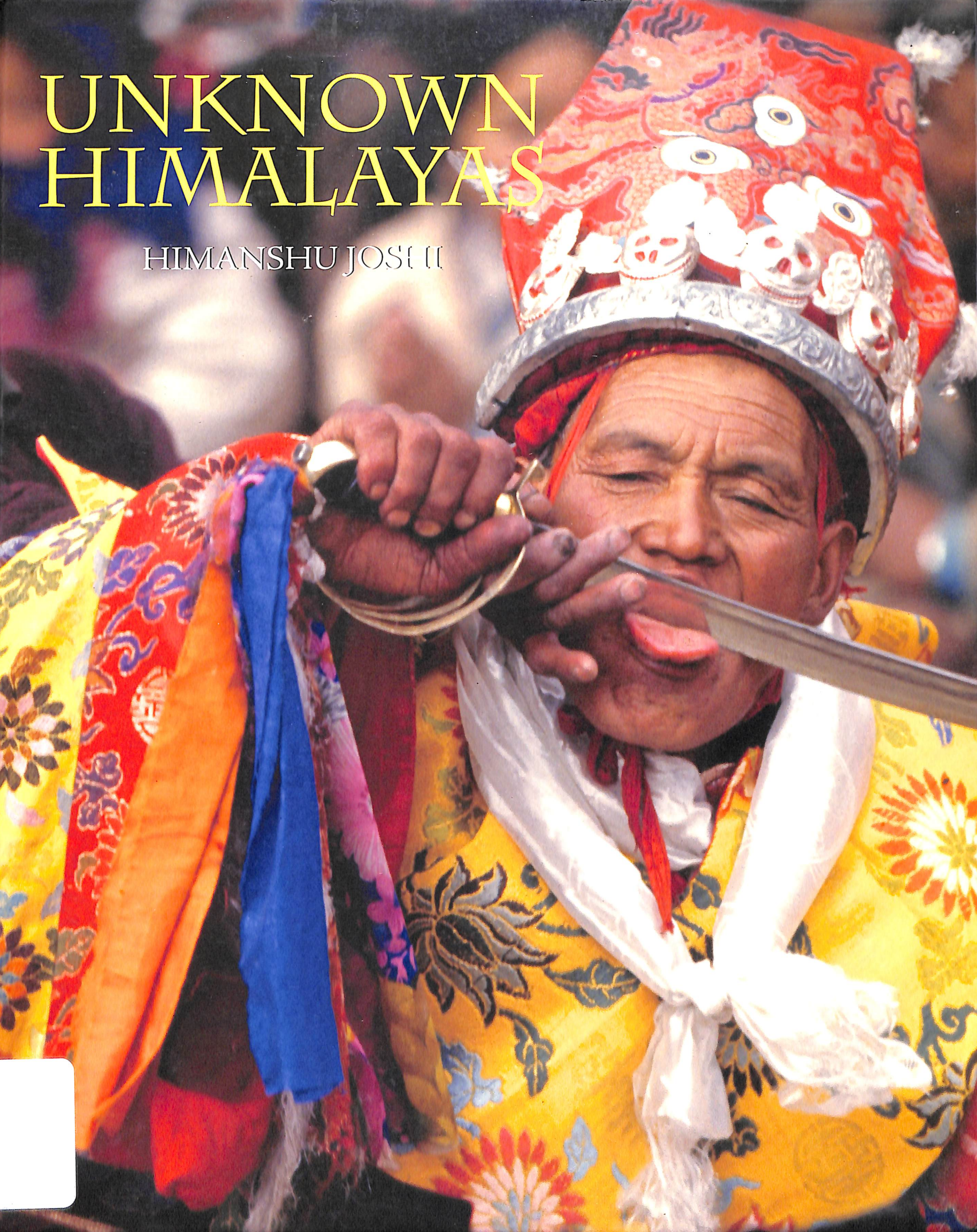


UNKNOWN HIMALAYAS

HIMANSHU JOSHI



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Preceding page: A monk's shoes at Diksit monastery
in Ladakh.

Facing page: The rolling grasslands of eastern Tibet stretch
behind a horseman on a white stallion.



