Jammu & Kashmir (including Ladakh)

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Why Go?
J&K combines three incredibly different worlds into one state. Hindu Jammu, the state’s major railhead, is a busy hub for domestic pilgrims. Muslim Kashmir is India’s Switzerland, attracting hoards of local tourists seeking cool summer air, alpine scenery and Srinagar’s romantic houseboat accommodation. For most foreigners, J&K’s greatest attraction is the Himalayan land of Ladakh, whose disarmingly friendly, ethno-linguistically Tibetan people are predominantly Buddhist. Their timeless monasteries are set between arid canyons and soaring peaks with emerald-green villages nestled photogenically in highland deserts.

Although Kashmir has been relatively calm of late, be aware that it is politically volatile and arguments over its status caused three 20th-century wars. Ladakh is different, a meditatively calm world, where the main concern is giving yourself ample time for high-altitude acclimatisation. Note that Ladakh is inaccessible by road outside the summer season.

When to Go

Leh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temp</th>
<th>Rainfall</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>°C/°F</td>
<td>inches/mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0/32</td>
<td>8/200</td>
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<tr>
<td>20/68</td>
<td>16/400</td>
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<tr>
<td>40/104</td>
<td>24/600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/68</td>
<td>32/800</td>
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Apr–Jun Kashmir is in full bloom but overloaded with domestic tourists. Prices peak.

Jul–Aug Perfect for Ladakh; rain drenches Jammu. Countless pilgrims flood to Amarnath.

Winter Ski season at Gulmarg. Ladakh has festivals but no road access for tourists.
LADAKH

Spectacularly jagged, arid mountains enfold this magical, Buddhist ex-kingdom. Picture-perfect gompas (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) dramatically crown rocky outcrops amid whitewashed stupas and meditational mani walls topped with countless 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 (barley booze). 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.

Ladakh is hemmed in by walls of dramatic mountains. This makes for unforgettable landscapes, but be aware that road access requires crossing tortuous high passes that close altogether from around October to May (or longer when snows are heavy).

History

Ladakh's (now-deposed) royal family traces its dynasty back 39 generations to AD 975. 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 artisanship 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 Tsong-khapa (who left a curious relic at Spituk).

Ladakh's greatest king, Sengge Namgyal (r 1616–42) gained riches by plundering gold reserves from western Tibet and re-established a capital at Leh. Ladakh remained an independent kingdom until the 1840s when the region was annexed by the Jammu maharajas. The Namgyals eventually passed Leh Palace to the Indian Archaeological Survey and retired to their summer palace at Stok.

Ladakh is now a pair of subdistricts within J&K. That’s a culturally odd situation for this ‘little Tibet’, which is one of the last relatively undisturbed Tantric Buddhist societies on Earth. When tourism was first permitted in 1974 commentators feared that the area would lose its identity, but the traditional lifestyle of the Ladakhis has proved unexpectedly robust to outside influences. Meanwhile locally relevant technologies, such as solar energy and Trombe thermal-storage walls, have helped to improve rural living standards.

Ladakh news and weather reports are available through www.reachladakh.com.

LADAKHI FESTIVALS

Buddhist temple festivals abound in Ladakh and Zanskar. Most follow a relatively similar formula with masked dances in a square or monastery precinct watched by a fair proportion of locals dressed in traditional goncha-robe costumes. Men might sport tall gonda hats with some women wearing perak ‘crowns’ encrusted with turquoise. The most genuine festivals are usually in December at Losar (Ladakhi New Year) and February/March during Dosmoche (Buddhist New Year) notably in Leh, Diskit and Likir where effigies representing the evil spirits of the old year are burnt or cast into the desert. Around the same time at Matho’s monastery, oracles perform blindfolded acrobatics and ritual mutilations. Several other monastery festivals are now held in the summer, but tourists often form a large proportion of the crowd. For a detailed online festival calendar, see www.reachladakh.com/festival_dates.htm.

Leh’s tourist-friendly Ladakh Festival (Leh), held in late September, is a fun celebration including several days of Buddhist dances, polo, music and archery.

Silk Route Festival (p251) is a new, vibrant celebration of Nubra Valley culture including archery contests, camel riding and dances.