Women of Ladakh Photography Tour Report 2019

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by Julie-Anne Davies

Memorable encounters with some of the world's highest nomads and most obscure Himalayan cultures were a highlight of our 2019 tour to photograph the beautiful women and cultures of Ladakh. Here Wild Images leader Julie-Anne Davies reports on her highly successful tour.

Thiksey to Ulley

Our trip began with an early morning departure from Leh, hoping to witness a Puja ceremony at the Thiksey monastery, about a 30 minute drive south of the city. The first morning could not have begun in a more magical way. Sunrise, deep blue high altitude morning skies and there we were, high up on the balcony of the monastery watching two red robed monks call the other monks to prayer with their conch and Tibetan horn. Against a backdrop of snowcapped Himalayas and high desert, we watched as monks young and old made their way up the ancient stone staircase to the temple hall. For an hour, we sat quietly, sipping butter tea, legs crossed, as the Thiksey monks chanted, reciting ancient Buddhist scriptures. Their chants were accompanied by Tibetan horns and the clang of symbols while the smoke from Juniper incense hung thickly in the air. An incredible way to begin our two week journey through Ladakh. We climbed the steep stone staircase to the roof of the monastery to get what might be one of the best vistas of the high desert valley from anywhere surrounding Leh. After Thiksey, we drove north again, following the road back to Leh, for a quick breakfast, before heading North in our cozy van along the Indus River. Only a short distance from Leh, traffic dropped off and rolling foothills of deep purple and orange hues led into jagged, impossibly high peaks of the Northern reach of the Himalayas. We stopped briefly to admire the confluence of the Zanskar and Indus rivers and passed through the village of Nimmo, stopping to buy a bag of their infamous Samosas, and then on past the ancient Basgo monastery, built high into the hillside above the village.

We were fortunate to have been tipped off by one of Ladakh's foremost Snow Leopard experts, Jigmet Dadul, that there was a possibility of seeing this magnificent animal if we were willing to do a small side trip on route to our homestay that afternoon. When we reached the village of Likir – the village closest to the latest sighting – we all agreed this was an opportunity we had to act upon. A short drive up a dirt track and we were out, walking in silence along the spine of a high desert ridge. After about 20 minutes, we reached the spot where the Snow Leopard team were stationed, glued to their spotting scopes in hopes of a sighting. About 800 feet below our spotting ledge was a fresh Ibex carcass – the Snow Leopard's last meal. After an hour of scoping, we still had not spotted the Snow Leopard and it was time to continue on towards our evening homestay, but it was an absolute honour to know had been in the vicinity of this beautiful and elusive animal.

We continued on towards the mountain hamlet of Ulley. Branching off from the main highway, the 7km narrow dirt road to Ulley winds steeply into a high alpine bowl with a stunning view back towards to the Western Himalayas. To say Ulley is remote and rugged is to put the description lightly. At 4,050m, Ulley is one of the highest villages in Ladakh. This is a true mountain village, relatively untouched from the outside world. There were only a handful of traditional Ladakhi homes and families in Ulley, with the recent addition of a couple of new buildings to house the growing Snow Leopard industry. Our hosts, Nilza and Angdu, greeted us with hot cups of Masala tea and a lunch of veggies, rice and fresh made Ladakhi bread. That evening, Nilza donned her traditional Ladakhi tibi and bok (hat and robe) for us and was more than happy to allow us to photograph her in her Ladakhi kitchen. An evening stroll led us to home of neighbouring family, Dolma and Norbu, a Ladakhi couple who have made their home in Ulley for decades, raising four children and tending to Tso (a cross between a yak and a cow), goats and chickens. Back at Nilza's for dinner, we were treated to a meal of Thukpa, a type of freshly made noodle soup made from tsampa (barley flour) and veggies, along with a broth of yak cheese and locally grown peas and mustard leaves. A full day and high altitudes had us all ready for bed shortly following dinner.

