

Condé Nast Traveller

JAMMU &
KASHMIR SPECIAL

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INDIAN EDITION

WITH LOVE FROM KASHMIR

The ultimate guide to paradise by locals who know it best





GUIDE TO LEH & LADAKH

SEE & DO ★ EAT ★ SHOP ★ STAY

PLUS INSIDER SECRETS

Jigmat Norbu ★ Nihal Rehman ★ Motup Goba and more

SEE & DO

Be an adventure junkie Biking aficionados looking to take on the dizzying roads of Ladakh can hire a motorbike from **Ladakh Bike Rental** (ladakhbikerental.com).

For treks and monastery tours, **Ladakh Ecological Footprint** (ecologicalfootprint.in) is your best bet. They also offer river rafting expeditions for both beginners and the more experienced. **Frozen Himalayas** (frozenhimalayas.com) conducts biking trips to and from Leh and also organises snow leopard treks in winters. **Voygr Expeditions** (voygr.com) is another option when it comes to putting together customised trekking itineraries in the region.

Experience a local festival The Ladakh Festival in September brings out the best of local culture, with music, dance, archery contests, polo matches, and a grand Ladakhi parade. You could also time your visit with the Hemis Festival, a two-day celebration that takes place in June or July.

Go to local workshops See local art at the **Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation** (lamo.org.in) in the old town, which also conducts workshops on subjects such as textiles, design and writing.

Visit Buddhist temples & monasteries Keep a day free to visit the various monasteries within and around Leh. Thiksey Monastery, a magnificently imposing structure, is best explored at dawn when the monks have their daily prayer meeting. Alchi is the site of a complex that houses some of Ladakh's oldest Buddhist temples. Two hours down the road from Alchi is Lamayuru, a village surrounded by oddly bulbous rock formations. The sprawling Yuru Monastery, one of the oldest in the region houses an impressive 11-headed, 1,000-eyed image of Chenzing and is a must-visit.

Walk around the city Stroll around the dusty streets of the old town, stopping by bookstores, curio shops and hip, local restaurants that attract all kinds of travellers. Hike up to the 16th-century Tsemo Fort, which dominates the landscape and houses a gold-faced Maitreya Buddha. The white Shanti Stupa, jutting out of a rocky ridge and providing a little oasis of peace is also worth a visit. Built by King Sengge Namgyal in the 16th century, Leh Palace is the perfect example of medieval Tibetan architecture.

MOTUP GOBA & YANGDU

OWNER, RIMO EXPEDITIONS; FOUNDER, LADAKH MARATHON

"Walk around the bylanes of Leh. Close to one such alley is the Central Asian Museum featuring a mini photo essay on the Faces of Ladakh on the top floor. Head to Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO) for a bit of art and culture. For authentic local shopping, head to Nowshara, which is located behind the main market, and Moti Bazar." **Don't miss:** The Annual Hemis Festival held in June at the Hemis Monastery and the annual Ladakh Marathon in September—the world's highest marathon. **Favourite Kashmiri souvenir:** Carpets, pashmina, papier-mâché, saffron, local hand-ground Kashmiri spices, apricots and seabuckthorn juice. **Locals I admire:** Padma Shri awardee Chewang Norphel, the person who created the artificial glaciers and Sonam Wangchuk, founder of the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL).

INSIDERS



EAT

Amigo Korean Restaurant While its name can throw you off, this Korean restaurant serves delicious bibimbap and vegetable pancakes. (097974 91134)

Blue Lotus Shey Bhumi's Blue Lotus, a three-storey pan-Asian restaurant in Leh serves up fine cuisine from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Think finely-spiced nasi goreng and hearty bowls of fragrant Thai curry. (01982 256 640)

Coffee Culture This is a neat spot to cool your heels after a long walk through the dusty market. With a reliable wi-fi connection—a rarity in the region—you can browse while you sip on a range of brewed coffees. (098102 48909)

Il Forno With sweeping views of the old Leh Palace and Tsemo Fort, Il Forno restaurant in Leh is popular for the pizza and naans that are baked in their clay oven. Although it isn't on the menu, you might be able to snag a beer if you ask nicely. (ilfornoladakh.com)

Lamayuru Restaurant Situated on Fort Road, their vegetarian and Indian food is well-regarded. Ask your server for the wi-fi password to update your social media while waiting for your meal. (094198 87890)

