The adventure commences with a visit to historic landmarks like Shey Palace, once a capital of Ladakh, and Thiksey Monastery, reminiscent of Tibet's majestic Potala Palace. Further along the route, encounters with Stakna and Matho Monasteries offer insights into the spiritual heritage of the region, culminating in the grandeur of Hemis Monastery, a beacon of the Drukpa Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

As the journey progresses, Kharu town emerges as a pivotal junction, offering travelers the choice to traverse towards the azure waters of Pangong Lake via Changla Pass or ascend towards the lofty plains of Ladakh, weaving through the timeless landscapes that connect Ladakh with Himachal Pradesh. Each turn of the route unveils a new facet of Ladakh's natural splendor and cultural richness, inviting adventurers to immerse themselves in its awe-inspiring beauty.

Pangong Lake: Pangong Lake, one of the most famous high altitude lakes in Leh Ladakh. This scenic wonder derives its name from the Tibetan word, "Pangong Tso", which means "high grassland lake". You could spend hours in contemplation here, and still not have enough of its beauty. Pangong Tso is also known to change colors, appearing blue, green and red at different times of a day. If you have decided to go on a trip to Ladakh anytime soon, don't forget to visit Pangong Tso Lake. Serene, beautiful, color-changing, tranquil, and picturesque landscapes in the backdrop. Pangong Lake is not only a prime attraction of Leh-Ladakh but a nature lover's paradise as well. The mesmerizing Pangong Tso Lake is a delightful place on the Indo-Tibetan border. It is one of the world's highest located saltwater lakes perched at an altitude of 4350 m above sea level. The lake is almost 160 km in area and that's only one-third of the lake that's in the Indian Territory.

Korzok : The 'mountain lake' of Ladakh, or lake Tso Moriri is situated at an altitude of 15,000 ft and has a village of its own called the Korzok village, the highest civilization in the world, Surrounded by purple hills and with a beautiful backdrop of snow-capped mountains, this Tso Moriri lake is a must-visit for all those who wish to be one with nature. The lake in itself is mind- numbingly beautiful and the calm and peaceful surroundings would make you want to sit by the lake and gaze all day long The climate of this region is quite cold and dry; there's snowfall during the winters, but the summers are hot. The best time to visit the Tso Moriri or the village is between the months of May and September. Winter is definitely the worst time to visit, since temperatures here dip to minus 25 degrees!



Tsomoriri Lake

Chumathang: is a relatively small village, with a population of around 641 people. It is known for its hot spring, which is believed to have medicinal properties. The village also has a monastery, which is over 400 years old. The village is also a good base for exploring the nearby Changthang region, which is home to a variety of wildlife, including kiangs, wild asses, and snow leopards.

Hanley: Hanle is one of the largest villages in Ladakh region, known predominantly as the place which is home to the Hanle Monastery. Located along the Hanle River, this hamlet lies on the old branch of the ancient Ladakh-Tibet trade route. Situated in a remote place, the village of Hanle is one of the most offbeat places to visit in Ladakh. Also often spelled as Hanley, Anle, or Anley, this hamlet is home to a population of around 300 people and lies on the ancient trade route between Ladakh and Tibet. The presence of the Indian Astronomical Observatory makes this village quite famous. This observatory is the best spot in the whole country to observe the skies and indulge in stargazing as it is located 4,500 m above sea level. Hanle village is also known for the eponymous monastery among tourists, which boasts of a rich history.

Umling La: The Border Road Organisation has completed the new road that goes even higher than Khardung La. The road passing through Umling La (Pass) stands at a higher altitude than the base camp of Mount Everest. The new benchmark for travellers and adventure junkies is set at 19,300 feet.



Ladakhi Traditional Kitchen

Leh - West

The West region of Ladakh is lower in altitude. Indeed, all the villages in the west part of the Indus valley located between Leh (3,500m) and Khamti main town (2950m) are all at an elevation. The Dha-Hanu valley is located at an average height of 2,700m and Kargil is at an altitude of 2,680m. Therefore, a tour in the west region is ideal at the beginning of your trip in Ladakh so that you can give time to your body to acclimatise to altitude before travelling to higher parts of Ladakh such as Pangong lake and Tso Moriri lake. It is located on Srinagar-Leh National Highway NH1 and famously known as the abode of apricot trees. Apricot is an integral part of Ladakhi culture, locally called 'chuli'. Sham, which is also known as 'lower Ladakh', is warmer as compared to the rest of the region. The villagers practice both primitive and subsistent farming, especially organic farming. You will find a wide range of organic products on this route. This enchanting valley consists of varied cultures, languages, landscapes, wildlife and flora and fauna. Some of the oldest, remotest, unique temples and monasteries of Ladakh are also situated here. It's also popular among trekkers for many routes from elementary to advanced grade Treks.

