Women of Ladakh Photography Tour Report 2023

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You know you are in Leh when your early morning wake-up call is the reverberation of Muslim prayer and the cacophony of unruly street dogs. If you are lucky to fall back into a gentle high altitude snooze, your second alarm bell is the megaphone from the city garbage truck as it winds through the narrow streets spreading Buddhist concepts of 'how to care for the environment'. The capital of this high and stunningly beautiful desert known as Ladakh sits at 11,500ft, nestled into the Eastern flank of the Himalayas. In the wide open fertile trench below, the Indus River flows steadily northward, white washed monasteries and crumbling stupas dotting the landscape.

We wasted no time immersing ourselves into the Buddhist traditions and culture we had come to see. Rising early on our first morning, we drove through the empty streets 20km south, following the banks of the Indus River to 15th century Thiksey Monastery, one of the most prominent and largest monasteries in Ladakh. The sun was only just cresting the eastern ridges as we made our way up the pathway to the mountaintop temple. As we climbed, we could hear the horns and conch calls from the rooftop, summoning the resident monks to assemble for morning puja. Upon our arrival, we were welcomed into the temple as guests, as is customary in so many of Ladakh's still thriving monasteries. We were offered butter tea by young monks who were struggling to pour from copper tea pots almost larger than their hands could carry and sat drinking silently as the monks recited mantras from ancient texts. Discreetly from our seated positions, we captured candid moments as the monks swayed to their chanting, beat in unison on 500 year old drums and clanged together cymbals that were connected by strands of braided yak hair. It was a beautiful start to our two week journey through a landscape that was both spiritually, culturally and geologically breathtaking.

Our destination for that evening was the remote high altitude village of Ulley. After a hearty breakfast back in Leh and numerous refills of Masala and ginger tea, we hit the road north following a winding route along the turquoise Indus. We hadn't been in Leh long, but it was good to be leaving when we did. The Y-20, or the 'pre-summit' to the G20, this time hosted by India and held in Leh, was only days away from beginning and the buzz around town was palpable and the crowds larger than normal.

The road leading north passes through what feels like a never ending barrage of Indian army complexes of camouflaged outbuildings and petroleum trucks. The military presence in this relatively peaceful region is prominent as you near the capital or come within proximity to the borderlands, but seems to lessen elsewhere. About an hour after leaving Leh, the landscape opens into sweeping scenes of geological folds and clam shaped deposits of manganese, iron and salt, backdropped by snow covered Himalayan skyscrapers and blossoming orchards.

We stopped to stretch our legs at the first major landmark, where two of Ladakh's significant rivers come together to form one. The Zanskar, flowing northeast from its deeply remote and tightly funnelled headwaters, spills into the Indus at Sangam Point, just a few kms before the village of Nimoo. Ladakhi rivers are about as pure as water gets and as blue as the clear Himalayan skies. Perhaps this has something to do with glacial deposits or light refraction at high altitudes, but whatever it is, it is nature's gift to the onlooker.

After passing through the villages of Nimoo and Basgo, we turned east off the main route and began a slow but steady climb towards Ulley. Our drive followed a rocky riverbed thick with Sea buckthorn bushes – reddish beige and tinged with orange tips – adding to the already watercolour painting feel of the surroundings. Rather than stopping, ordering and waiting for lengthy amounts of time for our lunches on this journey, we had a 3 man crew of fabulous helpers who would go ahead, cook up a storm and set up spots for us to eat along the way. Our first picnic lunch of the journey was on our way to Ulley and a memorable one, as we arrived to a green meadow complete with table, chairs, delicious freshly prepared food and tea all ready for us to enjoy alongside a few Dzo and a curious cow.

ULLEY

Ulley sits at 14,300ft and is reached via a slow-going curvy one lane gravel road. It is a Himalayan hotspot for wildlife viewing, including Blue sheep, Urials and Tibetan wolf but most notably for the elusive Himalayan Snow Leopard. Ulley is transitioning from a high altitude subsistence farming village to a well-renowned headquarters for the increasingly popular Snow Leopard Lodge, on the map of most serious wildlife photographers. We had tea and settled into our homestay. When we heard that Nilza, our host, was not home, but a few hundred feet higher in the upper fields of Ulley planting the first spring crop for the season, we drank our tea quickly and headed up so as not to miss the chance to witness and photograph this important event. Today was the 'Saka', or first plow of the season and was being performed as it has been for hundreds of years, with a couple of Dzo (a cross between a cow and a yak), a wooden plow and a whole lot of communal effort.

At the time, I wasn't entirely aware of how privileged we were to be witnessing the Ulley 'Saka' or just how sacred an occasion it actually was. Upon more research, I learned that the first plow of the season is a deeply spiritual ritual that ties together Buddhist practices and beliefs to nature and the land on which they rely. Households come together to decide when the Saka should take place, often on the advice of a local 'onpo' or astrologer. The planting of a village's fields is a community affair and meant that no single family would ever be left to plant, maintain or harvest their field alone. Once the date is determined, seeds are collected from each and every household and taken to the village monastery where a monk will bless them. The villagers then gather for the first plant and once their Dzo are outfitted with the wooden yoke and plow, an elder from one of the families will 'awaken the earth spirits' who may be dwelling in the soil after a long cold winter and ask them to leave. They offer items such as Shukpa or juniper, butter, chang and flour to these spirits and recite Buddhist prayers until they feel the earth is clear and the plow is ready to begin. One villager leads the Dzo, while another walks behind singing traditional Ladakhi songs to praise the animals strength and keep them motivated to move. The other villagers walk behind tossing seeds in the newly formed trenches, while others use wooden rakes to push soil over the seeds.