Namza Cafe This is a quiet spot for a meal right in the middle of the bustling city. Try the vegetable har gow, packed with local veggies and spices, along with the Yarkhandi pulao. The café also has an attached studio, which showcases contemporary silhouettes inspired by traditional Ladakhi clothing for those looking to shop. (094192 99111)

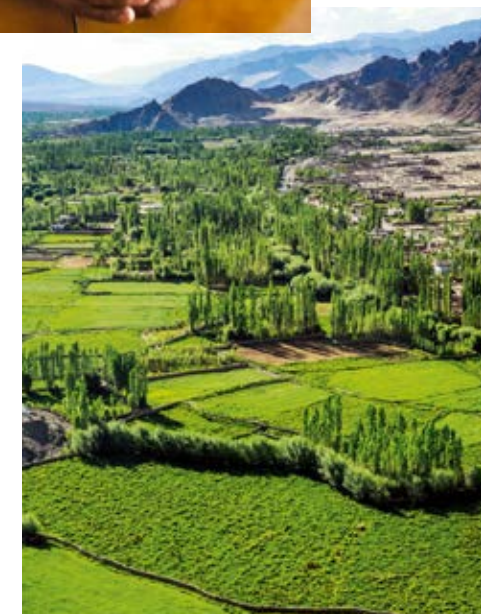
Rendezvous Café Leh & German Bakery Rendezvous is one of the restaurants in Leh that offers a wholesome English breakfast and for those who want to try it, the local version, with khambir and nun chai. (facebook.com/pages/Rendezvous-Cafe-Leh-German-Bakery)

CNT LOVES Summer Harvest Specialising in wonderfully spiced momos and soup, Summer Harvest is a good spot to try the local fare. While you're there, we recommend a plate of mutton momos and clear soup for a full meal. (099069 86556)

Tibetan Kitchen On Fort Road with outdoor seating is the ideal restaurant for your fix of steamed momos and thenthuk (noodle soup). Manali grilled trout is also on the menu here. (095968 59020)



Clockwise from left: a masked dancer; the intricate details at a monastery; a local guide is the best way to explore the region; a view of the Leh landscape; inside Tibetan Kitchen; a dish at Blue Lotus Previous pages: the spectacular landscape as seen from the air



SHOP

Leh main market This is where you'll find Tibetan antiques, jewellery and curios. Pick up Buddhist art like Tibetan thangka paintings that depict deities on cotton or silk fabric and traditional wooden tables called choktse, which are decorated with Buddhist motifs and emblems.

Chospa General Store If you're a spice aficionado and looking to take back some local produce, this is the place. The yellow chilli powder from here packs a powerful, sweat-inducing punch, though there are other locally-grown ingredients available as well. (094191 77245)

CNT LOVES Jigmat Couture This prêt store offers chic clothes fashioned from locally-sourced fibres. Traditional techniques are used to create modern silhouettes. Perfect, if you're looking for one-of-a-kind pieces to add to your wardrobe. (096970 00344)

Utpala Arts & Natural Dye Centre Make a beeline for this hidden gem for traditional Kashmiri items like pashmina shawls and hand-painted, tie-dyed home textiles, which include bed sheets, cushion covers and more. (094192 18589)

INSIDER

NIHAL REHMAN
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, CAPTIVATING KASHMIR ONLINE PLATFORM "Most tourists don't know of harissa, which is boneless meat mashed until it becomes a paste which is then eaten with traditional Kashmiri bread. Buy walnut wood carvings from Prince Wood Carving Store, custodians of this heritage art." **Don't miss:** The Great Lakes trek is an experience of a lifetime for travellers because the view, the meadows and the lakes cannot be found in any other part of the world. **Kashmir in one word:** Captivating **What I love about Kashmir:** The hospitality. We are the most "Mehmaan Nawaz" people in the whole world. **Locals I admire:** I admire local entrepreneurs and artists because they are busy doing something innovative and creating jobs in Kashmir. In a nutshell, they are working on reforming Kashmir economically. @captivatingkashmir

