



# Jammu & Kashmir (including Ladakh)

## Includes »

Jammu & the Kashmir Valley . . . . .	226
Jammu . . . . .	227
Srinagar . . . . .	231
Gulmarg . . . . .	238
Sonamarg . . . . .	239
Kargil & Zaskar . . . . .	240
Kargil . . . . .	240
Around Kargil . . . . .	240
Suru Valley . . . . .	241
Zaskar . . . . .	241
Ladakh . . . . .	243
Leh . . . . .	244
Nubra Valley . . . . .	269

## Best Buddhist Monasteries

- » Lamayuru (p268)
- » Diskit (p269)
- » Chemrey (p273)
- » Thiksey (p272)
- » Karsha (p242)

## Best Mountain Scenery

- » Pangong Tso (p276)
- » Dal Lake, Srinagar (p235)
- » Shyok Valley (p270)
- » Manali-Leh road (p274)

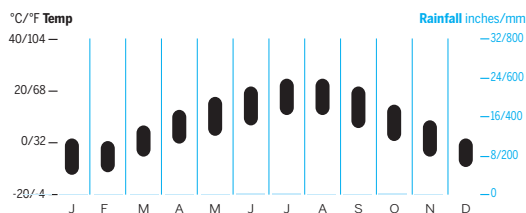
## Why Go?

Welcome to three incredibly different worlds in one state. For most foreigners, J&K's greatest attractions are the Himalayan lands of Ladakh and Zaskar, with their disarmingly friendly Tibetan Buddhist people, timeless monasteries, arid canyons and soaring snow-topped mountains. But neither area is easily accessible, especially outside midsummer.

Hordes of domestic visitors make pilgrimages to temples around Hindu Jammu and love Muslim Kashmir for its cool summer air and alpine scenery. Srinagar's romantic houseboat accommodation is another drawcard. However, political volatility remains a concern. Disputes over Kashmir caused three 20th-century wars and intercommunal strife still breaks out sporadically. Always check the security situation before travelling to Jammu or Srinagar but, even if things look dodgy there, you can expect Ladakh to be as meditatively calm as ever.

## When to Go

### Leh



### Jun & Sep

Ideal for Srinagar and Sonamarg; roads to Ladakh can be blocked.

### Jul-Aug

Perfect for Ladakh; Pahalgam overflows with pilgrims; rain drenches Jammu.

### Winter

Skiing at Gulmarg. Ladakh, only accessible by air, has festivals but no tourists.

## Food

A full traditional Kashmiri *wazawan* (feast) can have dozens of courses, notably mutton-based dishes like *goshtaba* (pale mutton balls in saffron-yoghurt curry), *tabak maaz* (fried lamb's ribs) and mildly spicy rogan josh (rich, vividly red-coloured mutton curry). Kashmiri chefs also serve deliciously aromatic cheese-based curries and seasonal *nadir* (lotus stems) typically served in *yakhni* (a curd-based sauce made mildly minty with fennel).

Ladakh's Tibetan favourites include salt-tea, *momos* (dumplings) and *thukpa* (noodle soup) though a more genuinely Ladakhi dish is *skiu*, a stew incorporating flakes of homemade barley 'pasta'. Ladakh's barley-beer, *chhang*, is available at rural homestays but not for general sale.

### DON'T MISS

Buddhist **Ladakh** is India at its most beguilingly human and scenically stunning, a rugged high-altitude desert softened with Tibetan temples, irrigated paddies and mesmerising mountain lakes. Come in summer when the rest of sweltering India is drenched in monsoons. But allow ample contingency time for acclimatisation, cancelled planes and roads that can suffer lengthy closures caused by landslides.

## Top State Festivals

Hindu festivals are celebrated in Jammu, Muslim ones in the Kashmir Valley and Buddhist temple festivals abound in Ladakh and Zaskar. The latter, held around local monasteries, typically feature masked dances and village fairs that are colourful but lengthy, slow-moving affairs. Those held in winter, eg at Spituk (January), Stok (March) and Thiksey (November), see few foreigners but summer ones, like those at Lamayuru (June), Hemis (July) and Takthog (July), can feel overloaded with camera-toting tourists. Exact dates vary with the lunar calendar.

- » Losar (Dec) Ladakhi New Year, celebrated in Buddhist homes and gompas with feasts, rituals and dances.
- » Dosmoche (Feb-early Mar, widespread) Buddhist New Year. Masked dances; effigies representing the evil spirits of the old year are burnt or cast into the desert.
- » Matho Nagrang (Feb-Mar, Matho, p262) Monastery oracles perform blindfolded acrobatics and ritual mutilations.
- » Ladakh Festival (1-15 Sep, Leh, p244) Unrepentantly touristy but entertaining cycle of events including a carnivalesque opening parade, Buddhist dances, polo, music and archery.

## MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Srinagar, Jammu and Leh have commercial airports. Jammu has the only major railhead. By road, Ladakh is only accessible in summer over tortuous mountain roads from Srinagar and Manali.

## Fast Facts

- » Population: 12.5 million
- » Area: 222,236 sq km
- » Capitals: Srinagar (summer), Jammu (winter), Leh (Ladakh)
- » Main languages: Kashmiri, Urdu, Ladakhi, Balti
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹1000, \$\$ ₹1000 to ₹5000, \$\$\$ above ₹5000

## Top Tip

Check the security situation before heading to the Kashmir Valley but don't let troubles in Srinagar deter you from visiting ever-calm Ladakh.

## Resources

- » **News** [www.greaterkashmir.com](http://www.greaterkashmir.com), [www.dailyexcelsior.com](http://www.dailyexcelsior.com), [www.kashmirtimes.com](http://www.kashmirtimes.com), [www.kashmirherald.com](http://www.kashmirherald.com)
- » **Traveller Forum** [www.indiamike.com/india/jammu-and-kashmir-f30](http://www.indiamike.com/india/jammu-and-kashmir-f30)
- » **Tourism** [www.jktourism.org](http://www.jktourism.org), [www.ladakhtourism.in](http://www.ladakhtourism.in)
- » **Rare maps** <http://blankonthemap.free.fr>
- » **Ladakh Homestays** [www.himalayan-homestays.com](http://www.himalayan-homestays.com)



## Jammu & Kashmir Highlights

**1** Murmur meditative mantras in the mural-decked gompas (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) of the **Indus Valley** (p272)

**2** Escape India's humid summer heat in entrancing **Leh** (p244), a low-key traveller hub with dusty medieval backstreets, a Potala-style palace and a deep sense of ecological awareness

**3** Experience the stark magnificence of **Ladakh** or **Zaskar** on an unforgettable high-altitude trek (p252)



**4** Enjoy an amusingly caricatured Raj-type deluxe Dal Lake houseboat in **Srinagar** (p236)

**5** Gawp at the mountain-valley scenery backing surreally blue **Pangong Tso** (p276) or the splendid **Nubra Valley** (p269)

## JAMMU & THE KASHMIR VALLEY

Predominantly Hindu Jammu swelters at the edge of the Indian plains, north of which seemingly endless layers of alpine peaks start unfolding. Hemmed deep within those mountains is the fabled Kashmir Valley where tin-roofed villages guard terraced paddy fields delineated by orchards and pin-straight poplars. Proudly independent-minded Kashmiris mostly follow a Sufi-based Islamic faith, worshipping in distinctive box-shaped mosques which, traditionally, feature a small central spire rather than dome or minaret. Many Kashmiris have startlingly green eyes and in winter keep warm by clutching a kangri (wicker fire-pot holder) beneath their flowing grey-brown pheran (woollen capes).

Once the very vision of tranquillity, the Kashmir Valley has been scarred by violence ever since Indian Independence. The India-Pakistan wars left greater Kashmir painfully divided, while Kashmiris' longing for more meaningful autonomy has resulted in waves of civil unrest and resultant curfews that periodically cripple the valley's tourist industry.

### History

Geologists and Hindu mystics agree that the 140km-long Kashmir Valley was once a vast lake. Where they disagree is whether it was drained by a post-Ice Age earthquake or by Lord Vishnu and friends to kill a lake demon.

In the 3rd century BC the Hindu kingdom of Kashmir became a major centre of Buddhist learning under Emperor Ashoka. For centuries Kashmir's Buddhist artists travelled across the Himalaya, creating monastery murals like those at Alchi.

In the 13th and 14th centuries AD Islam arrived in Kashmir through the inspiration of peaceable Sufi mystics. Later some Muslim rulers, like Sultan Sikandar 'Butshikan' (r 1389-1413), set about the destruction of Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. However, others like the great Zain-ul-Abidin (r 1423-74) encouraged such religious and cultural tolerance that medieval visitors reported finding it hard to tell Hindus and Muslims apart. Relative open-mindedness continued under Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605), whose troops took Kashmir in 1586. The Mughals saw Kashmir as their Xanadu and developed a series of extravagant gardens around Srinagar that partially survive today.

When the British arrived in India, Jammu and Kashmir was a loose affiliation of independent kingdoms, nominally controlled by the Sikh rulers of Jammu. In 1846, after the British had defeated the Sikhs, they handed Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh in return for a yearly tribute of six shawls, 12 goats and a horse. Singh's autocratic Hindu-Dogra dynasty ruled until Independence, showing an infamous disregard for the welfare of the Muslim majority. Many citizens were little better than slaves, liable for service as unpaid porters or labourers at the whim of local landowners.

### PARTITION & CONFLICT

As Partition approached in 1947, although Jammu and Kashmir's population was majority Muslim, the (jailed) popular leader of the predominantly Islamic opposition favoured joining India. Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh favoured Kashmiri independence but failed to make a definitive decision. Finally, to force the issue, Pashtun tribesmen, backed by the new government in Pakistan, attempted to grab the state by force. They were within a day or so of reaching virtually unprotected Srinagar when, in the nick of time, India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, himself a Kashmiri Hindu, airlifted in Indian troops, sparking the first India-Pakistani war. The invaders were pushed out of the Kashmir Valley but Pakistan retained control of Baltistan, Muzaffarabad and the valley's main access routes. Kashmir has remained divided ever since along a tenuous UN-demarcated border, known as the Line of Control. A proposed referendum to let Kashmir's people decide (for Pakistan or India) never materialised and Pakistan invaded again in 1965, triggering another protracted conflict.

Although most Indian Kashmiris would prefer to be independent of both India *and* Pakistan, the conflict became a cause célèbre for pro-Pakistani Islamic radicals. A militant fringe turned to armed rebellion, countered with brutal force by the Indian Army, stoking a cycle of increasing resentment. By 1990 the state was awash with fighters, some from Kashmir but rather more from Afghanistan and Pakistan, whose brand of fundamentalist Sunni Islam jarred significantly with Kashmir's native Sufi-based forms of broad-minded spirituality.

Kashmir was placed under direct rule from Delhi in 1990, triggering the bloodiest years of unrest. Massacres and bomb attacks by militants were countered by brutal counter-insurgency tactics from the Indian

armed forces with significant human rights abuses reported on both sides.

In 1998 India and Pakistan's nuclear weapons tests brought regional tensions almost to breaking point and resulted in the brief 1999 'Kargil War', a high-altitude Pakistani incursion. However, after a ceasefire, increasing autonomy for Kashmir was matched by a significant reduction in tensions, while the tragic 2005 earthquake helped bring the Indian and Pakistani governments a little closer and some relief aid was allowed to cross the Line of Control.

With militant attacks dwindling, domestic tourist numbers had been increasing rapidly until disturbances in 2008 (over an arcane land dispute at Amarnath) and June 2010 (after the shooting of juvenile stone-throwers). Each resulted in months of strikes, violence, curfews and the closing of the Jammu-Srinagar road. The 2010 events stirred up deeply felt popular resentment towards the heavy Indian military presence and the situation is likely to remain highly unpredictable for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, ever-peaceful Ladakh is angling for Union status (like Chandigarh) so that it can finally divorce itself from Kashmir's troubles, with which it has no real connection.

## Jammu

📍0191 / POP 612,000 / ELEV 327M

Sweaty Jammu is J&K's winter capital and main rail hub. It's a major 'base camp' for floods of Hindu *yatri* (pilgrims) en route to

Katra and Amarnath (p231) but foreign visitors are rare.

## 👁 Sights

Jammu dubs itself as the 'city of temples'. Although few of these are historically compulsive, many offer a joyously colourful festival of kitsch that helps justify a one-day stop en route to Srinagar. Attractions are widely spread and given the heat it's a great idea to take one of the autorickshaw drivers' ₹300 inclusive four-hour 'tours'.

### Mubarak Mandi

PALACE, MUSEUM

Crowning a hilly maze of bustling if architecturally neutral 'old town', Mubarak Mandi is the extensive former palace complex of Jammu's 19th-century maharajas. Later used as government offices and now severely neglected, it's a fascinatingly maudlin sight whose only functioning section is the **Dogra Art Gallery** (foreigner/Indian ₹50/10; 🕒10am-5pm Tue-Sun). Occupying the former Durbar Hall (painted a ghastly pink), that's actually more museum than gallery and features bronzes, armaments, instruments, 9th-century carvings and Kushan coins.

### Amar Mahal

PALACE, MUSEUM

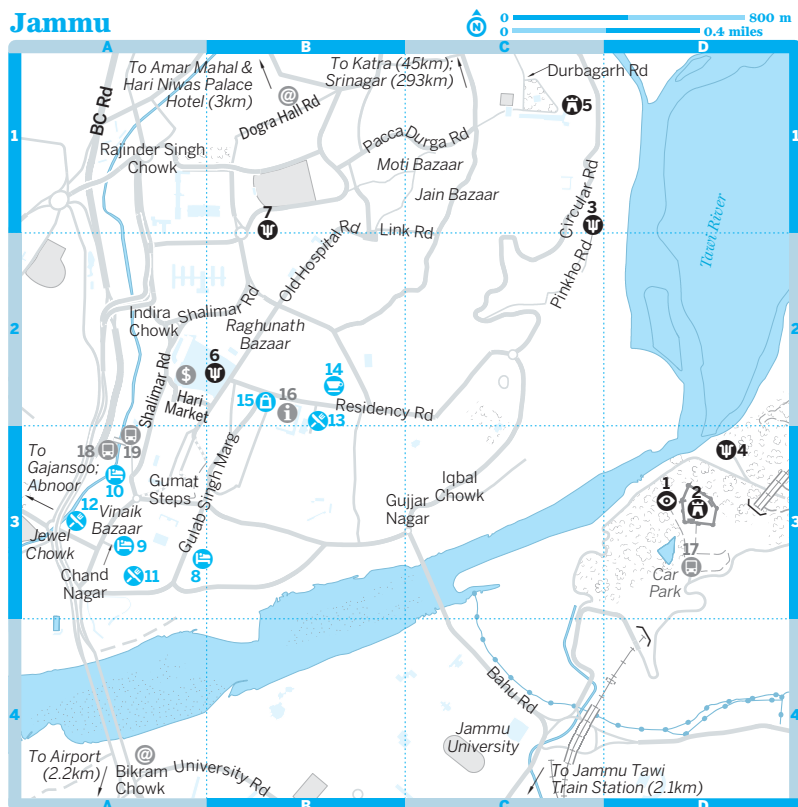
([www.karansingh.com/amml](http://www.karansingh.com/amml); foreigner/Indian ₹45/10; 🕒9am-12.50pm & 2-5.50pm Tue-Sun, to 4.50pm Apr-Sep) The last official residence of Jammu royalty, this very European brick-and-stone mansion has fine wooden balconies, a token castle tower and a cliff-top setting with sweeping valley views. Visiting the few open rooms takes barely five minutes,



## SAFETY IN KASHMIR

Kashmir's history as a political football between India and Pakistan plus the delicate relationship between nationalist Muslims and Jammu Hindus creates a cauldron of intercommunal tensions. When things are calm, Kashmir is probably safer than most places in India but even then, army presence at banks, offices and religious sites can feel intrusive (don't take photos of anything military without express permission). Strikes and outbursts of stone-throwing can erupt after a firebrand speech or controversial arrest. Tourists are very rarely targeted directly, but buses, bus stations and pilgrim groups are vulnerable; at times of tension, consider hiring private transport, travelling very early in the morning, and avoiding hotspots like Baramulla, Sopore, Anantnag or Srinagar's Old City. Occasionally the Srinagar-Jammu highway is closed completely. During troubles, local newspapers often print timetables indicating which days businesses will open, but prolonged strikes and curfews can mean closures for days on end, making it hard to buy food, change money etc. And it's hardly conducive to a holiday mood, though relaxing on a Srinagar houseboat you could easily forget that there was any problem at all. Use common sense and avoid public demonstrations, political rallies and military installations.

Before travelling, consult a wide range of resources to get a feel of the situation, keeping in mind that every view of the debate sounds 'biased' to someone.



but if you've paid, don't miss peeping through a guarded rear window to see the raja's canopied throne, supposedly made of solid gold.

### Raghunath Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

(Raghunath Bazaar; ☎6-11.30am & 6-9.30pm) Marking the heart of the older city, this 19th-century Rama temple complex is fronted by partly gilded temple-spires and surrounded by pavilions containing thousands of what look like grey pebbles set in concrete; in fact, these are saligrams (ammonite fossils) symbolically representing the myriad deities of the Hindu pantheon.

### Ranbireshwar Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

(Shalimar Rd) This large if architecturally unremarkable temple enshrines a large collection of lingams, some in opalescent crystal.

### Gupawala Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

(Pinkho Rd) Tucked behind shawl stalls in an easy-to-miss side valley, this small complex

comprises tunnels and glitteringly colourful Krishna and Shiva caves.

### Bahu Fort Area

FORT

Across the Tawi River the low-slung, completely renovated walls of 19th-century **Bahu Fort** now enclose a **Kali temple**, while the lawn outside covers a subterranean **aquarium** (adult/child ₹20/10; ☎11am-9pm Tue-Sat, to 8pm Sun), less interesting for its minor fish collection than for the fact that you enter through the gaping mouth of a giant carp.

Nearby is **Har-ki-Paori Mandir**, a family of giant, concrete gods in a modern, Disneyesque style. Viewed across the river from here, the vast scale of the cliff-top Mubarak Mandi becomes apparent.

### Sleeping

Hotels are spread all over town but Vaishno Devi pilgrims fill virtually every bed during

## Jammu

### 📍 Sights

- 1 Aquarium..... D3
- 2 Bahu Fort..... D3  
Dogra Art Gallery..... (see 5)
- 3 Gupawala Mandir..... C1
- 4 Har-ki-Paori Mandir..... D3
- 5 Mubarak Mandi..... C1
- 6 Raghunath Mandir..... B2
- 7 Ranbireswar Mandir..... B1

### 🛏 Sleeping

- 8 Fortune Riviera..... A3
- 9 Green View Hotel..... A3
- 10 Hotel Samrat..... A3

### 🍴 Eating

- 11 City Square Mall..... A3
- 12 Dhabas..... A3

- 13 Falak..... B2  
Wazwan..... (see 16)

### ☕ Drinking

- 14 Café Coffee Day..... B2

### 🛍 Shopping

- J&K Government Arts Emporium (see 16)
- 15 Jay Kay Bookhouse..... B2

### Information

- 16 J&K Tourism..... B2

### Transport

- 17 Matador 108 Terminus..... D3
- 18 Private Buses & Shared Jeeps..... A3
- 19 Public Bus Station..... A3

peak *yatra* (pilgrimage) periods (early summer, early October). Basic budget options are plentiful around Vinaik Bazaar (a block southeast of the bus station) but names like Hotel Touch Wood give a premonition of their chancy nature. If booking Jammu accommodation through online discounters be aware that many hotels offered are 45km away in Katra.

### Fortune Riviera

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2561415; www.fortunehotels.in; Gulab Singh Marg; s/d from ₹4195/4410; 📞@📺) Jammu's most stylish address includes a glass elevator in the four-story atrium, Empire State bedposts and slight hints of oriental minimalism in the flower arrangements.

### Hari Niwas Palace Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$

(☎2543303; www.hariniwaspalace.com; s/d from ₹2860/3320, deluxe ₹3850/4950; 📞@📺) With maharaja connections and elements of princely style, this all-white 20th-century palace has a fine cliff-top setting beside the Amar Mahal Palace. Deluxe rooms are professionally appointed but cheaper 'Palace Mews' units are below ground level and overall upkeep is a little flawed given the prices. Indoor pool.

### Hotel Samrat

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2547402; s/d from ₹1650/1760; 📞@) The neatest of numerous options as you leave the bus station, Samrat's best rooms (single/double ₹2090/2200) are brand new with high ceilings, lashings of marble and Chagall prints on wooden back-boards.

### Green View Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎2573906; 69 Chand Nagar; s from ₹150, d ₹300-500; 📞) This budget standby is a little quieter, friendlier and more accustomed to foreigners than most Vinaik Bazaar options. Certainly the cheap singles are miserable coffin-boxes but most doubles come with cold-shower bathroom, air-cooler and even windows. For ₹500 there's AC and new tiling. It's hidden at the end of a dead-end side lane east of Jewel Chowk.

### Vaishnavi Dham

PILGRIM HOSTEL \$

(☎2473275; www.maavaishnodevi.org; Railway Rd; dm/d ₹60/650; 📞) Although primarily for *yatri*, this large, modern hostel accepts non-pilgrims out of season. It's immediately on the right as you leave the train station's large forecourt square.



### Eating & Drinking

Between Jewel Chowk and Vinaik Bazaar are several inexpensive **dhabas** (snack bars), a fast-food place, wine shops and two bars. **City Square Mall** has Domino's Pizza and four other air-conditioned restaurants. Residency Rd has a wide range of options from cheap fish barbecues (near Raghunath Mandir) to AC vegetarian restaurants to ever-reliable **Café Coffee Day** opposite KC Plaza.

### Wazwan

KASHMIRI \$\$

(☎2579554; Residency Rd; veg/non-veg mains ₹110/210; ☎12.30-4pm & 7-10pm) Filigree lamps, wood panelling and draped crewel



canopies set the scene for a range of classic Kashmiri specialities. It's hidden within the accommodation block behind J&K Tourism.

### Falak

INDIAN \$\$

(☎2520770; www.kcresidency.com; 7th fl, KC Residency Hotel, Residency Rd; mains veg/non-veg ₹175/255, rice ₹100; ☎12.30-10.45pm) This jerkily revolving hotel restaurant serves a faultless if pricey range of enticing pan-Indian cuisine. Add 22.5% to prices (for tax/service charge).

## i Information

**Cyber Point** (Jewel Chowk; per hr ₹25; ☎9am-10pm) Sweaty but cheap and central internet access.

**J&K Tourism** (☎2548172; www.jktcd.org; Residency Rd; ☎8am-8pm) Refreshingly air-conditioned reception centre. Just west is a well-presented **government arts emporium** and an English-language **bookshop**.

**SBI** (Hari Market; ☎10am-4pm Mon-Fri) Exchanges currency and travellers cheques. ATM.

## i Getting There & Away

### Air

The following all fly to Delhi (from ₹2250, one hour) and Srinagar (from ₹2250, 35 minutes). Air India also flies to Leh on Mondays and Fridays.

**Air India** (☎2456086; www.indianairlines.in; J&K Tourism complex; ☎10am-4.45pm Mon-Sat)

**GoAir** (www.goair.in)

**IndiGo** (www.goindigo.in)

**JetLite** (www.jetlite.com)

**SpiceJet** (www.spicejet.com)

### Bus & Jeep

Private buses and shared jeeps depart from a chaotic strip in the shadow of the BC Rd (NH1A Hwy) overpass. Public buses use the big, rotting concrete bus station complex immediately east.

**Amritsar** Up to 30 buses daily (₹117, six hours) via Pathankot in Punjab (₹59, 2½ hours).

**Chamba** Bus (₹170, seven hours, 8.05am).

**Dalhousie** Bus (₹160, six hours, 8am).

**Delhi** Public buses 13 times daily (₹360, 12 hours) plus many private services leaving between 5pm and 10.30pm (seat/sleeper ₹500/800).

**Dharamsala** Direct bus at 8.30am (₹170, six hours) or take an Amritsar service and change at Pathankot. Taxis cost around ₹4000.

**Katra** Buses, minibuses and taxis (₹31/60/800, 1½ hours) regularly depart from both bus and train stations.

**Srinagar** Buses run by day, by night or not at all depending on the security situation. Shared/chartered jeeps (from ₹400/3000) depart early morning from both bus and train stations.

### Train

**Jammu Tawi**, Jammu's main train station, is well south of the river, 5km from the bus station.

**Agra** Indore-bound **Malwa Express** (12920) departs at 9am, reaches Agra 10.40pm (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹270/792/1087).

**Amritsar** **Muri Express** (18102) departs at 2.30pm (₹124, four hours).

**Delhi** **Shalimar Express** (14646) departs at 9pm (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹237/668/924, 14 hours).

**Udhampur** Local trains (₹11) 7.45am and 5pm, **Jammu Mail** (₹23) 10.25am. Line extension to Katra due 2012, to Srinagar in 2017 crossing the Chenab River on the world's tallest rail-bridge.

## i Getting Around

**AUTORICKSHAWS** Short hops ₹30, train station to bus station ₹70, to airport ₹100.

**MINIBUS** Overloaded minibuses and curiously stretched 'Matadors' charge ₹5 per hop: route 117 links bus and train stations, 108 to the fort, 'Satwari' minibuses pass the airport.

## Jammu To Srinagar

The well-paved Jammu-Srinagar road has many scenic points and is kept open year-round, but it's also exceedingly busy, a thundering conveyer belt of trucks and army convoys that jams up entirely during hartals (strikes) and when landslides block the passes. Be prepared to fly at such times.

Leaving Jammu, the road climbs through a bizarre landscape of wooded hilly chunks that seem to have been diced by an overenthusiastic divine sous-chef preparing a never-finished geological recipe. Approaching **Tikri**, a hulking, multishouldered mountain looms distantly ahead. Accessed from nearby **Katra**, that mountain's latter-day **Vaishno Devi Shrine** (www.maavaishnodevi.org) is one of India's busiest pilgrim sites but its appeal is hard to understand for most non-Hindus.