Temisgam-Tingmosgang-Tia

After an early morning stroll through the village of Ulley, we said our goodbyes to Nilza, Angdu, Dolma and Norbu and headed off down the mountainside. Our ever vigilant guide Angmo spotted a small Himalayan fox on the grassy hillside before once again reaching the main road that led us on northward. After an hour, we reached the village of Hemis Shukpachan – Shukpachan literally meaning Juniper Tree, and upon driving through the village, it is easy to see why this is the name given the town. Gnarled and twisted old growth Junipers lined the narrow road through the village and outlined the perimeter of farmers' fields. A short drive past Hemis Shukpachan and we were in a Shangri-la of sorts. A high elevation meadow with a bright white stupa stood out against a backdrop of treeless hills streaked with purple mineral deposits. The view from the pass just beyond the meadow was enough to cause several of us to gasp, jaws dropped open, at one of the most stunning landscapes we had all collectively seen. The valley dropped thousands of feet below, the hillsides in tones of pastel purple, pink and orange as though painted by a higher hand. Beyond the painted hills, the Ladakh Range of the Northern Himalayas jutted upward, still pasted in white late winter snow. We stood in silence, photographing and simply absorbing the beauty of the Ladakhi landscape. The road narrowed as we continued on from the pass, and at one sharp corner we pulled over just enough to let a horseback goat herder slink himself and his large herd past us along the edge of steep canyon rim. Another hour of descending along the windy backroad and we could see the village of Ang. Several thousand feet lower than Ulley, the village of Ang was blanketed in old growth Apricot trees laden with pink blossoms. It was another stunning sight to behold. Not far beyond Ang was the village of Temisgam, where we would find this evenings homestay. After getting settled into our rooms, we drove through the village of Temisgam and up a windy, narrow road leading to the hilltop, aesthetically perched 15th century Tingmosgang Monastery, where, in 1684, the historic treaty was signed that demarcated the boundary between Ladakh and Tibet. Here we spent time admiring the Buddhist paintings of the main tempe hall and practiced the technique of photographing 'motion' using spinning prayer wheels as our prop.

On our drive back down Tinmosgang, we decided to pay a visit to the nuns at the Tinmosgang Chomoling (nunnery). We arrived unannounced but were welcomed with open arms into the courtyard of the Chomoling where a half dozen nuns sat peacefully in the shade of the blossoming Apricot trees, spinning mani wheels, reciting mantras, reading Buddhist texts and sifting through barley. We sat in the cool of the fruit trees with the nuns, sharing masala tea, biscuits and laughter. The peaceful energy emanating from the nuns ran though us all and is undoubtedly an experience likely never to be forgotten by anyone in the group. We carried on after our visit upwards and west, up to the hillside village of Tia. Tia is completely off the beaten path and at the end of a long and windy uphill route. Because of this, it was about as authentic a place a traveler could wish for. The village is off the beaten track and accessible only by crooked, narrow stone walking paths. Tia is untouched by modernity; stone homes with elaborately hand carved wooden doors and windows, a matrix of animal pens and willow fence lines, ancient but functional waterways lining the paths from home to home. Hardy vegetables grew in every small plot of soil, home made tin cans painted with Om Mani Padme Hum lined up in rows, mounted into the stone walls at head height to keep the wheel of dharma ever spinning. Villagers young and old sat together beside a brightly coloured mani wheel, chatting, laughing, some swaying to the rhythm of their own chanting. The villagers, unaccustomed to outsiders, were as intrigued by us as we were by them. We spent the better part of an hour sitting, giggling, making silly but sensible hand gestures to communicate. We showed them photos of where we were from on our iPhones. They laughed. We traded hats. Tried on each others glasses. Giggled some more. It was early evening as we drove the long road from Tia back down to our homestay, stopping en-route to take a few photos of the Tingmosgang Monastery in the setting sun. A spectacular day full of landscapes and memorable connections.

