



# Jammu & Kashmir

The mountain retreat of Mughals and Buddhist lamas; the Alps of India; Jehangir's Valley of Paradise. All these terms have been used to describe Kashmir, one of India's wildest and most controversial tourist destinations. After 20 years of isolation, travellers are slowly drifting back to this legendary backwater, returning to Srinagar's famous houseboats and walking the trekking routes north of Pahalgam. Kashmir boasts some of the highest and most rugged landscapes on earth in mountainous Ladakh, and one of the most sublime in serene Dal Lake.

Many people panic at the idea of travelling to Kashmir, so it's important to dispel some myths. The state of Jammu and Kashmir is actually three separate regions: Hindu Jammu, Buddhist Ladakh and the Muslim Kashmir Valley. Ladakh to the northeast is almost untouched by the Kashmiri conflict, while Jammu and the Kashmir Valley are safer than they have been for decades. However, the Kashmiri insurgency is ongoing and it is *essential* to check the security situation before travelling to either Jammu or the area around Srinagar. Remember that the dispute over Kashmir has been the cause of three wars between India and Pakistan.

If Jammu and Srinagar seem like too much of a gamble, don't overlook Ladakh and Zaskar. These rugged Buddhist regions are a little slice of Tibet, transplanted to India and wedged in by roaring rivers and snow-capped mountains. A series of mountain passes, the highest in the world, connect Ladakh, Zaskar, Kashmir, Lahaul, Spiti and Manali, opening up a fabulous circuit from Srinagar all the way to Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Climb stupas (domed edifices housing Buddhist or Jainan relics), murmur mantras, munch *momos* (Tibetan dumplings) and explore the dusty backstreets of **Leh** (p367), Ladakh's glorious medieval capital
- Marvel at murals and mix with meditative monks at the gompas (monasteries) and palaces of the **Indus Valley** (p380)
- Experience the giddy heights of the Himalaya on magnificent mountain treks through **Ladakh** (p379) and **Zaskar** (p391)
- Pay your respects at ancient mosques and relive the Raj on a Dal Lake houseboat in **Srinagar** (p357)
- Ski some of India's finest powder on the ski slopes of **Gulmarg** (p360) or hike among the pines at the mountain resort of **Pahalgam** (p361)







# JAMMU & THE KASHMIR VALLEY

Hemmed in by the Pir Panjal mountains and the western Himalaya, the Kashmir Valley straddles India and Central Asia. In both culture and appearance, this Muslim heartland is closer to Afghanistan or Iran than the neighbouring states of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. The countryside inside the valley is flat and heavily cultivated, with low, terraced fields delineated by fruit and nut orchards and rows of pin-straight poplar trees, backing onto a wall of snow-capped mountains. Kashmiris even look different to their southern and eastern neighbours, with their green eyes and grey flowing *pheran* (woollen tunics).

Unless you fly, there are only two routes into the Kashmir Valley – the summer-only highway from Srinagar to Kargil and the southern highway to Jammu, exiting the valley via the 2531m-long Jawahar Tunnel. Once a vision of tranquillity, the valley has been scarred by violence ever since Indian Independence, when the majority-Muslim kingdom joined with India instead of ceding to Pakistan. However, recent peace overtures have gone some way towards quelling the violence, and both Jammu and the Kashmir Valley are safer than they have been since 1989, when the tourist industry collapsed after a series of deadly attacks on foreign tourists.

As this book went to print, Jammu and the Kashmir Valley were the safest they have been for many years. The winter capital, Jammu, is a fascinating metropolis jammed with temples and museums, while the summer capital at Srinagar is a mesmerising sprawl of ancient wooden mosques and bobbing houseboats. In the north, the hill stations of Gulmarg and Pahalgam are once again attracting trekkers and skiers, and growing numbers of travellers are using Srinagar as the western gateway to Ladakh.

However, certain caveats apply. Violence can flare up suddenly and it would be foolish to visit Kashmir without checking the political situation first; see the boxed text, p352.