STAY

The Apricot Tree Hotel, Nurla Perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the gushing Indus River and surrounded by apricot trees, this boutique stay is as local as it gets. Open between April and September and run by the fifth generation of a farming family, each of the 21 rooms of the hotel are well-appointed and built using indigenous materials. Skip the multicuisine fare at the restaurant for a traditional Ladakhi meal from the ancestral kitchen—try the chutai-sku, which is similar to ravioli. (*theapricottreehotel.com; doubles from ₹9,400 with all meals*)

CNT LOVES TUTC Chamba Camp For an exceptional glamping experience, book the camp at Thiksey flanked by the eponymous monastery on one side and the Stok Kangri range on the other. This seasonal campsite offers tents complete with central heating, four-poster beds and fully-furnished bathrooms with running hot water. The on-site restaurant whips up an impressive range of Indian and exotic dishes. Excursions include watching polo matches, archery and rafting along the Indus. (*tutc.com; price on request*)

Desert Himalaya Resort Nestled in the Nubra Valley, Desert Himalaya Resort offers tents with private bathrooms and a decent range of dining options. Diskit Monastery nearby is worth a visit or you can head to Hunder Village to experience the unique Bactrian camel safari. The six-acre property also features a specially-designed swimming pool which contains fresh spring water and an 80-seat dining hall to get to know your fellow guests over meals that feature fresh vegetables from the local garden. (*deserthimalayaresort.com; doubles from ₹6,000*)

Dragon Hotel and Guesthouse Run by Tashi Skyabu and his family, the Dragon Hotel in Lamayuru is located just five minutes from the famed monastery of the same name. The hotel has clean and spacious rooms with basic amenities and a wi-fi connection. Try the Ladakhi meals crafted lovingly by the house chef from ingredients grown in the family's kitchen garden, or sip local apple juice or tea while taking in the dramatic surroundings. (*dragonhotellamayuru.wordpress.com; doubles from ₹4,500*)

CNT LOVES The Grand Dragon Ladakh If you're looking for a place to stay that is equipped with every possible comfort, then this property is the finest in town. One of the few hotels that is open through the winter, The Grand Dragon is ideal whether you're in the region to splurge for a few days or at the end of a hike or adventure. (*thegranddragonladakh.com; doubles with breakfast from ₹15,600*)

Gyab Thago Heritage Homestay Located across the valley from the palace and monastery, this homestay in Stok is a favourite with trekkers. Expect clean and cheerful rooms with a well-maintained shared bathroom, traditional décor and a warm welcome from the owner Gyab Thago. The highlight of the homestay is its delectable food. Served in the beautiful Ladakhi dining room, a special spread is available if you book in advance. (094192 18421; ₹1,000 per person with meals)

Himalayan Homestays Nothing beats the authentic experience of living with Ladakhi families that Himalayan Homestays provide. This network of rural homestays across the mountains features basic homes with simple meals, Ladakhi-style floor seating, boiled spring water for drinking and dry pit local Ladakhi toilets that have minimal environmental impact. (*himalayan-homestays.com; from ₹800 per person with meals*)

Lotus Hotel This decade-old hotel is centrally located and boasts a traditional Ladakhi-style design as well as splendid views of Tsemo Monastery above the Leh Palace and Stok Kangri in the distance. You'll find central heating throughout the complex (the hotel remains open through winter), a multicuisine restaurant and modern amenities combine with lovely reading nooks and an enchanting garden to laze in. Its location is also ideal for setting out on long evening walks, including one up to Shanti Stupa. (*lotushotel.in; doubles from ₹5,930 with breakfast*)

Mahey Retreat A short walk from Leh in a quiet suburb, this hotel has rooms overlooking sprawling gardens that grow most of the produce used by the restaurant. With only 17 centrally-heated rooms and modern amenities, it combines the best of the region with 21st century comforts. (*maheyretreat.com; doubles from ₹4,600*)

Hotel Mogol This family-run establishment has friendly staff for its 19 spacious rooms. The rooftop restaurant is where you'll meet other guests after a day spent exploring. Its location near the popular Shanti Stupa and local market make nearby exploration easy. (*hotelmogol.com; doubles from ₹4,500*)