We arrived at the top of Ulley in time to see the last field of the Saka being plowed. It was chilly at almost 15,000ft, with fresh snow on the hills not too far above us. When the last few passes were made by the Dzo and the seeds had been covered, the eldest local said a blessing to the seeds, the land and all sentient beings as we were just beginning to walk away. No fan fare, no big event, and I would not have even noticed if it weren't for Angmo translating the elder's quiet words to me as we walked back towards the van. We were about to head back down to lower Ulley, but Dolma and her husband Namgyal, the owners of the home beside the field, would not think of letting us go without a solid offer to come inside for a visit. This marked the first of many sincere invitations along our journey. Ladakhis are legendary for their hospitality and as we sat alongside our hosts in their beautiful kitchen, high on the mountainside, I think a few of us felt like the journey had truly begun. The light from a row of windows was enough to softly illuminate Dolma, and we took our time making portraits and chatting and laughing with our kind hosts.

In classic Ladakhi fashion, it was less than a whole 10 minutes after leaving Dolma and Namgyals home that we were invited into the home of another local family. Dolma – yes, another Dolma – and her husband Norboo run the Snow Leopard Lodge, with the help of the other locals. The cats presence is so regular in Ulley that the opening at the top of every animal pen had to be covered in a tightly bound mesh to stop the nightly chance of being taken. Dolma manages the business, while Norboo and their son Morup work as guides, leading and filming the expeditions.

Dolma and Norboo had not moved out of their winter kitchen yet, as the night's were still quite cool despite the spring blossoms and decision to go ahead with the first plant of the season. We sat sipping butter tea as Dolma steadily placed handfuls of dung into the fire to keep the room comfortable. After a short but lovely visit, we thanked our hosts and headed to our homestay for a dinner of Ladakhi Timok, or dumplings and mutton. Full and a little tired from a long day and thin air, we retired to our cozy but chilly rooms. The thick wool blankets and hot water bottles tucked against our bellies ensured that we would not only make it through the night without freezing in the high altitude temps, but we do so quite comfortably.

We rose the next morning and after a delicious breakfast of hot tea, Chapatis, homemade apricot jam and masala omelettes, we said our goodbyes to Ulley and our local friends and began the slow descent back down to the lower Sham Valley and northwards. The geologic formations along the route were a fascinating contradiction of sorts – pinnacles of sand and rock carved by millennia, all the while appearing fragile and transient.

HEMIS-SHUKPACHAN

An hour or so north we descended into what appeared even from afar to be a Shangri-La. Hemis Shukpachan is known around Ladakh as 'the land of the sacred juniper trees' and looks as though it could be a movie set from Lord of the Rings. There are clusters of traditional homes, spring water that meanders through the meadows and slopes tainted pink by manganese. A large Buddha statue sits cross-legged, towering over the abodes in the centre of the village. In the fields above is the ancient stand of Junipers that the local people believe to have supernatural forces. A tree called Ama-Shukpachan, or Mother Juniper, stands the tallest, protecting the village and the surrounding earth.

Many of the most genuine encounters along the way are unplanned and as we made our way through the narrow street, the van was blocked by an oncoming vehicle. We needed to pull over to let it pass and had we not done so, we would have driven right past and missed our chance to meet Ronchon Tundup. An 80-something year old with deep green eyes, he was dressed in a well worn Goncha – the deep red wool robe that Ladakhi men traditionally don. Hand stitched and covered in varying shades of burgundy patches, it was held closed at the waist by a deep pink sash. From his waist hung a knife, small folding scissors, a thimble, a button, a handmade leather case lined with felt for his sewing needles and a traditional Ladakhi brass key. With Angmo's help, we chatted with Tundup while he patiently allowed us to photograph his collection of tools, his clothing and his portrait, marked by those deep green eyes.

Only a short drive up the road, we stopped again. This time to wander out into the field to introduce ourselves to the tiny woman sitting alone on a rock. Tsering Yanskit, a middle aged local, sat clutching a Buddhist text, her long silvery braids woven together at the bottom, spilling down her back. She was quietly reading to herself while her cow grazed alongside a few Dzo at the base of the rose tinged slopes. In her late 60's, she had not yet learned to read, but had decided it was time. She too sat patiently and allowed us to photograph her – her portrait, her weathered hands, her hair, her jewelry, her smile. She wore traditional Ladakhi turquoise and coral stones around her neck and strings of pearls looped around her ears to take the weight off the piercing. She laughed when we showed her the results of our photographic efforts.

The next stop was not planned either, but wasn't really the kind we had hoped for. Mebtak La Pass, at 3840m, has jaw dropping vistas of rainbow coloured hills and snow capped peaks just beyond, but it also has boulders, misplaced on the already narrow roadway. Our van managed to wedge itself between one of these boulders and the steep uphill embankment, unable to move forward or back. With some ingenuity and the help of the engineer in the group – and surely a bit of luck – we were on our way, no worse for wear, after 30 mins or so. Winding our way down from the pass, we could see remnants of ancient footpaths and sections of the more recently traveled Sham Valley trek. As we descended, trees ladened with apricot and walnut blossoms became plentiful and the landscape once again took on the feel of a watercolour painting. We drove slowly through the quaint hamlet of Ang, the narrow roadway lined with locals who were coming together to eat, pray and celebrate the life of a villager who had recently passed.

TEMISGAM and TINGMOSGANG

As we rounded the corner just beyond Ang, we caught our first glimpse of the Tingmosgang Monastery – perched along on a rocky ridge top, framed by the pastel blossoms and willows of the valley bottom. This 15th century Drukpa lineage monastery is renowned for being the site of the 1684 Treaty of Tingmosgang that was signed between Ladakh and Tibet, ending the Tibet–Ladakh–Mughal War and marking the boundary between the two countries. We checked into our garden homestay and headed off up the steep road leading to the Temisgam fortress and monastery. At one point in time, these walls were full with monastics but now only one monk care-takes the Tingmosgang monastery.