The next morning we headed off for our first formal photo shoot. We had 3 local woman dressed in traditional Ladakhi Tibi, Bok and Thikma (colourful cape, tall black top hat and pointed felt shoes) accompany us to one of the village's original Ladakhi homes. The home was unoccupied, but left untouched since the family had moved out, with an abundance of beautiful authentic artifacts left behind. We shot in the well lit summer kitchen with a backdrop of traditional brass pots and mugs, and then into the Chantsa, or dark winter kitchen, our subjects lit only by a small hole in the roof where smoke from the wood fire used to escape and large hand carved charcoaled wooden beams. A large cast iron stove sat in the middle of the room. The pots the family were cooking with as they moved out were still on the stove top. It was an eerie, yet stunning location. We then moved to the upper courtyard, where we had another excited local woman jump in, wanting to be photographed as well! And finally, we ended our shoot outside, with the women going for a stroll though a nearby magical field lined with old growth apricot trees in full blossom. A successful shoot indeed!

Lamayuru

We said goodbye to our homestay hosts and drove an hour to the village of Khaltse for lunch and a quick stroll to see villagers working the fields, nuns and market vendors in jovial conversation, old men and women quietly spinning prayer wheels, chanting under their breath. We continued north along the Indus for a short distance from Khaltse to a quick but mandatory stop at the Army Check Point that marks the boundary of the Line of Control. Just beyond the check stop, we took our first departure since leaving Leh away from the Indus, and west into a windy narrow chasm that led to what has very succinctly been described as a 'Moonscape'. Treeless folds of brown earth, as barren as a landscape can be, yet somehow enticing you to run barefoot across the smooth clay surfaces that extend as far as the eye can see, broken only by the more distant jagged Himalayan skyline. The sensation of space travel suddenly ends as you turn a corner and perched atop a rocky slab formation in the centre of the valley above you is one of Ladakh's oldest monasteries. At 1000 years old, the Lamayuru Monastery takes your breath away at first sight. Remains of the original structure still stand, crumbling yet visible around the base of the modern day monastery. We made our way up the steep and windy road that runs through the village, past curious locals clearly excited to see some of the first foreigners of the season, past goat and sheep caravans and to our home for the night in a local hotel

We left the hotel at 6am the next morning in eager anticipation to capture the 'little' monks of Lamayuru as they were called via horn and symbol to morning Puja. Masala tea and biscuits on the doorsteps of the Monastery as we waited was a beautiful way to start the day. We followed the monks into their prayer chamber and sat silently for an hour in the dark room, surrounded by the celestial voices of little humans chanting in unison, swaying their bodies to the rhythm of their mantras. One group of older boys played the horns and clashed the symbols, the littlest ones struggling to stay awake at this early hour. We kept our presence as discreet as possible, sitting quietly, working with the sliver of light that made photographing the boys possible. It was valuable practice in photographing in low light situations. After puja, we spent our day meandering at a snails pace through the village of Lamayuru with endless opportunities to capture rural Ladakhi life in action. Goats, sheep, tso, yaks all wandered freely about town. Elders sat spinning their mani wheels, women hung colourful laundry to their rooftop lines while others hauled woven baskets of grass three times their size up from the fields. Little monks and village children ran freely, a group of them playing cricket with a rubber ball with a homemade bat, laughing wildly. Down below the village we lay quietly in the grass to watch as villagers worked together tilling their fields for the coming growing season. Awhile further through the fields we came across a jovial group of local elders sitting together in the shade drinking Chang (rice beer) and Masala tea, with a picnic of Khambir (Ladakhi bread) and Tsotma (veggies). They were taking a break from the hard work of tilling their communal field. They didn't hesitate to invite us to join them (as seemed customary in Ladakh) and one man, excited by our presence, broke into song. It was a special moment of just 'being' with the locals. Few words were said, but many cups of tea and smiles were shared. We watched as they went back to work with their Tso and Yak pulling a wooden plow, one man maneuvering the animals, the other singing loudly to motivate them to keep moving. The rest of them walked along together behind the plow tossing seeds or hoeing them into the dirt. It was a beautiful example of community and connection to one another and to the land. The rest of our time at Lamayuru was spent walking the Kora circuit around the monastery, drinking tea with little monks and a short drive to the mountain top prayer site to capture the stunning village and it's surrounding otherworldly landscapes.