Spitik monastery is just 8 km away from Leh and sits on a hill overlooking the airport runway. Locally known as Pethup Galden Targyasling, the monastery is the first Gelugpa monastery in Ladakh. It was founded by Lama Lhawang Lodoe. Originally, 'Spe-thub' means 'efficient example'. People believe that this is the first Tibetan monastery in Ladakh. It's headed by successive reincarnations of the Bakula Rinpoche.

Phyang monastery marked the first establishment of Drikung teaching in Ladakh, and it lies about 21 km west of Leh. You can find the finest murals of Kagyu lineage of Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa. The protector deity of Phyang monastery 'Apchi Choski Dolma' could be seen as a veiled image.

Likir monastery was built inside a ring formed by the bodies of two great Naga serpent kings, 'Nando and Taksoko'. Thus, the name Lukhyil originated. Lu means 'Naga spirit' and Khyil means 'encircled'. It was the fifth King of Ladakh, Lhachen Gyalpo, who founded the monastery. Currently, it is under the patronage of Ngari Rinpoche (the younger brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama) and is affiliated to the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Confluence of Rivers: The confluence of two major rivers in Ladakh is popularly known as Sangam near Nimmu village. The mighty Indus river (Singye Khabab) originates from Mt Kailash of Tibet, flows in Ladakh and meets Zaskar river (a tributary of Indus) at Sangam forming a breathtaking sight that lead to Pakistan than to Arabian Sea.

Alchi monastery is situated down amidst Alchi village on the left bank of the Indus river. We bet you haven't had witnessed or seen the 10th century Kashmir's exquisite and meticulous paintings and sculptures as depicted in Alchi ever before. The temple was established by Lotsawa (Translator) Rinchen Zangpo from Western Tibet during the later dissemination period of Tibetan Buddhism. The Choskor consists of several temples like Sumstek (three-tiered temple), Lotsawa Lhakhang (the translator chapel), Jamyang Lhakhang (Manjushri temple), Vairocana temple to name a few. There is a huge willow tree said to be planted by the founder and hence reckoned as the oldest willow tree in entire Ladakh.

Lamayuru Monastery or Yungdrung Monastery: In ancient time, here at spot of present temple there existed a great lake. The Arhat Nyimagyung made a prophesy saying: May a Monastery will build in future and then he offered a votive water offering to the nagas or serpent spirits who were the guardians of that place. The grains he offers in the lake to scattered and mix up with the earth. Later the grains sprouts forth and taken the shape of Swastika. With the founding of monastery it was called Yung Drung (Swastika). In the 11th century, Mahasiddhi Naropa while his journey to Zaskar, he Meditated in cave there for some time. The cave you can still see inside the main Assembly Hall of Lamayuru Monastery. Later Rinchen Zangpo and his Disciple also visit the site & build many temple and stupas. 17th & 18th of 5 month of Tibetan Calendar, Monastery Celebrate Yuru Kabgyad (festival).

Wanla Monastery : located at south east of Lamayuru village. This Monastery was built approx. 990 years ago during the time Lama Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo, the Translator. According to history of Ladakh, it is said that the earlier ruler of Lower Ladakh as Wanla Lonpo reside in this village

Maiterya Buddha: rock carving of 8m of the future Bodhisattva (Gyalwa Chamba) overlooks the main road at **Mulbek**. An interesting fact is that it was carved during the period of Kushan dynasty in the first century.

Aryan Valley : the people of valley distinguish themselves as the 'pure-blood' Aryans. Well, this seems true with their unique eyes and physical features. The tribe is known as 'Brokpa,' and their valley is located 160 km away from Leh. It is popular for apricot, grapes, wine, walnut, and berries. Brokpas have a very distinct identity, especially their culture, language, costumes and tradition that are significantly different from the rest of Ladakh. To safeguard their unique identity, they celebrate 'Aryan Festival' every year. The two-day affair has all the ingredients for a perfect festival that includes folk dance & songs, food stalls, wine and an amicable atmosphere.