Between Udhampur and Srinagar, the road winds up a vertical kilometre into mature coniferous woodlands where, between **Kud** and **Patnitop** (Km110) lies a sprinkling of **resort hotels** (d low season/rack rate ₹700/2500).

The main road zigzags back down almost as far as the controversial billion-dollar **Baglihar Dam** before winding back up to the 2531m **Jawahar Tunnel**, where foreign-

ers must fill in lengthy forms for entering/leaving Kashmir (curious, given that you're already within J&K). The **Titanic Viewpoint** (Km208), 2km beyond the tunnel, provides sweeping views across the vast mountain-rimmed **Kashmir Valley**, with its beautiful poplar-edged rice terraces. Another viewpoint at Km213 surveys **Verinag**, one of three local villages to sport Mughal Gardens. Most traffic makes a tea stop in **Qazigund**, full of saffron sellers and shops selling locally produced cricket bats.

At times of unrest, a common trouble-spot is **Khanabal/Anantnag** where the Lidder Valley branches off towards the pine-framed pilgrim-tourist resort of Pahalgam.

At the roadside in **Awantipora** (Avantipura; Km266), 30km before Srinagar, is the chunky ruin of 9th-century **Avantisvara Vishnu Temple** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☀dawn-dusk). The stone blocks are massive with numerous column bases but most carvings have long since been defaced. The essentially similar but even less complete **Avantisvara Shiva Temple** (Km226.9) can be visited on the same ticket.

Straggling between Km279 and Km281, dusty **Pampore** is India's saffron capital. The violet crocuses, whose yellow stamens produce the saffron, bloom colourfully in October around Km275.

## PAHALGAM

POP 6000 / ELEV 2740M

Surrounded by high peaks, the Lidder and Seshnag rivers tumble down picturesque, deep-cut mountain valleys covered with giant conifers. Where they meet, the scene is marred by the sprawling low-rise resort town of **Pahalgam** ([www.pahalgam.com](http://www.pahalgam.com)) that overflows with Amarnath-bound *yatri* in summer. Heading up the Lidder valley to-

wards Aru you'll swiftly get away from the worst pilgrim crowds and, further into the mountains, the region offers superb trekking potential. However, compared to Ladakh, prices are very high, fellow hikers hard to find and the alpine scenery feels less exotic. Also be aware that access roads to Pahalgam pass through areas particularly prone to violence during times of instability in Kashmir. Get advice before departing.

Accommodation prices fluctuate up to 600%, peaking in July. Choice is vast though most places close in winter. Main concentrations are around the bus stand (where there's an ATM and essentially useless tourist office) and along the main road towards Chandanwari, notably 4km east in Laripora where the brand new **Hotel Pine Spring** (☎243386; [www.hotelpinespring.com](http://www.hotelpinespring.com); s/d ₹4400/5500) makes an unusually successful attempt at modernist hip design. Directly across the quiet laneway **Himalaya House** (☎243072; [www.himalayafunandtours.com](http://www.himalayafunandtours.com); rear house ₹1200, front houses ₹1500-2500) is a spic-and-span, homely place with a lawn-garden forming an island in a pretty section of river. Unlike most cheaper Pahalgam places, the owners are accustomed to foreigners but might try to nudge you into an expensive trekking deal.

The most convivial eateries, **Troutbeat** (fish meals ₹350) and coffee shop **Log Inn** (veg mains from ₹110, espresso ₹50) front the venerable **Pahalgam Hotel** ([www.pahalgamhotel.com](http://www.pahalgamhotel.com)) in the upper bazaar area. Much closes down in winter.

## Srinagar

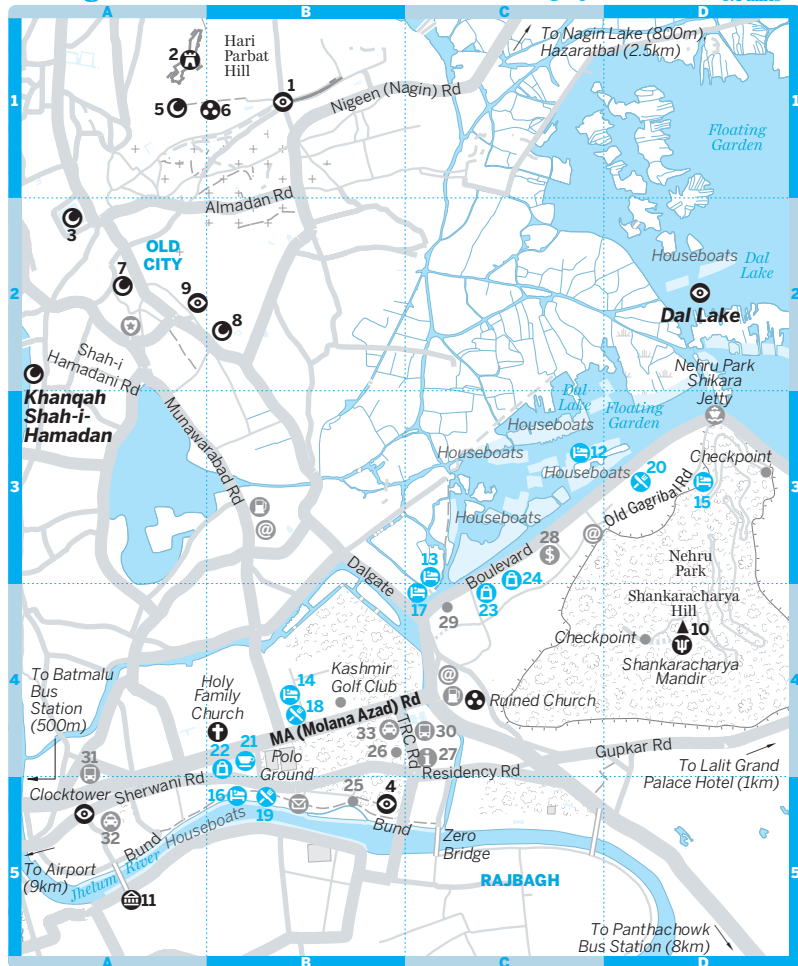
☎0194 / POP 988,000 / ELEV 1730M

Indulgent houseboats on placid Dal Lake, famous Mughal gardens, distinctive Kashmiri wooden mosques and a mild summer climate

## AMARNATH

Far from the nearest road, in a mountain cave at **Amarnath**, a natural stone lingam becomes opalescently encrusted with ice and is believed to wax and wane with the phases of the moon. Seen as symbolising Lord Shiva, it's the destination for a vastly popular summer *yatra* (Hindu pilgrimage). Joining the chaotic swarm is an unforgettable experience but it's certainly not a peaceful or meditative country hike. All prospective *yatri* (pilgrims, hikers) must sign up through **SASB** ([www.shriamarnathjishrine.com](http://www.shriamarnathjishrine.com); ☀Jul-Aug), be suitably equipped for potentially subzero conditions and be ready for intrusive security: both blizzards and Kashmiri militants have killed pilgrims in the past.

There are two approach routes. From Pahalgam it's a 16km taxi ride to Chandanwari then a 36km, three-day hike. Alternatively, from the vast Baltal Camp near Sonamarg (p239) it's a 14km walk to the cave. Wealthier pilgrims complete the journey by pony, helicopter (₹7600 return) or *dandy* (palanquin).



combine to make Srinagar one of India's top domestic tourist attractions. Except, that is, when intercommunal tensions erupt. Sadly, such eruptions have proved depressingly frequent and throughout summer 2010 paralysing strikes and curfews effectively shut down the city altogether. Visiting Srinagar without thoroughly checking the latest security situation would be foolhardy (see boxed text, p227).

Srinagar's three main areas converge around Dalgate, where the southwestern nose of Dal Lake passes through a lock gate. Northwest lies the Old City, largely out-of-bounds during curfews. The commercial centre, southwest around Lal Chowk, can

also face major disruptions but the Boulevard, facing a major concentration of houseboats, is usually comparatively calm as are the Mughal gardens, strung out over several kilometres around the lake further east.

## Sights

Sitting and watching waterborne life go by from a houseboat's carved wooden veranda is one of Srinagar's great pleasures.

### OLD CITY

When visiting mosques, follow normal Islamic formalities (dress modestly, remove

## Srinagar

### ☉ Top Sights

Dal Lake .....	D2
Khanqah Shah-i-Hamadan .....	A2

### ☉ Sights

Chetipacha Gurdwara .....	(see 1)
<b>1</b> Gateway Through Old City Walls .....	B1
<b>2</b> Hari Parbat Fort .....	A1
<b>3</b> Jama Masjid .....	A2
<b>4</b> Kashmir Government Arts Emporium .....	B5
<b>5</b> Makhdoom Sahib Shrine .....	A1
<b>6</b> Mosque of Akhund Mulla Shah .....	B1
<b>7</b> Naqshband Sahib .....	A2
<b>8</b> Pir Dastgir Sahib .....	B2
<b>9</b> Rozabal (Jesus) Shrine .....	A2
<b>10</b> Shankaracharya Hill .....	D4
<b>11</b> Sri Pratap Singh Museum .....	A5

### 🛏 Sleeping

<b>12</b> California Group (Houseboats) .....	C3
<b>13</b> Hotel Akbar .....	C3
<b>14</b> Hotel Broadway .....	B4
<b>15</b> Hotel Swiss .....	D3
Noor Guest House .....	(see 17)
<b>16</b> The Residency .....	B5
<b>17</b> New Zeenath Guest House .....	C4

### 🍴 Eating

<b>18</b> Coffea Arabica .....	B4
<b>19</b> Mughal Darbar .....	B5
<b>20</b> Nathu's Sweets .....	D3

### ☕ Drinking

<b>21</b> Cafe Robusta .....	B4
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### 🛍 Shopping

<b>22</b> Gulshan Books .....	B4
Kashmir Government Arts Emporium .....	(see 4)
<b>23</b> Kashmir Government Arts Emporium (Boulevard branch) .....	C4
<b>24</b> Wine Shop .....	C3

### Information

<b>25</b> FRO .....	B5
<b>26</b> Houseboat Owners Association .....	B4
<b>27</b> Tourism Reception Centre .....	C4
<b>28</b> Transcorp International .....	C3

### Transport

<b>29</b> Indian Airlines .....	C4
<b>30</b> J&K SRTC Bus Station .....	C4
Jet Airways .....	(see 19)
<b>31</b> Lal Chowk City Minibus Stand .....	A4
<b>32</b> Shared Jeeps & Private Minibuses to Jammu .....	A5
<b>33</b> Tourist Taxi Stand 1 .....	B4

shoes) and ask permission before entering or taking interior photos. Women will usually be expected to cover their hair and use a separate entrance.

### Khanqah Shah-i-Hamadan

MOSQUE

(Khanqah-e-Muala; Khawaja Bazaar area) This distinctively spired 1730s Muslim meeting hall is one of Srinagar's most beautiful with both frontage and interiors covered in papier-mâché reliefs and elaborately coloured *khatamband* (faceted wood panelling). Non-Muslim visitors can peek through the door but may not enter. The building stands on the site of one of Kashmir's first mosques, founded by Persian saint Mir Sayed Ali Hamadani who had arrived in 1372, one of 700 refugees fleeing Timur's conquest of Iran. He is said to have converted 37,000 people to Sufi Islam, and it's likely that his retinue introduced Kashmiris to the Persian art of fine carpet-making.

### Jama Masjid

MOSQUE

(Nowhatta) This mighty 1672 mosque has room for thousands of devotees between 378 roof-support columns, each fashioned from the trunk of a single deodar tree. Monumental brick gatehouses mark the four cardinal directions. Bags and cameras are prohibited.

### Pir Dastgir Sahib

SACRED SITE

(Khanyar Chowk area; ☀4am-10pm) This large, fanciful Sufi shrine has a spired tower, wooden filigree work outside and a colourfully faceted interior with some beautiful papier-mâché work around a series of graves that flash with fairy lights.

### Rozabal

SACRED SITE

A minute's stroll northwest from Pir Dastgir Sahib, facing the four-level brick tower of Rozabal Mosque, is the small, green **Rozabal Shrine** (Ziyarat Hazrati Youza Asouph). Visually it's utterly insignificant. Yet a highly controversial theory claims that the shrine's

## JESUS IN KASHMIR?

To many the theory sounds crackpot or even blasphemous but several authors have claimed that Jesus' 'lost years' (between his youth and the start of his ministry when he was 30) were spent in India where Buddhism moulded his ideas. This theory gained a lot of publicity in the 1890s when Russian traveller/spy Nicolas Notovitch 'discovered' supposedly corroborating documents at Hemis Gumpa (Ladakh), described in his book *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*. The Hemis documents have since gone missing.

The Koran (surah 4, verses 156–157) suggests that Jesus' death on the cross was a 'grievous calumny' and that 'they slew him not'. Khwaja Nazir Ahmad's *Jesus in Heaven & Earth* further postulates that Jesus (as Isa, Yuz Asaf or Youza Asouph) retired to Kashmir post-crucifixion and was buried in Srinagar. Holger Kersten's *Jesus lived in India*, widely sold in Indian traveller bookshops, agrees and even gives a floor-plan of that tomb at Rozabal in Srinagar. The roughly four-million-strong Ahmadiyya sect (who consider themselves Muslim but are not recognised as such by some Islamic communities) also subscribe to the idea of Jesus dying in Kashmir ([www.alislam.org/topics/jesus](http://www.alislam.org/topics/jesus)), seeing Christ's mortality as underlining his role as human prophet.

crypt holds the grave of Jesus Christ. Supposedly, a sarcophagus here features carved feet punctured by half-moon 'crucifixion marks'. Tourists aren't encouraged and in reality you're unlikely to be granted access but the very act of discovering this little place is highly thought-provoking and might inspire you to read more deeply about the fascinating subject of Jesus' historical career.

### **Naqshband Sahib**

SACRED SITE

(Khanyar Chowk area) This beautifully proportioned but uncoloured 17th-century shrine was built in Himachal Pradesh style with alternating layers of wood and brick to dissipate the force of earthquakes.

### **HARI PARBAT HILL**

The imposing 18th-century **Hari Parbat Fort** is visible from virtually anywhere in Srinagar but closed to the public, for military use. It crowns a prominent hill that Hindus believe was originally the island from which Vishnu and Sharika (Durga) defeated Jalodbhava, Kashmir's mythical lake demon. On the hill's mid-slopes, Muslims pay homage at the large **Makhdoom Sahib Shrine**, reached by beggar-lined steps that pass the ruined 1649 stone mosque of **Akhund Mullah Shah**. The steps start a few hundred metres beyond the scant remains of Srinagar's **Old City walls** (built by Akbar in the 1590s) and the large **Chetipacha Gurdwara** (Sikh Temple).

### **CENTRAL SRINAGAR**

#### **Sri Pratap Singh Museum**

MUSEUM

([2312859](http://spsmuseum.org); <http://spsmuseum.org>; Indian/foreigner ₹10/50; ☉10am–4pm Tue–Sun) Accessed by a footbridge across the Jhelum River then

by shimmying through frightening coils of razor wire, this richly endowed historical museum features Mughal papier-mâché work, weaponry and traditional Kashmiri costumes. An impressive new exhibition hall is nearing completion. Bring ID.

### **Kashmir Government Arts Emporium**

HISTORIC BUILDING

([2452783](http://2452783); Bund; ☉10am–5.30pm Mon–Sat) The century-old half-timbered former British Residency Building (restored 2004) is now used as an elegant fixed-price craft showroom where, without sales pressure, you can peruse Kashmiri copperwork, rugs, crewel (embroidered bedcovers) and intricately carved furniture. Information boards make the place more museum than shop. The building is army-guarded and flanked by curious gatehouses that seem transported from an Oxford College.

### **AROUND DAL LAKE**

#### **Shankaracharya Hill**

VIEWPOINT, SACRED SITE

(☉7.30am–5pm) Thickly forested Shankaracharya Hill is topped by a small Shiva temple built from hefty blocks of visibly ancient grey stone. Previously known as Takht-i-Sulaiman (Throne of Solomon), it's now named for a sage who reached enlightenment here in 750AD, but signs date the octagonal structure as 5th-century and the site is even older. Some claim, controversially, that a previous temple here was once renovated by Jesus and St Thomas. Access is by a winding 5.5km road from Nehru Park (₹150 return by autorickshaw). Walking isn't advisable, given the population of wild bears. The temple

is five minutes up a stairway from a police checkpoint where you must leave phones and cameras before reaching the panoramic views of Srinagar and Dal Lake.

### Parks & Gardens

GARDENS

Srinagar's famous gardens date back to the Mughal era. Most have a fundamentally similar design with terraced lawns, fountain pools and carefully manicured flowerbeds interspersed with mighty *chinar* (plane trees), pavilions and mock fortress facades.

Built for Nur Jahan by her husband Jehangir, **Shalimar Bagh** (adult/child ₹10/5; ☀9am-dusk Apr-Oct, 10am-dusk Nov-Mar) is the most famous garden. However, **Nishat Bagh** (adult/child ₹10/5; ☀9am-dusk Sat-Thu) is more immediately impressive, with steeper terracing and a lake-facing panorama.

**FREE Pari Mahal** (☀dawn-dusk) is set amid palace ruins high above the lakeshore. The ensemble looks intriguing when floodlit at night and viewed from afar. By day, making the long, steep autorickshaw ride is worthwhile more for the lake views than for the gardens themselves. Bring ID for serious police checks on your way. En route you'll pass the petite **Cheshmashahi Garden** (adult/child ₹10/5; ☀8am-8pm) and the extensive, less formal **Botanical Garden** (adult/child ₹10/5; ☀8am-dusk Sat-Thu).

### Hazratbal

MOSQUE, AREA

Several kilometres north of the Old City, Srinagar's main university area extends around the large, white-domed **Hazratbal Mosque**. This 20th-century building enshrines Kashmir's holiest relic, the **Moi-e-Muqqadas**, supposedly a beard hair of the Prophet Mohammed. Hazratbal's original mosque was built to house it when the Naqshband Sahib proved too small for the many pilgrims. In December 1963 the hair briefly disappeared in still-unexplained circumstances, nearly sparking civil war.

The mosque backs onto Dal Lake through heavily guarded prayer lawns. Surrounding **market areas** sell lotus pods and vast Kashmiri fried *puris* (flat dough that puffs up when fried).

### Sleeping

Staying on a houseboat (p236) is one of the city's main attractions, but you might prefer to sleep at least the first night in a hotel while carefully selecting a suitable boat. Dozens of large, forgettable hotels along the Boulevard charge around ₹5000 per night in season but far, far less during troubles. Several hotels subcontract rooms to government departments or the army, making for an odd ambience. Many others rely primarily on noisy, self-catering groups of domestic tourists, especially in summer and during Bengali holidays (May and October). Useful lower midrange options are dotted along Old Gagribal Rd and around Dalgate. Srinagar's most deluxe option is the new Taj Vanta ([www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com)).

### Hotel Swiss

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎2472766; [www.swisshotelkashmir.com](http://www.swisshotelkashmir.com); Old Gagribal Rd; foreigners d ₹450-850, Indians ₹1200-1800; @) The Swiss has reliably good-value budget accommodation at prices that are discounted for foreigners. There's a peaceful lawn, free fast internet and bicycle hire available. But most of all it's the tirelessly helpful Sufi-spiritual manager which makes the place so congenial. The area stays calm during curfews.

### Lalit Grand Palace

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2501001; [www.thelalit.com/Srinagar](http://www.thelalit.com/Srinagar); ste from ₹20,000) Vast period suites in the Maharaja's 1910 palace and a wing of (slightly) cheaper new rooms are all beautifully set above hectares of manicured lawns. The Durbar Hall features royal portraits and one of the world's largest handmade carpets.

#### DON'T MISS

### DAL LAKE

Whether you sleep on one of its wonderful time-warp houseboats or just stroll along the Boulevard savouring the sunset, beautifully serene Dal Lake is likely to be your main memory of Srinagar. Mirror-flat waters beautifully reflect the misty peaks of the Pir Panjal mountains while gaily painted *shikaras* glide by. These are gondola-like boats, hand-powered with heart-shaped paddles and used to transport goods to market, children to school, and visitors on explorative tours of the lake's floating communities. Nehru Park is a good starting point for visiting the early-morning floating vegetable market and canal-like passages link all the way to Nagin Lake.

## HOUSEBOATS

Srinagar's signature houseboats first appeared in colonial times, because the British were prohibited from owning land. Most houseboats you'll see are less than 30 years old but the best **deluxe** ones are still palatial, with chandeliers, carved walnut panels, *khatamband* (wooden patchwork) ceilings and chintzy sitting rooms redolent of the 1930s Raj era. **Category A** boats are comfy but less grand. Lower categories often lack interior sitting areas. **Category D** boats hopefully stay afloat. Better houseboats typically have three double bedrooms; when the political climate drives tourists away you're likely to get the whole boat to yourself, chef and all.

Choosing from 1400 boats is challenging. Some owners are super-friendly families, others are crooks – ask fellow travellers for recent first-hand recommendations. For most visitors, staying on a houseboat is a relaxing Srinagar highlight. But others report feeling cheated, being held virtual hostage ('kidnapped' passport, external dangers exaggerated, etc), or suffering inappropriate advances from houseboat staff.

### Things to watch out for

- » Don't prepurchase houseboat packages; never book in Delhi.
- » Thoroughly check out houseboats in person before agreeing to or paying anything.
- » Get a clear, possibly written, agreement stating what the fees cover.
- » Don't be pressured into giving 'charity' donations.
- » Don't sign up for overpriced treks or excursions (prices are usually far lower in Ladakh).
- » Beware isolated or less friendly houseboats. Trust your instincts.
- » Don't leave valuables unattended.
- » Don't leave your passport with the boat owner.
- » Tell a friend, hotelier or the **Houseboat Owners Association** (☎2450326; www.houseboatowners.org; TRC Rd; ☀10am-5pm Mon-Sat) where you're staying.

### Choosing the Area

The boats facing the **Boulevard** offer a good variety, close together, so you can visit a wide selection by *shikara* (gondolalike boat) before choosing. Just drop into the ones that take your fancy (the boatman will probably nudge you towards those that give him better commission). Their proximity to shore makes it relatively easy to hail a *shikara* should you need to 'escape'.

A second row of boats directly behind in **Golden Dal Lake** (eg the **California Group**) is still easily accessible but quieter, with sunset views. Houseboats further out offer beguiling solitude but leave you prey to pressures from owners. **Nagin Lake** houseboats also suffer somewhat from isolation but readers have recommended several groups including **Mount View**. In almost any location, visits from *shikara*-borne souvenir sellers are an unavoidable irritation.

### Prices

Officially prices are 'set', between ₹1100 (category D) and ₹4500 (deluxe) for a double room including all meals, but when occupancy is low you might only pay a fraction of that.

Always double-check what's included and how much: food and drink (only dhal-and-ricer? Is tea extra?), heating, *shikara* transfers and/or use of a canoe (once or unlimited?). Ideally get this in writing. Check the price of extras – 'hidden charges' can amount to hundreds of dollars.

Sumptuous. When occupancy is low you might get half-price walk-in rates.

**New Zeenath Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎2474070; off Dalgate; r ₹400-800) Compact, but sparkingly clean with new tile-floored rooms above a doctors' clinic.

**Noor Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎2450872; off Dalgate; d ₹400-500, without bathroom ₹150-250) Cheaper rooms are in a creaky but characterful old wooden house and newer ones have thin hardboard divider walls but the family owners are

kind and the front room gets canal views. Limited free laundry.

**Hotel Akbar** HOTEL \$\$  
(☎2500507; hotelakbar.com; d ₹1500-2500)  
Trump cards are the manicured garden with trellises of blooming vines and the quiet yet central, lakeside location. Older rooms are wood panelled and a little musty but newer ones are fresher with geysers in bathrooms.

**Hotel Broadway** HOTEL \$\$\$  
(☎2459001; www.hotelbroadway.com; s/d ₹5750/7000; 📶🚰🚰) Behind a drab concrete-slab facade, the atmosphere is unexpectedly warm, rooms are ageing but well-tended business-style affairs and the outdoor swimming pool is sparkling clean. Off-season rates ₹4000 or less.

**Residency** HOTEL \$\$\$  
(☎2473702; www.hotelresidencykashmir.com; Residency Rd; s/d/ste ₹4500/5500/7500; 📶) A glass elevator whisks you up through a reverberant shopping-mall atrium to this small but professional business hotel.



## Eating & Drinking

Srinagar's Muslim mores mean that alcohol isn't served in restaurants and there are just a tiny handful of bars, mostly in upmarket hotels.

**Mughal Darbar** KASHMIRI \$\$  
(☎2476998; Residency Rd; mains ₹150-300; ☺10am-10pm) Widely considered the city's best place to indulge in top quality Kashmiri delicacies. The better of the two separately managed dining rooms is upstairs above the bakery section.

**Coffea Arabica** MULTICUISINE \$\$  
(MA Rd; meals ₹150-250; ☺9am-10pm) Behind a half-timbered facade, this spacious modern eatery has various fast-food-style serving stations (Arabic, Chinese, Italian, coffee-and-cake) and a little bookshop.

**Nathu's Sweets** INDIAN \$  
(Blvd; mains ₹40-130, thalis ₹150; ☺8am-midnight) Brighter and more inviting than most of the basic *dhabas* dotted along the Boulevard serving inexpensive, filling veggie meals including dosas and grilled sandwiches.

**Cafe Robusta** CAFE  
(MA Rd; ☺9.30am-9pm; 📶) Srinagar's hip young set sip a selection of coffees or share sundaes and smoothies in a pseudo-Western

upstairs lounge with chess and pictionary to play. All-day wi-fi ₹50.

**Dar Bar** BAR  
(☺10am-10pm; cocktails from ₹350) The little bar of the Lalit Grand Palace Hotel has indulgent lawn views towards Dal Lake.