At the base of the mountain below, the Temisgam nunnery sits nestled into the hillside, surrounded by high orange walls and a wrought iron gate. The inner courtyard was the home to about 40 nuns of all ages – the youngest maybe 5 and the eldest surely in their 80's. We poked our heads into the two small classrooms where the girls were learning to read both Tibetan scripture and English text. Our stay was short, so as not to disturb their lessons. Instead, we joined the elder nuns for tea and biscuits under the shade of their blossoming fruit trees and sat quietly as they twirled their mani wheels and chanted om-mani-padme-hum under their breath.

We left the nunnery after a lovely visit and a few chuckles from the otherwise stoic women and made plans to return early the next morning to attend puja. We continued on to the upper end of the Temisgam Valley, where the landscape forms a small cirque, as the valley ends in steep mountains on all sides but the way we came. A golden Buddha sat crosslegged at the back end of the valley, as if watching over the nearby hamlets.

Our next stop was to the car-less village of Tia. The only way through Tia is via age-old footpath and winding tunnels between tall clay and stone buildings. We watched a local family working together on the construction of their new home. An elderly woman sat on the ground peeling logs, while another grandmother laughed and cuddled her grandchild. Others arrived with heavy loads in their baskets, the weight of the load on the tump line across their foreheads. Our group enjoyed a few laughs with the locals and even had a brief lesson in how to peel logs. Ladakhis are incredibly resourceful people and the ways in which they incorporate local materials and building techniques comes with a millennia of wisdom.

You don't want to look anywhere but where you are stepping when you walk around Tia. Uneven stone pathways wind their way through the narrow alleys and past animal pens, circumnavigating the clustered homes that stand attached and in the centre of the village. It's like as if Tia was built during a time where there was fear of invasion. The walls are high, the homes connected with rooftop lookouts and tunnels running throughout. The Tia locals seemed as happy to meet us as we were them and it wasn't long before we were offered the customary invite for tea. After a full day of exploration, and many cups of tea, this was probably one of the only tea invitations we declined over the course of the entire journey. It was time to head back to our homestay and catch some sleep before our early rise for morning puja.

It was just after 6am the next morning when we arrived at the nunnery. The air was thick with Buddhist chanting from both inside and out. A low syllabic mantra was being broadcast via loudspeaker from the mountain top monastery and as we got closer to the nunnery temple, we could also hear the sounds of female voices, young and old mingled together. We sat crosslegged on the temple floor, listening, watching and discreetly photographing the women as they rocked back and forth, some with hands clasped in prayer, others reading from thick hard covered Buddhist texts. It was a beautiful way to start the day and an honour to witness the daily devotion of these nuns up close.

Back at our homestay we enjoyed morning tea while our host demonstrated how to form Champa into balls by mixing barley flour with water. While we ate, our lovely Ladakhi models prepared for our first official shoot of the tour. When they were ready, we headed off together down the lane to an open field with a backdrop of twisted apricot and walnut trees ladened with pink blossoms. The women were dressed in ankle length wool robes known as Sulmas. Draped over their shoulders were Lokpas or Boks, sheepskin shawls with the wool placed against the body for warmth. On their heads they wore traditional Ladakhi Tibis, silk hats with characteristic curved flaps, matching the colour of the Sulma. On their feet were traditional Ladakhi shoes with brightly coloured embroidery, pointy upturned toes and wooden soles.

From the apricot grove, we moved into a traditional Ladakhi home for the rest of our shoot. The clay home had been abandoned for some years, but the remnants of traditional life remained behind. A steep climb up a short ladder took us into the first room – the Summer kitchen. The women stood lit naturally by a small south facing window, the beautiful hearth in behind still displaying copper and brass pots that had been used for centuries. Bending down and stepping through a low dark doorway, we accessed the winter kitchen, built deeply into the hillside for warmth during the long harsh winters. The room had declined in state and what remained behind was covered in a thick dust from slowly decaying clay walls. The only light entering the room was from a hole in the ceiling above the clay oven, where the smoke would have been able to escape. The low light gave us an opportunity to practice with different settings and ideas, like simply increasing our ISO, but also having our subject clasp her hands together and try to bounce the rays of light coming from above off of her clasped hands and onto her face.

LAMAYURU

Finishing up our shoot, we headed back to our homestay to gather our things and said goodbye to the beautiful Sham Valley, winding our way down towards the Indus again. Khaltse, our first stop, felt as bustling as the Sham Valley felt serene. Khaltse is the point at which all travellers heading south or north stop and change buses. A bridge over the Indus at Khaltse divides all traffic heading north into two paths – you will either be on the west side of the river heading towards Kargil, or on the east side heading towards the Aryan Valley. We crossed the bridge and began our climb westward and up towards Lamayuru.

Lamayuru, one of the oldest monasteries in Ladakh, is also known for its moonlike landscapes. Sometimes referred to as "The Valley of the Moon", the landscapes around Lamayuru were shaped over millions of years by tectonic movements, erosion and deposition of sedimentary rock. According to myth, roughly 1100 years ago, the Indian scholar Naropa caused a large lake at the site of Lamayuru to

dry up and founded the monastery. Whether it was Naropa himself, or some major geologic event, it is clear that there was once a large amount of water here, carving and eroding the soft mud, silt and sandstone. We stopped for a quick capture of the unique ochre landscape and continued up the steep roadway to our aptly named accommodation for the next two nights, 'The Moonland' hotel. We enjoyed a round of Masala and Honey Lemon Ginger tea before heading up for our first visit to the monastery.

The monastery was quiet in terms of activity that evening. The young monks were mid-school lessons and only a few locals were doing their daily kora circuit around the courtyard stupas. One of those locals was 85 year old Tashi Tsomo who had been coming up to the monastery around 4 times a day, every day her entire life.