Kargil is the second largest town of Ladakh after Leh. The region is a gateway to Kashmir from Leh and is home to a few ancient monasteries, war memorials, melting glaciers, mountain passes, valleys, and picturesque landscapes. Just nearby, Drass is the second coldest inhabited place in the world after Siberia. Through Kargil, you can visit Zaskar valley via Suru valley,

Rangdum and Penzi la. Kargil has 11,000 inhabitants and the majority of them are Shia Muslim with a unique set of dialects, traditional practices, cultural values that are quite different from the neighbouring district Leh.



Apricot Blossom at Lower Indus



Leh - North

Nestled in the northern reaches of Ladakh, Nubra Valley beckons travelers with its stunning natural beauty and diverse attractions. The crown jewel is the famed Khardongla Pass, reaching a staggering 5300 meters and offering panoramic views of majestic peaks and glaciers. The valley, also known as Ldumra, earns its name from its lush orchards and vibrant flowers, thriving in the fertile soil nourished by abundant water sources. Here, visitors can explore Diskit and Samstanling Gonpas, indulge in camel safaris at Hunder, and rejuvenate in the soothing Panamik hot springs. This historic region, dotted with charming villages that were once bustling halts for Silk Road traders, invites travelers to immerse themselves in its rich cultural heritage and breathtaking landscapes.

The Siachen Glacier : nestled in the eastern Karakoram range, marks the end of the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. Stretching 76 km, it ranks as the second- longest non-polar glacier globally. India has administered the entire glacier since 1984, despite Pakistan's territorial claim. Situated south of the drainage divide between the Eurasian Plate and the Indian subcontinent, it's an intensely glaciated area dubbed the "Third Pole." The glacier lies between the Saltoro Ridge to the west and the main Karakoram range to the east. Temperatures plummet to -50°C, with heavy snowfall averaging over 1000 cm annually. It's the world's highest battleground, with both countries maintaining a military presence.

The Nubra River: The Nubra River flows through Ladakh's Nubra Valley and originates from the Siachen Glacier, while the Shyok River rises from the Rimo Glacier. The Nubra River joins the Shyok River near Diskit village, after which the Shyok River continues its course downstream into Pakistan.



Hundar, Nubra Valley

Turtuk: a quaint village nestled between the Karakoram Range and the Himalayas, sits on the border between India and Pakistan. Despite being geographically part of Baltistan, which is largely under Pakistani administration, Turtuk, along with four other villages, is under Indian control. Following illegal occupation by Pakistan until the 1971 war, it was regained by the Indian Army. Renowned for its apricots, Turtuk also serves as a gateway to the Siachen Glacier, adding to its strategic importance.

Hundar: once the capital of the former Nubra kingdom, boasts remnants of its storied past, including the Langchen Khar ("Elephant Palace") ruins and the hilltop Gula fort. Two Buddhist temples, the white temple (Lhakhang Karpo) and the red temple (Lhakhang Marpo), add to its cultural allure. Nestled between Hundar and Diskit are enchanting sand dunes. Additionally, domesticated Bactrian camels, renowned for their endurance in cold, drought, and high altitudes, facilitated Silk Road trade. Tourists can experience this rich history by riding these camels amidst Hundar's sand dunes.

Diskit: a prominent town in Ladakh's Nubra region, allures tourists with its scenic charm, located approximately 118km from Leh and just 7 km from Hunder. Positioned along the picturesque Shyok River, Diskit offers a range of homestays and guest houses, catering to visitors year-round. Its compact market features quaint eateries. The renowned Diskit monastery, established in the 14th century by Changzem Tserab Zangpo, embodies the region's rich history. During Ladakh's rule by King Grags-pa-'bum-lde and his brother, efforts to control Nubra Valley were thwarted, leading to the monastery's construction under the patronage of a local ruler and a Gelugpa advocate.

The Shyok River: derived from the Tibetan words for 'gravel spreader', aptly describes its nature, as it deposits vast amounts of gravel during floods. Occasionally misinterpreted as the 'river of death', its name reflects its unique geological feature.