**Wine Shop** TAKEAWAY BOOZE  
(Heemal Hotel Shopping Complex, Boulevard) Rare takeaway outlet for alcoholic beverages.



## Shopping

The Boulevard has several emporia flogging Kashmiri souvenirs, including elegantly painted papier-mâché boxes and carved walnut woodwork, plus cashmere and pashmina shawls, originally popularised in Europe by Napoleon's wife Josephine. Saffron, cricket bats and dried fruits are widely sold around Lal Chowk. Carpet-selling 'factories' line the road to Shalimar Bagh targeting tour groups. Unless you know how to assess carpet values, consider erring instead towards much cheaper chain-stitched *gab-bas* (Kashmiri rugs with appliqué) or floral *namdas* (felted wool carpets). Be aware that your guide, driver or even hotelier may be getting hefty commissions unless you show up without 'help'. The Kashmir Government Arts Emporium is an exception with fixed, marked prices.

**Kashmir Government Arts Emporium** HANDICRAFTS  
(☎2452783; Bund; ☺10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) In a historic building (p234). It has a less glamorous branch upstairs on the Boulevard.

**Gulshan Books** BOOKSTORE  
(Residency Rd; ☺9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Stocks a wide selection of English-language books including plenty on Kashmiri history and politics.



## Information

Most banks, shops and offices shut for Muslim prayers around lunchtime on Friday: if you have urgent business, get it done by Thursday to be safe.

ATMs are widespread, especially on Residency Rd, but during prolonged curfews they might run out of funds. Beware of freelance moneychangers offering improbably good rates – you're likely to get forged banknotes.

**Euphoria** (Old Gagribal Rd; internet per 30min/hr ₹20/30; ☺9am-10pm) Internet access.

**Skybiz Internet** (Dalgate; internet per hr ₹30; ☺9am-8pm)



**Tourism Reception Centre** (☎2456291; www.jktourism.org, www.jktdc.org) With perseverance you might actually find answers to your questions. Supposedly open 24hr but don't count on it.

**Transcorp International** (Boulevard; ☺9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Half-hidden between hotels Sunshine and Dal View, this moneychanger offers good cash rates.

## **i** Getting There & Away

### Air

Srinagar's sparkling new airport is 1.2km behind a high security barrier where there can be long queues for baggage and body screening. You'll need to show an air ticket (or e-ticket confirmation print-out) to get through so don't come to the airport hoping to buy a ticket on departure. The barrier opens at 7.15am but on curfew days (usually safer before 6.30am) it's still wise to arrive earlier and wait rather than getting caught in strikes or stone-throwing en route.

The following all fly to Delhi and/or Jammu. Air India also flies to Leh on Wednesdays.

**Air India** (☎2450247; www.airindia.in; Boulevard)

**GoAir** (www.goair.in)

**IndiGo** (www.goindigo.in)

**Jet Airways** (☎2480801; Residency Rd)

**JetLite** (www.jetlite.com)

**Kingfisher** (www.flyingfisher.com)

**SpiceJet** (www.spicejet.com)

### Bus

Everything is highly dependent upon security measures and road conditions so double-check carefully.

**J&K SRTC bus station** (☎2455107) has buses to Kargil (₹413, 10 hours), Jammu (class B/A bus ₹200/280, nine hours) and Leh (₹799, two days) all at 6.30am.

**Batmalu bus station**, west of centre has services thrice daily to Sonamarg, frequent to Tangmarg for Gulmarg.

**Panthachowk bus station**, 8km south of centre has various buses to Pampore and Anantnag (change for Pahalgam).

Given sufficient custom, the Tourism Reception Centre runs day-return excursions to mountain 'resorts' Sonamarg (₹193, 87km northeast), Gulmarg (₹186, 52km west) and Pahalgam (₹193, 100km southeast), all departing at 8.30am.

### Jeep

Check security and road conditions.

Shared jeeps depart from **Tourist Taxi Stand 1** to Kargil (per person/jeep ₹620/4340, 5am) and to Jammu (₹500/4500, 6.30am to 9am). Somewhat cheaper jeeps and minibuses to

Jammu start from near the clocktower at Lal Chowk.

Jeep hire one-way/return costs: Pahalgam ₹1900/2100, Sonamarg ₹1600/1900, Gulmarg ₹1200/1500.

### Train

Local services only: Qazigund-Anantnag-Srinagar-Baramulla.

## **i** Getting Around

Even when there's no official curfew, don't rely on being able to find an autorickshaw or boatman after 8pm, when Srinagar becomes eerily silent.

**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT** Airport buses (₹40) run very sporadically. Prepaid, fixed-price taxis cost ₹350 to town. During curfews and strikes expect to pay around ₹500 to reach the airport and leave at dawn to avoid getting blocked en route.

**AUTORICKSHAWS** From ₹25 for short hops, ₹50 across town, around ₹600 for a full-day tour including Mughal gardens, Old City and Hazratbal.

**BOAT** *Shikaras* charge ₹20 for short houseboat-to-shore hops. Posted per-hour rates (₹300) are very negotiable.

**MINIBUSES** Overcrowded. Destination boards only in Urdu. Useful routes include Lal Chowk-Hazratbal and Lal Chowk-Shalimar Bagh via Dal Lake's south bank and Nishat Bagh.

## Gulmarg

☎01954 / ELEV 2730M

Pine-fringed Gulmarg is the nearest India gets to a ski resort. It's not so much a town as a twisting 4km-long loop of road ringing the undulating 'Meadow of Flowers' for which it's named. The meadow is given some visual focus by the demure 1890s Anglican **Church of St Mary's** sitting on a lonely hillock. It's accessed off the dead-end road linking historic **Gulmarg Golf Club** (admission ₹5, driving range ₹450) to the resort's oldest cottage-hotels, the 1888 **Nedous Hotel** (www.nedoushotels.com) and the 1965 neo-colonial style **Hotel Highlands Park** (www.hotelhighlandspark.com). Without being really luxurious, both have pleasant garden settings and lounges decorated with trophies and animal hides (₹50 for tea, no alcohol served).

However, the only real reason to come to Gulmarg is to venture up through the backing stands of mature pines towards the bald ridge of **Mt Afarwat**. This can be done on foot or with ponies (₹300 per hour) but is easiest using the two-stage **Gondola** (cable

car 1st/2nd stage ₹150/250) that whisks you to 3747m for outstanding clear-day views, reputedly encompassing Nanga Parbat (the world's ninth-highest mountain across in Pakistan). The gondola's base-station is around 1km west of the bus stand.

Gulmarg offers over 40 accommodation choices. In July, musty, ageing rooms average ₹2000, newer ones over ₹5000 a night. Prices dip around 20% in winter and fall massively lower during troubles in Srinagar and in less popular months, like September. For skiers and hikers the most convenient accommodation is located on the rise just north of the gondola. Here, the new **Heevan Retreat** (☎254455; www.ahadhotelsandresorts.com; d/ste ₹5000/6500, incl half-board ₹6250/7750) is head and shoulders above most competition. Fresh pine interiors are inlaid with crewel embroidery panels and there's a wonderfully cosy lounge.

On the same hill the untidy **Pine Palace** (☎254466; d ₹2500-3800) is the only hotel with a public bar (beers ₹200) and bakes fresh pizzas on Tuesday nights.

The other side of the gondola, **Hotel Green Heights** (☎254404; hotelgreenheights.gulmarg@yahoo.com; d winter/peak season ₹1000/2750) has seriously ageing rooms that are far

from charming but they're big and currently (at troubled time of research ₹300) about the cheapest you'll find in Gulmarg.

## **i** Getting There & Away

Buses and more frequent shared jeeps run from Batmalu Bus Station in Srinagar to Tangmarg (summer/winter ₹45/55). Change there for Gulmarg (₹20/30), around 13km beyond on hairpins through the pine forest.

By private jeep, day returns from Srinagar cost around ₹1800 per vehicle.

## Sonamarg

☎0194 /POP 800/ ELEV 2800M

A beautiful 200km drive between Srinagar and Sonmarg takes you from alpine valleys over the double loops of the 3529m **Zoji La**, a spectacular pass that becomes treacherously muddy after rain, then descends into a series of high-sided valleys. Windows on the vehicle's south side offer the best views.

Though ugly in itself, the jerry-built one-street strip settlement of **Sonamarg** occupies a memorable mountain-valley setting and could make for a great trekking base. Many Indian tourists get their first taste of snow here by walking or pony-riding two hours towards the **Thajiwals Glacier**, which rises on a spectacularly soaring mountain crag. The access track is 5km down a lane that starts 2km west of Sonamarg, opposite the area's best accommodation, **Hotel Snowland** (☎2417262; hotel.snowland@yahoo.com; s/d/ste from ₹2900/3300/4400) whose brand-new deluxe rooms (from ₹3600) are fashionably appointed if not overly large.

Sonamarg town has a strip of boxy restaurants, almost all offering poorly maintained guest rooms for around ₹1500 in season, bargainable to ₹350 when occupancy is low. Even the newest (Hotel International, Hotel Sonamarg) are already conspicuously battered by the endless procession of pilgrim-tourists who start their *yatra*-hike to Amarnath's famous ice lingam (p231) from **Baltal Camp**, a summer-only mayhem of tents, shacks and even a mobile ATM machine.

Buses to Srinagar depart Sonamarg at 7.30am, 9.30am and 12.30pm (₹80, 2½ hours). Alternatively take shared/private jeeps (₹120/1200), possibly changing en route at Kangan. Eastbound buses are often full by the time they reach Sonamarg, so for Kargil consider chartering a taxi/jeep or returning to Srinagar to get a seat.

## SKIING AT GULMARG

In season (mid-December to mid-March) Gulmarg is famed amongst serious skiers for its high-altitude powder. However, weather conditions can be unreliable, only a small section of piste is groomed, rescue facilities are limited and avalanche prevention is hamstrung by military restrictions on explosives and weather data. For regularly updated snow and safety conditions, consult <http://gulmargsnowsafety.com>.

Apart from beginners' drag-lifts on the meadow, ski access is by the **Gondola** (day pass ₹ 1000), which closes down when winds blow over 35km/h and whenever Kashmir has curfews. Quality equipment can be hired from **Kashmir Alpine** (☎254638; www.kashmiralpine.com) outside Hotel Highlands Park and from the **Indian Institute of Skiing and Mountaineering** (IISM; ☎214037; www.iismgulmarg.com), 1.5km from the gondola in the conspicuous new octagonal building near the army camp.

**DRAS**

📍0194 / POP 2000 / ELEV 3280M

Muslim Dras (Km147) is a miserable parade of shop-houses and army bases marring an otherwise attractive, upland valley. One day it might make a good hiking base but as it's so close to the Line of Control, strolling carelessly into the mountains here could get you shot. On 9 January 2005, Dras meteorologists recorded a freak temperature of  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$  and ever since the town has touted itself as the world's second-coldest place (after Oymyakon in Sakha-Yakutia, Russia). Local tourists visit various battlefields of the 1999 Indo-Pakistan conflict. Just east of town at Km148.2, notice a small collection of very battered ancient carvings gathered by the roadside.

## KARGIL & ZANSKAR

Ladakh's less visited 'second half' comprises remote, sparsely populated Buddhist Zaskar and the slightly greener Suru Valley, where villagers predominantly follow Shia-Islam, as they do in the regional capital Kargil. Scenery reaches some truly majestic mountain climaxes.

### Kargil

📍01985 / POP 10,700 / ELEV 2817M

Most travellers only stop in Ladakh's second 'city' to change transport between Leh and Srinagar or Zaskar. After the calm and charm of Buddhist Ladakh, Muslim Kargil feels grimy and mildly hassled, though the feeling's only very relative. Slow-motion **internet cafes** (per hr ₹80) and an ATM are conveniently found within the three central blocks along bustling Main Bazaar (aka Imam Khomeini Chowk, Khumani Chowk). Tucked behind the main bus stand is a Kafkaesque **Tourist Reception Centre** (📍232721; ☎️10am-4pm Mon-Sat).

Central, down-at-heel budget options include the ageing **J&K TDC Tourist Bungalow** (📍232328; d ₹200) right beside the tourist office. Follow a well-signed alley from the main drag to find **Hotel Greenland** (📍232324; r old/new ₹800/1500), a popular choice with Westerners seeking fellow Zaskar-bound travellers. Its cheaper rooms are old if passable, the new block unexpectedly well appointed and fair value. **Hotel Caravanserai** (📍232237; r standard/deluxe ₹1000/1800), hidden 500m up Hospital Rd from Main Bazaar, has decent views from upper storeys and rooms that are quiet and

clean but hardly luxurious. Bargaining can save around 35% in many Kargil hotels.

Numerous simple restaurants line Main Bazaar but finding non-meat options can be challenging.

### **i** Getting There & Away

The jeep stand (Hospital Rd) and bus station are one block apart, linked via a narrow alley of butchers' and barbers' shops. Both are a short distance off Main Bazaar towards the river. The minibus station is 300m further west. Kargil's only operative petrol pump is 2.5km up the Leh road from the main river bridge (nearest alternatives at Kangan and Wakha).

**LEH** Buses (from ₹300, 10 hours) depart at 4.30am, driving via Mulbekh (1½ hours) and Lamayuru (around five hours). Shared jeeps (₹600) leave around 7am.

**MULBEKH** Minibuses (₹30) leave at 2pm, 3pm and 4pm from the minibus stand, returning next morning.

**SRINAGAR** Buses (from ₹330, 10 hours) and share taxis (₹600, seven hours) usually leave around either 2pm or 1am. Hire your own jeep (₹5000) if you want to leave at a much more sociable hour and enjoy the beautiful if occasionally nail-biting scenery.

**SURU VALLEY** The 11am Parkachik and 1pm Panikhar buses start from the minibus station. The 6.30am Panikhar bus departs from outside the post office on Main Bazaar.

**ZANSKAR** Leh-Kargil-Padum buses run approximately thrice weekly, supposedly departing Kargil bus station around 1am but timetables are infamously idiosyncratic. Consider gathering a group and hiring a jeep to Padum (₹10,000, 14 hours): start before dawn or consider overnighting at Rangdum. Double-check that your driver has Zaskar-endorsed permits from the drivers' cooperative.

### Around Kargil

#### **MULBEKH**

📍01985

High on a dizzying pyramidal crag, a pair of two-monk gompas and mud-brick tower-stumps are all that remain of Mulbekh's medieval castle. However, the 45-minute zigzag climb is rewarded by symphonic views across gently terraced barley fields to the Zaskar Mountains, rising with Grand Canyon majesty in a series of angular cliffs and crags. Access is easiest driving up a 2.8km spaghetti of crumbling asphalt lane starting 100m west of **Chamba Gompa** (Km243.2), a tiny 1975 shrine guarding a resplendent 8m-high Maitreya-Buddha relief

that's over 1000 years old. Opposite are three forgettable roadhouse hotel-restaurants. For much more atmospheric accommodation, the venerable old **Karzoo Guest House** (☎270027; Km242.3; s/d without bathroom ₹200/300) offers carpet-mat sleeping spaces in a traditional Ladakhi homestay. In a pleasant garden further west is Mulbekh's most comfortable option, **Maitreya Guest House** (☎270035; Km241.3; per person ₹600), which oddly charges the same for decent en suite rooms as for low-ceilinged ones with shared bathrooms.

### SHARGOL

Little **Shargol Gompa** is built onto a cliffside, its minuscule prayer chamber lit by a single flickering butter lamp. Access is via a ladder then through the sole monk's kitchen. The site is distantly visible from Km238 on the Leh-Kargil road but reached from Km235.5 on 1.6km of unpaved lane. Before hiking up the short, steep approach path, check in at the new Lower Monastery building.

## Suru Valley

The main Kargil-Zaskar road winds prettily through rustic Muslim villages in the fertile Suru Valley. High valley walls and mountain backdrops reach a thrilling climax approaching **Panikhar** with views of spiky, ever snow-capped **Nun** (7135m) and **Kun** (7087m). A steep but satisfying day-trek crosses the 3900m Lago La from the Panikhar bypass road then descends to **Parkachik**.

Despite the area's great scenic grandeur, traveller infrastructure is limited to rarely used **J&K Tourist Bungalows** (d ₹200-300) at Sanku, Panikhar, Tangole, Parkachik and lonely Purtickchay – which has perfectly framed Nun-Kun views. Each bungalow's *chowkidar* (caretaker) can rustle up extremely basic dinners and Sanku has very simple tea-stall shops but you'd be well advised to bring your own supplies.

Buses to Kargil leave Panikhar at 5am and 11am, Parkachik at 7am. Taxis aren't available and, for Zaskar, transport is generally limited to highly uncertain hitch-hiking.

## Zaskar

Majestically rugged, the greatest attraction of this mountain-hemmed Ladakhi-Buddhist valley is simply getting there, preferably on a trek. Beware that Zaskar has no

money-changing banks nor any official petrol stations (though Padum's taxi union has its own supply). If camping, be prepared for very cold nights even in summer. As for winter, see the boxed text, below.

### RANGDUM

POP 280 / ELEV 3670M

Set in a wild, big-sky valley, wind-scoured Rangdum is the first Buddhist village heading for Zaskar. Rangdum's tiny cluster of low-rise Ladakhi houses and communications masts isn't attractive in itself. However, 7000m mountains Nun and Kun rise spectacularly white-capped to the west while **Rangdum Gompa** (admission ₹50), 5km east, looks like a tiny floating island backed by an arid pastiche of oddly contorted strata. The gompa's 25 yellow-hatted monks are outnumbered by monastery donkeys who sleep inside at night.

Beside the slightly hidden police checkpost, Rangdum's three basic teahouses can organise beds in village homes for around ₹300. There's also a central **J&K Tourism Bungalow** (d ₹200). In marvellously scenic isolation, 2km beyond the village, **Nun-Kun Deluxe Camp** (d ₹2500) has bedded tents with shared outside toilets and sometimes offers drop-in bargain rates from ₹700, (₹1200 with meals).

### RANGDUM TO PADUM

Rugged **Pensi La** (4401m) is the pass dividing the Suru and Zaskar Valleys. Just beyond are spectacular views encompassing the long, glistening-white **Drang Drung glacier**. Further down, the Zaskar Valley broadens with several small villages in grassy parcels of farmland hemmed by sheer mountain walls. **Phey** has a small gompa and homestay. At **Sani**, Zaskar's oldest gompa is a small, two-storey prayer hall

### ZANSKAR IN WINTER

In winter Zaskar is essentially cut off. Nonetheless, every February, intrepid travellers (along with Zaskar's teachers returning from their winter break) arrive here on the unique **Chadar Trek**. Much of the route is along the frozen Zaskar River, crossing side streams on precarious snow-bridges and camping in rock caves en route. While there are no high-altitude stages, you'll need serious winter equipment and an experienced local guide who can 'read' the ice.

ringed by a tunnelled cloister and a white-washed stone wall studded with stupas.

## PADUM

☑01983 / POP 1500 / ELEV 3505M

After the rigours and beauty of getting here, Zanskar's dusty little capital is rather an anticlimax. Despite an impressive mountain backdrop, central Padum is essentially a characterless crossroads within a block of which you'll find the bus/share-taxi stand, phone offices, an internet cafe, a **Tourist Office** (☑245017; ☺10am-4pm Mon-Sat) and most of Padum's dozen hotel-guesthouses. The main road then straggles 700m south past a sizeable 1991 **mosque** to the crumbling little 'old town' and a hillock of stupas and water-eroded boulders. More traditional **Pibiting** village, 2km north, has a small gompa dwarfed by a large hilltop stupa topped with a beacon lamp.

## Activities

Zanskar's top activity is trekking in or out. Guides, tents and provisions are essential for such multiday routes on which highlights include the isolated monasteries at Lingshet or Phuktal. To find **horsemen** (per horse per day from ₹400) as guides/porters, ask at the simple camping ground opposite the Tourist Office or agencies like **Zanskar Trek** (☑245136) along the road to the mosque. To avoid hiking within the stark, sun-blasted Padum Valley you could give the horses two days' head start, then drive to Hanumil/Itchar, trailheads for Honupatta/Darcha.

## Sleeping & Eating

Most hotels close from late October to June, except when pre-booked for winter trekking groups. There's a simple camping ground opposite the Tourist Office, which has an acceptable **Tourist Bungalow** (d ₹200).

### Hotel Ibx

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☑245214; d ₹700) Room standards vary, but there's a pleasant setting around a sheltered garden courtyard and a convivial restaurant. Similarly priced Kailash and Changthang Hotels nearby look outwardly smarter but lack the traveller vibe.

### Mont-Blanc Guest House

HOMESTAY \$

(☑245183; r ₹400, without bathroom ₹250) Friendly place with four traditionally furnished rooms and possibly a free glass or three of chhang (barley beer).

### Gakyi Hotel

RESTAURANT \$

(s/d from ₹700/900) Good-looking, well-furnished if slightly musty rooms beneath Padum's glitziest restaurant.

## Getting There & Away

Until the Darcha-Padum-Chiling road is completed, years hence, public transport to Zanskar remains very limited.

**BUS** The unpredictable Padum-Kargil-Leh bus takes around 18 hours to Kargil (₹300). It only runs a few times weekly (keep asking!).

**JEEP** Jeep hire to Kargil from Padum costs ₹8000 (while Kargil to Padum is ₹10,000 – taxi-union rules don't allow return trips) per vehicle, whether done in one gruelling 14-hour drive or with an overnight stop en route. Other one-way/return rates from Padum: Karsha ₹600/750; Zangla ₹2000/3000, Rangdum ₹4000/6000.

## AROUND PADUM

Zanskar's largest Buddhist monastery, **Karsha Gompa** dates back to at least the 10th century. It's a jumble of whitewashed blocks rising almost vertically up the red rock of a mountain cliff across the valley from Padum. Concrete steps lead to the monastery's upper cloister and prayer hall with its cracked old murals and wobbly wooden columns. It's a great vantage point from which to survey Karsha's old-fashioned homes, barley fields and threshing circles worked by dzo (cow-yak half-breed). Three homestay-style 'guesthouses' all come with shared local toilets. One daily bus (₹15) leaves Padum at 4pm, returning from Karsha next morning at 8am. Walking from Padum takes around two hours across the exposed plain.

For a fine half-day excursion from Padum, drive to Zangla admiring the curled, contorted geological strata that are especially striking above **Rinam** and **Shilingskit** villages. A trip highlight is **Stongde Gompa** crowning a bird's-eye perch some 300m above the valley, 12km from Padum. The entrance to **Zangla** is guarded by a small hilltop **fortress-palace ruin**. See <http://.csomasroom.kibu.hu> for details about volunteering to help save it. At the far end of the village there's a small, friendly Buddhist **nunnery**.

The road south from Padum passes **Bardan Gompa**, spectacularly sat on a rocky outcrop above the valley. Appealing little **Raru** village has two tiny eateries and a very basic homestay. The road ends near the rock-perched village of **Itchar** (aka Khor) whose homestay is in the highest house, beside a tiny gompa, with great views.

## PHUKTAL & BEYOND

Partly damaged by heavy snows in 2010, **Phuktal Gompa** remains one of Zanskar's most photogenic monasteries, built up against a cliff face beneath a gaping cave entrance. It contains a sacred spring and some

700-year-old murals in the Alchi style. The monastery guesthouse, a fair distance beneath the gompa, has five rooms with real beds and even a shower.

There's no road – trekking to Phuktal (possible in one long day, better in two) is easiest using the south-bank trail. There are bridges at **Dorzong** and **Purne**, both with homestay/guesthouse, though space is limited.

Rather than returning to Padum, many trekking groups continue to **Darcha** on the Manali road (around four days) but you'll need proper gear and a guide to cross the 4980m Shingo-La.

## LADAKH

Spectacularly jagged, arid mountains enfold this magical, Buddhist ex-kingdom. Picture-perfect gompas dramatically crown rocky outcrops amid whitewashed stupas and meditational *mani* walls topped with mantra-inscribed pebbles. Colourful fluttering prayer flags spread their spiritual messages metaphorically with the mountain breeze. Prayer wheels spun clockwise release more merit-making mantras. Gompa interiors are colourfully awash with murals and statuary of numerous bodhisattvas.

Ladakh's remarkably well-balanced traditional society has much to teach the West in

terms of ecological awareness. While most Ladakhis are cash poor, traditional mud-brick homesteads are large, comfortable and self-sufficient in fuel and dairy products, organic vegetables and barley used to make *tsampa* (roast barley flour) and *chhang*. Such self-sufficiency is an incredible achievement given the short growing season and very limited arable land in this upland desert, where precious water supplies must be laboriously channelled from glacier-melt mountain streams.

### History

Ladakh's (now-deposed) royal family traces its dynasty back 39 generations to 975AD. They took the name Namgyal ('Victorious') in 1470 when their progenitor Lhachen Bhagan, ruling from Basgo, conquered a competing Ladakhi kingdom based at Leh/Shey. Although Ladakh had been culturally 'Tibetanised' in the 9th century, Buddhism originally arrived in an Indian form that's visible in ancient temple craftsmanship at Alchi. Over time, however, different Buddhist sects struggled for prominence, with the Tibetan Gelukpa order eventually becoming the majority philosophy after its introduction in the 14th century by Tibetan pilgrim Tsongkhapa (who left a curious relic at Spitik).

Ladakh's greatest king, Sengge Namgyal (r 1616–42) gained riches by plundering gold

### REACHING LADAKH

There are only three route options and all suffer a significant degree of uncertainty, so always build several days' flexibility into your plans. Visit websites [www.leh.nic.in](http://www.leh.nic.in) or <http://vistet.wordpress.com> to check which seasonal roads are open.

Zanskar is essentially cut off altogether in winter except by ice-trek.

#### Air

Flights (year-round) are dramatically scenic, but can be cancelled at short notice. Although flying into Leh means you're likely to suffer mild altitude problems on arrival, the Delhi–Manali–Leh drive is arguably worse as you'll cross passes over 5000m. Flying is the only way to reach Ladakh once roads close in winter.

#### Manali–Leh Road

Fabulously beautiful but gruellingly rough (minimum 22 hours), the road is frequently subject to landslides and is generally closed from October to May. Travelling southbound reduces the risk of altitude problems on high passes and has other advantages (see p274).