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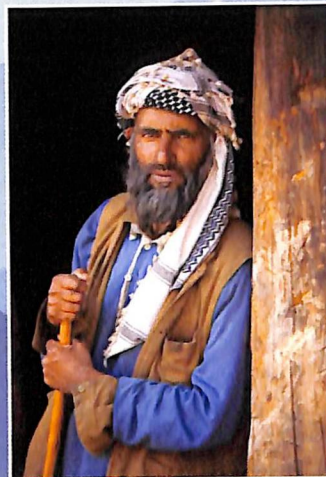
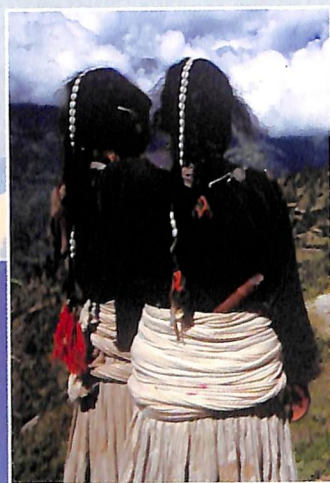
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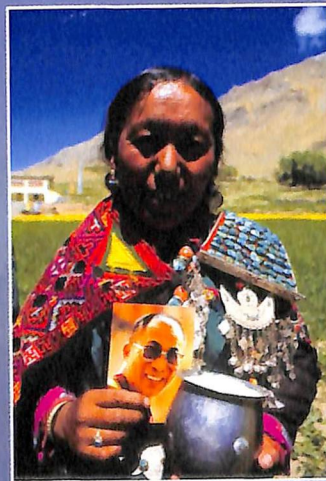
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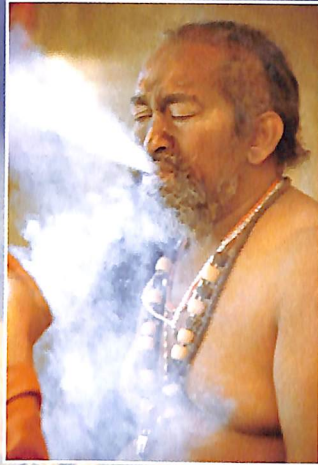
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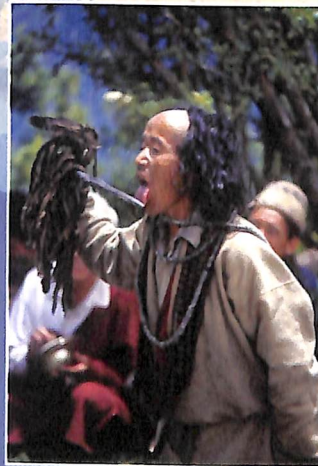