Leh -> South

Zaskar Region: spanning 7,000 square kilometers at elevations of 3,500 to 7,135 meters, lies along two branches of the Zaskar River. The first, the Doda River, originates near Penzi La pass and flows southeast toward Padum, the capital. The second branch forms from the Kargyag (or Kurgiakh) and Tsarap Rivers, originating near Shinku La and Baralacha-La respectively. The name "Zaskar" likely derives from the Tibetan word "Zangs," meaning copper, with interpretations including "white copper," "copper palace," or "copper star." Acting as a boundary between Ladakh and Kashmir, Zaskar hosts peaks like Nunkun and crucial passes like Marbal and Zojila, serving as a branch of the mighty Himalayas.

Padum: With a population of around 2,000 people, Padum town thrives below the gompa and the now-ruined Palace khar. Two large chortens mark the traditional center of the village, symbolizing its cultural and religious significance.

Zangla: Sitting atop a hill about one kilometer from the village, the ancient Zangla Fort, believed to date back to the 11th century, stands in ruins. The present-day Zangla village lacks a monastery but houses a nunnery. Confusion arose when some mistakenly referred to Zangla Palace as a monastery, likely due to errors made by early biographers and scholars visiting the area. Despite this, Zangla remains an intriguing historical site.

Phuktal: Phuktal Gompa, rooted in the ancient tradition of scholars and teachers residing in caves, is a place of deep spiritual practice and learning. Its name, derived from the Zangskari dialect, reflects this history, meaning 'the cave of leisure' or 'the cave of liberation'. This monastery holds a rich legacy of meditation, education, and enlightenment.

Gonbo Ranjon: a tall rocky cliff near Kargyak village in Zaskar, Ladakh, India, is sacred to the local Tibetan Buddhist community, known as "God's Mountain." It stands along the Darcha - Padum trek route and road, visible from Kargyak, about 16 km away. The peak reaches 5,520 m, with its base at 4,500 m.

Karsha Monastery : is the largest Monasteries in Zaskar Region, Karsha founded by Phagspa Sherab, the Translator. At the Later stage one Lama Dorje Sherab developed the present monastery. The Yellow Hat / Gelug pa School was introduced here by Changsem Sherab Zangbo. The Bone Relics of Dorje Rinchen are also to be seen

Dran Drung Glacier: the 22 km long Drang-Drung Glacier in Zaskar, Ladakh, is a major tourist attraction and the largest accessible glacier in the region. Originating the Doda and Stod Rivers, it can be seen from the Pensi La pass, appearing like a river of ice. This glacier enhances the allure of Zaskar with its stunning, snow-capped scenery and is a key highlight for adventure seekers.

Sani : is a sacred site believed to have been visited and blessed by Padmasambhava of Udiyana. He is said to have prophesied that a holy cemetery, similar to Dechendal in India, would arise there. Consequently, the area now features a cemetery ground, special trees, springs, and the footprint of Guru Odzer Nima, a manifestation of Padmasambhava. Across the river, there's a meditation cave and another footprint of Nima Odzer, where the Guru Rinpoche is said to have stayed for many years. Sani also has the Kaniskha Stupa and a sacred image of Naropa.



Caption



Caption

In Buddhism, there are 3 vehicles : 1 Mahayana Buddhism 2 Hinayana 3 Vajrayana

In Mahayana Buddhism, there is a rich pantheon of deities, bodhisattvas, and other celestial beings. Within this tradition, many of the deities and bodhisattvas are considered enlightened or on the path to enlightenment. Bodhisattvas, in particular, are revered as beings who have attained a high level of spiritual realization but have chosen to remain in the cycle of birth and death to help all sentient beings achieve liberation. These beings are often depicted in various forms and play significant roles in Mahayana Buddhist practices, rituals, and teachings.

Hinayana or Theravada Buddhism, often referred to as the "Teaching of the Elders," generally focuses more on the historical Buddha's teachings and emphasizes individual enlightenment through personal practice and discipline. While Theravada Buddhism acknowledges celestial beings and deities, its primary focus is on the path to achieving enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara).