Until the last few years, she had always done the daily kora with her group of friends. With a stoic look in her eyes, she told us (through Angmo's translation) that she was the only one left. One by one, Ladakh is losing its elders – those who carry with them the knowledge of their ancestors, their culture, their traditional ways of life and their strong connections to the landscapes and the spirituality that makes Ladakh so unique.

The next morning we decided to head back to the monastery, despite being told we would not be allowed to join the monks at their puja. Recent social media controversy surrounding the Dalai Lama had created a noticeable feeling of distrust of outsiders and their intentions when a camera is in hand. This was a marked difference from previous trips, where I always felt a little surprised at how open the monasteries were to allowing the outside world enter their walls with cameras and cell phones.

When we arrived that morning, we could hear drumming. As a photographer, it can be invaluable to learn to follow sounds as well as sights. You never know what you might come across if you do. In the inner courtyard a few of the older monks were teaching a group of young monks the Cham dance. Cham dance is a 1300 year old mystic Tibetan costume and mask dance that is performed on special occasions throughout the year in order to 'transform evil for the benefit of the world' and protect all living beings from demons. It was developed as a way of storytelling through dance to largely illiterate populations.

The young monks varied in levels of enthusiasm and dance skill, some looking like unimpressed teenagers doing something reluctantly because they were made to, while a couple of the boys were clearly enjoying the experience, almost over accentuating every move. We positioned ourselves at the edge of the courtyard and were able to capture the lesson unobtrusively. Focused on the task or not, the boys likely knew better than to misbehave in front of the older monks.

After the Cham dancing, we found Tashi Tsomo once again making her way around the temple, slowly and methodically spinning each prayer wheel she passed. We stopped again to chat and gave her a pair of sunglasses. A past Wild Images guest had graciously donated a large box of sunglasses for us to give to anyone in need along our way. Tashi mentioned that at 85 she had never owned a pair. She chose a stylish white pair with crimson lenses that took 10 years off her age just by putting them on.

We decided to walk from the monastery down through 'Old Lamayuru' below the main temple, to the fields in the lower portion of the village. When we arrived at the fields, what we witnessed was a visual metaphor for where Ladakh is in todays world. For possibly one of the first times in Lamayuru's history, the village 'Saka', or first plow of the season, was being done by a diesel tractor and not the local Dzo. Instead of a group of villagers singing to the animals and with one another as they worked their fields together, the tractor tore through each field in a few short dusty minutes and a handful of locals then threw down the seeds and covered them with their wooden rakes. It was unclear as to whether the locals would still follow the other rituals that the Saka has maintained for more than 1000 years. Were the seeds still blessed first? Did the village elder take time to ask the soil spirits to vacate before the plowing began? Did anyone stop to pray for the seeds, the land, for all sentient beings once the tractor had completed its rounds? Times are changing.

That evening, we drove above the village, where we navigated (braved) a long and narrow ridge out to a sacred spot with an old, crumbling chorten. Literally hundreds of prayers flags flew overhead, flapping wildly in the wind, one end connected to the chorten, the other to the rocky ridge. When the wind blew the flags horizontally, we were able to capture beautiful shots of the monastery framed by the flags, the Zanskar Range fading in orange light in behind.

The next morning, a mist had risen from the valley stream and those in the group who opted for an early wake-up were able to capture the monastery, the mist and the first light of the day from the comfort of their bedroom window, as the Moonland hotel is situated with the perfect vantage point and bedroom balconies. After breakfast, we headed up and out of Lamayuru towards the 13,478ft Fotu La pass, the highest point on the Srinagar-Leh highway. The Border Roads Organization, or BRO for short, is responsible for maintaining the

roadways throughout Ladakh and someone within the organization clearly has a witty sense of humour and a fun job creating road signs. Signs like 'Feel the curves, don't hug them' and Better late than Mr. Late', or 'Safety starts with s, but begins with u' are just a few examples of signs posted along the highways. On the top of the Fotu La pass was 'To survive in high altitudes you must change your attitude' and on the way down through the steep switchbacks was ' Mountains are a pleasure if you treat with leisure'. All over Ladakh, there are witty signs like this, reminding drivers that ultimately your safety is up to you.

As we headed north after descending the Fotu-La, the first noticeable change was in the design of the homes within the villages. Then it was the clothing. We had crossed the line where Ladakh changes from a Buddhist majority to a Muslim one. Monasteries had been replaced by mosques and the homes are larger, made from wood and painted bright colours as opposed to the classic clay and stone homes we had been seeing all along. The landscapes were stunning along this section – peaks with narrow chasms for valleys, leading deep into the Zanskar Range, orange hillsides with razor like ridge lines and meandering waterways in the wide open valley bottom. We turned eastwards after a few hours and into the Chiktan Valley. Stopping for tea and a stroll around Chiktan Village, you could see the changes in the physical characteristics between the Tibetan look of the more Buddhist regions and the Kashmiri look of the Balti muslim people. Taller, lighter skinned, longer faces and narrow sleek features.

We continued on our way east, the Chiktan Valley narrowing into a tight gorge with high rock walls and signs of ancient terraced landscapes along the Kanjak river flowing down the centre. After an hour or so, we arrived back at the Indus River, at Sanjak – a small muslim village just on the outskirts of the Aryan Valley. We had done a large U-shaped commute, leaving the Indus at Khaltse and joining it again at Sanjak, passing through and over truly beautiful landscapes. Here, we crossed to the East side of the Indus and turned left, heading north into the homeland of the Brokpa Tribes.