CNT LOVES Nimmu House Just 45 minutes from Leh in the quiet village of Nimmu lies this boutique homestay. Only four of the 30 original rooms in this century-old Tibetan house have been renovated and opened to guests. The five garden tents are an adventurous alternative. A highlight for kids is the stable full of yaks, cows and goats—a mini petting zoo. There's no wi-fi or round-the-clock room service, but plenty for those who love the outdoors: think yoga classes in the garden and hikes to the surrounding valleys. (*ladakh.nimmu-house.com; doubles from ₹12,900*)

INSIDERS

JIGMAT NORBU & JIGMAT WANGMO

FASHION ARTISTS, JIGMAT COUTURE LADAKH "Explore a slice of Leh's history on a heritage walk from Leh Palace towards the Textile Museum. Check out the thangka paintings, which are created with minerals and pigment colour, at the Norbulingka store. Eating options are diverse. Try the fresh buckwheat momos at the Alchi Kitchen in Alchi village, or the chocolate momos at Bon Appetit. Opt for a stay at the eco-friendly Nimmu House Boutique Heritage Hotel in Nimmu village or the luxurious, seasonal TUTC Chamba Camp in Thiksey." @jigmat.couture



PHOTOGRAPH: ATHUL PRASAD

Nubra Organic Retreat There's nothing like the stark contrast of a lush farm in the high-altitude desert of the Nubra Valley to make your jaws drop. Run by award-winning farmers, Nubra Organic Retreat in Hunder offers 20 Swiss-style deluxe tents to suit all tastes. Book a heritage walk with owner Nordan Otzer who grew up in the region. (nubraorganicretreat.com; doubles with all meals from ₹9,600)

Hotel Omasila Another hotel that stays open throughout winter, Omasila is one of the oldest properties in Leh. The wooden floors, old-world decor, sprawling lawns and stunning terrace decorated with flowers make for a charming stay. (hotelomasila.com; doubles from ₹5,800)

Hotel Shangrila This 45-room property is minutes away from Leh's airport and has a Tibetan-inspired restaurant that serves Ladakhi food as well. Also available is fare ranging from Continental and Chinese to Thai and Israeli. The hotel closes for winter, so it's best to book ahead. (shangrilaladakh.com; doubles from ₹6,500)

Shaolin Guest House Located on Sankar Road, this guest house is great for those looking to set out and explore the area. The family-run property has trusted guides and more that they're happy to book for guests. The 11-room property also has its own organic vegetable garden. (shaolinladakh.com; doubles from ₹3,500)

Shey Bhumi If you've always dreamt of living on a farm, Shey Bhumi is the right hotel to book. Offering both cottages and rooms, this property—located in a six-acre seabuckthorn orchard—is luxurious, filled with local touches and handicrafts and offers bespoke itineraries for those looking to explore the surrounding mountainous region. Their Asian restaurant, Blue Lotus, is also worth a visit. (sheybhumi.com; doubles from ₹15,000)

Hotel Skitsal Located in Stok, this hotel offers pet-friendly accommodation. The simple rooms come with flat-screen TVs and lots of wood panelling. With loads of parking, stunning views and an on-property restaurant, it's the perfect base from which to set out on a hike or camping trip. (skitsal.com; doubles from ₹3,200)

Sonam & Padma's Guest House About a 72km detour en route to Pangong Lake, the tiny village of Hanle is known for its observatory that houses the Chandra telescope from the Indian Institute of Astrophysics. Once here, stay at Sonam Dorje's extremely simple guest house for its colourful interiors, fresh, home-cooked meals, clean rooms and bathrooms which even include a Ladakhi style bio toilet. (padmahomestay.in; from ₹900 per person)

INSIDERS MUZAMMIL HUSSAIN

CO-FOUNDER, ROOTS LADAKH

"Go on a curated tour of the abandoned Hunderman village near the line of control. Visit the Aryan Valley in April, during the apricot blossom season, or in August—during the harvest season. If you visit between May and September, cycle through the little-explored Suru Valley. Stop at City Palace for Kashmiri wazwan, Hungry Panda for thukpas and momos. FHS Dry Fruits in Bemathang, Kargil offers a variety of apricot products. Visit the family-run Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum for a glimpse of Kargil's Silk Route trade history." @roots_ladakh

TSEWANG NAMGAIL

**WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST & DIRECTOR,
SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVANCY
(SLC) INDIA TRUST**

"If you have an interest in exquisite handicrafts, pay a visit to Likir, a pottery village in the Sham Valley. It is the only village in Ladakh where potters use an ancient technique to make earthenware. You can learn various skills such as clay preparation, moulding, baking of earthenware and glazing. If wildlife is what you are interested in, then winter is the best time to visit. It is quite magical to see a snow leopard—often referred to as the 'grey ghost'—materialising out of the barren rocks in the frigid winter air."