#### Srinagar–Leh Road

This route is less physically painful and lower altitude but also less spectacular than Leh–Manali. Landslides are possible on the Zoji La, which gets dangerously slippery after rain. Transport can stop altogether during serious political disturbances in Kashmir and the road is generally closed from November to May.

reserves from western Tibet and re-established a capital at Leh. Ladakh remained an independent kingdom until the 1840s when the Namgyals lost power and the region was annexed by the Jammu maharajas.

Since Independence Ladakh has been ruled as a (now semi-autonomous) sub-district of J&K. That's a culturally odd situation for this 'little Tibet' which is one of the last undisturbed Tantric Buddhist societies on earth. Tourism was first permitted in 1974 but, while globalised economics and climate change have certainly caused many problems, including dangerous population shifts, the traditional lifestyle has proved unexpectedly robust, while locally relevant technologies, such as solar energy and Trombe walls, are starting to improve rural living standards.

Ladakh is famed for crystal-blue skies and enjoys sunshine an average of 300 days a year. But storms can brew suddenly and heavy rain, while very rare, can cause devastating (if localised) mudslides. The worst in decades hit during August 2010, killing around 200 people and rendering thousands homeless. At the time of writing, recovery was well under way.

### Climate

Ladakh's short tourist season (July to early September) typically sees pleasantly mild T-shirt weather by day, with slightly crisp, occasionally chilly nights. However, on higher treks night-time temperatures can dip below  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  even in midsummer. By September snow is likely on higher ground although major passes usually stay open till October. In winter temperatures can fall below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  and most tourist infrastructure closes.

### Language

Though they use the same script, the Tibetan and Ladakhi languages are significantly different. The wonderfully all-purpose word *jule* (pronounced *jo-lay*) means 'hello', 'goodbye', 'please' and 'thanks'. To the greeting *khamzang*, simply reply *khamzang*. *Zhimpo-rak* means 'it's delicious'. Rebecca Norman's excellent *Getting Started in Ladakh* (₹200) has more phrases and useful cultural tips.

### Activities

In summer Ladakh is an adventure playground for outdoor types. Thanks to Leh's vast range of agents, making arrangements is very easy for climbing, rafting, high-altitude trekking or jeep tours.

## Leh

☑ 01982 / POP 28,640 / ELEV 3520M

Few places in India are at once so traveller-friendly and yet so enchanting and hassle-free as mountain-framed Leh. Dotted with stupas and crumbling mud-brick houses, the Old Town is dominated by a dagger of steep rocky ridge topped by an imposing Tibetan-style palace and fort. Beneath, the bustling bazaar area is draped in a thick veneer of tour agencies, souvenir shops and pizza restaurants but a web of lanes quickly fans out into a green suburban patchwork of irrigated barley fields. Here gushing streams and narrow footpaths link traditionally styled Ladakhi buildings with flat roofs, sturdy walls and ornate wooden window frames. Leh's a place that's all too easy to fall in love with, but take things easy on arrival. The altitude means that most visitors initially suffer mild headaches and breathlessness. To prevent this becoming full-blown Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS, p1193), drink plenty of ginger tea and avoid strenuous exertion at first. Climbing Palace Ridge or Shanti Stupa on your two days in Leh is unwise unless you're already altitude-acclimatised.

### 👁️ Sights

#### CENTRAL LEH

Leh's major monuments are perched on the stark rocky ridge that forms the town's mesmerising visual focus.



#### LADAKH PERMITS

You'll need an **inner line permit** to visit Nubra Valley, Pangong Tso, Dha-Hanu, Tso Moriri and the Upper Indus (beyond Upshi).

Such permits, valid for seven days and unextendable, are effortlessly obtained within one working day through Leh travel agencies for around ₹150. You're supposed to have a group (at least two people) to apply but, once you have the permit, travelling alone is rarely prevented. Agencies organise multiple copies of your passport, visa and permit, to give to police checkpoints en route, but making extra copies can prove wise. Whether or not a permit is required, always carry your passport; as Ladakh's a border region, checkpoints are fairly common on rural roads.

**Leh Palace**

PALACE

(Map p249; Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☉dawn-dusk) Bearing a passing similarity to the Potala Palace in Lhasa (Tibet), this nine-storey dun-coloured palace took shape under 17th-century king Sengge Namgyal. Essentially it has been unoccupied since the Ladakhi royals were stripped of power and shuffled off to Stok in 1846. Today the very sturdy walls are mostly unadorned and a few interior sections remain in a state of partial collapse; only the palace prayer room gives any sense of former grandeur. Nonetheless it's gently thrilling to weave your way through the maze of dark corridors, hidden stairways and makeshift ladders to reach the rooftop for great views across the city. Carry a torch (flashlight) and watch out for holes in the floor.

**Palace Gompas**

BUDDHIST TEMPLES

A trio of photogenic religious structures guard the imposing palace entrance. The courtyard of the 1840 **Soma Gompa** is used in summer for **traditional dances** (Map p249; admission ₹200; ☉5.30pm). Behind, the colourfully muralled **Chandazik Gompa** (Chenrezi Lhakhang; admission ₹20; ☉7am-6pm) celebrates the full pantheon of 1000 Buddhas (of which 996 have yet to be born). The main attractions of the red, 1430 **Chamba Lhakhang** (Map p249; admission ₹20; ☉7am-6pm) are the medieval mural fragments between the inner and outer walls. Its central chamber enthrones a very gaudy three-storey Maitreya statue, reworked in 1957.

**Tsemo Fort**

CASTLE RUIN

(Map p249; admission ₹20; ☉dawn-dusk) Visible from virtually everywhere in Leh, 16th-century Tsemo (Victory) Fort is a defining landmark that crowns the top of Palace Ridge. Up close, it's surprisingly small and the shattered walls contain little more than flapping prayer flags but scrambling around them provides a precarious frisson. Directly beneath, **Tsemo Gompa** consists of two little 15th-century **temple buildings**, one enshrining an 8m-tall gold-faced Maitreya. An alternative descent slithers down to a **collection of stupas** in Chubi.

**Old Town**

AREA

Behind Leh's fanciful **Jama Masjid** (Sunnī men's mosque; Map p249), the winding alleys and stairways of Old Town burrow between and beneath a series of eroded chortens (stupas) and traditional mud-brick Ladakhi houses. Belatedly, many finer structures are

being restored and a new **Central Asian Museum** (Map p249; [www.tibetheritagefund.org/pages/projects/ladakh/central-asian-museum.php](http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/pages/projects/ladakh/central-asian-museum.php)) is under construction, styled like a tapered fortress tower. That's in a courtyard opposite **Datun Sahib** (Map p249), a sacred tree supposedly planted in 1517 by a Sikh mystic, though others claim it grew magically from the walking staff of Staksang Raspa, guru to Ladakhi's great king Sengge Namgyal.

A tunnel-passage leads up to the beautifully reconstructed 17th-century **Munshi Mansion** (Map p249), once the residence of the Ladakhi royal secretary and now housing the **Lamo Arts Centre** (☎251554; [www.lamo.org.in](http://www.lamo.org.in)).

The squat **Guru Lhakhang Shrine** (Map p249) contains newly repainted murals and a fierce-looking **Guru Rinpoche statue**. A short rocky scramble above, prominent **Namgyal Stupa** (Map p249) is just outside the palace walls.

Informative small-group **walking tours** (per person ₹300; ☉9.30am & 3pm, Tue, Thu & Sat) dawdle around the Old Town starting from Lala's Art Cafe (p257), where you should pre-book. Although advertised as lasting two hours, sometimes they take double that.

**Chowkhang Gompa**

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

Hidden in a large courtyard behind Main Bazaar (Map p249), the small, 20th-century Chowkhang Gompa has a gilt-roofed prayer room strung with hundreds of prayer flags. It's the headquarters of the Ladakhi Buddhist Association.

**Women's Alliance**

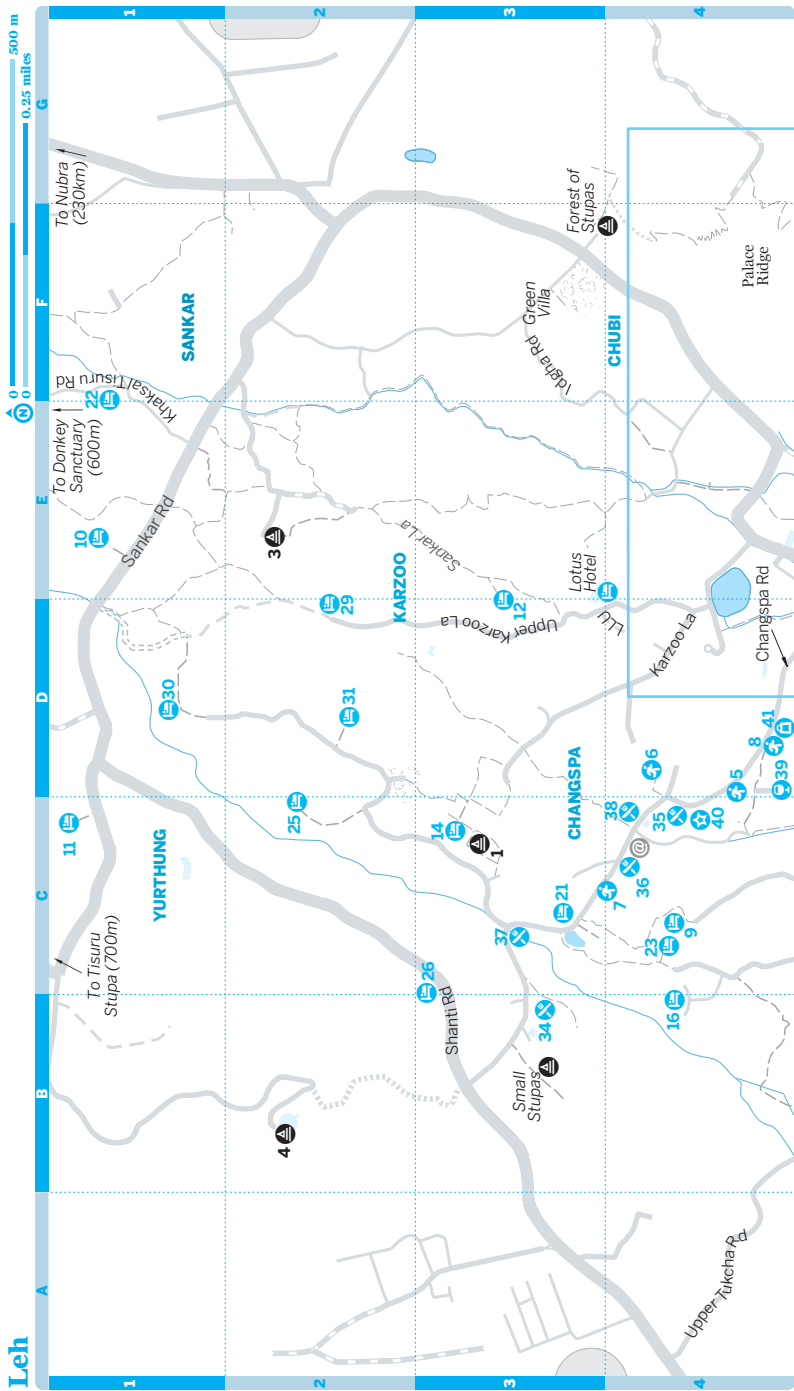
CULTURAL PROGRAM

(Map p249; ☎250293; [www.womensalliance.ladakh.org](http://www.womensalliance.ladakh.org), [www.isec.org.uk/pages/ladakh.html](http://www.isec.org.uk/pages/ladakh.html); ☉10am-5pm Mon-Sat) To learn more about the admirable balance between man and nature in traditional Ladakhi society, consider attending one of ISEC's relevant film screenings here (the venue might change). At 11am there's a varying programme, at 1pm *Economics of Happiness* and at 3pm the excellent hour-long documentary *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. Films are often followed by a group discussion. Donation appropriate.

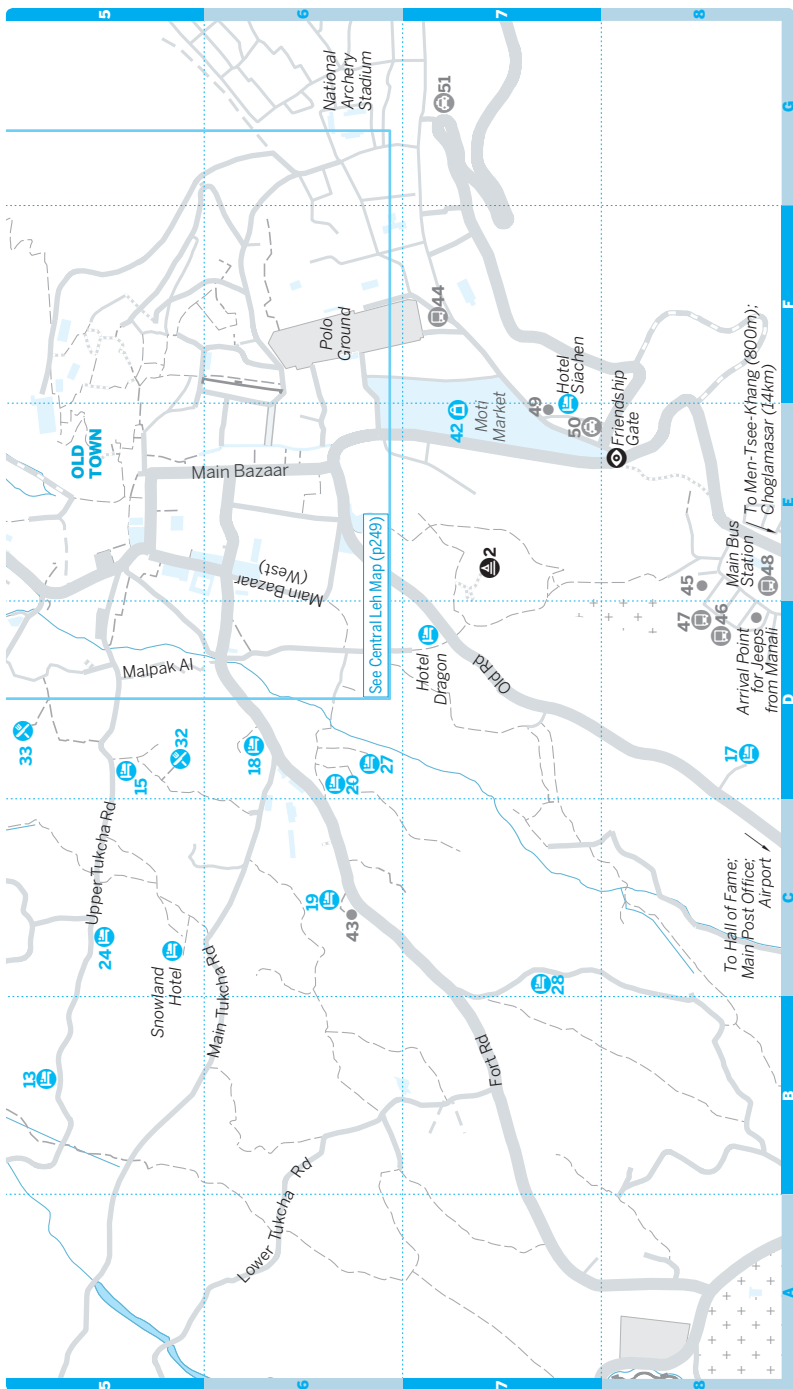
**NORTH OF CENTRE**

Leh's rural qualities, its remarkable network of canal-streams and its impressive mountain setting become swiftly apparent as you wander north. A relatively short yet captivating route follows crooked footpaths and lanes to little **Sankar Gompa** (Map p246;





Leh



## Leh

## 🕒 Sights

- 1 Gomang Stupa.....C3  
 2 Nezer Latho.....E7  
 3 Sankar Gompa.....E2  
 4 Shanti Stupa.....B2

## 🏞 Activities, Courses &amp; Tours

- 5 Himalayan Bikers.....D4  
 6 Mahabodhi Centre.....D4  
 7 Splash Adventures (Changspa Branch).....C4  
 8 Yama Adventures.....D4

## 🛏 Sleeping

- 9 Chow Guest House.....C4  
 10 Deskit Villa.....E1  
 11 Druk Ladakh.....C1  
 12 Dumbang Villa.....D3  
 13 Gangs Shun.....B5  
 14 Gomang Guest House.....C3  
 15 Haldupa Guest House.....D5  
 16 Hotel Gawaling International.....B4  
 17 Hotel Grand Dragon.....D8  
 18 Hotel Grand Willow.....D6  
 19 Hotel Namgyal Palace.....C6  
 20 Jamspal Guest House.....D6  
 21 Ladakh Residency.....C3  
 22 Lak Rook Garden Guesthouse.....F1  
 23 Lardakh Guest House.....C4  
 24 Norzin Holiday Home.....C5  
 25 Nurboo Guest house.....C2  
 26 Oriental Guesthouse.....C3  
 27 Padma Hotel.....D6  
 28 Poplar Eco-Resort.....C7  
 29 Royal Ladakh Hotel.....D2  
 30 Tse-Tan Guest House.....D1  
 31 Zee Guest House.....D2

## 🍴 Eating

- 32 Amego.....D5  
 33 Bon Appetit.....D5  
 34 Cafe Jeevan.....B3  
 35 Calabria.....C4  
 36 Dzomsa.....C4  
 37 Otsal Restaurant.....C3  
 38 Wonderland Restaurant.....C4

## 🍷 Drinking

- Bon Appetit.....(see 33)  
 39 Elements.....D4

## 🎮 Entertainment

- 40 KC Garden Restaurant.....C4

## 🛍 Shopping

- 41 Harish.....D4  
 42 Moti Market.....E7

## Information

- Oxygen bar.....(see 40)

## Transport

- 43 Air India.....C6  
 44 Bus to Kargil.....F7  
 45 Ladakh Taxi Operators Cooperative.....E8  
 46 Main Bus Station - J&K SRTC Buses.....D8  
 47 Main Bus Station - LBOC Buses.....D8  
 48 Main Bus Station - Minibuses.....E8  
 49 Shared Jeeps to Kargil.....E7  
 50 Taxi Stand.....E7  
 51 Zabakhana (Shared Taxis to Diskit).....G7

admission ₹30). Then, for memorable views, continue around 1km uphill to the laudable **Donkey Sanctuary** (Korean Temple Rd) or the nearby 11th-century **Tisuru Stupa**, a bulky, partly-restored mud-brick ruin that looks like a half-built *ziggurat* (stepped pyramid).

## WEST OF CENTRE

**Shanti Stupa**

VIEWPOINT

(Map p246) Built in 1991 by Japanese monks to promote world peace, this large, hilltop stupa has brightly coloured reliefs on its mid-levels and is topped by a spired white hemisphere. The greatest attraction is the stunning view of Leh. Ideally, make the breathless 15-minute climb when golden

afternoon light still illuminates the city but the steps up from Changspa are already bathed in cooling shadow.

**Gomang Stupa**

SACRED SITE

(Map p246) This one-of-a-kind, 9th-century stupa rises in concentric serrated layers flanked by ancient Buddhist rock carvings and numerous chortens. Its peaceful, shady setting feels genuinely spiritual.

## SOUTH OF CENTRE

**Hall of Fame**

MUSEUM

(off Map p246; Indian/foreigner ₹10/50; ☀9am-1pm & 2-7pm) Overlooking the airport runway at Km428 of the chokingly busy Leh-Spituk-Kargil road, this well presented museum

mostly commemorates the various high-altitude battles fought with Pakistan during the 20th century. Two afterthought rooms feature Ladakhi culture and nature.

### Nezer Latho

VIEWPOINT, SACRED SITE

(Map p246) This mysterious whitewashed cube, topped by a sheaf of juniper twigs, is the shrine of Leh's guardian deity. It sits atop a rocky outcrop offering superb 360-degree views over the city through colourful strings of prayer flags, a five-minute climb from Hotel Dragon.



## Activities, Courses & Tours

### Cycling

CYCLING

For an exhilarating yet effortless excursion take a jeep ride up to Khardung La (the 'world's highest road-pass', p269) and let gravity bring you back down. Actually, given the potholes of the uppermost 15km you might prefer to start from South Pullu army camp from which all 25km to Leh are well

paved. The ₹700 to ₹900 per person fee includes bike hire, permit and support vehicle (minimum group-size four). Book through **Summer Holidays** (Map p249; ☎252651; Zangsti Rd) or **Himalayan Bikers** (Map p246; ☎250937; www.himalayan-biker.com; Changspa). Both also rent mountain bikes (per day ₹350 to ₹550).

### Gephel Shadrupling

MEDITATION

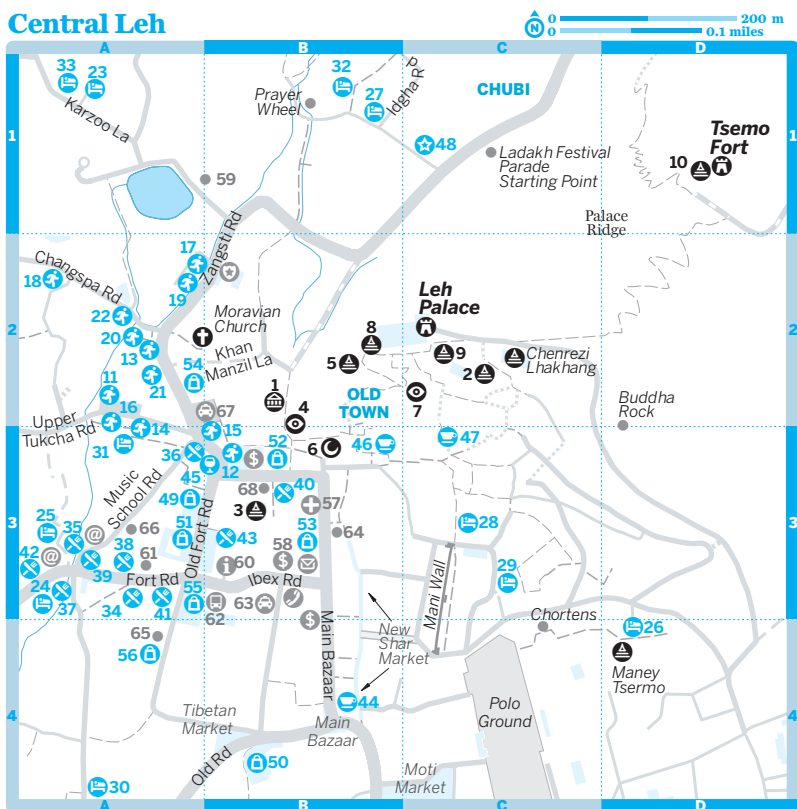
(www.ladakh-gsn-nuns.org; Ayu-Sabu) This tiny nunnery, around 6km from Leh, runs five-day meditation courses. The suggested donation of ₹500 per day includes bed-space and food. It's very hard to find but Choglamsar-based taxi-driver **Hassan** (☎9419243576) knows the way.

### Mahabodhi Centre

YOGA, MEDITATION

(Map p246; ☎251162; www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org; Changspa Lane; 90min yoga class ₹150-250) Daily except Sundays there's a meditation session (by donation) and several 1½-hour yoga classes in a variety of styles. Book here for

## Central Leh



## Central Leh

### 📍 Top Sights

Leh Palace.....	C2
Tsemo Fort.....	D1

### 📍 Sights

1 Central Asia Museum.....	B2
2 Chamba Lhakhang.....	C2
Chandazik Gompa.....	(see 9)
3 Chowkhang Gompa.....	B3
4 Datun Sahib Sacred Tree.....	B2
5 Guru Lhakhang Shrine.....	B2
6 Jama Masjid.....	B3
Lamo Arts Centre.....	(see 7)
7 Munshi Mansion.....	C2
8 Namgyal Stupa.....	B2
9 Soma Gompa.....	C2
10 Tsemo Gompa.....	D1

### 📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

11 Hemis National Park Guide Service.....	A2
12 Ladakh Eco Adventure.....	B3
13 Ladakh Tour Escort.....	A2
14 Ladakhi Women's Travel Company.....	A3
15 Little Tibet.....	B3
16 Open Ladakh.....	A2

17 Rimo.....	A2
18 Shayok Tours & Travels.....	A2
19 Snow Leopard Trails.....	A2
Splash Adventures.....	(see 45)
20 Sri Sonam Wangyal (IMF).....	A2
21 Summer Holidays.....	A2
22 Venture Equipment.....	A2

### 📍 Sleeping

23 Hotel Saser.....	A1
24 Hotel Tso-Kar.....	A3
25 Indus Guest House.....	A3
26 Namgyal Guest House.....	D4
27 New Royal Guest House.....	B1
28 Old Ladakh Guest House.....	C3
29 Palace View Guest House.....	C3
30 Pangong Hotel.....	A4
31 Peace Guest House.....	A3
32 Rehela Guest House.....	B1
33 Travellers' House.....	A1

### 📍 Eating

34 Chopsticks.....	A3
35 Dolphin Bakery.....	A3
36 Dzomsa.....	A3
37 Dzomsa.....	A3
38 Gesmo.....	A3

**residential courses** (3/10 days ₹3000/7000) in *vipassana* meditation at the organisation's much bigger Meditation Centre, approximately 1km north of Km464.2 in Choglamsar where Sunday 'introduction-to-meditation' sessions cost ₹500 including bus transfer from Leh.

### Mountain Climbing

MOUNTAINEERING

Stok Kangri (6120m) is the triangular snow-capped peak usually visible straight across the valley from Leh. As a 'trekking peak' it's accessible to those with minimal climbing experience but scaling its uppermost slopes still requires ice axes, crampons, considerable fitness and a guide with groups roped together for safety. Pre-climb acclimatisation is essential as AMS can be a serious worry. Many agencies offer Stok Kangri packages generally taking five days from Stok or Zingchen.