Aryan Valley

Our drive north began after an early morning breakfast at the hotel. The weather had turned for the first time during our travels and we had hoped to make it to our next destination before the forecasted heavy rains and wind hit. We were back along the narrow and windy Indus River, heading north into the Aryan Valley, the land of the Brokpa Tribe who have called this valley home for the past 5000 years. The Brokpas believe themselves to be of pure Aryan bloodline, descendants of four brothers from Alexander the Great's army who remained behind and settled the four villages that remain today, Dah, Darchik, Hanu and Garkon. Today there are less than 2000 Brokpas remaining. Their geographical isolation and stringent social rules have kept the Brokpa culture intact for thousands of years. But, things are changing. Tourism is still relatively new to the Aryan Valley, but the world is now at it's doorstep. Brokpa youth are choosing to pursue educations outside the Valley and the desire to remain living an isolated, self sufficient village life is not necessarily what the Brokpa youth of today are wanting. We arrived at Biama before lunch, which gave us time to get settled before continuing north for the afternoon to our first Brokpa village. The exposed, half-kept road narrows even more so as we head north to Garkon. In places, the cliff walls loom overhead like a partial tunnel as if one wall has already fallen the five hundred feet into the Indus sharply below you. The village of Garkon lies just beyond the Line of Control (LOC) – an area nestled against the China/Pakistan border. Indian Army presence beyond the LOC becomes a quiet, but noticeable constant. If you have watched the Lord of the Rings and know 'the Shire', you have been to Garkon. One immediately senses the weight of history in the crumbling yet occupied stone buildings, the ancient aqua ducts lining the

fields, the tunnels of shady ancient pathways arced by blossoming old growth apricot trees. There is one pathway through Garkon, and we walked slowly, almost as if you can sense the immensity of time and history within each step. We sat and ate apricots, drank tea, communicated through smiles and hand gestures with the elders as they allowed us to capture their portraits.

Ten kilometres north, the village of Darchik was our destination for the next morning. It was questionable if we would even be allowed into Darchik, as the doors of tourism are barely open there. The village is relatively untouched by the outside world and was not 'officially' on our itinerary. We took the opportunity to try, and were received with open arms. Nestled into the rocky slopes across the Indus from Garkon, Darchik is a timeless, fairytale of a village with a stone path that circles fields of lush green gardens and twisted fruit trees. Entering the village we encountered two women dressed in full traditional Brokpa fur, jewelry and flowered headdress, on their way down from the village to the Army post below, where they were planning to perform for some dignitaries that morning. After some negotiating, the army agreed to allow us to the chance to watch the performance, and we nestled under a tent, out of the already blistering heat. After our performance, we strolled through the village of Darchik and then headed back to Garkon for our formal shoot of the Brokpa. We harnessed the shade of the old growth trees of Garkon and a small stone hut and courtyard to shelter our subjects from the bright spring Indus Valley sun. The women were shy and carried themselves with what might be considered a Brokpa sense of stoicism, which in it's own way added to the feel of the shoot and the sense that we were engaging with a culture that was remote, distinct and still quite sheltered from the world at large.