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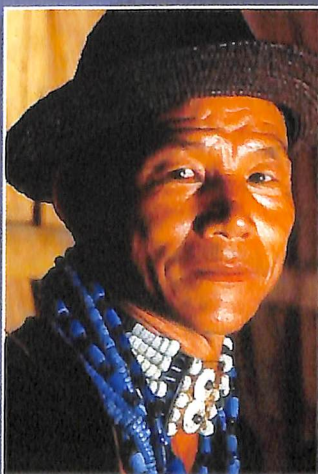
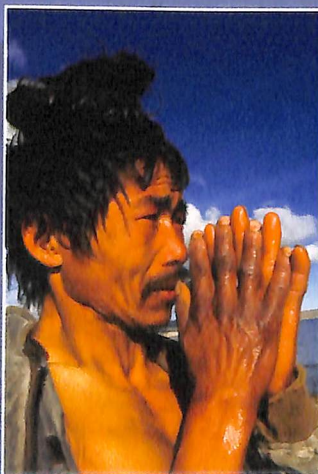
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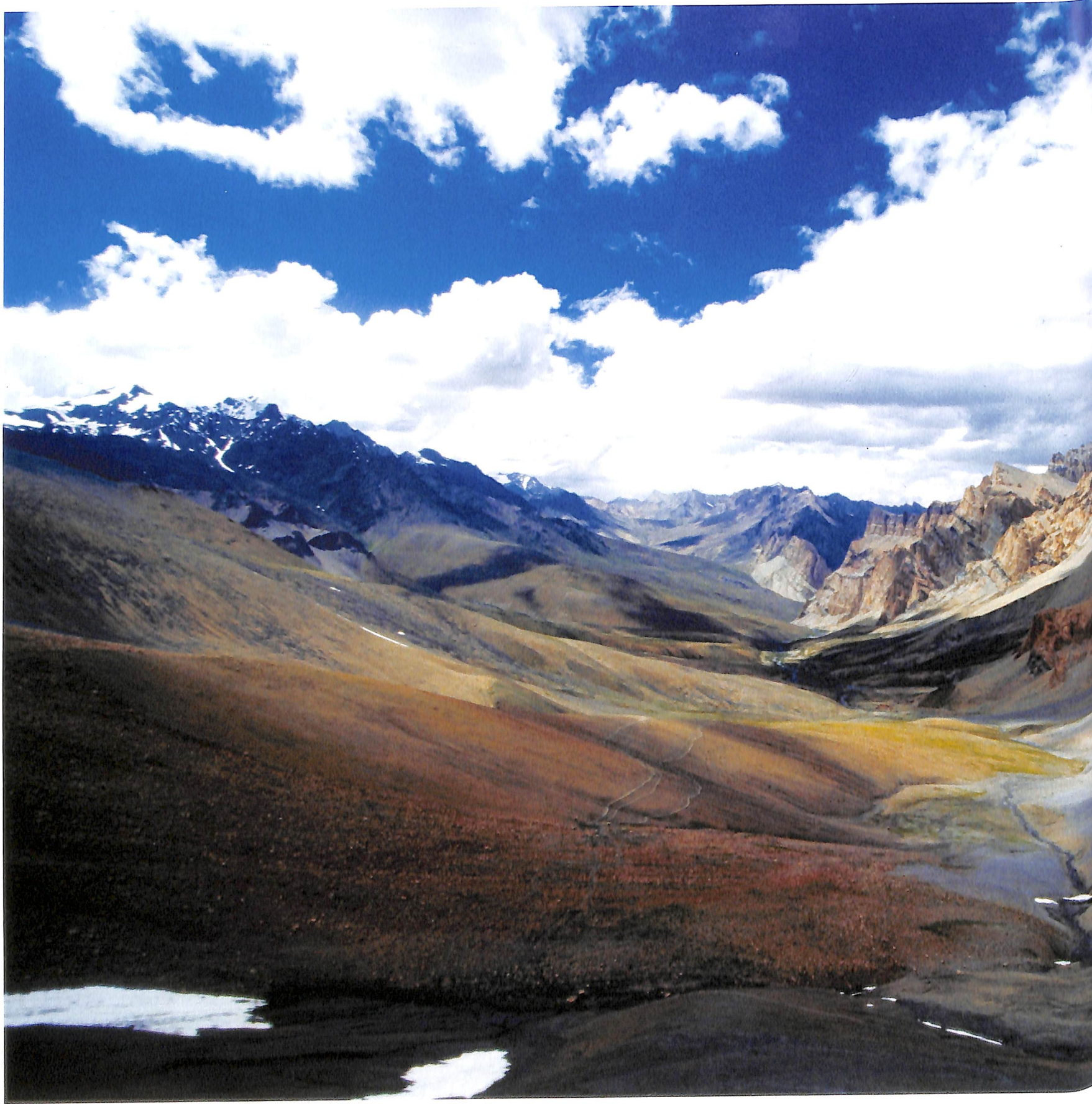
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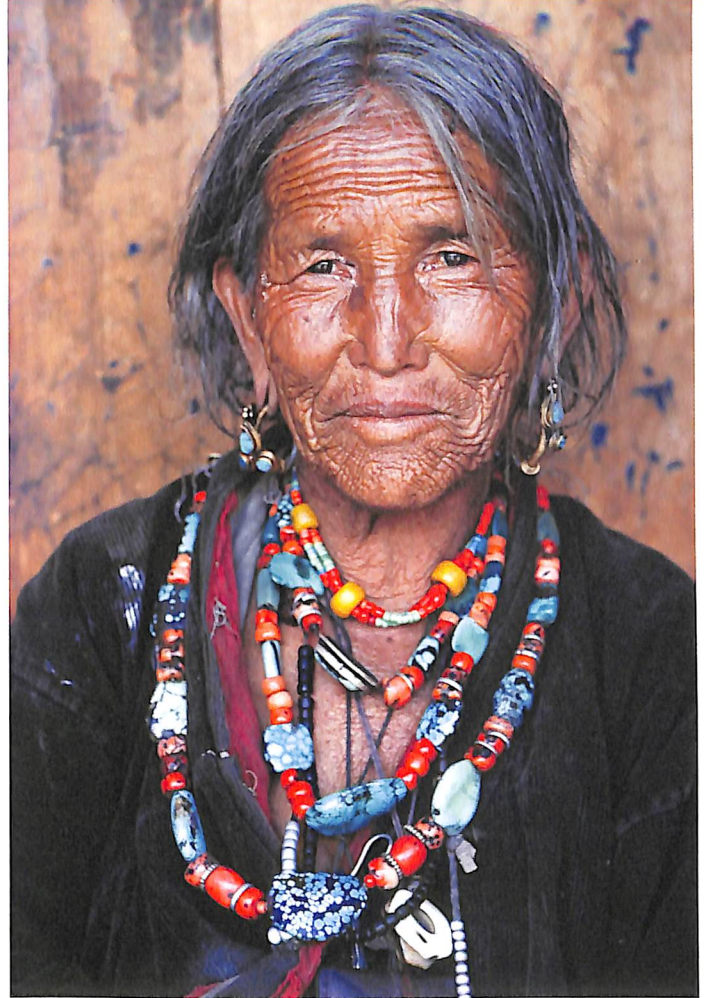