In Vajrayana Buddhism, also known as Tantric Buddhism or the Diamond Vehicle, deities play a central role. Vajrayana practitioners view these deities not as external beings but as manifestations of enlightened qualities within themselves. Deities in Vajrayana Buddhism are often depicted in elaborate iconography and are invoked through rituals, visualizations, and mantras as a means to realize one's own enlightenment swiftly. The practice of deity yoga involves identifying with and embodying the qualities of specific deities to accelerate spiritual progress. In Vajrayana, deities are seen as embodiments of wisdom, compassion, and skillful means, guiding practitioners along the path to enlightenment.

Buddhism in Ladakh

Evidence suggests the presence of the Kanishka Stupa in Ladakh's Zaskar Valley dating back to the 1st or 2nd century. However, Buddhism didn't thrive during this period, possibly hindered by language barriers. It wasn't until the 9th century that Buddhism gained momentum in Ladakh, entering from Tibet. This time, it flourished due to shared cultural and traditional affinities between the regions. This exchange facilitated a deeper understanding and acceptance of Buddhist teachings, paving the way for the rich Buddhist heritage that thrives in Ladakh today.



Buddhist Murals, Painting, Symbolic Offerings

There are few murals that are often seen on most of the Buddhist Monasteries Courtyard

• The Wheel & Deer Emblem

In Buddhism, the deer and jewel symbolize the Buddha's first sermon at Deer Park. The deer represent the audience, freed from ignorance, while the jewel signifies the Dharma, illuminating the path to enlightenment. Together, they symbolize the core teachings of Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

• The Four Cardinal King

The Four Heavenly Kings, also known as the Four Guardian Kings, are important figures in Buddhism. They are believed to protect the world and guard the four cardinal directions. Each king is associated with a specific direction and has a retinue of celestial beings under their command.

• Pair Bird with 2 headed, with Flaming Sword and Book

This sign called Khanlop Chos Sum, meaning the wise teacher, the king, the sign of flaming sword symbolise Khan Chen Bodhhisattva, the great learned Pandita Invited from India to Tibet for the translation of the Buddhist Scriptures from Sanskrit to Tibetan. The Vajra in the Lotus symbolise the Tantric Teacher Lupon Padmasambhava. The Lotus flower symbolise the King of Tibet, Thri Srong De Tsan, who was believed to be the reincarnation of Avalokeshavara who hold lotus in his hand. The two headed pair bird symbolise the translator who knew two languages : Sanskrit & Tibetan

• 4 Harmonious Brothers

Once, in the thick forest near Benaras city, an elephant, a monkey, Hare and Bird happened to meet under a huge banyan tree. they became friends in the Dharma and resolved to carry honourable life, giving due respect to the elders with a desire to ascertain the seniority among themselves. These four brothers adopted the tree over their heads as yardstick. Pointing at the tree the elephant said that when he had come to place as a mere boy he had seen it over growing, stretching its branches all directions. The monkey said it was already well grown sapling of his size when he had seen it. Lastly the Bird said he had brought the seed and planted it at the same spot . Thus the bird who was responsible for bringing the seed of the tree was unanimously declared as a senior most in a hierarchy where monkey was placed second in position, the Hare the thirdhand the elephant the fourth and the youngest. The animals thus decided to live a long and happy life together showing respect to the seniors. This had its effects not only on their own lives in the forest but also on the surrounding town of Benaras.



• **6 Long Lives:** The Six auspicious signs are found in every monastery. They stand for peace, prosperity and longevity. They are as follow ;

- 1 The long lived Man
- 2 The long lived Bird
- 3 The long lived Deer
- 4 The long lived Rock
- 5 The long lived Stream
- 6 The long lived Tree

The fresco painting of this six signage found invariably in every chapel of the monasteries.

• **Mandalas (KHIL-KHOR)**

The Creation of sand Mandalas: the purpose of creating the complex artwork is to heal the world and all the living being in it. Mandala itself is a representation of the Buddhist view of the Universe. By offering this beautiful Art to the Buddha & Bodhisattvas. The Monks create positive karma for all living beings. As with all in the universe, the mandala is Impermanent . it's destruction is an important to Buddhist Tradition as its Creation. By destroying the art they just created, the artist remind us that Practicing non-attachment is essential to understanding The true nature of Universe. Non Attachment doesn't mean the absence of love & appreciation but rather acknowledgement & acceptance of the fact that we cannot cling to things in an ever changing universe. Mandala, at the End: The monk pour the sand into the river, so that the healing energy of the mandala can flow to all places in the world & may all Beings who encounter these grains are free from suffering.