Takmachik

We left our guest house early to begin our travel south back towards Leh. We stopped to visit a 2000 year old rock art sight that lined the Indus River. The markings carved into the rock were made by Chinese traders and were mostly depictions of Ibex and hunters with bows and arrows. We spotted 3 Urial on the hillside across from the rocks. An hour further down the road we made it to Takmachik, a lush village that calls itself 'Ladakh's Organic Village', growing field after field of organic fruit and vegetables. Here we were staying at the home of Jigmet Dadul, Ladakh's foremost Snow Leopard expert and ultra friendly guide. He lives with his mother, father, wife and youngest daughter, all together in a gorgeous traditional Ladkahi home. We were treated like good friends from the minute we arrived, and sat, all together in their large summer kitchen, drinking Masala tea and sharing fresh homemade bread. The village, like most in Ladakh, is built into a hillside and is a mix of crumbling abandoned clay and stone homes, more modern sturdily renovated Ladakhi homes, a hilltop monastery, a large golden Buddha and livestock wandering freely along dirt pathways. We were fortunate to be able to use one of these stunning, yet abandoned homes for our formal shoot of the five women in Perak. The Perak is a traditional headdress worn by Ladakhi women, made of leather and precious stones of Lapis Lazuli and turquoise, believed to protect and to signify the status of the woman wearing it. They are passed down from mother to eldest daughter when she marries, adding turquoise stones to it over the years, sometimes selling the stones when in need of money. We had five gorgeous models for an entire afternoon in one of the oldest homes in Takmachik. The lighting was spectacular. Small cracks in the clay walls and ceilings allowed slivers of dusty, aesthetic light beams into the otherwise dark winter Ladakhi kitchens, still adorned with all sorts of traditional pots, pans, bowls, sacks of grain and dried herbs. There was a courtyard of old wooden beams, intricately painted walls and window sills and narrow, crooked stone archways. A perfect location for our final formal photoshoot. The next morning, we headed back to Leh where we spent the afternoon wandering the markets freely, combining a few hours of shopping with casual street photography and an early evening dinner of traditional Kashmiri cuisine.

Changthang

After a comfortable evening at our hotel in Leh, we were on the road early, heading south and upwards in altitude towards the Changthang Plateau. The roads were quiet, as we were still reaping the rewards of traveling through Ladakh before the high passes were free of snow and the traffic from Srinagar and elsewhere arrived to busy the roads. Construction meant long, dusty and rough sections of gravel but it also meant several brand new smooth sections of fresh pavement. One sure gained an appreciation on this drive for the advent of modern paving and just how impactful, for better or worse, it is on the world it opens the doors to. After a hot lunch at the Chumathang Hot Springs, we continued on, spotting our first Tibetan Wild Asses and a few minutes later, our first Blue Sheep. The tones in the landscape increased in orange and purple as we wound our way upwards towards the high plateau. After hours of narrow roads and tight walls following the Indus River south, our van crawled up and onto what had a sense of being the top of the world. A high, wide plateau, rimmed by peaks that curled up along the edges of the vast expanse of land and sky. We were on the Changthang! Within minutes of arriving on the plateau, we had spotted two tents a short but rough drive from the main road. We went to investigate and

sure enough, we had come across our first group of nomads – two families living together in two small tents and a stone corral for the 400 goats they shared. Only the month old baby goats were there when we arrived, as the others were up grazing on higher pastures above the camp, where they would go each morning, returning later that evening. Their camp was basic – a stone corral, a few small holes in the rocks where they would put the baby goats each night, and a few pots and small solar chargers. Inside their tents, the floor was covered in brightly woven pashmina rugs, goat skin blankets and bundles of wool to rest their heads at night. A wooden pellet stove for cooking and heating, a few copper cooking pots, a water jug, and a few large bags of barley and tsampa flour made up the rest of their belongings. At the back of the tent was a suspended horizontal stick, skewering a skinned goat. They seemed very excited by the visit, and were eager to show us their home. We held the baby goats, as they took turns posing for a photo with each of us. We brought 4 kilograms of apricots from Takmachik to give to the Nomads that we would meet, and the gift was highly received. We said our goodbyes and continued on toward Korzok and Tso Moriri. We arrived in Korzok in time to drop our bags at our homestay and head out in search of more Nomads in the early evening light. Our spotting scope proved worth its weight, as we were able to scan the far reaches of the plateau south of the village and make out a small tent tucked into the base of a knoll on the Western shore of Tso Moriri. We made our way over a rough 4×4 'road' and up to the tent site. As we arrived, we could see two nomads descending from the high plateau above their camp, returning for the evening with several hundred goats in tow. Our presence seemed to excite them, and they arrived back in camp welcoming us with smiles and laughter. The two women invited us into their tent where we they quickly made a fire to take the edge out of the cool evening air and we sat together, admiring a handmade Pashmina vest one of the women had spun and knitted. We chatted together as Angmo translated. They had spent their entire lives in these hills with their goats, spending only short periods of the coldest time of year in the village of Korzok. Hardier women you would be pressed to find.