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ARUNACHAL

Where the Sun
Rises First





The Himalayas, the youngest mountain chain in the world, have always exerted an irresistible pull on the imagination of travellers. With innumerable valleys and many rivers hiding among the world's highest peaks, the 2500-kilometre length of the Himalayas is a treasure trove of geological and cultural diversity. Probing the various folds of the mountain range is not only fascinating, but also an enriching cultural experience. The exposure to customs and places that have little link with the outside world is akin to taking a peek into time gone by.

This book is a celebration of these nooks and corners of the Himalayas that still continue to preserve and conserve their culture and natural surroundings. It is not that these places – mostly hidden from prying eyes – have not changed over time. They have, but the change is very gradual. This may be due to the remote location of a place or the closed traditions of its inhabitants, or just plain ignorance on our part. These places and people are a window to life that respects nature and strives to live in harmony with it – not in conflict with it as many of us do.

Left: The Lingshed trekking trail in Ladakh. Lingshed is one of the remotest villages in Ladakh.

Top: The work-worn face and heirloom necklaces of a woman in the hidden valley of Humla in Nepal.



The book is divided into nine chapters, with each chapter devoted to a region in the Himalayas. From the high-altitude Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, the eastern tip of the Himalayan range, we travel west to east, observing the natural splendour en route and delving into the traditional, cultural and social practices of the indigenous people.

But how does one reach these places? It is always easier to delve into the unknown if you understand the known. Therefore, we first visit the known, tourist-friendly hub of the region we want to explore. This hub gives an introduction to the region and its people and that, in turn, helps us make sense of its hidden secrets. In each chapter, we start from the main hub – for example, Leh in Ladakh or Kathmandu in Nepal – explore the places worth visiting in and around the hub, before taking the road less travelled. The journey could be to a place less visited or a peep into a culture that is less known.

We start with the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir where, after exploring around Leh, we try to observe the lives of two little known tribes of the region – the Drogpas (who claim to be descendants of pure Aryans) and the Changpas (a nomadic tribe that roams the barren Changthang). For the second journey into the Ladakh region, we go to the remote Zaskar valley, which sees only a small trickle of outside visitors.

The next stop is the beautiful Kashmir valley. We start off with Srinagar and then take a lake circuit of the valley, visiting the famous Dal, the lesser known Wular and the little known Manasbal lakes. What follows is the trek up to the Amarnath shrine – this houses the mythical Shivaling (phallus of Lord Shiva worshipped by Hindus) high up in the mountains that is formed and shaped every year by nature.

The third chapter takes us to Himachal Pradesh and its capital Shimla, where we take in the sights and sounds of the

Top: A Buddha statue in Ladakh.

Facing page: The Dhankar fort complex perches on a 3870-metre spur that projects into the main Spiti valley and ends in a precipice.



old summer capital of the British Raj and then slowly wind our way along the famous Hindustan-Tibet road, passing through Rampur Bushair, Kinnaur and finally stepping into the spectacular Spiti – a place that time hasn't changed. A visit to the Ki monastery in Spiti valley with its unique honeycomb structure, alongwith Tabo monastery, called the Ajanta of the Himalayas, brings this rugged yet beautiful region alive.

The next journey is along the holy Ganga (Ganges) river in the state of Uttarakhand. We go up the river from Rishikesh and visit the glacier at Gaumukh, a holy spot for Hindus, from where the Ganga originates as Bhagirathi. We undertake a trek to the mysterious lake of Roopkund, where centuries-old skeletons can still be seen. With high Himalayan peaks like Nanda Devi, Trishul and Nanda Ghunti ringing the lake, it is indeed a journey into the unknown realms of life. From the Garhwal region of the state, we then move into Kumaon to

visit places like Kasauni, Baijnath and Binsar, which combine the natural beauty and cultural diversity of the region.

We cover two other Indian states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh in the North-East. In Sikkim, after a stay in Gangtok, we try to understand the life and traditions of Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the state. We then visit the high-altitude lakes of the state that are at once inviting yet mysterious. In Arunachal Pradesh, we go to Itanagar, and then on to Bomdila in the West Kameng district, which is known as the coldest place in the state. In the second part, we try to make our way into the thick rainforests of Namdapha in search of the elusive tiger. In fact, Namdapha is the only forest in India where one can find nine types of cats, right from the celebrated tiger to the small yet beautiful marbled cat.

Outside India, we visit Nepal, the land of high peaks, Bhutan, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, and Tibet, the



Rooftop of the World. While Nepal attracts a lot of visitors from all over the world, we move away from the Kathmandu valley after a short stay to go to the two least visited areas of Nepal – Humla and Dolpo. In Tibet, we start off in Lhasa with its gleaming Potala Palace, bustling bazaars and age-old temples before going on to the mysterious trails where pilgrims throng to circumambulate the sacred mountains. We also focus on the sky burials of Tibet, where the dead are chopped and fed to the vultures. In Bhutan, we visit the Tiger’s Nest or the Taktshang monastery, and then try to learn about dzongs, a distinctive type of fortress architecture found only in Bhutan.

This book is essentially a journey to places that march to a different beat, have their own imaginations and the people inside live in their own, different and enviable world.