THE BROKPA PEOPLE OF THE ARYAN VALLEY

The air felt significantly warmer and humid once we arrived at the relatively low altitude of the Indus. The surrounding landscape was as barren as could be – only rock and water – but as we approached the Aryan Valley, it was like arriving at an oasis. The climate, combined with several thousand years of deep connection with and cultivation of the local land had created lush gardens and orchards and old growth twisted shade trees, intricate aqueducts and ancient stone walkways. It was obvious that these are people who had lived with and worshiped the natural world around them for millennia.

There are roughly 3000 Brokpa in the four Brokpa villages that make up what is known as the Aryan Valley; Dah and Hanu in Leh district, and Garkone and Darchik in Kargil district. The Brokpa people believe their ancestry can be traced back to when Alexander the Greats army passed through the Indus Valley in 326 BC. These claims are not substantiated, but with such physically distinct characteristics from the other North Indian ethnic groups, they hold strong to their claim. The Brokpa are taller than your average Ladakhi, typically green eyed, with fair complexions, high cheek bones and long slim nose lines. They speak an endangered Indo-Aryan language called Brokskat, which is now the oldest surviving ancient Dardic language. Officially they are Buddhists, but practice a more ancient form of the nature worshipping Bon religion that pre-dates the origins of Buddhism.

We arrived at our homestay and had tea on the upper patio overlooking the spring crops, surrounded by apricot, apple and walnut trees and grape vines as thick as forearms. We decided we would finish our tea and head to Darchik, 10km north, downstream and across the Indus on the west slope of the rocky narrow valley. Darchik is most remote of the four Brokpa villages, only having let outsiders in for the last few years. Etched over an ancient timeline into a steep hillside, it has also seen the least amount of changes of the villages. Even the new road that circles around and ends up high above the village manages to somewhat preserve the integrity of the ancient foot paths that have been the only access through this otherwise timeless village for a thousand years.

To enter Darchik we walked up a steep stone staircase through a tunnel of old growth fruit trees. We met a Brokpa elder sitting in the shade who chatted with us about change and how he is worried about his grandchildren and how they may not ever know their Brokpa heritage. Kids do not seem interested to learn about it, he said. We continued on and emerged onto a level open barley field large enough to feed the entire village and followed a stone pathway between clay homes as we navigated the village. Darchik is more of a hamlet than the others. The houses are tightly connected to one another, with narrow walkways and newer homes interspersed with old and crumbling facades. Children played on a smooth rock slide, others ran along the pathways, ducking around and under small waterfalls and through flower gardens. There were Brokpa sitting and chatting together in the shade of apricot trees and in the fields. We

met Iskit Dolma, a lovely young lady who offered to wander with us and share the beauty of her village. We met Tashi Palmo, a grandmother who was lovingly teasing her grandchildren. And we met Norboo Gyalson, who graciously invited our group into his home at the top of the village, where the lush vegetation stops and steeper hillsides and large boulders begin. By this point our group was ready to rest and enjoy a cup of masala tea, as it had been a long and eventful afternoon.

We woke the next morning to nothing but the gentle sound of the Indus River as it flowed past Garkone. The quiet was beautiful. After a buffet breakfast, we headed out to meet the locals. Within minutes, we were invited into the traditional home of Tashi Palmo and Tsering Angchuk and into their low lit but cozy winter kitchen. The two sat cross legged beside their stove and in front of a wall full of brass and copper bowls and wooden containers. Tsering, a musician, played an old flute carved by his grandfather out of apricot wood.

Tashi wore her Tepi, the elaborate headpiece unique to the Brokpa community. Brokpa love flowers and wear headpieces made from perennial flowers called Monthu Tho. Each prop on the Tepi has some significance. There are seven coloured ribbons to ward off any ailment caused by the sun and eclipse. The silver brooches and peacock feathers help to guard against any negative planetary influences and paralysis. Tashi moved over, next to a small window for natural light and patiently waited while we took turns capturing her beautiful and distinct Aryan features. While we documented her beauty, Tsering chatted about his worries that the younger generations have little interest in their cultural heritage and are sadly short on the same respect and value for antiquity as their ancestors had. He is undecided about where and who to pass his apricot-wood flute to, as it is a family heirloom and he is worried his grandchildren won't understand its significance or value.

Next we visited Tsering Jorzom and her sister Tsering Domskit, as they sat on the sunny rooftop terrace with their young granddaughter and family members. Each time I visit Garkone I am told of elders who did not make it to the spring that year and sense their noticeable absence. Tsering Jorzom sat stoically hugging her young granddaughter as her son and family sorted out the logistics of carrying her to the closest vehicle and transporting her to the hospital, the closest one still hours away. She had not been feeling well for awhile and her health had certainly declined since our last meeting. The photos we make of these elders will be a keepsake for these cultures and for humanity – a reminder of what made them unique in this world, but also how they fit into the larger story of our shared humanity. Those still living traditional lives are also the ones who carry the endangered wisdom of how to coexist with their surroundings and are the keepers of the knowledge that comes from generations upon generations of connecting deeply, both spiritually and practically, with nature.

We left the rooftop, said our goodbyes – hopefully not for the last time – and walked back through the village. We stopped to visit a man named Tsering Tundup and the woman he refers to 'as his favourite wife', Tsering Chonzom. They sat together on the old stone stairs of their tiny traditional clay and stone home at the edge of a newly built road. Chonzom explains, when we ask her, that she likes the new road on one hand, as she doesn't have the energy to walk far these days, but she feels sentimental about what 'used to be' and doesn't like the careless damage the bulldozer has caused to many of the homes, including their own. Our guide Angmo translates for her, but before she tells us Chonzoms words, it is easy to sense how she feels.

Late in the afternoon, when the high altitude sun was less harsh in the sky, we were treated to a 'cultural performance'. Two young drummers, Tsering Angchuk on his apricot flute and a handful of men and women came together in the village courtyard to share their traditional dance with us.