Ladakh has over 100 other climbable peaks above 6000m, many rarely, if ever, scaled. **Venture Equipment** (Map p249) and other Changspa outfits rent climbing gear.

Per-person **peak fees** range from US\$50 (trekking peaks) to US\$400 according to peak height. Peaks over 7000m require spe-

cial permission from Delhi and thus take months of preparation. However, any others are usually issued in minutes through **IMF's** Leh representative, **Sri Sonam Wangyal** (Map p249; ☎252992; www.indmount.org; Changspa Rd) whose house-office is tucked inconspicuously into the Mentokling Restaurant yard. The youngest man to scale Everest back in 1965, he happily shows off his medals and recounts climbing yarns. You'll need six copies of your passport and visa plus details of your guide. Agencies can apply on your behalf.

### Open Ladakh

MEDITATION

(Map p249; ☎9906981026; www.openladakh.com; Hemis Complex, 1st fl, unit 23) Runs one-hour **meditation sessions** at 4pm Monday to Thursday, a Wednesday all-day workshop on understanding Buddhism (₹300), weekend *vipassana* residential retreats in Stok (₹2000) and monthly meditation treks.

### Rafting & Kayaking

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

In summer, numerous agencies offer daily rafting excursions through glorious canyon scenery. You can also follow in a kayak for

Ladag Apricot Store .....	(see 36)
<b>39</b> Lamayuru Restaurant .....	A3
<b>40</b> Norlakh .....	B3
Pumpernickel German Bakery .....	(see 45)
Tandoori Bakeries .....	(see 4)
<b>41</b> Summer Harvest .....	A3
<b>42</b> Tenzin Dickey .....	A3
<b>43</b> Vegetable Market .....	B3

#### **Drinking**

<b>44</b> Desert Rain .....	B4
<b>45</b> Il Forno .....	B3
Indus Wine Shop .....	(see 58)
<b>46</b> Lala's Art Café .....	B3
<b>47</b> Zoya Cafe .....	C3

#### **Entertainment**

Traditional Ladakhi Song-&-Dance Shows .....	(see 9)
<b>48</b> Women's Alliance .....	C1

#### **Shopping**

<b>49</b> Book Worm .....	A3
<b>50</b> Gol Market .....	B4
<b>51</b> Handicrafts Industrial Cooperative Shop .....	A3

<b>52</b> Ladakh Bookshop .....	B3
LEDeg .....	(see 59)
<b>53</b> Leh Ling Bookshop .....	B3
<b>54</b> Otdan Bookshop .....	A2
<b>55</b> Tibetan Refugee Market .....	A3
<b>56</b> Wamda Wood Carving .....	A4
Women's Alliance .....	(see 48)

#### **Information**

<b>57</b> Het Ram Vinay Kumar Pharmacy .....	B3
<b>58</b> J&K Bank ATM .....	B3
<b>59</b> LEDEG (Ladakh Ecological Development Group) .....	B1
<b>60</b> Tourist Office .....	B3

#### **Transport**

HPTDC Booking Office .....	(see 34)
<b>61</b> HPTDC Booking Office .....	A3
<b>62</b> HPTDC Buses Departure Point .....	B3
<b>63</b> Jeep and Taxi Stand .....	B3
<b>64</b> Jet Airways .....	B3
<b>65</b> Motorcycle Rental Companies .....	A4
<b>66</b> Motorcycle Rental Companies .....	A3
<b>67</b> Taxi Stand .....	B2
<b>68</b> Vajra Voyages .....	B3

around 50% extra. Prepare to get very wet. There are two main routes, **Phey to Nimmu** – grade II (beginners) from ₹1000; and **Chiling to Nimmu** – grade III, tougher, from ₹1400; kayakers must be experienced.

**Rimo** (Map p249; ☎253348; www.rimoriverexpeditions.com; Zangsti Rd) has very helpful staff and offers two-day kayaking courses for beginners and a twice-yearly expedition making a full four-day rafting descent of the Zaskar river from near Padum (US\$728 inclusive). **Splash Adventures** (☎254870; www.splashladakh.com) Central (Map p249; Zangsti Rd) Changspa (Map p246; Changspa Rd) is another useful contact.

#### **Trekking & Jeep Safaris** OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Countless agencies offer trekking packages (p252) and jeep tours. Few seem systematically bad but many are very inconsistent. In reality, a deciding factor is often which agent happens to have a group leaving on the day you need. The ones we've listed here proved competent and/or were warmly recommended by travellers. For multi-day jeep hires, agencies can put together a fare-sharing

group, organising permits, vehicle and driver. Five per jeep is optimal for comfort versus expense. Most popular excursions are Pangong Tso or the Nubra/Shyok Valleys. Book at least 24 hours ahead.

**Shayok Tours & Travels** (Map p249; ☎9419342346, 9419888902; shayoktravels@rediffmail.com; Changspa Rd) Frank, trustworthy and helpful. Can organise inner line permits for travellers on motorbikes.

**Yama Adventures** (Map p246; ☎250833; www.yamatreks.com; Changspa Rd) Consistent recommendations from several readers underlining their eco-credentials.

**Ladakh Tour Escort** (Map p249; ☎255825; Zangsti) Honest and obliging.

**Snow Leopard Trails** (Map p249; ☎252074; Hotel Kang-Lha-Chen Complex, Zangsti Rd)

**Little Tibet** (Map p249; ☎252951; www.littletibetladakh.com; Zangsti Rd)

**Ladakh Eco Adventure** (Map p249; ☎252951; www.ladakh-eco-adventures.com)

## TREKKING IN LADAKH & ZANSKAR

Bargain value, thrillingly scenic treks can take you into magical roadless villages, through craggy gorges and across dazzlingly stark mountain passes.

### Seasons

The season is essentially July and August. Storms occasionally interrupt itineraries and snow is possible from early September. In February you could attempt the challenging Chadar ice-trek (p241).

### Preparation

As most trekking routes start around 3500m (often climbing above 5000m) proper acclimatisation is essential to avoid AMS (p1193). You could acclimatise with 'baby' treks or by adding extra (less interesting) days to the core treks, for instance starting from Lamayuru, Spituk or Martselang rather than Hinju/Photoksar, Zingchen or Shang Sumdo.

Book a jeep transfer from your finishing point or choose to end up somewhere with public transport (eg Stok).

### Horse Treks

At these altitudes carrying heavy packs is much more exhausting than many anticipate so consider engaging packhorses (the accompanying horseman can often double as a guide) or do a 'homestay trek' (see below). Agencies will happily arrange all-in packages with horses, guides, food and (often old) camping gear starting from around \$35 per person per day. If you're self-sufficient (tent, food) it's often possible to find your own horseman from ₹300 per horse per day, but prices rise considerably during August (harvest season) and many horsemen are contracted to agencies, so even at Lamayuru or Padum you'll need patience. If booking horses or trekking late in the season, expect to pay for the necessary extra days' travel between trailhead and stables (for many agency horses, that's Spituk).

### Homestay Treks

Rural homestays and/or parachute cafes are now available along many (though not all) popular trekking routes, reducing or negating the need to carry significant supplies and camping gear. Such homestays (typically ₹400/700 per single/double including simple meals) provide a fascinating window into local culture; you'll generally eat with the family in their traditional kitchen, their pots and pans proudly displayed above the Aga-style winter stove. You might even be able to help harvesting or planting the family fields. Mud-brick rooms generally have rugs and blankets for bedding, some have solar-battery electric lamps. On popular routes it's probably worth paying the ₹50 extra to have Leh agencies (listed on [www.himalayan-homestays.com](http://www.himalayan-homestays.com)) book bed-space for you. However, given the lack of telephones, such 'bookings' are essentially just notes in Ladakhi asking a host to

### Sleeping

Leh has hundreds of guesthouses and around 60 hotels. Conditions in rock-bottom places are usually simple rather than sleazy, though room standards can vary significantly within each property so, when possible, look before you book. Many budget places won't take advance bookings. If all our suggestions are full, there are dozens of other decent budget options, especially in Changspa and Karzoo.

Often, better guesthouses (around ₹700) are preferable to lacklustre ₹2200 hotels with ill-fitting carpets, saggy beds and faux veneer panelling. A few slap on 10% service fees.

Hot water is typically provided either morning or evening (sometimes both) using wood-fired boilers. Water can take up to 10 minutes to run warm, wasting a precious resource. An ecofriendly alternative is to request hot water by bucket or use it less often. Geysers are likely to be more common and power cuts less frequent once the Alchi hydro-power dam comes online (probably 2012). Many guesthouses will provide towels on request. Toilet paper is rarely included and usually should NOT be flushed (use the plastic bin).

Most accommodation closes in winter. A few hotels and family guesthouses do stay

give you priority. In Rumbak and Sham villages it's generally OK to turn up unannounced. Engaging a guide (typically ₹800 per day) is worthwhile for security, route-finding and to better appreciate social interactions en route. Useful contacts:

» **Ladakhi Women's Travel Company** (Map p249; ☎250973; www.ladakhwomenstravel.com; Hemis Complex, 1st fl, unit 14, Leh; ☀10am-7pm) Female run, but male customers accepted. Recommended but only four guides available.

» **Hemis National Park Guide Service** (Map p249; ☎256207; hemis\_npark@yahoo.co.in; Hemis Complex, 1st fl, unit 11, Leh; ☀9am-1pm & 2-7pm) Dozens of guides available.

## Which Trek?

Popular options:

DAYS	ROUTE	HOMESTAYS?	HIGH PASSES	SEE
2	Zingchen-Rumbak-Stok	plenty	4900m	p262
2	Hinju-Sumdho Chinmu-Sumdha Do	yes, limited space	4950m	p268
2-4	Itchar-Phuktal-Itchar	yes, limited space	no	p242
3+	Chiling-Skiu (Markha Valley)-Yurutse/Rumbak-Zingchen	yes	4920m	p262
5+	Chiling-Kaya-Markha-Hankar-Nimaling-Shang Sumdo	yes (or tent-camp)	5030m	p263
5 (8)	(Rumtse)-Tso Khar-Korzok	no	four (seven)	p277
6 (8)	(Padum)-Itchar-Darcha including Phuktal	some days	5090m	p242
5 (9)	(Lamayuru-Honupatta)-Photoksar-Lingshet-Hanumil-(Padum)	some days	at least four	p267

For something relatively easy, Zingchen-Rumbak-Yurutse-Zingchen makes a great one- or two-day sampler from Leh, Markha Valley routes before Nimaling have no passes to cross and Sham (p265) 'treks' are little more than road walks between attractive old villages.

## Further Information

- » Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya*
- » Trailblazer's *Trekking in Ladakh*
- » www.myhimalayas.com/travelogues/ladakh.htm.

open, the latter often charging ₹100 extra for heating and offering only bucket water since pipes freeze.

### CENTRAL LEH

The following accommodation features on Map p249.

#### Travellers' House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎250419; thetravellershouse@gmail.com; Karzoo Lane; d ₹500-600) Eight well-kept guest rooms with geyser-equipped bathrooms face the friendly family's attractive traditional home and vegetable patch. Great castle views from the flat roof. There are sev-

eral other great-value choices on the same quiet lane, including the nearby **Hotel Saser** (☎250162; Karzoo Lane; d ₹600-1000).

#### New Royal Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎252956; Idgha Rd; d ₹800, without bathroom ₹600) A notch above many hotels, the rooms have smart fittings, wood-effect floors and bathrooms with designer shower-heads. The upper-floor balcony has a swing seat perusing mountain and fortress views.

#### Palace View Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎250773; palace.view@hotmail.com; d from ₹450, without bathroom ₹200-300) First opened in



1975, this upliftingly lived-in family place has garden seating, two sitting rooms and a rooftop with brilliant views of the palace ridge. Rooms are simple with ageing but clean linen, the cheapest using camp-beds. Bathrooms have geysers. The owners are friendly and conscientious. Ladakhi dinners available if you order by 5pm. Open year-round.

### Pangong Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎254655; www.pangongladakh.com; Chulung Lane; s/d ₹2000/2210; @☎) Despite a few signs of wear, the Pangong is comparatively stylish with attractive pine cladding in public areas. The best rooms are on the top floor with rooftop terraces. Wi-fi per hour/day costs ₹100/500.

### Namgyal Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎253307; d ₹400, s/d/tr without bathroom ₹150/200/300) En suite rooms have varnished log ceilings, geyser and sit-down flush toilet, though some seem dusty and have foam beds. Many have views of Stok Kangri and the Maney Tsermo stupas. Cheaper rooms are simple but recently repainted and share three bathrooms (seatless toilets) in a cube of traditional old building.

### Old Ladakh Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎252951; www.littletibetladakh.com; d ₹400-600, without bathroom s/d ₹200/300) Picked out with distinctive crimson timbers, there's a central courtyard, traditional kitchen/breakfast room and phenomenal rooftop view. Downstairs rooms are dingily claustrophobic, others are bright if worn; room 304 has roof terrace and settees. New annex under construction.



### Indus Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎252502; masters\_adv@yahoo.co.in; Malpak Alley; d ₹300-700; ☎) All 16 rooms are en suite, the water heated all day by a furnace burning waste (cardboard, cow-dung etc). Little shared terraces have fortress views and the semi-enclosed courtyard is peacefully tree-shaded. Food, served on request, is mostly sourced from the well-travelled family's organic farm. Original treks available.

### Hotel Tso-Kar

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎255763; www.lehladakhhotel.com; Fort Rd; d from ₹1000) Rooms have newly re-tiled bathrooms but otherwise aren't quite as attractive as the seductively colonnaded courtyard might imply.



### Rehela Guest House

HOMESTAY \$

(☎250969; Tsemoview Alley; d ₹400-500, without bathroom ₹200-300) Small, partly solar-

powered homestay with bright unfussy rooms, free drinking water and use of the kitchen/laundry tap.

### Peace Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎253514; r ₹400) Very central yet quietly tucked away in a hidden garden, this new bungalow has five good value, gleamingly clean rooms each with decent bathrooms.

## NORTH OF CENTRE

Karzoo becomes delightfully rural towards the north and west and has some of Leh's best-value budget accommodation but there are no shops or restaurants and at night it's a long, dark walk home from town if you're as far out as Sankar or Yurthung. The following accommodation features on Map p246.



### Royal Ladakh

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎251646; www.hotelroyalladakh.com; Upper Karzoo Ln; s/d ₹1800/2450; ☎) Behind the manicured lawn, whitewashed facade and traditionally carved wooden window frames lies a stylishly appointed modern hotel with fine linen, flat-screen TVs and 1960s-retro bathrooms. Virtually every room has oodles of space and inspiring views of either Stok Kangri or Tsemo Fort.

### Dumbang Villa

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9419219416; Sankar Ln; d ₹300-600) One of Leh's best value guesthouses, this new bungalow is set in peaceful gardens with wide panoramic views. Fair-sized rooms come with wicker seats, log ceilings and good bathrooms (hot water by bucket).

### Tse-Tan Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎250510; tsetan\_n@yahoo.com; Upper Changspa; r without bathroom ₹200-300) Worth the walk for large, airy rooms sharing very clean bathrooms with geysers. There are perfectly framed mountain views from the upper front rooms and the adorable host family plies guests with endless mint tea. Other peaceful family guesthouses costing under ₹300 include friendly **Zee Guest House** (☎251131; r without bathroom ₹250) and **Nurboo Guest House** (☎9419340947; s/d without bathroom ₹200/300), where you'll be serenaded by the sound of rushing water.

### Gomang Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎252657; Old Karzoo; r without bathroom ₹200-300) A warren of wobbly stairways links simple rooms sharing Ladakhi and Western bathrooms. A big plus is the pair of 1st-floor sitting areas overlook Gomang Stupa.

**Lak Rook Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍252987; Sankar; s/d ₹300/350, s/d/tr without bathroom ₹200/250/300) This cult traveller favourite is a large, ramshackle Ladakhi farmhouse almost lost within its vast organic vegetable garden. Friendly owners and good food but be prepared for lumpy ageing mattresses, paper-bag lampshades and other minor inconveniences. Ladakhi toilet available.

**Oriental Guest House**

HOTEL, GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍253153; www.oriental-ladakh.com; Shanti Rd; r ₹600-1000, without bathroom ₹150/250; 🕒year-round; 📍) This self-contained 70-room complex on the edge of Changspa uses solar heating, has a lobby-library with internet, a central lawn and both traditional and modern glass-fronted kitchens, the latter serving a full-scale restaurant. Rooms range from very basic, through fair-value ₹600 doubles to newer ₹1000 versions with sizes and views that vary.

**Deskitt Villa**

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(📍253498; Sankar; d incl breakfast ₹1200) But for the typically undulating carpets, rooms would be adorable with marble-floored bathrooms and private balconies (in some). An attraction is the thatched gazebo in the raised garden offering comfortable outdoor reading space. Includes breakfast

**Druk Ladakh**

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍251702; Yurthung; s/d/ste ₹3400/4400/6400; 📶) Echoing acres of marble, carved wood and crimson furniture lead to relatively indulgent new rooms with parquet floors, flat screen TVs and closable shower booths. Luxuries even run to free toilet paper.

**WEST OF CENTRE**

Pleasant, if traffic-clogged, Fort Rd and Changspa Rd are conveniently full of cafes, internet travel agencies and tourist shops. The Tukcha roads are quieter while side lanes take you swiftly into another, altogether more peaceful world with dozens of decent sleeping options available. The following accommodation features on Map p246.

**Padma Hotel**

HOTEL \$\$

(📍252630; www.padmamaladakh.net; d ₹1850-2200; 📶) Hidden in a large garden, the eco-aware Padma has attractively appointed new hotel rooms with fan, bed lamps, good linen and simple bathrooms using solar-

heated water. The upstairs restaurant and common balconies enjoy fine mountain views, there's a library, ₹8 water refills and free wi-fi. The guesthouse section (d ₹600) with shared bathrooms occupies the family's traditional Ladakhi house, complete with traditional kitchen and chapel/meditation room.

**Gangs-Shun**

HOMESTAY \$

(📍252603; morup\_lee@yahoo.co.in; Upper Tukcha Rd; d ₹600-700, f ₹800) Five guest rooms above an attractive new family home come with good beds, quality parquet flooring and attached bathrooms that are better quality than in most Leh hotels. Shared upper terrace.

**Chow Guest House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍252399; d ₹400, without bathroom ₹250) Sparkling clean, airy budget rooms with good mattresses and log ceilings in two new but unobtrusive buildings set in a beautiful flower-filled garden down a narrow path from Changspa Rd.

**Jampal Guest House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍251272; Mayflower Alley; r ₹400-500, without bathroom ₹200-300) Super-friendly family place, with large garden, shrine and traditional-style sitting room. Simple but central, and open year-round.

**Norzin Holiday Home**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍252022; norzin.holidays@gmail.com; Upper Tukcha Rd; r ₹500-600, without bathroom s/d ₹200/300) Unusually well-kept local home with roof terrace, garden seating and a grapevine dominating the glassed-in veranda. Free drinking water refills, welcoming family.

**Haldupa Guest House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍251374; Upper Tukcha Rd; r ₹400-500, without bathroom ₹250) One airy, cheaper room (with shared squat) is inside the wonderfully authentic original house, home to an utterly enchanting local family. The rest are compact but brand new with good bathrooms in a separate block facing the garden.

**Hotel Gawaling International**

HOTEL \$\$

(📍253252; www.hotelgawaling.com; s/d/deluxe ₹1980/2640/2970; 📶) Rooms are better maintained than at most other Leh hotels with parquet floors and good bathrooms albeit offering minimal toiletries. Each has a balcony (huge in deluxe rooms) facing attractively rural scenery and the whole complex is serenaded by a flowing river. Wi-fi is free, internet ₹100 per hour. Road access from Upper Tukcha Rd.

**Ladakh Residency**

(☎254111; www.ladakhresidency.com; Changspa Rd; s/d/ste ₹3850/4950/6600; 📶) This brand-new layered collage of wooden balconies and marble floors is one of the few wheelchair-friendly buildings in Ladakh, though it feels disproportionately large for Changspa and a carpark fills most of what should be the garden.

HOTEL \$\$\$

📶) Leh's only really international-standard hotel, the Grand Dragon is professionally appointed with functioning lift, fitting carpets and rooms approximating to business standards (safe and fridge in suites). However, it's away from shops down a busy road and there's an ugly foreground to the mountain views. Open year-round. Wi-fi ₹300/1600 per hour/day.

**Hotel Namgyal Palace**

(☎256356; namgyalpalace.com; Fort Rd; s/d/ste ₹1570/2180/3630; 📶) The facade's clashing mix of silvered windows and Tibetan woodwork is eye-catching if discordant. Rooms have well-appointed bathrooms (including toiletries) and seats in the bay windows from which to contemplate mountain panoramas (upper floor rooms). Better than most in this price range but there are some minor housekeeping niggles.

HOTEL \$\$

**Lha-Ri-Sa Resort**

(☎252423; www.ladakh-lharisa.com; s/d/ste ₹2800/3380/6000) Strikingly designed, the soaring atrium is held aloft on temple-like pillars. Raised walkways between apple trees link large, high-ceilinged rooms with 1940s-retro walnut furniture. This is arguably Leh's best hotel but it's 3km south of town via unpleasantly busy major roads so you'll need wheels to go almost anywhere of interest. Ample parking.

HOTEL \$\$

**Poplar Eco-Resort**

(☎253518; poplar\_ecoresort@yahoo.com; Shenam Rd; s/d ₹1600/2200, full board ₹2450/3300) Lost in the birdsong of an overgrown apricot orchard are a series of two-room cottages, each pair sharing a veranda with wicker chairs. Rooms have good tiled bathrooms with all-day hot water, though beds are soft and decor is mostly lacking. Most food and juice served is sourced from the organic garden.

ECORESORT \$\$

**Eating**

Traveller cafes abound, Israeli and Chinese options supplementing curries, banana pancakes, tandoori pizzas and Tibetan favourites but curiously few restaurants offer true Ladakhi food (try Chopsticks or request it at family guesthouses). Many eateries, including Changspa's numerous garden-restaurants, close from mid-September to July, their owners often decamping to Goa.

**Ladakh Guest House**

(☎250480; s/d/view without bathroom ₹150/200/300) From the wobbly old pillars to the rooftop shrine, this is the absolute archetype of a classic Ladakhi house but it makes few concessions to Western comfort and the bathroom is in the big, attractive garden.

HOMESTAY \$

**CENTRAL LEH**

You won't need a guide to find the numerous rooftop and Tibetan/Chinese restaurants dotted all along Main Bazaar but while there are a few decent options, food tends to be better and gardens more inviting if you head out along Fort Rd or into Changspa. Self caterers can buy fresh produce from the **vegetable market** (Old Fort Rd) or from colourfully dressed women along Main Bazaar. Fresh-baked bread rounds (₹3) are sold hot from traditional wood-fired **tandoori bakeries** behind Jama Masjid.

**Hotel Grand Willow**

(☎251835; www.hotelgrandwillow.net; Fort Rd; s/d ₹1600/2200) Three floors of carved balconies fold around a small, neat garden area. Recently re-painted rooms have ceiling mouldings and silky bedcovers and although a little dark, come with good new bathrooms. Discounts possible.

HOTEL \$\$

The following eateries feature on Map p249.

**SOUTH OF CENTRE**

Noisy Old Road has several lacklustre mid-range options and package tour places, of which only a couple are recommended.

**Hotel Grand Dragon**

(Map p246; ☎250786; www.thegranddragonladakh.com; Old Rd, Shenam; s/d/ste ₹6050/7150/11,000;

HOTEL \$\$\$

**Chopsticks**

(Fort Rd; mains ₹60-180, rice ₹55) This 3rd-floor pan-Asian restaurant is one of Leh's most stylish eateries. Their 'Wonderwok' stir-fries and Thai green curry are excellent and prices are very fair, given the high quality of service.

ASIAN \$\$

**Norlakh**

(Main Bazaar; mains ₹40-100, momos ₹50-95, rice ₹30) The best of several town-centre options

TIBETAN \$

with mildly trendy decor touches and great pure-veg Tibetan food. Try the cheese-and-spinach *momos* or special *gyathuk* (a rich noodle soup). It's upstairs and easy to miss hidden behind a willow tree almost opposite Ladakh Bookshop.

### Pumpnickel German

#### Bakery

BAKERY CAFE \$

(Zangsti Rd; meals ₹70-180) Behind the simple bakery counter (good strudels) is a merrily ramshackle dining room with Ladakhi wooden columns and a full multicuisine menu.

### Gesmo

MULTICUISINE \$

(Fort Rd, curries ₹40-100, rice ₹35) Old-fashioned traveller haunt, with gingham tablecloths, checkerboard ceilings, and a range of cakes, breakfasts and good-value meals from curries to yak-cheese pizza.

### Tenzin Dickey

TIBETAN \$

(Fort Rd, mains ₹40-70) Cosy if unpretentious eatery serving generous portions of excellent vegetarian Tibetan and Chinese food at sensible prices. Try the delectable cheese *kothay* (like Japanese *gyoza*).

### Summer Harvest

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Fort Rd; mains ₹70-120, rice ₹30-90) Tourist favourite with pseudo-traditional lacquered-wood columns and dangling mod-Chinese lamps. Our malai kofta was divine but *momos* were bullet-proof. Service charge 10%.

### Lamayuru Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$

(Fort Rd; curries ₹30-80, rice ₹25) Plain but reliable backpacker place for good inexpensive Indian, Chinese and international snacks, all vegetarian. A ₹70 thali is available till 7pm.

### Dolphin Bakery

CAFE \$

(Malpak Alley; mains ₹40-120) Cakes and snack meals served in the open air at a simple triangle of a tree-shaded, streamside terrace.

## CHANGSPA

The following eateries feature on Map p246.



### Bon Appetit

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(251533; mains ₹180-350; ☺11am-late) By far Leh's most imaginative restaurant is a stylish exercise in Ladakhi minimalist architecture and offers a wide panorama of the southern mountains. A limited but thoroughly scrumptious selection of artistically

prepared dishes includes sublime cashew chicken in pesto sauce.