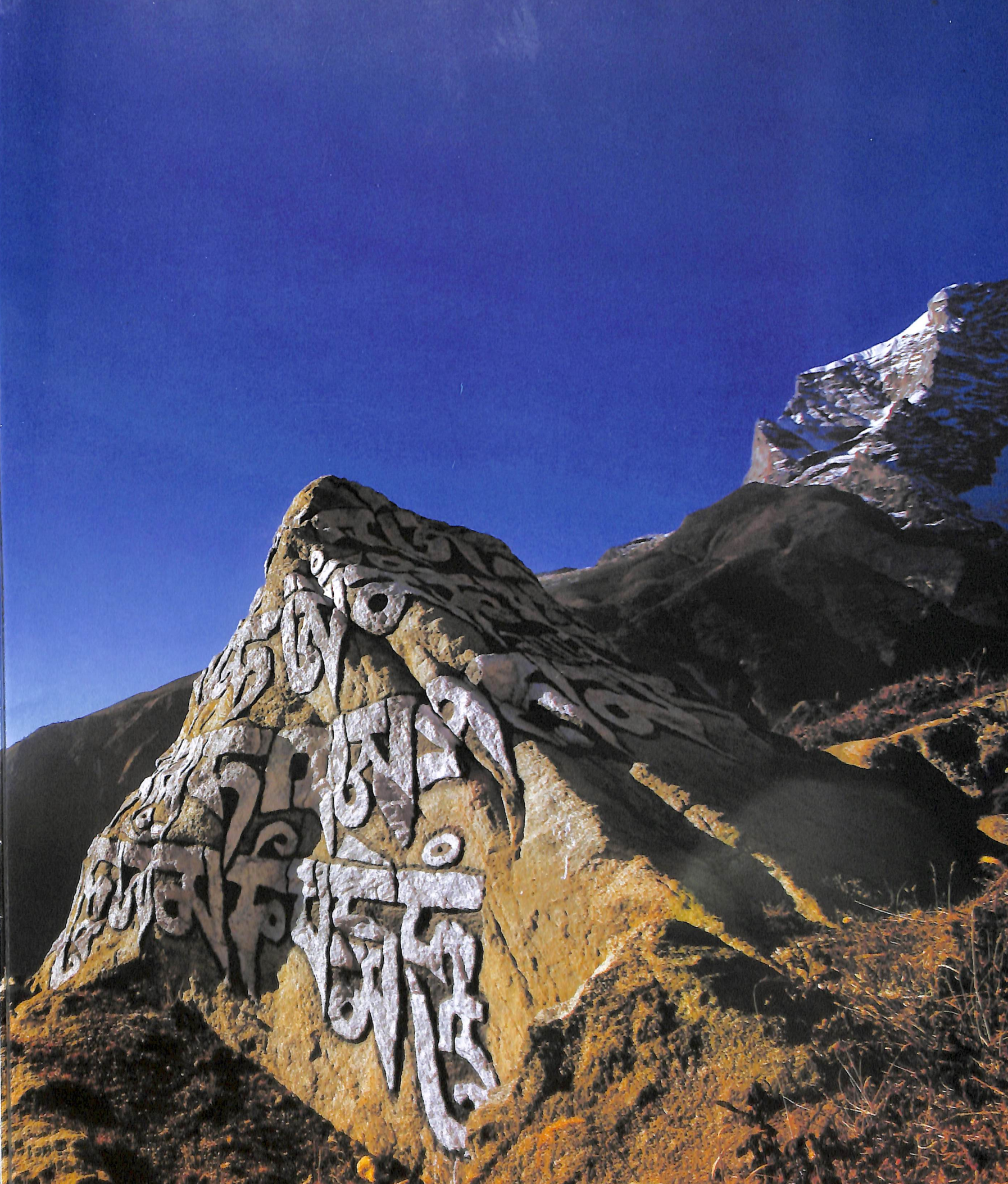
Top: A detail from the Labrang gompa in Phodong, north Sikkim.

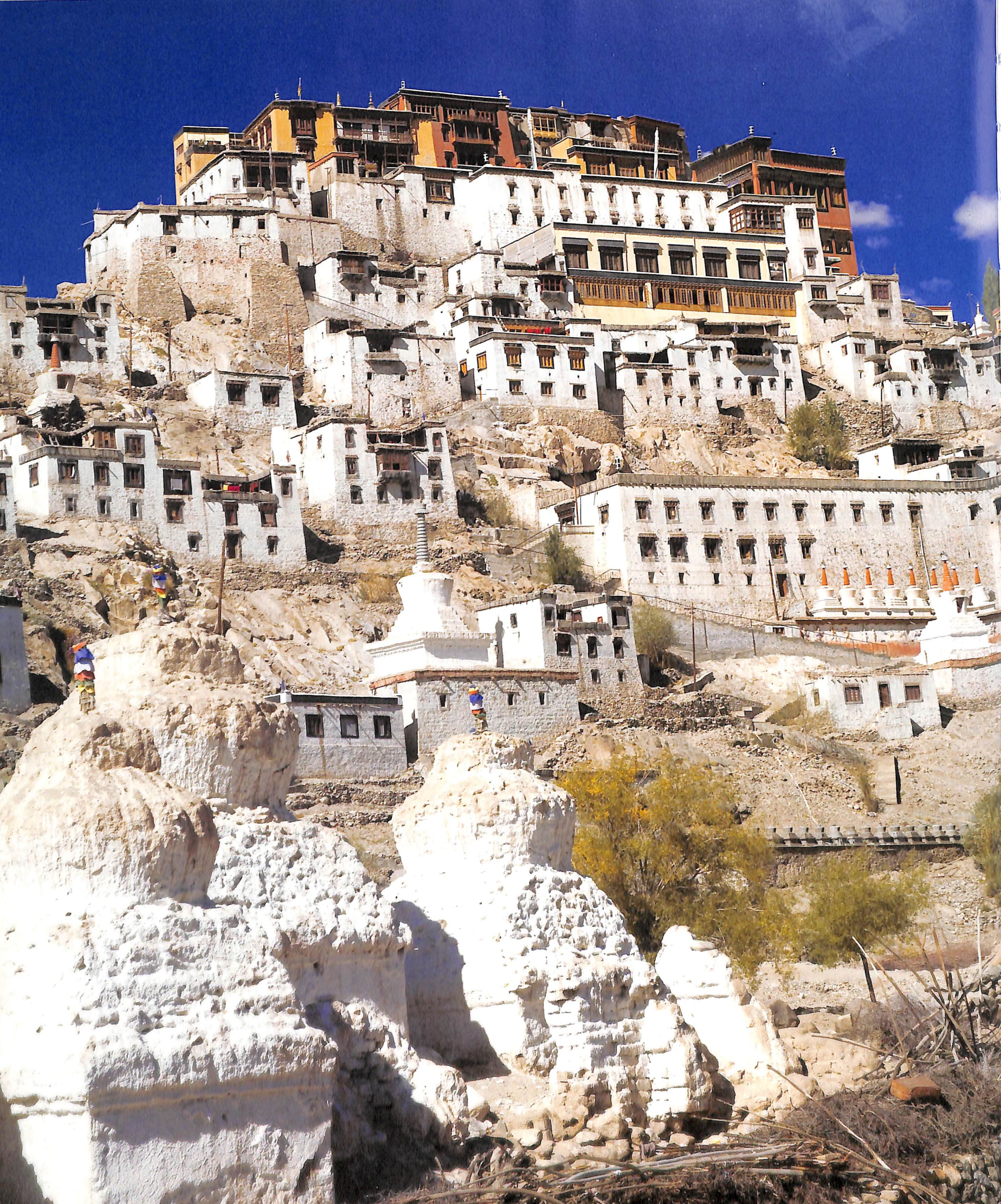
Bottom: A blue water creek enters the brown waters of Zaskar river in Ladakh.