It wasn't a formal shoot, per se, but gave the group the ability to shoot Brokpa in their traditional clothing in a semi-candid setting. The next morning we took a more formal approach and spent time photographing a local woman in her Brokpa attire in the doorway of Tsering Angchuk and Tashi Palmo's clay home. It was a beautiful setting and nice way to finish our time in the Aryan Valley with the Brokpa tribe.

SKURBUCHAN – DOMKHAR – TAKMACHIK

Soon we were off, heading south along the Indus towards Leh, leaving behind the narrow canyon, fast moving rapids and tall walls of the Aryan Valley. After an hour or so of driving, the course of the waterways began to widen and calm significantly. We decided we would branch off the main road and head up for a short but sweet visit to the village of Skurbuchan. On a green, wide and level plateau above the Indus, Ladakhis sat passing time with one another, all the while continuing to chant under their breath, keeping the flow of prayer unbroken and their mani wheels moving. Women in pastel wool hats carried wicker baskets and scurried by on their way to the fields. A

few monks gathered to perform puja for a local who had only recently passed. All around us was village life as it has been for centuries. We were welcomed to photograph a group of elderly men, who chuckled amongst themselves, amused by our interest in their traditional clothing and hand stitched shoes.

Our next stop was lunch just down the road in riverside village Domkhar and a visit with Sonam Stanzin at his impressive nursery. Stanzin has spent a lifetime on this beautiful piece of land and now promotes sustainable agro-based local economy through the cultivation of organic fruit trees. He is also tasked with taking on the preservation of Ladakh's most well-preserved 2000+ year old rock art. The exact age of these petroglyphs is unknown, but some date back as far as the Paleo and Neolithic periods – suffice to say, they are old. All along the bronze rocks just above the Indus we saw carvings that appeared to be of Ibex, yak and various animal figures and hunting scenes that were left here, remnants of the early Central Asian trade routes and cultures who passed through over the last several thousand years.

The last stop for the day was another 20 mins down the road at the village of Takmachik and the family home of our fabulous cook Gyaltson and our local partner Jigmet Dadul. Takmachik is in an idyllic setting on the west side of the Indus, with beautiful orchards and expansive fertile terraced gardens and fields. We were greeted like long lost family members by Yangdul, Jigmet's wife, who spoke no English but communicated beautifully through her beaming smile and kind hearted ways. We arrived in time for a delicious Ladakhi meal of Mutton Momos and garlic soup topped off with 'Khers' (glass noodles, boiled apricots, cashew seeds and hot milk) for dessert and a taste of Yangdul's homemade Chang. As is customary in Ladakh, Chang (Tibetan Barley wine) is pulled out when guests are in the home and is served in the family's nicest brass or copper pitcher called a Chapskan, with a small blob of butter on the spout for good luck.

The next morning we woke to the smell of fresh bread and found Yangdul sitting on the ground just outside the family home making Khambir, or Ladakhi bread from scratch on a small fire. She had made a ring of rocks and balanced a flat rock on top, stoking a fire of a few smalls branches. While we ate our meal, Yangdul, Jigmet's mother Tashi Palmo, and a family friend dressed for our final formal shoot. The women donned their long wool robes and their heirloom traditional Ladakhi Peraks. Perak literally translates as 'lotus cover' and is a gorgeous turquoise and coral headress that symbolizes the wealth of the family and the strength of the Ladakhi ties between spirituality and ceremony.

We wandered down the lane to the site of another abandoned home where we took turns photographing the women, first on a terrace that was nearing a state of disrepair but still beautifully adorned with the intricate details of traditional design, including stain glass, delicate trellises and carved windowsills. We then took the women into the winter kitchen, where Tashi Palmo danced and hummed Ladakhi tunes for us and the peraks were lit with a soft natural light from small windows. Photographing these women in these settings and in their traditional clothing is an experience to be treasured. How many more times will a perak be worn inside these crumbling clay walls? Will the scenes of traditional Ladakhi life inside these old homes remain only in photographs? It was an honour to see this clothing and these women inside these rooms with our own eyes.

CHANGTHANG

We bid our Takmachik hosts farewell, but not before purchasing 5kg of apricots from them to take to our next destination. We were heading back to Leh for the night and at the crack of dawn the next day, we would depart for the Changthang, up on the Tibetan Plateau. The apricots were for the nomadic people we hoped to encounter.

We made a brief but lovely stop in the village of Alchi on our way back to Leh. The monastery here is one of the oldest in Ladakh and is well known for its stunningly intricate 11th century Tibetan paintings. We admired the fragile, ancient art work, but wondered how long these temples could remain. Water damage and a thousand years of existence in these clay walls gave Alchi a sense of history but also a sense of impermanence.

After a comfortable sleep in Leh, we rose at first light and began our long journey south towards the Changthang plateau. Passing by Shey, Thiksey and Hemis monasteries, we continued on until the road began a slow and steady climb in altitude. We stopped for lunch at Chumathang Hotsprings, a small hamlet along the Indus that is believed to have waters with healing medicinal powers. A few hours later, driving through hillsides of ochre and magenta hues, we finally departed from the Indus River and angled West. Not long after, we reached the 14,000ft mark where we stopped climbing and the plateau opened into a seemingly endless landscape of treeless, rolling expanse, turquoise lakes and royal blue skies.

We began scouting, on the look out for nomad camps with clusters of small off-white tents, usually at the base of a mountain, tucked in for some relative protection from the elements against the wide open landscape. It wasn't long before we spotted a few off-white specks in the distance and made our way towards them, following faint tire tracks, a dust-cloud trailing the van, announcing our visit. The nomads of the Changthang are pastoralists known as Changpa. They live intricately connected to this harsh but beautiful high altitude landscape in a resilient and sustainable way and have done so for centuries. They raise goats and yak, migrating between high pastures and lower winter ranges, selling the high value wool to Kashmiri or in a variety of their own custom products. Despite their hard lives, the Changpa have lived culturally rich lives, maintaining their own language, music and folktales shaped by centuries of intimate connection with their surroundings.