### Calabria

MULTICUISINE \$

(Changspa Rd; mains ₹45-90, rice ₹30, pastas ₹160-180) The decor wins no prizes and traffic outside can be annoying but the vegetarian Indian and Chinese fare is consistently excellent, sensibly priced and obligingly served. Pastries and real espressos (₹30) are available, electricity willing.

### Café Jeevan

MULTICUISINE \$

(Booklovers Retreat; Changspa Rd; meals ₹70-140) Despite the comparatively sophisticated appearance, prices aren't significantly higher than most bog-standard traveller pads. A glass-sided kitchen turns out high quality vegetarian meals in a wide range of cuisines, including some of Leh's best pizza. There's also a two-case bookshop and a covered roof terrace.

### Amego

KOREAN \$\$

(mains ₹85-400; ☺9am-8pm Mon-Sat) A wide range of very authentic Korean specialities served in a rural farmhouse setting surrounded by barley fields.

### Wonderland Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$

(Changspa Lane; meals ₹70-190, rice ₹30) The brick-thick menu is a veritable dictionary of cuisines covering virtually all bases. The rooftop offers indoor and outdoor seating, limited views and respite from traffic noise. Prices are reasonable. Real coffee served.

### Otsal Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$

(Changspa Rd; mains ₹40-90, pizza ₹90-130) Serenaded by a gurgling stream, this pleasant backpacker retreat includes rooftop seating plus an indoor area of floor mats and colourful Tibetan tables.



## Drinking

Many garden and rooftop restaurants serve beer, but it's almost never on the menu: ask the waiter. Bon Appetit has a cocktail menu and pours a mean mojito (₹170). For take-away booze the handy **Indus Wine Shop** (Map p249; lbex Rd; ☺10am-1pm & 3-9pm) is closed on the 8th, 10th and 15th days of the Tibetan calendar.



### Lala's Art Cafe

CAFE

(Map p249; Old Town; ☺8.30am-7.30pm) A tiny, brilliantly restored mud-brick Old Town house with trip-you-up stone steps and an open roof terrace serving great Italian coffee

and scrumptious cake-of-the-day. Read the newspapers then check out the ancient carved steles in the ground floor shrine section.

### Elements

GARDEN CAFE

(Map p246; Changspa Rd; ☉noon-late) The idiosyncratic food is almost as full of herbs as the clients' cigarettes in this popular open-air chillout. Adobe-style low walls separate cushioned ground-spaces, there's an open fire on colder evenings and after the mountain views have faded into darkness, movies or music vids are often projected. Open unusually late. Beer available.

### Zoya Cafe

CAFE

(Map p249; Old Town; ☉9am-7pm) Handy as a landmark when climbing to the palace or as a tea-stop when returning, entry is disconcertingly through a typical local home but the 360-degree rooftop views are unparalleled anywhere in Leh.

### Desert Rain

CAFE

(Map p249; New Shar Market; ☉9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Relaxed Western-style cafe serving good coffee and various teas with plenty of (predominantly Christian) books to read. Film nights on Saturdays around 5.30pm.

### Il Forno

RESTAURANT-BAR

(Map p249; Zangsti Rd) One of several gastronomically lacklustre rooftop restaurants above Main Bazaar where town views and (sometimes cold) beer are the main attractions. The thin-crust, wood-oven pizzas (₹140-190) are OK too.



## Entertainment

### KC Garden Restaurant

CINEMA RESTAURANT

(Map p246; Changspa Rd) One of Changspa's liveliest evening spots. Open-air movies are projected (around 8pm most nights) and KC's is also the pickup point for monthly all-night parties (₹400 including transport) on full-moon nights May to August.

### Traditional Ladakhi Song-& Dance Shows

CULTURAL PROGRAM

(Map p249; admission R200; ☉5.30pm) Tourist-oriented performances on summer evenings outside Soma Gompa, partly visible for free from the ridge behind.



## Shopping

Many colourful souvenir shops and **Tibetan Refugee Markets** (Map p249) sell wide selections of *thagkas*, Ladakhi hats, 'antiques' and heavy turquoise jewellery, as well as Kashmiri shawls and various Nepali, Tibetan and Chinese knick-knacks.

Several bookshops are well stocked with postcards, novels, spiritual works and books on Ladakh, Kashmir and Tibet.

### LEDeG

HANDICRAFTS

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; www.ledeg.org; ☉9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Sells crafts and clothes that are locally produced (see www.himalayanhandicrafts.org) and generally very fair value. Behind (except weekends) you can peruse their display of renewable energy devices and visit their one-room exhibition featuring a typical Ladakhi kitchen scene.

## LEH ECO AWARENESS

Water is precious – those streams you see cascading beside virtually every lane aren't a sign of plenty but an elaborate network of irrigation that keep Leh from reverting to dusty mountain desert. Anything you can do to save water is a positive step. One move among guesthouses is to encourage eco-aware clients to use traditional Ladakhi long-drop toilets. These recycle human waste into compost with earth occasionally sprinkled over the latest 'deposits'. These brilliant inventions prevent sewerage from polluting streams while avoiding the terrible water wastage of flush toilets. But don't put anything nonbiodegradable down the hole. Remember whatever goes in will end up on the farmer's field in a year or two.

To save Leh from vanishing under a sea of plastic bottles, refills of pressure-boiled, purified water are provided by environmental organisations **Dzomsa** (Map p249 & Map p246; refill ₹7; ☉8am-10.30pm) – which has branches on Changspa Rd, Fort Rd and Main Bazaar – and **LEDeG** (Map p249; ☎253221; www.ledeg.org; refill ₹5; ☉9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat). Both also offer recycling and disposal services for paper, bottles and batteries while Dzomsa also offers an eco-friendly laundry service (₹70 per kg).

Sensitive travellers are encouraged to buy locally sourced foods, eg apricots and *tsestalulu* (sea buckthorn) juice instead of imported chocolate and packaged soft drinks. Get these and other local fruit products at Dzomsa or **Ladag Apricot Store** (Map p249; ☉9am-6pm).

**Ladakh Bookshop**

BOOKSHOP

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Main Bazaar) Hidden upstairs near the SBI ATM, it's the best stocked of the bookshops. It publishes locally relevant works and stocks Olizane's pricey, slightly flawed but indispensable *Ladakh Trekking Maps* ([www.abram.ch/lzmmaps.php](http://www.abram.ch/lzmmaps.php)) for ₹1300 per sheet.

**Women's Alliance**

HANDICRAFTS

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; [www.womensalliance Ladakh.org](http://www.womensalliance Ladakh.org); ☉10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Sells similar wares to LEDeG.

**Handicrafts Industrial Cooperative Shop**

HANDICRAFTS

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Old Fort Rd; ☉10am-5pm Mon-Fri) This shop and Wamda Wood Carving sell wooden *choktse* tables carved with images of mythical beasts.

**Wamda Wood Carving**

HANDICRAFTS

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Old Fort Rd; ☉9am-6pm).

**Harish**

MUSIC STORE

(Map p246; Changspa Rd) Sells local and Western musical instruments.

**Gol Market**

MARKET

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Old Rd; ☉9am-5.30pm) A good first place to look for prosaic items of cheap clothing plus bags and limited camping supplies.

**Moti Market**

MARKET

(Map p246) Bigger than Gol market but less central.

**Leh Ling**

BOOKSHOP

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Main Bazaar)

**Otdan**

BOOKSHOP

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Zangsti Rd)

**Book Worm**

BOOKSHOP

(Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Map p249; Old Fort Rd) Buys and sells secondhand volumes.

**i Information**

Noticeboards all over town have adverts for tours, treks and activities.

Dozens of internet cafes all charge ₹90 per hour. Connection speeds vary randomly even at the same place and power cuts can prove annoying. There's a wide choice along Changspa Lane, around Dolphin Bakery (Fort Rd) and near Il Forno (Main Bazaar). Some bigger hotels offer wi-fi but virtually all charge extra and coverage rarely stretches beyond the lobby.

There are numerous moneychangers on Changspa Rd and Main Bazaar. Compare rates carefully. Leh's two ATMs are the only ones in Ladakh and are often over-stretched. Keep back-up cash for emergencies.

**Central post office** (Main Bazaar; ☉10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat)

**Cyber Station** (Fort Rd; internet per hr ₹90; ☉9am-11pm) One floor below Chopsticks, this unusually comfy internet cafe has a generator, satellite connection and serves great coffee (₹40) and free black tea.

**Het Ram Vinay Kumar pharmacy** (Map p249; Main Bazaar; ☉9.30am-8pm)

**J&K Forex** (1st fl, Himalaya Complex, Main Bazaar; ☉8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Good exchange rates, better still for travellers cheques. ATM on Ibex Rd.

**Men-Tsee-Khang** ([www.men-tsee-khang.org](http://www.men-tsee-khang.org); ☉8.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri & 1st & 3rd Sat). Amchi (Tibetan herbal medicine) consultations with no appointment required; average ₹180 including prescribed herbal drugs. Their one room **museum** (admission ₹5) displays medicinal herbs, clinical thangkas and minerals (lapis lazuli, tiger eye etc) used in making 'precious pills'. It's 800m south of the bus station.

**Oxygen Bar** (Map p249; KC Garden Restaurant; per min ₹20) Breathe pure oxygen to relieve altitude sickness, or just for the buzz.

**SBI** (Main Bazaar; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) The upstairs exchange desk can be chaotic and long queues are common at the 24-hour ATM outside.

**Tourist office** (Map p249; ☎253462; [www.ladakh tourism.in](http://www.ladakh tourism.in); Ibex Rd; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Sat) General info, listings and very approximate maps.

**i Getting There & Away****Air**

Delhi-Leh flights rarely cost under ₹11,500 in summer but in winter ₹4000 is possible. Unusually, Leh's airline offices sometimes undercut online prices.

**Air India** (Map p246; ☎252076; Fort Rd; ☉10am-1pm & 2-4.30pm) Leh-Delhi (₹11,661), via Srinagar (₹7354, Wednesday) or via Jammu (₹8053, Monday and Friday). Fly to Jammu for Dharamsala.

**Jet Airways** (Map p249; ☎250999; Main Bazaar; ☉10am-1pm & 2-5pm) Leh-Delhi daily in August. Frequency drops gradually to twice weekly in February.

**Kingfisher** ([www.flyingfisher.com](http://www.flyingfisher.com)) Leh-Delhi daily in summer.

**Bus & Shared Jeep**

**KARGIL** Bus (₹300, 10 hours) departs 4.30am from the Polo Ground (Map p246). Faster shared jeeps (per seat/vehicle ₹600/4500) leave

around 7am from outside Hotel Siachen ('Old Bus Station'). Make arrangements one day before.

**SRINAGAR** J&K SRTC bus (₹707, 19 hours) from main bus station (Map p246) at 3pm. Shared jeeps (front/back seats ₹1500/1300, 15 hours) depart from the 'Old Bus Station' around 5pm. Book by 8am that morning to get a good seat. Leh-Srinagar road closed November to May.

**MANALI** J&K SRTC buses (ordinary/deluxe ₹585/850, two days) depart Leh's main bus sta-

tion around 4.30am. More comfortable HPTDC buses (₹1500, two days) leave at 5am from outside J&K Bank (Ibex Rd, Leh) and must be pre-booked at **HPTDC** (Map p249; ☎94518460071; Fort Rd; ☎9.30am-1pm & 2-7pm), upstairs opposite Chopsticks. Jeeps take at least 22 hours. See boxed text, p274, for details. The route is gorgeous but strenuous so you might prefer to fly one way (to/from Delhi) rather than doing it twice.

For other destinations, see below.

## BUSES TO/FROM LEH

The following use Leh's main bus station, 700m south of the town centre. The shortest walk to get there from town uses a toilet-scented footpath starting opposite Hotel Dragon. Alternatively cut through the stepped bazaar from Friendship Gate.

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Alchi	60	3hr	8am (return 3pm)
Chemrey	35	1½hr	use Sakti buses
Choglamsar	8	15min	frequent
Chiling	55	2½hr	9am Wed & Sun (return 1pm)
Chitkan*	164	8hr	8am Tue, Fri, Sun (return Wed, Sat, Mon)
Dha*	151	7hr	9am both directions
Diskit/Hunder**	116	6hr	6am Tue, Sat (return Sun, Wed)
Hemis	40	2hr	9.30am (return noon)
Hemis Shukpachan*	78	4hr	2pm (return 8.30am) via Yangthang
Keylong	475	17hr	4.30am
Khalsi*	88	4½hr	3pm each way
Lamayuru	150	5½hr	use Chitkan or Srinagar buses
Likir Gompa	50	2hr	4pm (return 6.30am)
Matho	20	40min	9am, 2pm, 5pm
Pangong Tso	150	8hr	6.30am Sat using Chushul-Merak bus
Phey	13	30min	noon, 4.30pm (return 8am, 1pm)
Phyang	20	40min	7am, 8am, 9am, 3pm, 4pm
Rumtse*	72	3hr	4pm, alternate days
Sakti	40	1¾hr	8.15am, noon, then half-hourly till 5pm (return frequent 7am-9am, 12.30pm, 3.30pm)
Shang Sumdo	50	3hr	3pm (return 8am)
Shey	15	25min	use Thiksey or Sakti buses
Spituk	10	15min	one or two hourly till 7pm
Stakna	15	40min	Thiksey buses terminate nearby
Stok	15	30min	8am, 2pm, 4.30pm (return 9am, 3pm, 5.30pm)
Thiksey	20	30min	half-hourly 7.30am-6.30pm
Tia*	85	4½hr	noon
Timishgan*	78	4hr	11am (return 8am)
Wanla*	111	5hr	8.30am Tue, Thu, Sun

\* LBOC Bus (☎252792), \*\*J&K SRTC (☎252085), other minibus (☎253262)

## TAXI & CHARTER-JEeps FROM LEH

DESTINATION	ONE WAY (₹)	RETURN (₹)
Alchi	1330	1729
Basgo	819	1064
Chiling	1767	2287
Hemis	948	1232
Kargil	4709	6552
Keylong	11,000	14,300
Lamayuru	2579	3353
Likir	1125	1463
Matho	663	862
Manali	13,547	17,611
Nimmu	737	958
Phey	327	425
Phyang	511	664
Shang Sumdo	1175	1558
Shey	279	363
Spituk	204	266
Srinagar	9773	12,700
Stakna	686	892
Stok Palace	376	492
Sumur	3465	4504
Thiksey	442	574
Wanla	2562	3330

Combining destinations reduces the total price, eg: Leh–Stok–Matho–Stakna–Leh ₹1251.

### Taxi & Charter-Jeeps

Published in an annually updated booklet, fares (p261) are the same for taxis and charter-jeeps and include reasonable stopping time en route for photos/visits. Longer waits are charged (₹160/650/1251 per hour/half-day/full day), extra overnight stops add ₹350. Unplanned diversions from the agreed routing can cause unexpected difficulties so plan carefully.

**INDUS VALLEY** Monastery villages make interesting day trips: engage a driver at one of Leh's three main taxi-van stands or add sights as extra stops to longer jeep tours.

**JEEP TOURS** For multiday jeep hire, agencies can put together a fare-sharing group, organising permits, vehicle and driver. Five per jeep is optimal for comfort versus expense. Most popular excursions are Pangong Tso or the Nubra/Shyok Valleys. Book at least 24 hours ahead.

### Motorcycle

Several companies along Music School Rd and Main Bazaar (west) hire motorcycles for between ₹500 and ₹800 per day. Double-check insurance and fittings.

### **i** Getting Around

**TO/FROM AIRPORT** The airport's well-guarded terminal is at Km430 of the Leh-Spituk



### PETROL IN LADAKH

Ladakh's only petrol stations are at Leh, Choglamsar, Serthi (Km440.5, near Karu), Diksit, Spituk, Phyang junction, Khaltse, Mulbekh and Kargil. Even those don't always have anything to sell so, if driving, carry plenty of spare fuel.



highway, 4km south of centre. Taxi transfers cost ₹150/190 to central Leh/Changspa. Passing public minibuses to town cost only ₹5 but are usually packed full.

**TAXI** Leh's little micro-van taxis charge from ₹75 per hop. Flagging down rides rarely works; go to a taxi stand to make arrangements.

## South of Leh

📍01982

To visit Stok and Matho and then return to Leh via Thiksey and Shey, you'll need a vehicle that's small enough to cross the very narrow Indus River bridge at Stakna.

### STOK

Ladakh's former royal family now keeps a low profile life, dividing its time between a private mansion in Manali and the stately **Stok Palace** (admission ₹50; ☀9am-1pm & 2-7pm May-Oct). Vaguely potala-like and with colourful window frames, the three-storey palace is undoubtedly photogenic despite a giant telecommunication tower that looms directly behind. Inside, the handful of rooms that are opened to visitors display family treasures, including the queen's ancient turquoise-and-gold *yub-jhur* (crown) and a sword that the king's oracle managed to bend into a knot, Uri Geller-style. The palace's attractively appointed **cafe** (tea ₹15, sandwiches ₹60) has open terrace seating with gorgeous views.

Across from the palace, a short alley leads to the 350-year-old **Stok Abagon** (suggested donation ₹20), the decrepit former home of the royal physician (bring a torch).

Stok's peaceful main lane winds up past whitewashed farmhouses, crumbling old stupas and, after 1.4km, bypasses the modest **Stok Gompa**, where royal oracles make predictions about the future during Stok's important **Guru Tse-Chu festival** (February/March). Another kilometre south, buses from Leh terminate at a pair of simple food shacks known as the **trekking point**. Ten minutes' walk upstream from here on the path towards Rumbak, the village's last house is the misnamed **Hotel Kangri** (📍20 1009; per person half-board ₹350), a very authentic homestay with wall murals and a full-blown Ladakhi kitchen.

Along the main road about 200m north of the trekking point, **Yarsta Guest House** (📍242087; d half-board ₹700) is set in a garden amid poplar trees. Two top-floor rooms with beds and plenty of windows share a clean, tiled bathroom.

Commanding a fine valley panorama around 2km north of the palace beside the Leh road, isolated **Hotel Skittsal** (📍242051; www.skittsal.com; s/d ₹1500/2180) has a neo-traditional facade and giant Buddha seated in the garden. However corridors are straight from *The Shining* and dated rooms have rucked carpets.

### MATHO

Sakya-Buddhist **Matho Gompa** (📍246085; admission ₹20) is perched on a colourfully stratified ridge above Matho village. Most of the early-15th-century monastery has been replaced by more modern structures in recent years and the top-floor museum is only one room. However, it's still well worth the bumpy trip from Leh for the scenery en route and the exceptional valley views. During the monastery's famous **Matho Nagrang festival** (February/March), a pair of monk-oracles performs daring physical challenges while effectively blindfolded by mop-wigs, 'seeing' only through the fearsome 'eyes' painted on their chests. They also engage in ritual acts of self-mutilation and make predictions for the coming year.

### SPITUK & ZINGCHEN

Founded in the late 14th century as See-Thub ('Exemplary') Monastery, impressive **Spituk Gompa** (admission ₹20) is incongruously perched overlooking the end of Leh airport: don't photograph the militarily sensitive runway – soldiers are watching. The gompa's multiple mud-brick buildings tumble merrily down a steep hillock towards Spituk village on the Indus riverbank. Overlooked by the gilt-roofed **Skudung Lhakhang**, a photogenic courtyard leads to the very colourful **Dukhang** containing a yellow-hatted statue of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) who spread Gelukpa Buddhism. A Buddha statue on the other side of the room's main image supposedly incorporates an odd relic: Tsongkhapa's nose-bleed. On the very top of the gompa hill is a three-tiered **latho** (spirit shrine) and the small **Palden Lama temple** hiding veiled deities in a smoke-blackened rear section.

For treks, the pretty two-house oasis of **Zingchen** (Zinchan, Jingchian) makes a much better starting point than Spituk village, as the first 10km of the Spituk-Zingchen road is a sun-blistered masochistic slog. A Leh-Zingchen taxi ride (₹1300) should allow stops at Spituk Gompa and at photogenic spots in the monumentally stark canyonlands that start 6km before Zingchen.

Zingchen has a homestay, campsite and parachute cafe. There's no bus but, with a little patience, hitching a (paid) ride back to Leh is often possible with vehicles that arrive to drop off trekkers.

### RUMBAK & YURUTSE

Roadless **Rumbak** (4050m) is a magical village with a high proportion of closely packed traditional homes, almost all of which offer homestay beds. It's around three hours' riverside hike from Zingchen. The route is mostly easy to follow given a decent map: where in doubt, follow donkey droppings and cross any bridge you see. At a lone summer parachute cafe take the left valley (half an hour) to Rumbak, or continue for one hour to **Yurutse** (4200m), an eerie one-house hamlet/homestay flanked by little stupas. Yurutse has a dribbling, drinkable spring and enjoys a perfectly framed view of Stok Kangri (6121m) through a cleft valley opposite.

Next day from Yurutse you could trek across the 4920m Ganda La in around six hours to **Shingo** village (two farms, both homestays), possibly continuing three hours further to **Kaya/Skiu** in the Markha Valley. Alternatively from Rumbak, a similarly strenuous trek crosses the equally high **Stok La** (Namling La) pass and reaches Stok in around seven hours (turn left and descend at the second mini-pass). If there's cloud on either pass don't hike without a guide.

### LOWER ZANSKAR VALLEY

For a feast of stark, colourful geology, turn off the old Leh-Nimmu road at Km400 then take the riverside ledge road up the deep **Zanskar River** canyon.

The two house hamlet of **Sumdha Do**, where three- to five-day treks from Lamayuru, Wanla or Hinju typically culminate, has a summer tea-tent and the loveable **Tashi Khangsar** homestay.

At first glance tiny **Chiling** seems limited to a tealhouse and the boxy shop-cafe **Kongma Restaurant**, where trekkers should pay the **Hemis National Park fee** (₹20 per day). The village proper is on a fertile plateau above to the right. All six families here offer homestays.

Chiling village was founded by the families of Nepali copper craftsmen. They originally arrived in Ladakh to build Shey Palace's classic Buddha statue and never went home. The handicraft continues, though today typical products are roughly turned-out heart-shaped spoons (around ₹150). One of the best

known smiths is wizened old Ishay Namgyal whose house has a sizeable forge area in its yard. Finding the place takes you past some timeless old mud-brick buildings with a serrated dry-peak backdrop.

If trekking into the **Markha Valley**, continue 4km further south to the river confluence then cross the Zanskar on a dangling-basket ropeway contraption. A disputed road bridge, planned to replace this, remains half-built.

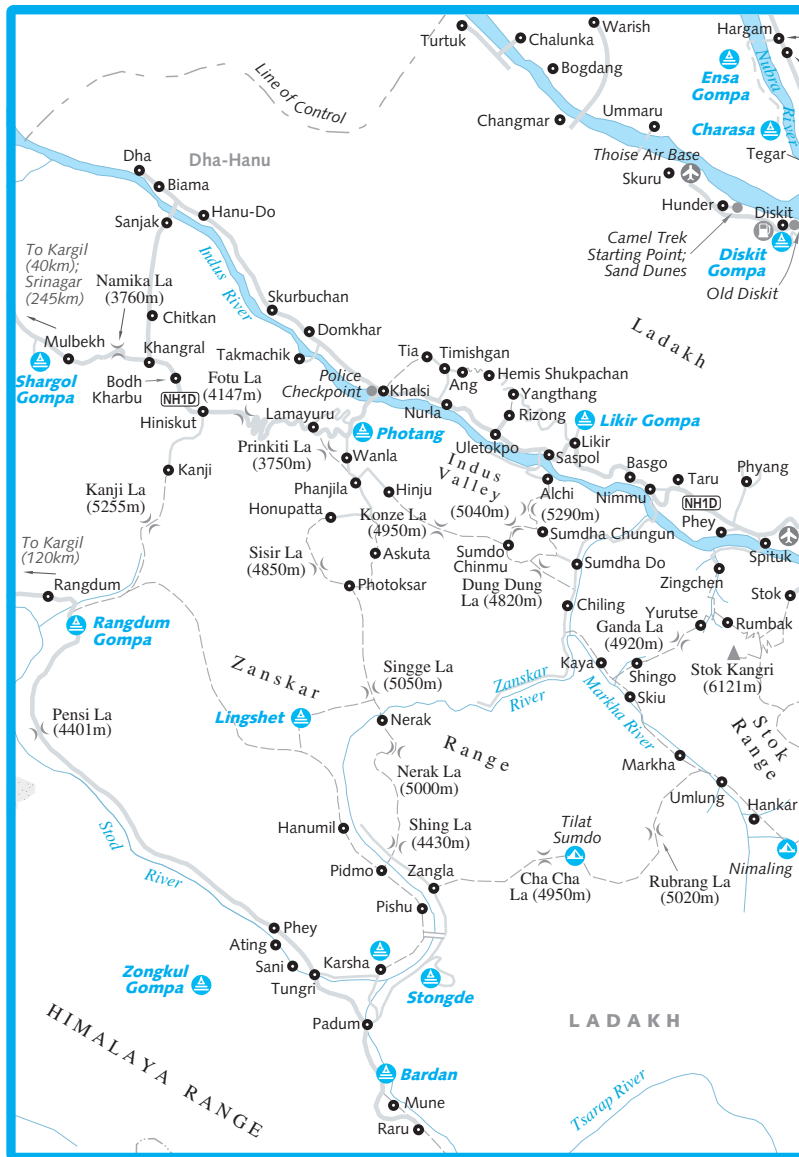
### MARKHA VALLEY

Very well trodden tracks between diffuse roadless villages make this Ladakh's most popular trekking area. There are fort ruins at **Markha** and **Hankar** and several seasonal parachute cafes. Homestays exist in virtually every settlement but before hiking across the Kongmaru La (5050m), those without camping gear will need to spend a night at Nimaling tent-camp. From Nimaling allow nine hours walking to Shang Sumdo via Chokdo (seven hours). Both places have homestays and there's an 8am bus to Leh from Shang Sumdo. Allow at least five days for the Chiling-Nimaling-Shang Sumdo loop, including transport to/from Leh. Or simply explore the valley out-and-back from Chiling. Nicholas Eakins' full-colour *Markha Valley Trekking and Homestay Guide* (₹450) is useful.