Facing page: A dancer with a skull mask takes part in a religious festival in Ladakh.

Following pages 12–13: The setting sun lights up a rock face with the carved mantra – ‘Om mani padme hum’, the mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara.







LADAKH

THE MYTHICAL SHANGRI-LA



The highest desert in the world, the breathtakingly beautiful Ladakh is a land of myth and silence, full of centuries-old hidden treasures. While its monasteries inspire awe, some of its tribes and communities, such as the Changpas and Drogpas, and far-flung parts such as Zaskar, are fascinating in that they are still off the beaten track.





Preceding page 14: Old chortens in the foreground lead the way to the 15th-century Thikse monastery, a 12-storey building that is home to a nunnery and ten temples.

Preceding page 15: A door at Diksit monastery with sculpted miniature heads.



Leh. The name brings with it a whiff of the exotic. And so it was for a better part of this century owing to its remote geographical location, and tough terrain. Spread along a valley in the Ladakh region of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Leh was the first major town in the trans-Himalayan region of India that came to the notice of tourists. At an altitude of 3650 metres and surrounded by high mountains, Leh was unlike any other Himalayan destination in India. The raw and stark landscape was awe-inspiring and spellbinding at once, and the colourful attire of the people and their unique way of living indeed raised visions of the mythical Shangri-La.

Leh is located in the Indus valley at a crossroads of the old trading routes from Kashgar, Tibet, and Kashmir. Its importance as a trading town lessened with the partition of British India, and ended with the closure of the border in 1962 during the Sino-Indian war. But today it has become a bustling tourist town, with large numbers of Kashmiri traders. As it is a small town, one can easily get to most places on foot. The old town is a compact area of

Left: Rugged mountains rising steeply above a valley in Ladakh.

Top: The wet main street of Leh, with Leh Palace rising above the town.









mud brick houses and narrow lanes directly to the east of Main Bazar. Changspa is the agricultural 'suburb' northwest of the centre, with many guesthouses.

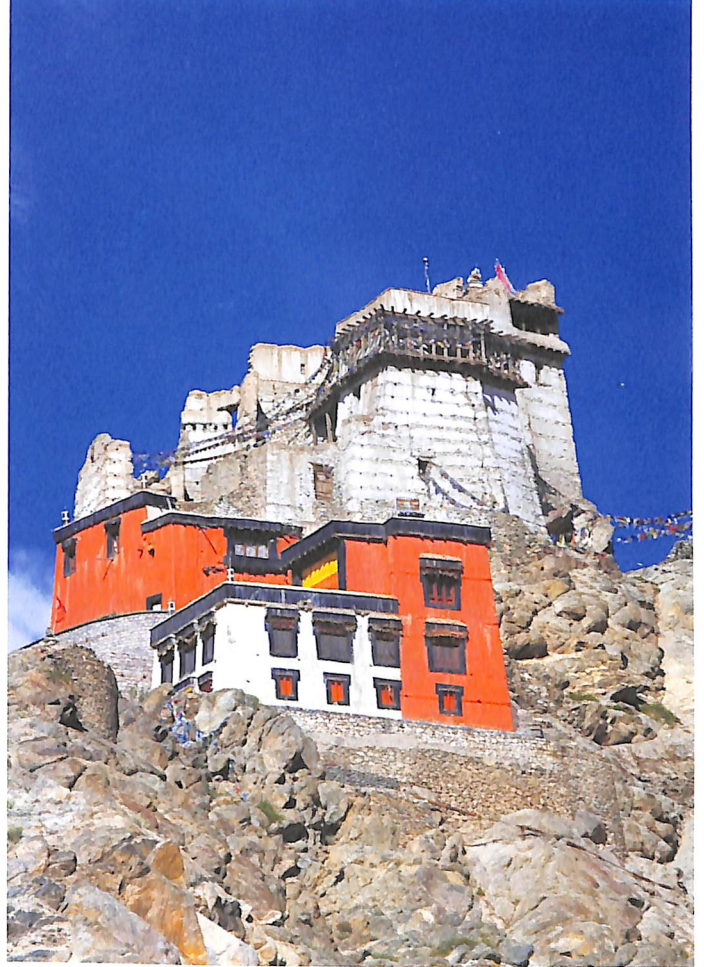
Though Leh is linked by air, because of its high altitude, surface travel is highly recommended for better acclimatization. There are two road approaches to Leh, one from Manali in Himachal Pradesh in the south, and one from Srinagar in the west. Both routes pass through spectacular scenic vistas and both require two-day journeys.