This camp housed three families, each with their own tent, set 30 to 40m apart. A stone enclosure in the centre of the camp was the housing for their several hundred Pashmina goats. When we arrived, the adult goats were off grazing, but much to our delight, all of their newborn baby goats had been left behind. Our unannounced visit was well received, as the nomads seemed genuinely interested in meeting outsiders. They invited us to look inside their tent homes and were visibly happy when we offered bags of dried apricots and gave them each a pair of sunglasses, much needed in this harsh high altitude environment. We were thankful to be afforded a first hand glimpse into the nomadic way of life, as they too were thankful for our visit and the offerings.

KORZOK

We said goodbye and turned the van back towards the one main road that etched its way through the open landscape and on towards Tso Moriri and Korzok village. The bumpy gravel road was beginning to feel endless, but thankfully, the turquoise waters of Tso Moriri finally came into site and the view was so stunning that the length of the drive quickly became a distant memory.
Korzok sits at 4,595m. It has the feeling of a rough and tumble Western movie set, but instead of cattle, there are yak and instead of cowboys, there are monks. It has an air of fortitude and resiliency. Life at this altitude, with such little access to supply and resource could not be easy. Yet there were dusty children running and laughing in the streets and a good cup of Masala tea was never far away. The locals here are mostly nomadic families who have 'settled' for village life, at least for parts of the year. It is a hub where families have traded canvas walls for stone ones and are trying to etch lives off of the relatively scanty tourist trade instead of traditional ways. Those living pastoral lives in the open landscapes are dwindling and we did our best that afternoon to spot their camps on the outskirts of Korzok, but to no avail. We went to sleep that night in the thin air under the light of a full moon rising over the Tibetan plateau.

We rose early in order to maximize our day and our chances to locate more nomads. We left Korzok and began the slow drive towards Tso Kar, several hours away. Not long into our drive, we noticed what looked like tents tucked at the base of a deep valley and although the route to investigate wasn't immediately clear, we took our chances and turned towards them. You would think that searching for camps on such a wide open expanse would not be all too difficult, but the landscape undulates and camps tend to be made in areas less exposed to the elements, so tracking them down can be like a game of hide and seek.

We actually stumbled upon another camp on the way to the one we had initially spotted and being early in the day still, the goatherd had not yet left for their day of grazing. Hundreds of woolly curious pashminas, still mostly corralled in their stone pens, were bleating with excitement at the site of our arrival. The morning temps were sub zero and handling the camera dials proved challenging in the biting cold. Still, we were able to capture images of these hard working nomads, as they wandered among the herd searching for, grabbing and aiding the newborns in finding a nipple to feed from. There were two families living here together, sharing in the raising of the herd.

The camp we had first set eyes on was not too far below this camp, over a ridge and down a slope, tucked closely to the opening of a narrow valley and against the hillsides to protect from the winds. Again, we were received openly, this time by the mother of the camp. There were only two women here – the others had gone with the goats to the hills. Tsewang Latso looked to be in her 40's, and was the mother of the other occupant in camp that day, her 20-something year old daughter. The women each had their own tent and Tsewang invited us into hers while she sat and made tea over her small pellet stove. Her home was simple but inviting. There were wool rugs to cover the bare ground, small pots, a kettle and a table covered in Buddhist relics and offerings at the back.

PUGA – TSO KAR – THUKJE

The drive towards Tso Kar was a teasing mix between freshly paved and bumpy slow-going gravel sections. We passed through the Tibetan refugee village of Hanley and continued along the wide open plateau towards the nomadic winter village at Puga. Puga houses the 'nomad school' of the Changthang and when we arrived, a large procession of children were walking through the village chanting buddhist mantras, as tonight was a full moon. The Tibetan calendar follows the lunar cycle and in Buddhism, the full moon is considered an auspicious day, with significant spiritual energy. These little nomad children had left their families to live here, at the government run boarding school, for the duration of the school year.

Lining the roadside of Puga is a handful of small stone homes, where the nomads spend the long, cold Changthang winters. We visited an elderly couple who were sitting, chanting and spinning their wheels on the ground outside their home. Time, and the passage of it, is a relatively very different experience for these nomads than it is for us. We met Yangchan Putit, a woman in her late 60's who had just arrived back to the village with an overloaded sac of yak dung strapped to her back, towering above her head. Her daughter in-law, Dokar Tsolmo, smiled and told us, through Angmo's translations, that Yangchan is very strong and never stops working. They stood for portraits in front of their small homes and enjoyed the process of choosing their own sunglasses.

It was a steady climb out of Puga and as we reached the height of land, a large herd of wild ass came into view. We had been seeing wild ass since arriving on the Changthang, but had not yet seen them in such a large cluster. The winds were howling and the air was thick with dust clouds, but we were able to stop and take several decent shots of the herd before beginning our descent towards Tso Kar. About halfway down from the pass we noticed two tents far in the distance and decided to take what would likely be our last opportunity to visit a traditional nomadic camp setting. We navigated the rough, faint road leading up to them and thought twice about getting out of the van when we saw a large Tibetan mastiff gnawing on a dead goat close to the campsite. When our presence was noticed by the nomads, we were waved to assuringly, and decided to brave the dog and make our last visit happen.

Our visit consisted of two women, two tents, and three little snoozing Tibetan children. Chemat and Tsering live here with their husbands and herd of pashmina goats, all out roaming when we arrived, and a couple of intimidating mastifs. Their camp was strategically, like the others before, tucked against a backdrop of rolling hillside to protect from the strong winds. We were invited to look inside one of the tents and quietly snapped photos of the two women while the children, tousled hair and dirt covered cheeks, slept soundly. A short while later Lobsang, one of the husbands, arrived back to the camp with several hundred curious Pashminas in tow. The goats, full of personality, came running towards us, as they recognized outsiders and proceeded to circle at our ankles and nibble gently at our pants.