## West of Leh

### PHYANG

Pretty Phyang is an emerald splash of tree-hemmed barley fields layered for miles up a side valley with stupendous views back towards the snow-topped pyramid of Stok Kangri. The white-and-ochre **Phyang Gompa** (admission ₹25) photogenically dominates the village, its west wing currently under full-scale reconstruction following earthquake damage. Behind, dzo graze their meadows and a beautiful lane follows a rock escarpment past traditional homes to Phyang's only accommodation (1.5km), the delightful **Hidden North Guest House** (☎226007; Phyang Tsakma; www.hiddennorth.com; campsite/site & tent hire ₹100/150, d ₹800, without bathroom ₹500). Set in a mountain-facing sunflower garden, unfussy rooms are immaculately maintained and room 8 has Stok Kangri views. You might be tempted to stay awhile. Meals are available, filtered drinking water is free and off-beat treks can be organised.



### BASGO

Capital of lower Ladakh until the Ladakhi kingdoms united in 1470, Basgo's ancient chortens whisper hints of its antiquity. Rising above the village on a surreal collection of eroded earthen pinnacles are remnant

stubs of once-great **citadel walls**, along with a largely derelict mud-walled **palace** and two brilliant **temples** (admission ₹20). The upper **Chamba Gompa** has spectacularly restored mural work covering walls and ceilings around a cartoonlike two-storey statue



of Maitreya, whose expression embodies the spirit of detachment. Within the palace complex is the darker and even more atmospheric **Sar-Zung Temple** hosting another outsized Maitreya statue and a library of wrapped scriptures.

## LIKIR

Surveying a grand section of mountain ridge, lower Likir has better value accommodation than at Alchi, making it a possible starting point for visiting the region. Around 4km above the main village, **Likir Gompa** (☉8am-1pm & 2-6pm summer, 10am-1pm & 2-4pm winter) very photogenically covers a hillside with archetypal Ladakhi buildings. Though founded in 1065, its current incarnation originated in the 15th century. The first prayer hall to the right on entry has seats allocated for both the Dalai Lama and his brother, Likir's honorary head lama. After two more colourful prayer halls you climb to the crammed-full, one-room **museum** (admission ₹20). The gompa is backed by a giant gilded 20th-century **Maitreya statue** that looks impressive from afar, less so once you notice its peeling gold paint.

For great photos of the gompa complex framed between barley fields and old chortens, descend for 10 minutes on the rocky footpath signed to the Old Likir Guesthouse.

There are half a dozen accommodation choices in lower Likir. Designed vaguely like a Chinese temple, **Hotel Lhukhil** (☎227137; www.hotellhukhil.com; d ₹1200-1800) has painted wall motifs, en suite bathrooms and mountain views from most rooms. There's oodles of outdoor sitting space and rates include breakfast and dinner.

**Norboo Lagams Chow Guest House** (☎227145; without bathroom d ₹200, dinner/breakfast ₹60/50) has compact but new, neat rooms hidden at the back of a farm-garden off the Yangthang road. Note that the only toilet is in the traditional house behind where there's also an ornate Ladaki kitchen-dining room.

**Lotos Guest House** (☎227177; per person incl meals ₹300), almost opposite Hotel Lhukhil, is relatively new and neat for a homestay. It has decent beds, dorm style in two rooms, but the toilet is in the yard.

Directly above the gompa are two homestay-guesthouses in traditional homesteads, each including breakfast and dinner in a wonderfully authentic Ladakhi dining room. **Chhuma Guest House** (☎9906973732; per person ₹200) has great views from two perfectly located if tatty mattress-on-floor rooms. Five minutes' walk beyond, **Dolker Guest House** (☎227141; per person ₹300) is similar but has real beds in the best, top-corner room.

## SHAM

A few kilometres north of the main NH1D, the parallel 'Sham' route links several pic-

turesque Ladakhi villages between Likir and Timishgan. The stark arid scenery here reaches some grand Nevada-style crescendos and the route is used as a homestay 'baby trek' to walkers who don't want to cross major passes. Daily bus connections mean you could do any one-day section then give up as you please. However, be aware that most of the trek is a road walk (only Hemis-Shukpachan to Ang is roadless) and there's minimal shade so hike early before the sun is high.

In timeless little **Yangthang**, sturdy old houses fit together, forming an architecturally cohesive square around a tiny shrine. Set in barley fields backed by a jagged horizon of saw-toothed mountains, the village has four traditional if basic **homestays** (per person ₹300) with floor mattresses and meals included. **Padma Guest House** (☎08991-922129) has fine views, its corner dorm-room overlooking the chasm that descends steeply to Rizong, a two-hour hike when the trail hasn't been washed away.

Central **Hemis Shukpachan** is a curiously medieval little knot of houses clustered around a central rocky hillock. Around 1km beyond at the village's northwest edge is a famous grove of **ancient juniper trees** beside the footpath leading towards Ang/Timishgan (a half-day walk). There are nearly a dozen widely scattered guesthouses and homestays. It's 10km west of Yangthang by a painfully bumpy jeep track.

The former co-capital of 14th-century lower Ladakh, **Timishgan** (Tingmosgan, Temisgam) sits at the centre of a very large, green Y-shaped valley stretching several kilometres to Ang (northeast) and Tia (northwest). It was here in 1864 that Ladakh signed treaties with Tibet allowing for formalised trade missions.

The mostly contemporary main **monastery** sits on a high, central rocky crag climbed by a large remnant section of fortress curtain-wall. There are two more small gompas in **Tia** which has an architecturally interesting central core. Central Timishgan and parts of **Ang** also have several fine old traditional Ladakhi houses offering basic **homestays** (incl food ₹200-400). Around 1km northeast of Timishgan's central junction, the **Namra Hotel** (☎229033; www.namrahotel.com; s/d/deluxe ₹1600/2200/2450) is far and away the Sham route's top accommodation option. Set in relaxing parasol-decked gardens, attractive common areas have bench

seats and photos of local scenes. Rooms are reasonably well appointed, albeit with occasional damp patches and soft mattresses. Deluxe rooms have balcony areas with monastery views.

## ALCHI

Central Alchi is 4km down a dead-end spur lane that leaves the Leh-Kargil road at Km370. This rural village has become a regional tourism magnet thanks to the famous **Chhoskhor Temple Complex** (foreigner/Indian ₹50/20; ☉8am-1pm & 2-6pm), reached by an obvious pedestrian lane lined by guesthouses, souvenir peddlers and a German Bakery. Founded in the 11th century by 'Great Translator' Lotsava Ringchen Zangpo, the temple complex (no photography allowed) looks relatively uninteresting from outside but interior murals are considered the crowning glory of Ladakh's Indo-Tibetan art. Visits start with **Sumrtsek Temple** fronted by a wooden porch whose carving style is very much Indian rather than Tibetan. Inside, murals cover all three levels with hundreds of little Buddhas. Oversized wooden statues of Maitreya, Manjushri and Avalokitesvara burst their heads through into the inaccessible upper storey. Next along, **Vairocana Temple** is impressive for its mandalas: as antique murals in the rear chamber; as contemporary exercises in coloured sand at the front. In the **Lotsa Temple**, Lotsava Ringchen Zangpo himself appears as the slightly reptilian figure to the left behind the central Buddha cabinet. Beneath him, a row of comical-faced figures underline the importance of taking nothing too seriously. The **Manjushri Temple** enshrines a joyfully colourful four-sided statue of Manjushri (Buddha of Wisdom).

In summer Alchi has nearly a dozen accommodation choices. Many close from mid-September. **Heritage Guest House** (☎227125; dikit1920@gmail.com; d ₹400-800, without bathroom ₹250-300) right at the exit of the monastery complex, has an impressive carved facade that leads through to a marble floored interior courtyard, off which are some of Alchi's best-value rooms.

The friendly, colourful **Choksor Guest House** (☎227084; r ₹500-600), with shrine room and open roof-terrace, is set in a flower garden 800m back towards Leh from central Alchi. Next door the sadly derelict, once-grand **Lonpo House** was formerly home to the Ladakhi King's local tax collector.

**Hotel Potala** (☎205030; downstairs/upstairs d ₹350/600) is fair value and central, with en suite bathrooms set in a small garden and hollyhocks enlivening gravel sitting areas.

At **Lotsava Summer Camp** (☎227129; d ₹300-500) close-packed bedded tents share a bathroom block. Prices are reduced if you forgo the by-bucket option of hot water.

### ULETOKPO & RIZONG

From pretty **Uletokpo** village, an erosion-prone lane leaves the Leh-Khalsi highway and climbs 6km along a narrow gorge. It dead-ends at the photogenic 19th-century **Rizong Gompa** (admission by donation; ☺7am-1pm & 1.30-6pm), stepped handsomely up an amphitheatre of rocky cliff. A steep, sometimes treacherous footpath continues up to Yangthang.

Uletokpo has three tourist camps. The best value if least manicured is **West Ladakh Camp** (☎9419178555; d ₹1500) where octagonal bedded tents in an apricot orchard come with shower, toilet and clamshell glass wash-basins. Add ₹1000 for all meals. **Uley Ethnic Resort** (☎227208) has many overpriced tent rooms but is building sturdy new river-view cabins with solar-heated bathrooms.

### KHALSI

Comparatively bustling Khalsi has shops, taxis, PCO phone booths, two basic **restaurant-hotels** (d ₹500) and several other eateries including relatively convivial **Samyas Garden Restaurant** (mains ₹50-140, rice ₹40). Taxis charge around ₹700 to Lamayuru or Phanjila. Hitch-hiking westbound, it's generally easier to start from the checkpoint 2km west.

### DHA-HANU

Foreigners with prearranged **permits** (apply in Leh) may take the lovely, increasingly dramatic Indus Valley road northwest of Khalsi as far as Dha. Just before reaching the walnut-growing village of **Domkhar**, look across the river for fine views of terraced **Takmachik**. Picturesque **Skurbuchan** village is topped by a rickety gompa-fort overlooking the Indus canyon. Scattered ancient **petroglyphs** are inscribed on brown, time-polished roadside rocks (eg at Km55.9) but they're small, hard to spot and some are latter-day imitations. From **Sanjak** a side road cuts through a sharp gorge to Chitkan. Kargil-bound shared jeeps (₹150) via Chitkan depart at 6.30am from near Sanjak's

bridge where there are teahouses and single guesthouse.

**Dha** (pop 250) is a centre of the Brokpa people (see boxed text, right). Though outnumbered these days by 'one pen' kids, a few Brokpa people still wear pearly button ear decorations and traditional hats, with older women tying their hair in long triple-stranded braids reminiscent of knotted dreadlocks.

The bus from Leh sputters to an unexpected halt at a middle-of-nowhere lay-by, from where Dha village is a 10-minute walk via the small footpath immediately opposite. Amid Dha's tomato gardens, apricot orchards and huddles of rough stone barns you'll pass mud-floored **Skybapa Guest House** (dm/d ₹200/400). It's simple with shared squat toilets across the yard, but a great feature is the outdoor dining area shaded by a vast grapevine that thrives in Dha's unexpectedly warm microclimate. Friendly owners make their own organic wine.

With linguistic help, other homestays can be arranged in Dha or in less striking **Biama**, 3km back towards Leh, where there's also an overpriced roadside tent-camp.

A two-day Leh-Dha return jeep-excursion costs ₹4631 per vehicle. The three-day circuit Leh-Dha-Chitkan-Kargil-Lamayuru-Leh costs ₹10,200. Foreigners are not allowed to use the Dha-Battalikh-Kargil road.

### YAPOLA VALLEY

Several classic villages that were previously only accessible to trekkers have recently become accessible with new (if often washed-out) jeep roads.

Perched above **Wanla** village on a towering knife-edge ridge is the tiny, medieval **Wanla Gompa** ([www.achiassociation.org](http://www.achiassociation.org);

### LOST TRIBES

The facial features of the Brokpa (aka Drokpa or Dard, 'people of the pastures') have led to speculation that the tribe was descended from Alexander the Great's invasion force or even a lost tribe of Israel. However, based on their dialect, they are thought to have immigrated to Dha-Hanu from Gilgit/Baltistan (just across what is now the India-Pakistan border) around a millennium ago. Some Brokpas still follow an animist faith that incorporates elements of the ancient Bon religion, precursor of Tibetan Buddhism.

admission ₹20; ☀dawn-dusk), flanked by tower remnants of a now-destroyed 14th-century fortress. The monastery's carved porch is reminiscent of Alchi's and its spookily dark prayer-chamber contains three large statues backed by ancient smoke-blackened murals and naive statuettes. If hiking in from Lamayuru you'll pass close to some desultory hot springs 4km west of Wanla but they aren't worth a special excursion. Hidden **Rongstak Guest House** (per person incl meals ₹400) is the most attractive of three homestays in Wanla proper but the area's most convivial accommodation choice is the very well kept **Tarchit Camp** (☎254866, 9419243601; per person incl meals ₹450), 2km beyond Wanla beside the Phanjila road. There are homestay mattress spaces in a traditional family dining room, one new private room and a sizeable camping area (₹100) with separate horse-tethering. **Singey La Camp** (per person ₹100) at **Phanjila** has a garden restaurant and three mat-on-floor sleeping spaces.

At the top of pretty **Hinju** village there's a recommended **homestay** with traditional Ladakhi kitchen. A fabulous two-day trek to Sumdha Do on the Chiling road can be done as a homestay **trek** (guide essential) if you're prepared to do a long, strenuous first day, crossing the 4950m Konze La for breathtaking views then sleeping at Sumdho Chinmu.

South of Phanjila a seriously rough jeep track follows the spectacular **Yapola Gorge** to its fork then veers right to **Honupatta**, a tight-knit village with three basic homestays tucked away in the upper section. Mudslides often block vehicular traffic on the track beyond which climbs the 4805m Sisir-La for sensational views of ridges and rocky spires before descending to **Photoksar**. Most **Zanskar-bound treks** follow this jeep road but, on foot, it's reputedly possible to hike an alternative route down the Yapola Gorge's left fork via Askuta camp, at least when water levels are low. Finding a suitably experienced guide might prove hard.

## LAMAYURU

☎01982 / ELEV 3390M

Set among mountain-backed badlands, low-paced Lamayuru is one of Ladakh's most memorable villages and an ideal place to break the Kargil-Leh journey.

### 👁 Sights & Activities

Picturesque homes huddle around a crumbling hilltop that's pitted with caves and topped by the ultra-photogenic **Yungdrung**

**Gompa** (admission ₹50). Behind glass within the gompa's main prayer hall is a tiny cave in which 11th-century mystic Naropa meditated. Before that, legend claims, this whole area had been the bottom of a deep lake whose waters receded miraculously thanks to the powerful prayers of Buddhist saint Arahāt Nimagung. Sculpted by time into curiously draped forms, the sands of that former lake-bed now form 'moonland' landscapes beside the new Leh road around 1km east of town.

Lamayuru is traditionally the starting point for some of Ladakh's greatest treks (to Zanskar, Chiling etc). Although new roads mean that walkers can now choose to reach advance trailheads (Honupatta/Photoksar, Hinju etc) by jeep, Lamayuru remains the most hopeful place for organising your own packhorses/donkeys (₹330 per day including driver), sometimes possible within a day or two. Guesthouses can help or ask **Royal Caravan Trek** (☎9469384434) at the bus stand who can also arrange jeep charters and, in extremis, currency exchange (terrible rates).

### 🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Lamayuru only gets electricity from 7.30pm to 11pm and some guesthouse rooms lack powerpoints. Accommodation prices will probably rise if/when Kashmir stabilises and transit tourist numbers recover.

#### Hotel Moonland

HOTEL \$

(☎224551; d ₹600-800) Lamayuru's best hotel is set in a garden at the first hairpin, 400m beyond the bus stop. Rooms offer little in terms of decor but have tiled bathrooms and hot showers while the agreeable restaurant has postcard-perfect views back towards the monastery complex. Limited menu.

#### Dragon Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎224501; d ₹500, without bathroom ₹300) Simpler rooms are a decent size in a big, clean traditional house with olde-worlde Ladakhi kitchen. A few newer rooms come with geysers-equipped private bathroom and the pleasant garden restaurant serves nonguests too.

#### Tharpaling Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎224516; d ₹300, without bathroom ₹200, half-board ₹500/400) Ever-smiling matriarch Tsirring Yandol gives this place a jolly family feel, serving communal dinners in a dining room that's new but with traditional-style painted motifs.

## Hotel Niranjana

MONASTERY HOTEL \$

(☎224555; r without bathroom ₹400-600) The main selling point is its location right beside the monastery complex, ideal for those attending 5.30am prayers. Above a dark, cavernous restaurant, rooms are bland but comfy enough, many with fine views. Clean shared bathrooms have geysers.

### **i** Getting There & Away

Daily Kargil–Leh buses briefly stop in Lamayuru sometime between 9am and 10am in both directions. Chitkan–Leh buses stop eastbound around 11am Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Khalsi has more choice of buses.

### WEST OF LAMAYURU

From Lamayuru, the NH1D road zigzags up towards Iguanodon-back spires that tower impressively over the **Fotu La** (4147m). At Km281 a rough 12km spur road leads to Kanji with its small but very historic **Chuchik-Zhal Temple** (www.achiassociation.org). After **Hansukot** (Heniskot; Km282), with its tourist bungalow and vague fortress ruins, a comparatively wide, fertile valley extends as far as **Khangral** (Km268) where passports are checked beside the Chitkan-Dha road junction. The NH1D then crosses the **Namika La** (3760m pass) and descends into the glorious **Wakha Valley** continuing to Kargil via **Mulbekh** (p240) and **Shargol** (p241).

## Nubra Valley

☎01980

The deep valleys of the Shyok and Nubra Rivers offer tremendous yet accessible scenery (permit required) with green oasis villages surrounded by thrillingly stark scree slopes, boulder fields and harsh arid mountains. Visiting from Leh by chartered jeep, including Panamik, Diskit, Hunder and everything in between, costs ₹6931 per vehicle (or ₹7331 if you add Ensa Gompa). While it's possible to do all that in two days, lengthy view stops are the main attraction so taking a third day is recommended and costs no extra. You'll certainly need that extra day (or more) if adding in Turtuk (around ₹3000 extra).

### KHARDUNG LA

ELEV 5602M

Zigzagging up a stark bare-rock mountain from Leh, it takes around 1½ hours to reach 5602m **Khardung La** (Km39), disputably claimed to be the world's highest motorable pass. Celebrate by sipping a cuppa at the pass-top canteen, buy T-shirts at the souve-

nir shop or, if your altitude acclimatisation allows, get dizzy clambering five minutes to a viewpoint through a chaos of prayer flags and boulders. Beyond Khardung La, as the road descends northbound alongside a gurgling stream, keep your eyes open for Himalayan marmots and grazing dzo. Permits are checked at army camps at Km24 and Km53.

### KHARDUNG

The yak-herding village of Khardung (Km71) is a two-centred shelf of barley fields and scattered Ladakhi buildings set within a jaw-dropping bowl of arid crags, giant tiger-paw bluffs and the distantly glimpsed teeth of snow-mountains. Tiny roadside **shop-cafes** (dhal ₹20) dish up delicious dhal while **Cho Guest House** (per person ₹400) offers mattresses on the floor of a large room with en suite squat toilet. Prices include breakfast, dinner and tea.

Beyond Khardung, the road descends through Grand Canyon scenery towards the impressively wide **Shyok Valley**, where soaring red-brown cliff-mountains rise from the gleaming grey-white sand of the floodplain.

### DISKIT

ELEV 3144M

Schizophrenic Diskit has two very different centres. Nubra's biggest settlement, **Central Diskit**, is a comparatively unattractive place by Ladakh's very high standards, but it has the area's **bus/taxi stand**, a useful **bazaar**, a **tourist reception centre** and the region's only **petrol pump** (1km north towards Hunder). Follow the bazaar east to a small roundabout then turn right to find the power-cut prone **NI Internet cafe** (per hr ₹100).

This lane leads 1.5km further south re-joining the main road at Old Diskit.

### **i** Sights

**Old Diskit** is a hamlet full of prayer wheels, mani walls and clusters of old stupas with a collapsing little old temple and a derelict Ladakhi mansion-palace.

Directly above Old Diskit, a 2km spaghetti of hairpins winds up to the 17th-century **Diskit Gompa** (admission ₹20), a brilliant jumble of Tibetan-style box buildings piled higgledy-piggledy up a steep rocky peak that ends in a toe-curlingly vertical chasm. On an intermediate hill, the access road passes a gigantic (32m) full-colour **Statue of Chamba** (Maitreya-Buddha), formally inaugurated by the Dalai Lama in July 2010.



## Sleeping & Eating

OLD DISKIT

### Lhasthang Guest House & Restaurant

HOTEL \$

(☎220165, 9469176104; d ₹600, without bathroom ₹350) Directly beneath the gumpa turning, this new, sparkling-clean place has big expansion plans, Buddha views from its open roof-terrace and excellent bathrooms with geysers.

### Sunrise Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎220011; r ₹500, without bathroom ₹250; ☀year-round) Reached through a 'tunnel stupa', this ageing stalwart has decent-sized guestrooms and is set in a small sunflower garden amid scattered Buddhist ruins. Two newer rooms have private bathrooms.

### CENTRAL DISKIT

Several decent options lie in quiet lanes conveniently close to the bazaar.

### Spangla Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎220022; d without bathroom ₹250-300) Neatly set in a rose and vegetable garden beside NI Internet, this female-run guesthouse is lovingly maintained, there's a traditional-style dining room and the shared bathrooms have geysers.

### Sand Dune Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎220022; r ₹400-600, without bathroom ₹200-250) Shaded by apricot trees, the garden courtyard makes a pleasant oasis from the nearby bazaar. Rooms vary considerably in size and style but all are well kept and the family is friendly.

### Getting There & Away

Leh-bound shared jeeps (₹300, 4½ hours) leave frequently between 6am and 9am. From Leh, these start near the *zabakhana* (abattoir, Map p246). Buses to Diskit depart from virtually every main Nubra village before 7am, returning from Diskit after lunch. A morning bus runs from Diskit to Sumur.

### HUNDER (HUNDUR)

Lost in greenery and closely backed by soaring valley cliffs, Hunder village is a popular overnight stop 10km from Diskit.

### Sights & Activities

**Hunder Gompa** contains a large gilded Chamba statue and a crude trail climbs to a precarious little ridgetop **fort**. Photogenic **sand dunes** starting 3km east of the village (500m from the army camp) can be explored on touristy **Bactrian camel rides** (per 15min ₹150, one-way to Diskit ₹700). Host camels are

reputedly offspring of animals that plied the Ladakh-Xinjiang caravans up until the closure of the India-China border in the 1940s. Hunder's dunes aren't exactly Sahara-sized but the landscape can prove disorientating so, if attempting to walk back to Diskit, bring plenty of water, stick relatively near to the road and beware following dead-end camel tracks into impenetrable thorn thickets.

### Sleeping & Eating

Hunder has around a dozen garden guesthouses, mostly clumped into two loose groupings around 1.4km apart, with Himalayan and Snow Leopard lying in between. The first, lower group (Karma, Mehreen, Olgok, Padma) is around 1km north of the army camp. The second forms Hunder's vague 'centre' where the village lane turns a right-angle beside Jamshed Guesthouse. About 200m further there's a small grocery shop on the paved side lane that runs to the Ibex and Goba guesthouses. Arrange meals with your accommodation or eat in Diskit.

Three seriously overpriced 'luxury' camps charge ₹3300 full-board for bedded tents with outside shared bathrooms.

### Goba Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎221083; d from ₹200) Choose upper options with private bathroom, especially room 8 (₹600) which has wraparound windows and a terrace with views. Staff are remarkably obliging, the setting is lovely and the food is reliably good.

### Ibex Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9469264242; d ₹600) Set in an unusually neat garden, this new bungalow home offers super-clean en suite rooms off a tiled central dining area.

### Karma Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎221042; karmaleh@yahoo.co.in; d ₹2000, half-board ₹2600) Ten spacious, comparatively smart rooms with big bathrooms, firm beds and bay-window seating overlook an extensive garden backed by a panorama of mountains. Coming from Diskit, follow signs towards the 'Organic Camp', around 2km before central Hunder.

### Snow Leopard Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎221097; r ₹500-800) Hunder's biggest and busiest guesthouse encloses a splendid central garden. Older rooms have traditional ceilings and squat toilets, newer rooms are bigger with sit-down loos.

**Olgok Guest House** HOMESTAY GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎221092; d ₹600) Three excellent new rooms with sparkling clean bathrooms in an unremarkable concrete bungalow set in a large if scrappy garden near Karma Inn. The nearby **Padma** is similar.

**Himalayan Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎221131; r ₹450, without bathroom ₹300) Tucked into a warren of village footpaths, rooms here are fairly standard but the welcome is heartfelt.

## BEYOND HUNDER

Since June 2010, permits allow you to drive 90km beyond Hunder following the turbulent **Shyok valley** along its scenically magnificent route to Turtuk. It cascades through a narrow canyon to tiny **Changmar** after which the raw-rock cliff-mountains become even more impressive. The rare, green splashes of village beyond are culturally and linguistically Balti rather than Ladakhi. Visitors are extremely rare and can expect considerable attention. The two biggest Balti villages, **Bogdang** and **Turtuk**, both have attractive centres that are almost invisible from the road. To reach central Turtuk, cross the bridge towards Tyakshi (closed to tourists) then turn immediately left. After 500m cross back on a conspicuous green footbridge and walk five minutes along a very scenic upper pathway to find **Maha Guest House** (☎248040; extremeadvindia@gmail.com; with/without windows ₹700/600, meals ₹100). While a tad pricey given the shared flush squat toilet, it's new, very clean and the owners speak English. On the main road Turtuk's only other accommodation option is **Turtuk Holiday** (☎248103; s/d ₹919/1335, half-board ₹1366/2191), nine bedded tents sharing a trio of outside bathrooms. Turtuk's three minuscule 'restaurants' can only manage instant noodles.