The main advantage of taking the road from Srinagar is that it runs at a lower altitude, and thereby reduces the risk and severity of altitude sickness. It is also open longer – normally from the beginning of June to October – and follows the traditional trade route between Ladakh and Kashmir, which passes through many picturesque villages and farmlands. The journey takes two long days, with an overnight stop in Kargil.

The route from Manali to Leh is more commonly taken by tourists. It takes two days, normally with an overnight stop either in Keylong (altitude 3500 metres) or in tented accommodation in Sarchu (4200 metres) or Pang (4400 metres). On the route are

Preceding pages 18–19: Stakna monastery, built in the early 17th century, rises above the winding Indus.

Facing page: Sculpture of Maitreya, the future Buddha, at Thikse monastery, near Leh.



three of the highest road passes in the world – Baralacha, Tanglangla and Namika La. The scenery is fantastic, though it is definitely not for the faint-hearted. It is accessible from mid-July to end-September, and is blocked by snow the rest of the year.

Leh, the capital of Ladakh, has many monasteries and stupas. But what catches the eye of the visitor first is the Leh Palace, an imposing nine-storey structure on top of a hill commanding a grand view of Leh town. Though in ruins now, the palace still has enough grandeur to speak of its rich past. Built in the 17th century by Singey Namgyal, the ruler of Ladakh, it displays features of the typical Tibetan architectural style and is said to have inspired the famous Potala Palace of Lhasa in Tibet, built half a century later. Crowning the Namgyal Tsemo, another peak overlooking the town, are the ruins of a fort, a royal residence built by King Tashi Namgyal in the 16th century.

Broadly speaking, there are two sects of priests or lamas in Ladakh. One is that of the 'Red Hat' lamas, who practise original Buddhism (they wear red hats at the time of ceremonies). In the 15th century, reforms were introduced in the monasteries and the lamas who belong to the reformed order are known as 'Yellow

Top left: Twists and turns on the road to Lamayuru monastery, 130 kilometres from Leh.

Top right: Built in 1430, Namgyal Tsemo gompa is believed to be the earliest royal residence in Leh. It straddles a hilltop behind the Leh Palace and provides some of the best views of the Leh valley.

Har' lamas, who observe celibacy, among other things. Irrespective of the sect, the power of faith is evident for all to see. All across the land are monasteries, chortens, prayer wheels and mani (prayer) walls covered with smooth river stones, all carefully carved with prayers and polished to a gloss. Faded and torn prayer flags flutter from the most inaccessible of heights. The prayer wheels contain reams of the prayer 'Om mani padme hum' written over a million times. In the world of Ladakh, the landscape is surreal, the air is still, and the squeak of a prayer wheel is answered by the single resounding stroke of a gong, from an unseen monastery in the rock face.

Most travellers use Leh as a base to visit the numerous gompas (Buddhist monasteries) of Ladakh. Landing at Leh airport, one is greeted by the spectacular sight of the Spituk gompa on a hill adjacent to the runway. Spituk is a thousand years old; the climb up is steep but the magnificent view from the top makes it worthwhile. From the back of the monastery one can look down on the winding Indus and a sprawling green village topped with willows and poplars. The monastery has a large statue of Lord Buddha and a natural rock formation of the Hindu goddess, Kali.

Barely 6 kilometres from Leh is one of the oldest monasteries in Ladakh – the Shey gompa. Built on a huge rock, it was once attached to the summer palace of the rulers. While the abandoned palace lies in ruins, the monastery is well-preserved and contains a 12-metre golden Buddha. In the year 1974, the last king of Ladakh passed away in this monastery. The monastery faces the Stok Museum that has, among other things, a collection of the royal family's traditional clothing and jewellery. It is a showpiece for the royal *thangkas* or painted scrolls (nearly 400 years old), crown jewels, dresses, coins, *peraks* (traditional Ladakhi head-dress) encrusted with turquoise and lapis lazuli as well as numerous religious objects.