The next morning we were up early to see the sun rise over the Eastern flanks of Tso Moriri and head out across the expanse in the direction of Tso Kar. We spotted a Tibetan Fox not far from Korzok village and soon several Ruddy Shelducks and marmots, a few lone horses and three black necked cranes milling about in a large wetland area, which was likely a nesting ground in which to lay their eggs. About an hour south of Tso Kar, we reached a village known as Puga. A handful of rudimentary stone huts lined the roadway. Tussle haired children ran about, squealing at our arrival. We greeted a group of nomads sitting together on the dusty ground outside the hut and were immediately invited for butter tea. An elderly nomad with scarlet red cheeks and a toothless grin invited us in to sit around the pellet stove. They were thrilled as we offered them apricots, hair bands and balls for their children and were very open to allowing us the opportunity to take a few photographs of their home. They were prepping horses for the early spring migration to the higher altitude camps but took time out to spend a few short, but precious moments with us. It was fascinating to witness how little these nomads appeared to have in terms of amenities, food or belongings. These stone huts were their refuge during the harsh and long Changthang winters, but it was time to move back up onto higher summer grazing grounds and tent life again.

Upon arrival Tso Kar village seemed eerily quiet – a spattering of huts surrounded by empty stone animal enclosures. We encountered an elderly woman sitting comfortably on the dusty ground, her legs stretched out, feet propped against a makeshift loom of rocks and one large stick weaving a 30 ft long pashmina rug, behind her a tall wall made of drying yak dung. A short walk away, we met a group of nomads sitting together spinning wool and stretching hides, singing and laughing while they worked. We gathered from them that we should come back 'later' that evening so we could watch as the hundreds upon hundreds of goats and yaks returned 'home' to be fed and safely sheltered for the night. We did just that, and for the unaccustomed, watching the wave of animals return home was like witnessing a migration of sorts. The nomads got straight to work feeding and sorting and penning the animals – a feat that was difficult to believe happened daily. We returned the very next morning to see the reverse migration of animals back out to the plateau, the first few hours of a newborn yak's life and the morning milking of several 'naks' (a female yak). The nomads of the Changthang were hardworking, rugged and extremely self-reliant and welcomed our group into their world with open arms. It was a true highlight of the trip to spend time with them.

Our plans to return to Leh via a circle route were thwarted as fresh snow had fallen overnight on the Tanglang La pass, deeming the steep mountain roads unsafe for travel. We followed our approach route in reverse, making the lengthy but stunning drive back to Leh for our final evening. We had arranged to meet with the Women's Alliance of Ladakh for tea and to present them with our Wild Images donation that night. The Alliance headquarters are located in upper Leh – a humble building with a beautiful grassy courtyard lined with apricot trees. We sat and listened as Angmo translated the words of alliance president, Tsering Chondol, as she told stories of the many struggles faced by the women of Ladakh and of their many successes over the years, through the work of the Women's Alliance and the valuable generosity of donors such as Wild Images. She told us how the women had campaigned vigorously for 4 years and had

eventually been successful in placing a ban on plastic bags in Ladakh. How they travel to villages to educate on the importance of women's empowerment, organic farming practices and the dangers of pollution, toxic chemicals and alcohol. How they have been able to provide weaving, sewing and traditional cooking lessons to the women during the winter months, and how with our donation, they hope to begin the construction of an onsite store where they will be able to sell their crafts and products and maintain a source of regular income for the alliance to be used to further support the education and wellness of Ladakhi women. The women were very pleased with our donation and our visit as we were to hear their stories and to know that we had played a role in improving the lives of the women of this special, remote and beautiful part of the world. The journey could not have been more fulfilling – our relatively slow pace, our firsthand encounters with the local people, our humble, yet fully immersing homestay experiences and dizzying array of world class scenery, cultural exploration and newly formed friendships all combined to make the 'Women of Ladakh' 2019 trip a truly unforgettable experience!