The Turtuk-Hunder road is almost entirely asphalted. The drive takes under three hours eastbound but westbound allow far longer as at least nine military check posts en route will entertain you with their interminable bureaucracy. You'll need a dozen permit photocopies.

## SUMUR & PANAMIK

The Nubra River proper descends towards the Shyok from the heavily disputed Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battleground (between India and Pakistan). With standard Nubra permits foreigners can take the recently asphalted road as far as Hargam Bridge.



## NUBRA NAMES

Note that on many maps, the names for several western Nubra settlements don't correspond at all with local reality.

### ON MAPS

Thoise village  
Khar  
Yaglung  
Biadango

### LOCALLY USED

Terchey  
Skuru  
Changmar  
Bogdang

At Km12 the road bypasses **Tirit village**, with views across the valley to a long **waterfall** spurring out of the bare rock-face. Spooky **Zonzhar Gompa** is a small ruin atop a roadside knoll at Km16.5. At first sight **Sumur** (Km22.5) seems little more than the trio of uninspired restaurants at a road junction. However to explore Sumur proper turn right here following the pleasantly green 'link' road past J&K Bank. After 2km, leading past several well-spaced guest houses and prayer wheels, turn left at a road fork and wind up another 1.5km to find the colourful if extensively rebuilt **Samstemling Gompa** (donation appropriate, ☉6am-6pm). The gompa is alternatively accessible by driving a 2km asphalted spur road from Km25 on the main road, ie the northern end of intriguing **Tegar** (Tiger) village. Directly overlooking that junction, the eerie rubble of Nubra's former royal citadel leads up to the largely intact three-storey shell of **Zamskhang Palace** (unguarded). Cautiously climb to the roof for stunning valley views.

**Pinchamik** (Km29) is a timeless hamlet full of prayer wheels, chortens and costumed old folk carrying baskets full of greens on their backs.

**Panamik** (Km44-48) is a diffuse low-rise hamlet with a sprinkling of budget guest houses. At the southern end are two famous but utterly forgettable dribbles of ferric-orange hot spring. Bathing is possible. Panamik's main attraction is the scenery of surrounding valleys, best appreciated from the bridge just west of **Hargam** (Km49). Since 2010, permits allow you to cross that bridge and double back down a very rough road (part stream) towards little **Ensa Gompa**. However, Ensa's single resident monk seems far from excited to see visitors, and the small, partly collapsing buildings are less interesting than the hair-raising 25-minute access trek along red-rock ledges from the nearest driveable track (a road is planned eventually).

## Sleeping & Eating

Most guesthouses can arrange simple meals (around ₹80) and allow camping (₹100) in their gardens.

### SUMUR

Near J&K Bank, almost at the main junction, **AO Guest House** (☎223506; r ₹250-400) is convenient for buses and is set in a garden of roses and hollyhocks. The best rooms are on the rooftop.

Some 600m up Sumur Link Rd are peaceful **Saser Guest House** (☎223501; d without/with bathroom ₹200/400) and similar **K,Sar Guest House** (☎9469177479; d ₹300, dm/d without bathroom ₹120/200), both pleasant low-rise houses set in garden-fields which is where you'll find the shared bathrooms for the cheaper rooms. K,Sar has a bright dorm room and generous meals are served family style at a central communal table.

Around 300m further, **Namgyal Guest House** (☎223505, 9419887505; d without/with view ₹600/700, without bathroom ₹350) is an attractive two-storey building where the best rooms have good tiled bathrooms and survey distant mountains across the organic vegetable garden.

A former traveller favourite, the basic **Largyal Guest House** (☎223537) is due to re-open in 2011 with at least one new ensuite room.

Where the link road forks after 2km, head right to find Sumur's two 'luxury' camps. **Mystic Meadows** (☎9419178944; d ₹1500, full board ₹3000) has bedded tents complete with a pebble-floored toilet set around a verdant vegetable garden. **Silk Route Cottages** (☎253439; d ₹2200, full board ₹3300) features claustrophobically tight-packed cottages, some made of bamboo, others of bamboo-clad concrete.

### TEGAR

Tegar has two hotels, both slightly smarter than Sumur's guest houses but at vastly higher prices. Both are off the main road around Km24.5. **Hotel Yarabtsu** (☎223544; s/d ₹1606/1784, full board ₹2160/2920) has the more impressive traditional-style facade and sits in farm-sized grounds but bathrooms at **Rimo Hotel** (☎223528; kesarbardam@hotmail.com; s/d ₹1700/1900, full board ₹3100/3300) are more polished. Standards vary between rooms at either hotel so look at a few.

### PANAMIK

Panamik has five budget guest houses. **Nebula** (☎247013; Km44.3; d ₹350) has the best kept rooms and its shared bathroom is indoors. **Bangka** (☎247044; Km44.7; d ₹250) and

**Charon** (☎247011; Km43.8; d ₹300) have family vibes with some rooms good, others less so. Toilets are in their attractive gardens. **Hot Springs Guest House** (☎247043; without/with bathroom ₹300/400) is the only Panamik place so far with ensuite bathrooms but despite the floral setting, its rooms are lacklustre. **Saser Restaurant** (☎247021; Km44.8; d ₹300) has three small but decent rooms sharing an indoor squat loo but it lacks personality.

## East of Leh

Permits are required for Pangong Tso or to continue east of Upshi.

### THEY

Once one of Ladakh's royal capitals, Shey is an attractive, pond-dappled oasis from which rises a central dry rocky ridge, inscribed with roadside **Buddha carvings** (Km459). Along the rising ridge-top, a series of **fortress ruins** bracket the three-storey, 17th-century **Naropa Royal Palace** whose wholesale reconstruction is nearing completion. The palace **temple** (admission ₹20; ☉6am-6pm) contains a highly revered 7.5m-tall gilded-copper **Buddha**, originally installed in 1645. The upper door opens to his inscrutably smirking face, a rarely open hall below views his torso.

For the most photogenic views of Shey's palace ridge, walk part-way along the access track to the simple, semi-dormant **Beshang Guest House** (☎267556; r without bathroom ₹300) then turn around.

Experienced teachers are in demand for volunteer work at the local, architecturally innovative, ecofriendly **Druk White Lotus School** (www.dwls.org).

### THIKSEY

Glorious **Thiksey Gompa** (☎267011; admission ₹30, video ₹100; ☉6am-1pm & 1.30-6pm, festival Oct/Nov) is one of Ladakh's biggest and most recognisable monasteries. Covering a large rocky outcrop with layered Tibetan-style buildings, it's a veritable monastic village incorporating shops, a school, restaurant and hotel. The **main gompa** starts with a prayer chamber containing a 14m-high Buddha whose expression is simultaneously peaceful, smirking and vaguely menacing. Smaller but much more obviously ancient is the **Gonkhang** (Protectors' Temple) and little rooftop **library**. A **museum** hidden away beneath the monastery restaurant displays well-labelled Tantric artefacts, some carved

from human bones. Notice the 10 weapons symbolically used to combat evil spirits.

Thiksey has an interesting dawn *puja* but it has become disproportionately popular with tourists who, in summer, often outnumber the monks.

Pedestrian access is a steep climb from near Km455. By car it's a 1.5km loop starting from Km454.2 where monastery-run **Chamba Hotel** (☎267005; d ₹1500, without bathroom ₹500) has fair-value if unexotic older courtyard rooms and newer, relatively plush en suite rooms within a traditionally styled two-storey building. The monastery itself also has some **guest rooms** (upper/lower r without bathroom ₹500/300) beneath the gompa museum.

### STAKNA

Small but visually impressive, the 1618 **Stakna Gompa** (admission ₹30; ☉8am-7pm) crowns a rocky outcrop that rises like an island out of the Indus Valley floor. Off the gompa's small central courtyard, four rooms with vivid new Tantric murals can be visited. Behind the main prayer hall, sub-shrines retain 400-year-old sandalwood statues, original frescoes and statuettes of the Bhutanese lamas who founded the monastery. From the Leh-Thiksey bus terminus (Km449), the complex is 1.7km away (less on foot), crossing the Indus on a narrow suspension bridge decked with prayer flags then climbing a winding access road.

### HEMIS

The 1672 **Hemis gompa** ([www.drukpa-hemis.org](http://www.drukpa-hemis.org); admission ₹100; ☉8am-1pm & 2-6pm) is the spiritual centre of Ladakh's **Drukpa Buddhists** ([www.drukpa.org](http://www.drukpa.org)). Documents supposedly found here were used to support Jesus-in-India conspiracists' notion that Christ visited Kashmir (p234). However, for all its fame, the main monastery has a rectilinear exterior that lacks the vertically stacked perfection of Chemrey or Thiksey. Inside, the fine central courtyard has plenty of colourfully detailed timbers but the main prayer hall is undergoing long-term reconstruction and the Guru Lhakhang's 8m-high statue of Padmasambhava is garish. The monastery's extensive museum has some very precious religious treasures mixed in with spurious tiger skins, swords and a bra-shaped wooden cup-case.

The annual **Tse-Chu festival** (☉Jul) sees three days of masked dances and every 12th year (next in 2016) the festival culminates in the unfurling of Hemis' famous three-storey-high, pearl-encrusted *thangka*.

Below the gompa, timeless Hemis village spills out of a craggy red-rock canyon with mountain and valley panoramas as you descend the winding 7km back to Karu, passing a pair of astonishingly long *mani* walls.

### SHANG

Many visitors end their Markha trek (p263) in the barley fields around diffuse **Shang Sumdo**. However, few visitors venture 5km up the side valley to **Shang** above which a tiny but extremely dramatic **gompa** rises on a prominent crag with many semiderelict mud-brick houses around its base. The stark, riverside road from Karu (15km) is being asphalted.

## Towards Pangong Tso

Chemrey and Takthog can be visited independently but permits are required for serene Pangong Tso, arguably Ladakh's loveliest lake. The whole route is scenically magnificent and constantly varied with serrated peaks, trickling streams, horse meadows, reflective ponds and drifting sands. Parched dry desert mountains form dazzling ochre counterpoints to the deep blue skies, some remaining snow-dusted even in August.

You'll cross the **Chang La** (5289m), India's third-highest motorable pass and probably the only one offering free cups of tea (courtesy of the Indian Army).

All but 20km of the Leh-Lukung road is now asphalted allowing masochistic tourists to pack a basic Pangong Tso experience into an exhaustingly long day trip. However, it's vastly more pleasurable to stay the night in pretty **Spangmik** or, more adventurously, in enchanting **Merak**. Foreigners can't (yet) visit Chushul nor the fabled 17th-century Hanle Palace.

One/two day jeep tours from Leh cost ₹5160/6143 (per vehicle) to Spangmik, ₹5960/7300 to Merak. A minivan excursion Leh-Chemrey-Takthog-Hemis-Leh costs ₹1785.

Km readings are initially from Karu (add 35km for Leh) then reset to zero at Tangtse (Km81). Petrol is not available beyond Karu.

### CHEMREY

Spectacularly viewed across barley fields and buckthorn bushes, Chemrey village is dominated by the beautifully proportioned **Thekchok Gompa** (admission ₹20; ☉festival Nov) covering a steep hillock with a maze of pathways and Tibetan buildings. Above the

## LEH–MANALI

Utterly beautiful but exhaustingly spine-jangling, this is a ride you won't forget. The Upshi–Keylong section crosses four passes over 4900m, and then there's the infamously unpredictable Rohtang Pass before Manali. Although the road is 'normally' open from June to late September, unseasonable snow or major landslides can close it for days (or weeks). There's no petrol station for 365km between Karu and Tandi (8km south of Keylong). When the road is open, straight-through jeeps should take 22 to 25 exhausting hours. Most travel agencies plus the **Ladakh Taxi Operators Cooperative** (Map p246; ☎252723; 🕒6am–7.30pm) organise shared through-jeeps (back/middle ₹1300/1500) departing around midnight. Hiring your own jeep (approximately ₹15,000 per vehicle) with at least one overnight stop means you can have more space and more time for photo stops.

Bus services (p259) take two days overnighing in Keylong.

### Which Direction is Best?

**Southbound** you'll be better acclimatised for high altitude sleeps (Pang or Sarchu); you could visit Tso Moriri en route; and, if there's a major landslide on the Rohtang Pass, you could 'escape' by walking two hours down to Mahri, a group of cafes jammed with day-trip tourist traffic from Manali.

**Northbound** jeep rental can prove much cheaper from Manali, if you find Ladakhi vehicles returning otherwise empty.

### Which Overnight Stop(s)?

» Overnighing in **Sarchu** handily breaks the journey into two roughly equal sections but the altitude can cause problems. Private minibuses overnighing at Sarchu Tent Camps run sporadically; tickets are usually sold through **Vajra Voyages** (☎9906999135; Main Bazaar, Leh) and **Tiger Eye Adventure** (☎01902252718; www.tigereyeadventure.com; Old Manali).

» **Keylong**, **Jispa** or **Gemur** offer more comfortable accommodation and significantly lower altitude but Leh–Keylong is a very long day's ride (around 14/17 hours by jeep/bus).

» To make a three-day ride you might stop at **Pang** plus **Keylong**. However at Pang (4634m) facilities are rudimentary and there are altitude worries if you're not acclimatised.

» Other lonelier parachute cafes offer handy rest stops for acclimatised cyclists.

### Km by Km to Keylong

» **Km425 Upshi**: shops, teahouses. The southbound Manali road leaves the Indus Valley.

» **Km410 Miru**: village with shattered fortress and numerous stupas. Beyond is a beautiful, narrow valley edged with serrated vertical mineral strata in alternating layers of vivid red-purple and ferrous green.

» **Km398 Gya**: picturesque village. Across the river is another crumbling crag-top fortress.

» **Km394 Rumtse**: last village for 250km. Then lonely rough road climbs through numerous hairpins to **Taglang La** (5359m), claimed to be the world's second-highest road pass (after Khardung La). South of Taglang La, the wide Moray Plains are edged with smooth peaks.

appealingly wobbly 17th-century prayer hall, the **Lama Lhakhang** has murals blackened to semi-invisibility by butter-lamp smoke. On the penultimate floor the **Guru Lhakhang** has contrastingly vivid colours and a 3m-high golden Padmasambhava statue en-

crusted with turquoise ornamentation. The monastery access lane starts from near Km8.

### SAKTI & TAKTHOG

Branching off at Km10.4, a paved side-lane passes through **Sakti**, a spread-out village of gently terraced fields, waterlogged meadows

- » **Km341** Jeep track signposted 'Pastureland Camp' leads towards **Tso Kar**, a sizeable lake ringed by round-topped, snow-speckled mountains.
- » \***Km297 Pang** (4634m): a gaggle of similar **parachute cafes** (bed space ₹100). For serious altitude problems, the army camp's **AMS unit** 800m away provides free oxygen.
- » **Km287** The road rises through a memorable, spiky-edged canyon before crossing **Lachung La** (5035m).
- » \***Km270 Dolma Tibetan** (per person ₹100): a lonely, basic parachute cafe with a few mattresses laid on stony ground. Thereafter the road crosses **Nakeela La** (4915m), descends the 21 switchbacks of the **Gata Loops** then trundles through two very photogenic valleys featuring Cappadocia-style erosion formations.
- » **Km222 Sarchu**: 'wine' shop plus 10 parachute cafes, many offering ₹100 communal bed-spaces. Better than most options, **Mount View Dhaba** (tr/q ₹500/800) rents whole bedded tents but there's still no bathroom.
- » \***Km216–214 Sarchu Tent Camps**: six more upmarket camps almost side-by-side along an attractive grassy valley. Most have bedded tents with attached toilets and tap/wash-basin though size and quality vary both between and within properties. Marginally the most attractive tents are at **Antrek Camp** ([www.antrek.co.in](http://www.antrek.co.in); Km214.3; bed/half-board ₹2000/2800) but a better deal and almost as good are the smaller 'standard' tents (₹1000/2000) at orange-topped **Goldrop** ([www.ladakhmanali.com/camping.htm](http://www.ladakhmanali.com/camping.htm); Km215.1) whose hard toilet floors are more comfy than stone cobbles or mud floors.
- » \***Km197 Bharatpur**: eight **parachute cafes** (bed-space ₹100-150) in a lovely high-altitude valley. **Biru Dhaba** has the sturdiest stone-sided communal sleeping tent.
- » \***Km176 Zingzingbar Restaurant**: one of three *dhabas* on the long steady descent from 4850m **Baralacha Pass**.
- » **Km174** Surreally isolated tyre repair tent.
- » **Km169 Zingzingbar road-camp**.
- » \***Km159.5 Hozer Café** (bed-space ₹200): sleeps 15. An opal blue pond reflects the mountains. Around 2.5km from **Patsio Camp**.
- » \***Km143 Darcha Bridge**, passport check and several *dhabas* including **Lhasa Food Corner** (bed-space ₹80) at the bridge's south side: friendly, female-run, has an unusually clean outdoor toilet. After a few days asking around it's possible to find **horses** for the trek to Zaskar (p242). Buses are generally full by the time they reach Darcha but, heading south, standing for the 30km to Keylong isn't too bad.
- » \***Km139–138 Jispa**: has three roadside hotels; **Padma Lodge** (d ₹1000-1400) is the best value.
- » \***Km134 Gemur**: pretty little Lahaul village whose single three-room hotel, **Gemoor Khar** (☎9459103910; [www.hotelsnowviewmanali.com/gemoor.htm](http://www.hotelsnowviewmanali.com/gemoor.htm); tent/d/lux ₹1000/1320/1650) is a British-style house with exposed stone walls and flagged bathrooms.
- » \***Km115 Keylong** (p338): the first real town. Plenty of hotels.

\* accommodation available (very basic communal sleeping spaces unless otherwise indicated)

and dry-stone walls. The lane skirts Sakti's shattered stone **fortress** ruins (also visible from the main road above) and after nearly 5km, passes beside **Takthog (Dakthok) Gompa** (donation appropriate; ☉festival Jul), the region's only Nyingmapa monastery. The

name Takthog ("stone roof") refers to a pair of small but highly revered cave-shrines in which the great sage Padmasambhava supposedly meditated during the 8th century. These smoke-blackened prayer chambers now form part of the monastery's attrac-

tive older section, directly opposite the tin-roofed **Tourist Bungalow** (s/d ₹300/500) where four simple rooms have en suite squat toilets and share a kitchen.

### TANGTSE

Dishevelled central Tangtse is an anticlimax after the surrounding scenic glory. However, 2km beyond, the main road squeezes through a rocky cleft behind which clings **Tangtse Gompa**. The colourful main monastery is a recent construction but a hidden stairway leads down to an intriguing 800-year-old cube of 'old gompa' with blackened murals and a mysterious shaft of sunlight cutting through the incense smoke.

Marginally the best of Tangtse's six guesthouse-restaurants is perfectly central **Dothguling Guest House** (☎9469368805; d ₹600) with a pleasant Tibetan-style dining room and private bathrooms in half of the guestrooms. **Zamserling Guest House** (d ₹800), in a garden 800m east of town, has the finest location and pretty gompa views but overpriced rooms are very basic, with outside toilets.

### PANGONG TSO

A **permit** is required to visit **Pangong Tso**, a giant lake, whose surreal palate of vivid blues can't fail to impress, backed as it is by colourful mineral swirls and rolling snow-brushed mountains. Whether you're driving or strolling, the views change constantly, emphasised by natural reflecting pools and occasional foregrounds of makeshift cairns. At one point, a sand-spit jutting into the turquoise waters creates an almost Caribbean beach scene near **Lukung**, the lake's most accessible point. Set back from the lake's salt-whitened western end, there's no village here, just an army hut plus a trio of makeshift **cafes**. They're mostly popular with day trippers who have no time to go further but all offer overnight options; sleeping spaces in **Pangong Restaurant** (₹150), dreary box rooms at **Pangtso Padma** (d ₹700) and misnamed 'luxury' tents (with tap and simple wc) at **Martsemik** (s/d ₹2000/2200).

Further east, a bumpy unpaved road continues to pretty **Spangmik** whose well-spaced mud-brick houses climb steadily amid gold-green barley fields and mazes of dry-stone walls. It's a wonderful place to unwind, meet part-time nomads and maybe stroll 30 minutes up to the lonely, very modest **Gontserboom Gompa**. Virtually all of Spangmik's 10 farmsteads offer a **homestay**

(per person ₹100-250) – usually just three to six mattresses laid side by side on the floor and (at best) sharing an outdoor toilet. None have showers. Most can serve simple meals (around ₹50) given a little warning. Places further away from the lake-shore generally have better views and more traditional interiors. Of these, **Gongma Homestay** (dm/d/tent ₹200/500/500) has outstandingly obliging hosts, an unusually clean outside toilet and three twin-bedded tents in addition to typically simple rooms. Nearer the lake **Wonderland Camp** (tw tent ₹400) is a good deal with bedded tents and shared sit-down toilets. Closest to the shore, **Padma** (tr ₹300) is a four-room blockhouse with three lie-on-the-floor box rooms. It's beside Spangmik's only 'restaurant', a **parachute tent** (dishes ₹25-40) serving omelettes, instant noodles and dhal-rice.

If you must have an attached toilet choose between **Pangong Tso Resort** (☎9568505530; www.campsofladakh.com; d half-board ₹3300), Spangmik's low-rise concrete eyesore, or **Camp Watermark** (☎9968420496; www.campsofladakh.com; d full board ₹3500), an are of unexceptional bedded tents attractively situated near the water's edge at the entrance to Spangmik. Both feel seriously overpriced.

Beyond Spangmik the lakeside track gets much rougher but remains every bit as beautiful especially after **Man**, approaching the similar but more extensive village of **Merak**. Backed by some of the lake's most memorable mountain ridges, Merak only opened to foreigners in 2010 and remains little visited. Permits don't allow you to go further but the lake itself stretches way beyond into areas under Chinese control. As yet Merak has no formal tourist facilities but for ₹150 per person **Twang Rigzen Amchi** can find you a sleeping space at the traditional medicine clinic while **Chawang Tunduk** offers homestay beds if you can track him down, price 'negotiable'.

## Tso Moriri & Eastern Indus Valley

ELEV 4595M

**Permits**, required to reach Tso Moriri and the upper Indus, are checked at Upshi. Beyond, the Indus flows through a stark, sharp-cut rocky valley with occasional villages eking out an existence from small oases of irrigated barley fields. The most significant settlement is **Chumathang**. All that most

travellers see here is a rag-tag handful of cheap restaurant shacks around some messy hot-spring pools: Chumathang village itself is hidden away above the road some 2km beyond. Foreigner permits currently allow you to continue 43km up the Indus beyond Mahe Bridge to the **Loma Bend** army checkpoint. The route is asphalted and passes through some mesmerising desert scenery and oxbow lakelands. However, apart from the twin-horned gompa at **Nyoma**, there's little else in the way of specific sights and the long drive can feel anticlimactic. At Mahe Bridge, most travellers swing south to **Tso Moriri**, a vast, mildly brackish lake. In the area you stand a good chance of seeing kiang (wild ass), foxes and marmots, and of meeting nomadic Chang-Pa (Khampa) people herding their pashmina goats and yaks. But the high altitude can cause trouble and the overall experience is arguably less satisfying than visiting Pangong Tso.

## KORZOK

Tiny Korzok village is Tso Moriri's only significant settlement. Set on a slope around 500m back from the grassy lakeshore, its mud-brick buildings have a scrappy half-finished look and first impressions are off-putting. But the backdrop of snow-topped mountains is attractive and the lake's ever-changing colours are photogenic. Some 3km up the jeep road behind town, a grassy valley bowl is dotted in summer with the tents and animal enclosures of a seasonal **Chang-Pa nomad camp**.

Korzok has seven active homestays/guesthouses each a little dusty and basic with shared bathrooms and cold water usually in buckets. Most are clean enough but consider bringing your own sleeping bag. Relatively good choices are **Mentok Guest House** (d ₹300, with view ₹500) and **Crane Homestay** (same prices), both with sit-down toilets on the same floor as the best view-rooms. **Lake View GH & Restaurant** (☎9419345362; d without bathroom ₹500) has comparatively airy

guestrooms but the squat toilet is upstairs. **Goose Homestay** (dm ₹150) has a lake-view dorm with floor mattresses and simple food included in the deal.

The only option with en suite bathroom facilities is **Tsomoriri Camp & Resort** (☎01982-254855 in Leh; www.campsofladakh.com; d ₹2000, full board ₹3700), five overpriced hut-rooms and a line of 'luxury tents', whose touted view of the lake is marred by fences and new boxy buildings.

Downhill from the village gompa on the opposite (south) edge of town are four more tent-camps. All have shared outdoor bathroom blocks and prices that seem to vary at whim (₹500 to ₹1500 for essentially identical double tents).

**Lhasa Restaurant**, a makeshift parachute cafe beside the central gompa, produces simple meals (from ₹40) and has ₹50 mattress-on-floor bed spaces in the rear tent section.

**Trekking** from Tso Kar to Korzok takes four to five days. Constant high altitude, four passes over 4700m and subzero nights make for an unusually arduous trek. You'll need pre-arranged guides, horses and good-quality camping equipment. Landscapes are broad pastureland valleys rolling up to very high but mostly smooth-topped mountains quite unlike Ladakh's signature arid, spiked peaks. No permanent villages en route.

## **i** Getting There & Away

**BUS** Departs Leh (₹219) at 6.30am on the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month, returning next morning.

**JEEP** A three-day, one-way excursion from Leh to Keylong/Manali (₹16,241/19,058) via Mahe, Korzok (first night), Tso Kar and Pang/Sarchu (second night) is only possible southbound since permits must be issued in Leh. A return jeep charter (Leh-Korzok-Leh) takes two days and costs ₹7035 per vehicle (via the Indus Valley both ways), or ₹7800 returning cross-country via Puga, Tso Kar lake and Tanglang-La (very bumpy). Add ₹2000 extra for Loma Bend.



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