Water Bowl Offering

Seven water bowl offering are traditionally presented on a Buddhist altar each morning, place in front or little below of Buddha Statue or Enlightened Beings. the bowls are normally made of Brass, Copper or Silver and are ornamented with the auspicious symbols. The seven bowls represent the Seven Limbed Practice for purifying negative tendencies and accumulating merit.

Cosmological Symbol

Sun & Moon: As the major luminaries of our world system, the sun & moon are two of the most important symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. Sun represents the feminine aspect of wisdom, and White moon the male aspect of method or compassion. According to the Tibetan medical tantras the onset of puberty occurs in around the age of twelve for girl and sixteen for boy. Symbolically these age represent the solar aspect of wisdom for a girl, with the sun's twelve months and Zodiac House, and the Lunar aspect of method for a boy, with moon's sixteen digits, or daily phases between new and full moon.

The Five Elements:

Earth: Yellow | **Water :** White | **Fire :** Red | **Air:** Green | **Space :** Blue

Tormas Offering:

The thread-cross, a vital element in ritual practices, consists of two sticks forming a cross and adorned with colored threads arranged in specific sequences. It can take on intricate geometric forms, symbolizing various aspects of spirituality. Often, it represents the four elements and serves as a base for symbolic offerings like dough effigies and ritual objects. In some rituals, it acts as a containment for evil spirits, ensnaring them within its intricate design. Eventually, it is destroyed through various means like breaking, burning, or casting away, typically at a crossroads or secluded location, thus dispelling the trapped energies.

The Thread Cross

The Torma, also known as a Sacrificial Cake, is a special offering made from dough and sometimes decorated with colorful designs made from sculpted butter. It comes from an ancient Indian tradition called Bali, meaning "Sacred Gift." In Buddhism, where all life is valued, animal sacrifice was replaced with symbolic offerings. There are three main types of Tormas: the offering Torma used in regular rituals, the conical food Torma eaten after rituals for blessings, and the deity Torma shaped to represent specific gods. Peaceful deities like White Tara have gentle-looking Tormas, while wrathful ones like Mahakala have fiercer designs.

Rosary Beads

A traditional Buddhist rosary consists of 108 even-sized beads. It is usually held in the right hands of deities or lineage masters, symbolising the purity of their speech through mantra recitation, devotion, and compassionate awareness. The number 108 is sacred or perfect number in Buddhist, Jain, Hindu traditions, and corresponds to the classical number of names assigned to deity or god. As a multiple of twelve and nine it represents the nine planets in the twelve zodiac houses.

Khataks / Scarfs In Ladakh / Buddhism, offering scarfs is a traditional practice with deep symbolic meaning. The khataks is a ceremonial scarf, often made of silk or cotton, and is used in various rituals and ceremonies across Himalayan Culture. It symbolises the purity, goodwill and compassion. It is a way to show respect, gratitude and Auspicious.

The Stupa The reliquary stupa is a sacred symbol representing Buddha's mind and holding his physical relics. It's hand-held and pays tribute to various deities like Virupaksha and Vaishnavana. Typically white or golden, it rests on a lotus base. Each part symbolizes a step on the path to enlightenment: a lion throne base, a dome, a square chamber, a spire with umbrella-wheels, and a lotus-crowned peak. After Buddha's passing, two sets of eight stupas were built to honor his life events and hold relics. As Buddhism spread across Asia, the stupa took on different styles in various cultures.

Incense Burning Pot:

Burning Incense, symbolising the faculty smell, is depicted as one of the five sensory offerings, and is an attribute of the incense offering goddess. Powdered juniper is the main ingredient of Tibetan incense, and it may be depicted as stick incense, or as a powder smoldering in an incense burner. This incense burner usually appears as a small ornate metal pot mounted upon a tripod of short legs. It may also be suspended upon a swinging chain.