CNT LOVES Stok Palace Heritage Hotel

The Stok Palace, built in 1820, was converted into a heritage hotel in 2008 and is a great place to get a glimpse into Ladakhi royal living. Scion Jigmed Namgyal still lives on the plush property, which features elaborate and ornate décor, reflecting the royal lifestyle. Rooms have breathtaking views of the Stok Valley. (stokpalaceheritage.com; doubles from ₹32,000)

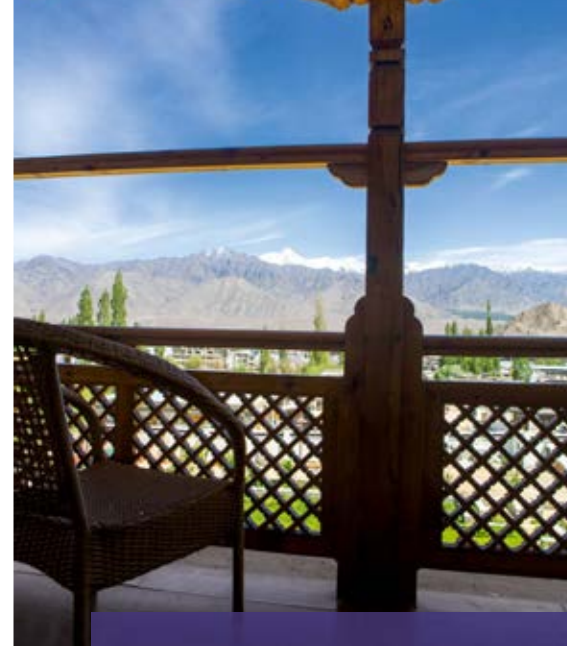
Tsetan Guest House Tucked away in upper Changspa, this family-run guesthouse has added five new en-suite rooms to its previous dormitory-only facility, equipped with hot water and wi-fi. The guesthouse also has a kitchen garden and serves delicious home-cooked food including their special vegetarian momos that are only available on Sundays. (tsetangueshouse.com; doubles from ₹3,800)

Ule Ethnic Resort Strategically located on the Leh-Srinagar highway, the village of Uleytokpo is increasingly becoming a favourite with trekkers and travellers visiting Sham Valley. The eco-conscious yet plush Ule Ethnic Resort is nestled amongst apple and apricot trees with the Indus River gurgling nearby. The family-run establishment uses micro-hydro plants and solar water heaters. From canvas huts to chalet-style accommodation, a spa and library, the resort spells luxury in harmony with the environment. (uleresort.com; doubles with all meals from ₹12,600)

Woody Vu Stok House This 100-year old structure is the former home of the Lhoskya family in Stok village. It has been refurbished keeping in mind the original character and features four-poster beds and wooden furnishings that will make you forget about the property's limited road connectivity. Situated at a distance of 12km from Leh, head here for panoramic views of the valley and peaceful surroundings. (woodyvu.com; doubles with breakfast from ₹10,500)

Zeepata Guest House The Zeepata Guest House is a little tricky to find if you're headed there the first time. It is worth the search though, as the rooms are cosy and while some have shared bathrooms, they are spotlessly clean. Ideal for backpackers who prefer to stay away from traveller ghettos for a more relaxed experience. (zeepataguesthouse.blogspot.in; ₹1,000 per person)

Zik Zik Holidays A homely, comfortable option for backpackers and solo travellers. The owner Tsering Didi and her staff make guests in their 26-room property feel like part of a family. With a garden filled with apple trees, it's the ideal retreat for those looking to de-stress. (094191 79357; doubles from ₹3,500) 📍



Clockwise from top: the view from the Grand Dragon Ladakh Hotel; a luxury tent in TUTC's Chamba Camp; the service at the Grand Dragon Ladakh is a throwback to the times of royalty; Shey Bhumi's expansive property; Jigmed Namgyal of the Stok Palace Heritage Hotel