We carried on towards Tso Kar and Thukje village, where we would be braving the elements sleeping in tents for our last evening on the plateau. As the salty wetlands of Tso Kar came into site, we were discussing how amazing it would be to see a Black Necked Crane, as this area is one of the most important migratory wetlands in India for Central Asian bird populations. Less than a minute or so later, we were pulled over, cameras pointing out towards the soggy ground, capturing several of them. It was a stunning scene – cranes on lush mounds of green tundra, murmurs of smaller birds skimming the still abundant snow patches, feeding on algae and small insects, yak and goats grazing in the distance against a backdrop of pastel rolling plateau. A man, walking briskly towards the van from the direction of the wetland, waved us down with one arm, while the other arm tightly clutched a goat. He approached our van, a few words were exchanged between him, our driver and Angmo and the next thing we knew, we had a new passenger joining us for the remainder of our drive to Thukje. Our woolly friend swayed between our seats as the van pushed on towards our destination. He had injured his leg and was no longer able to keep up with the herd, so we were tasked with giving him a ride instead.

When we arrived in Thukje village, Gyaltson and crew had our camp already erected – complete with our own tents, a heated dining room and two outhouses with seats (vs squat). There was enough time to settle in and enjoy a cup of hot tea before grabbing our cameras and heading out to watch the nightly migration of the livestock returning to their evening pens. Hundreds of animals – pashminas, sheep, yaks and horses – brought with them a wave of dust as they made their way back into the village after a day of grazing on the tundra. Thukje village exists primarily as a winter camp for the nomadic people of the Changthang. It consists of a cluster of stone homes, intermingled with animal pens, two dusty streets and a hilltop monastery, all just small dots on the wide open tundra and plateau on which it resides. We enlisted a local elder to walk with us as we meandered from scene to scene, as we were warned of a free roaming ill-tempered guard dog and hoped the elder would offer some form of protection. The village was abuzz, as the nightly ritual of herding, penning and feeding the migrating livestock was full on. We were able to capture life as it was happening – not prompted or pre-arranged. The sun set on Thukje as the last of the animals were being ushered into their pens. Warm and comfortable in our heated dining tent, we enjoyed an evening of laughter, delicious freshly cooked Veg Parlay, curried chicken, roasted eggplant and ginger garlic

soup. Just when we thought dinner could not get any better, Urgen, our head chef, surprised us with a cake he had managed to somehow bake at 15,000 ft with no oven and just his small cook stove. This was just the cherry on top of an incredible couple of weeks of on-the-road meals prepared for us by Urgen, Gyaltson and Ringzin.

TANGLANG LA – LEH

Just the right conditions had come together that would allow us to return to Leh via the Tanglang La pass and complete our Changthang journey as a circle tour rather than an out-and-back. Tanglang La, at 17,480ft, is the second highest pass in Ladakh, the 12th highest in the world. As it was quite early in the season, Tanglang La had literally opened a day or so before and only a handful of vehicles had made it through. Until now, snow had made it impassable. We departed early from Thukje, after having watched the reverse migration of animals from the previous evening. The views as our van slowly ascended to the pass increased in beauty with each switchback. We did not linger long at the top, as the air was dangerously thin. We stopped for a few photos of the landscapes that stretched out in all four directions – south towards Manali, east towards Tibet, west towards Zanskar and north, towards Leh. In places, there was only a narrow strip of road barely wide enough for the van through the still unmelted snowpack from the long winter. We were thankful for the large snowbank on our left hand side as we descended the corkscrew-like route, as it gave us a small sense of comfort and protection from the steep drop-offs and exposure. Crossing this high, remote and admittedly nerve-testing pass gives one a much greater sense of just how isolated Ladakh is from the rest of the planet. This road is the Leh-Manali highway and the main route into Ladakh and by any standard, is a wild ride.

We descended into the Rumtse Valley, where the steep slopes of the pass made way into level farm land and villagers worked side by side prepping spring crops. We dubbed this area the ‘purple valley’, as the hillsides were a gorgeous plum-tinged shade due to the large amounts of manganese in the rock. We passed through Sasoma, Gya and Lato villages at the head of the valley and the most scenic of them all, Miru, near the bottom, surrounded by slopes of mauve and orange hues and orchards of blossoming apricot trees. A few kms further and we arrived once again, full circle, on the banks of the Indus River.

The drive to Leh was a little over an hour from here and we opted to stop and enjoy a last picnic lunch together just on the outskirts of town, near Shey village, at Sindhu Ghat. Sindhu is another name for ‘Indus’ and this spot is a sacred ceremony site with steps leading down to the ‘holy’ river. After lunch, we arrived back at the Chospa hotel. Some opted for hot showers and others made their way to the Leh market for a late afternoon stroll and to purchase a keepsake or two. We chose a fabulous restaurant in the heart of the busy market for our farewell dinner. We enjoyed classic Ladakhi hospitality and tastes like freshly prepared Seabuckthorn and Carrot Ginger juices, mutton, Lebanese chicken and potato skewers, beetroot salad, and vegetable curry.

Our time together in this incredible land had come to an end. The amount of beauty, in both the landscapes and the people we met along the way, was stunning. Ladakh is a land of legendary hospitality and sacred connections with nature and spirituality. Timeless traditions still define much of the way of life here, but Ladakh hangs in the increasingly delicate balance between maintaining what makes it unique and finding its way in this modern and ever changing world. We parted ways with hearts full of beautiful memories and memory cards full of the beauty that was and still is Ladakh.