The Hemis gompa, 45 kilometres from Leh, is the largest and richest in Ladakh. It is a huge, stunningly beautiful building, with long yellow strips fluttering from its front parapet. Hemis is richly embellished all through – right from the main gate, beyond which is a row of prayer wheels, to the beautifully painted parapet that surmounts the gompa. The Hemis monastery also has an important library of Tibetan books and a very impressive and



valuable collection of *thangkas*. One of the largest *thangkas* is displayed every twelve years during the festival time.

Every gompa celebrates its festivals in the form of dance dramas or 'devil dances' in winter. These dances are known as Chham or mask dances and are an important part of Buddhist culture. Hemis, however, is the only gompa which has its two-day festival in summer and therefore attracts tourists from all over the world. Lamas wearing rich, brightly coloured gowns and grotesque masks of legendary or mythical characters perform the dances, accompanied by a Ladakhi orchestra. The dances are performed in the courtyard, while the two-storey gompa is packed with visitors. These dances originally celebrated the killing of the cruel Tibetan king, Landgarma by a monk and now symbolize the victory of good over evil.

Hemis to Thikse is a pleasant drive of about an hour. A cluster of houses rises tier upon tier, culminating in the chambers of lamas and the gompa on the hilltop. The monastery is a 12-storey building, all painted in white, ochre and dark red, and houses a nunnery and ten temples. The gompa's main hall is dark and gloomy, but contains a breathtakingly opulent statue of the Maitreya Buddha sitting in the lotus position and studded with gold, turquoise and semi-precious stones. Built in 1980, the 15-metre tall statue is said to be the largest in Ladakh. The walls of the monastery are painted with religious figures, murals, Tibetan

Top: Ceremonial trumpets rend the air during the Nga Chham dance, outside the Naro Photang Puspahari temple in Shey, 15 kilometres from Leh.

Facing page (top): Chham dance being performed in the main courtyard of the Matho monastery, built in the early 16th century

Facing page (middle): A masked dance performance in the Hemis monastery to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava, who introduced Buddhism to Tibet.

Facing page (bottom): Statues of Buddha in various poses at the Thikse monastery. Each gesture signifies an abstract principle.

calendars and the Wheel of Life. There is also a prayer room which contains many books, some of which are handwritten or painted.

Alchi, about 70 kilometres from Leh, is one of Ladakh's most richly painted monasteries. It is the only place where the art manifests marked Kashmiri influences as opposed to the Tibetan style. Unlike other gompas, which are perched on hilltops and are imposing structures, Alchi is a modest-looking structure of mud and tin on flat ground. But the art treasures of wall paintings and sculptures, which this gompa contains, are superb.

The Alchi gompa is said to have been built by Rin Chen Zampo, the great Tibetan teacher who was educated in the monasteries of Bengal and Bihar and spent seventeen years in India. But inscriptions point to its having been built by a member of a Tibetan noble family in the 11th century. The wall paintings here, well preserved over the centuries, are remarkable in concept and workmanship. Also, the village Alchi stands out among other villages of Ladakh with its lush greenery.

In the town of Leh, there is a new white Japanese Shanti Stupa, built in 1983, reachable by a stiff climb to the top (or through a jeepable road). There are excellent views of the town from the top. The architecturally striking Leh mosque, in the main bazaar, is also worth visiting. The Sunni Muslim mosque is believed to stand on land granted by King Deldan Namgial in the 1660s as his grandmother was the Muslim queen of Ladakh.





The oldest monastery in Ladakh is at Lamayuru, located 130 kilometres west of Leh on the Leh-Kargil road. Hemmed in by soaring scree-covered mountains, the whitewashed medieval gompa is perched on top of a near-vertical, unusually eroded cliff. It was founded, according to a legend, by a monk called Naropa, who spent his life meditating on top of a small bit of land emerging from a lake. He wanted a monastery here, so the lake was dried up and the monastery was built. The gompa, founded in the 10th or 11th century, was a major landmark on the old Silk Route. Within walking distance, are some extraordinary lunar-like rock formations. Standing at the start of the main trekking route south to Padum in Zaskar, they look remarkably like the cratered surface of the moon and are commonly referred to as a moonscape. These strange shapes are a big tourist attraction.

Top: The play of light reveals the 1000-year-old dramatically situated Lamayuru monastery in full glory amidst stark mountains.

The Lamayuru monastery belongs to the Kagyupa Order of Buddhism and is believed to have been wrecked and reconstructed several times. The monastery showcases some of the finest frescos, carpets and *thangkas* you will see in the region. There are caves carved out of the mountain wall and some of the rooms are richly furnished with carpets. The prayer ceremonies in the gompa should not be missed. More than 200 monks live here permanently; they sleep on the ground, and have no windows or electricity in the rooms.

The ideal time to visit the monastery is early morning or late evening when the priests are saying their prayers and doing their mystical chanting. The ringing of bells and blowing of long brass horns lends a magical touch to the whole atmosphere, investing it with a spirituality that is so much a part of Ladakh.

Facing page (left): An elderly Ladakhi woman in traditional garb at Lamayuru monastery.

Facing page (right): Nature's work over centuries has eroded the landscape near Lamayuru, making it look like the surface of the moon.