God / Goddesses:

Buddhism has spread in many countries and culture, always integrating the local gods into the system. For example, there are Hindu gods, Bon gods (the ancient religion of Tibet) and local gods in Mahayana & Tantrayana Buddhism. In order to place this entire pantheon correctly within the Buddhist teachings of Karma (the meaning of acts in the light of the purpose of enlightenment) and redemption, the gods are classified amongst the beings which have not yet been delivered from the cycle of rebirth but who have acquired a great deal of positive karma. Therefore it is best to consider a deity as a function such as the gift of fertility, health, protection against the demons.

8 DharmaPala in Buddhism

The eight Dharmapalas were originally hostile demons but they were tamed by Padmasmbhava by means of his magical strength and now act as they fiery defenders of Dharma(The Teaching), they are viewed as a wrathful manifestations of Boddhisattvas, who help the pupil to attain enlightenment. for this purpose they are often assembled in in a special temple (Gonkhang). The Dharmapalas can be recognised by their red hair, flaming aureoles and crowns consisting of five skulls.

1 Yamantaka : Yamantaka is the wrathful form of Manjushri, Buddha of Wisdom. It was as Yamantaka that Manjushri conquered the rampaging Yama and made him a protector of the Dharma. In some versions of the legend, when Manjushri became Yamantaka he mirrored Yama's appearance but with multiple heads, legs and arms. When Yama looked at Yamantaka he saw himself multiplied to infinity. Since Yama represents death, Yamantaka represents that which is stronger than death. In art, Yamantaka usually is shown standing or riding a bull that is trampling Yama.

2 Vaisaravna: God of Wealth(Zambala), Vaisravana is an adaptation of Kubera, the Hindu God of Wealth. In Vajrayana Buddhism, Vaisravana is thought to bestow prosperity, which gives people the freedom to pursue spiritual goals. In art, he is usually corpulent and covered in jewels. His symbols are a lemon and a mongoose, and he also is a guardian of the north.

3 Yama: Yama is lord of the Hell Realm. He represents death. In legend, he was a holy man meditating in a cave when robbers entered the cave with a stolen bull and cut off the bull's head. When they realized the holy man had seen them, the robbers cut off his head also. The holy man put on the bull's head and assumed the terrible form of Yama. He killed the robbers, drank their blood, and threatened all of Tibet. Then Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, manifested as Yamantaka and defeated Yama. Yama became a protector of Buddhism. In art (Wheel of Life), Yama is most familiar as the being holding the Bhava Chakra in his claws.

4 Beg-tse'e: Before he became Begste, was a Tibetan god of war. In Tibetan art, Begtse wears armor and Mongolian boots. Often he has a sword in one hand and an enemy's heart in the other.

5 Mahakala: Mahakala is the wrathful form of the gentle and compassion Avalokitesvara. In Tibetan iconography, he is usually black, although he appears in other colors as well. He has two to six arms, three bulging eyes with flames for eyebrows, and a beard of hooks. He wears a crown of six skulls. Mahakala is the protector of the tents of nomadic Tibetans, and of monasteries, and of all Tibetan Buddhism. He is charged with the tasks of pacifying hindrances; enriching life, virtue, and wisdom; attracting people to Buddhism; and destroying confusion and ignorance.

6 Hayagriva: The easiest way to identify of all the dharmapalas, Hayagriva is another wrathful form of Avalokiteshvara (as is Mahakala, above). He has the power to cure diseases (skin diseases in particular) and is a protector of horses. He wears a horse's head in his headdress and frightens demons by neighing like a horse.

7 Palden Lhamo: She is the only female Dharmapal and perhaps the most fearful, she is the buddhist form of the hindu goddess Kali, the goddess of destruction. Lhamo brings death and destruction to the opponent of Dharma. She appears in different forms but it is usually depicted with crown of heads, a human skin wrapped around her hair, riding a white mule. The reins are poisonous snakes, a bag of diseases hangs from the saddle and in her hand she holds a skull full of blood.

8 Tsangspa : Tshangspa is the Tibetan name for the Hindu creator god Brahma. The Tibetan Tshangspa is not a creator god, however, but more of a warrior god. He usually is pictured mounted on a white horse and waving a sword. In one version of his legend, Tshangspa traveled the earth on a murderous rampage. One day he attempted to assault a sleeping goddess, who awoke and struck him in the thigh, crippling him. The goddess's blow transformed him into a protector of the dharma.

Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life, known as the Bhavachakra, shows the cycle of birth, life, and rebirth in Buddhism. It's divided into six sections representing different realms where beings are born based on their actions (karma). These realms can symbolize mental states or life situations. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara appears in each realm to guide towards liberation, which is possible only in the human realm. The outer circle, not detailed here, depicts the Links of Dependent Origination, showing how actions lead to suffering. Overall, the Wheel teaches about the nature of existence and the path to liberation from suffering (Nirvana).

Yama, depicted holding the Wheel of Life, embodies impermanence and guards the Hell Realm in Buddhism. Despite his fearsome visage, Yama isn't malevolent but a wrathful dharmapala, devoted to Buddhism's protection. Legend tells of Yama's transformation: once a holy man, he assumed his terrifying form after robbers killed him. Only defeated by Yamantaka, an even more formidable dharmapala manifested by Manjushri, Yama thereafter safeguarded Buddhism as its protector.

The Realm of the Gods (Devas), depicted atop the Wheel of Life, offers long, pleasurable lives filled with wealth and happiness. However, their bliss blinds them to the truth of suffering, hindering their pursuit of liberation. Eventually, their joyous existence ends, leading to rebirth in less fortunate realms.

The Realm of Demi-gods(Asuras) is characterized by hyper competitiveness and paranoia, with inhabitants striving relentlessly to outdo others. Chih-i describes them as perpetually desiring superiority, showing impatience with inferiors, and displaying outward virtues while harboring selfish ambitions. Asuras, in constant conflict with Devas, vie for entry into the God Realm

Hungry Ghosts, known as Pretas, suffer from insatiable hunger due to their thin necks preventing food intake. Resulting from greed and jealousy, they hover between the Asura and Hell Realms, their karma not extreme enough for either. Psychologically linked to addiction, their plight mirrors perpetual desire for more despite abundance.

The Hell Realm, characterized by anger and terror, is depicted with both fiery torment and icy isolation. Hell Beings endure agony in the fire and numbness in the ice. Psychologically, they exhibit acute aggression, driving away companions with fiery rage or icy aloofness, ultimately descending into self-destructive isolation.

In the **Animal Realm**, characterized by ignorance and complacency, Animal Beings exhibit predictable behavior, clinging to the familiar while shunning the unfamiliar. Seeking comfort and avoiding discomfort, they lack curiosity and humor. Though they may find contentment, they easily succumb to fear in new situations and tend towards bigotry, all while facing the harsh realities of being preyed upon by others.

Only **Humans** can escape the cycle of rebirth. Humans are curious and passionate, wanting to achieve, experience, and explore. Though the path to enlightenment is accessible, many get distracted by worldly pursuits and miss the chance for liberation.

In the middle of the Wheel of Life are symbols representing **greed, anger, and ignorance**, known as the "Three Poisons." These negative qualities keep the wheel turning, causing suffering. Outside the center is the Sidpa Bardo, where beings are guided to higher or lower realms by bodhisattvas or demons, depending on their actions and mindset. In the top right of the Wheel of Life, you'll often see a Buddha figure. This Buddha represents hope for freedom from suffering. Sometimes, the Buddha points to the moon, symbolizing enlightenment. In some versions, the Buddha raises his hands, perhaps giving a blessing. In the top left of this Wheel of Life, there's a temple with a Buddha inside. People are shown moving towards this temple from the Human Realm, aiming for Nirvana. Different artists portray this corner differently. Sometimes, it's a Buddha representing happiness, or a moon symbolizing freedom. LADAKH TRAVERSE is an emerging name in adventure travel, founded by Tsewang Tundup, an enthusiast with over 12 years of extensive experience in various adventure activities. This company is dedicated to promoting ecological and sustainable tourism while offering a profound insight into the culture, customs, and ever-changing landscapes of mystical Ladakh.



Ladakh Traverse specializes in tailor-made treks, 6000m to 7000m expeditions, and cultural tours. It provides an unparalleled blend of adventure and spirituality, inviting travelers to experience the unique offerings of the Great Indian Himalayas. Tsewang Tundup's extensive background ensures that each expedition is meticulously planned, delivering both thrilling adventures and deep cultural immersion. The company emphasizes sustainable practices to protect the fragile environment of Ladakh, ensuring that its beauty can be enjoyed by future generations.

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