## History

The Hindu kingdom of Kashmir was mentioned in the Mahabharata and the valley became a major centre for Buddhist learning under the Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd

### FAST FACTS

- Population: 10.1 million
- Area: 222,236 sq km
- Capital: Srinagar (summer) and Jammu (winter)
- Main languages: Kashmiri, Urdu, Ladakhi, Hindi, Purig, Balti, Dogri, Punjabi and Pahari
- When to go: Kashmir – April to October (December to March for skiing); Ladakh – May to October

century BC. Kashmiri mural artists travelled across the Himalaya, creating fabulous monastery murals in Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti. Sufi mystics brought Islam to Kashmir in the 13th century and Hindu and Buddhist culture went into rapid decline. The Mughals consolidated their hold on the valley during the reign of Sultan Sikander (1389–1413), who ordered the destruction of most of the Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries in the valley. Followers of Buddhism fled east towards Ladakh, but the Hindu pandits were granted protection under Akbar (1556–1605) and the Kashmiri style of painting found a new expression in the lavish interiors of Srinagar's mosques.

By the time the British arrived in India, Jammu and Kashmir was a loose affiliation of independent kingdoms, nominally under the control of the Sikh rulers of Jammu. After the British defeated the Sikhs they handed Kashmir to the Hindu Dogra dynasty, who ruled from 1846 until Independence.

Most of the current problems in Kashmir began with Partition. Although the princely state of Kashmir had a majority Muslim population, its maharaja initially refused to sign up with either India or Pakistan. After months of equivocation, an invasion by Pashtun tribesmen, backed by the new government in Pakistan, persuaded the maharaja to throw in his lot with India. Pandit Nehru, himself a Kashmiri Hindu, sent troops to secure the border, sparking the first India–Pakistan war.

By the end of the conflict, two-thirds of the state was under Indian control, including the majority-Muslim Kashmir Valley, while the remaining third was held by Pakistan. This sparsely inhabited area has been the main

cause of tension between India and Pakistan ever since. In 1949, the UN established a tenuous border – known as the Line of Control – but Pakistan invaded again in 1965, triggering another protracted conflict.

Hindus and Buddhists were generally content with Indian rule, but the Muslim population grew increasingly restive. When promises of increased autonomy failed to materialise, a militant fringe turned to armed rebellion. The Indian army responded with brutal force, increasing resentment in the valley. By 1990, the state was awash with freedom fighters, some from Kashmir but rather more from Afghanistan and Pakistan, ensuring a pro-Pakistan agenda.

In fact, most Indian Kashmiris would rather be independent of both India *and* Pakistan. Most of the mainstream political parties, including the ruling Congress–Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party coalition, are working towards autonomy or full independence for Kashmir. However, the conflict has also become a cause célèbre for Islamic radicals. The two most active insurgent groups – Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad – were founded by Afghan *mujahideen* with the aim of restoring Muslim rule over India. The claim that militants are fighting for the rights of Kashmiris is undermined by the treatment of women in militant-controlled areas. Every year, dozens of Kashmiri women are executed

### FESTIVALS IN JAMMU & KASHMIR

**Jammu Festival** (Apr; Jammu, p363) Three days of eating, drinking and dancing in the Kashmiri winter capital.

**Sri Amarnath Ji Yatra** (Jul-Sep; Pahalgam, p361) At full moon, hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims trek for three days from Pahalgam to venerate the ice lingam at Amarnath.

**Ramadan** (statewide) The annual Islamic month of fasting starts on 13 September 2007, 1 September 2008, 22 August 2009 and 11 August 2010, ending 30 days later with the feast of Eid al-Fitr.

**Vaishno Devi Yatra** (Sep/Oct; Jammu, p365) Thousands of Hindus make the 12km trek to Vaishno Devi temple in honour of Mata Vaishno Devi.

**Eid al-Adha** (statewide) Muslims commemorate the sacrifice of Ibrahim (Abraham) with feasts and animal sacrifices on 20 December 2007, 9 December 2008, 28 November 2009 and 17 November 2010.

### FESTIVALS IN LADAKH & ZANSKAR

**Losar** (Dec/Jan; Ladakh, p365) Tibetan New Year is celebrated in Buddhist homes and gompas with feasts, rituals and dances.

**Gu-Stor** (times vary; Ladakh, p365; Zaskar, p389) Monks carry out special rituals and masked dances to celebrate the victory of good over evil. Gompas celebrating Gu-Stor include:

- **Spitik** (Jan; p380)
- **Karsha** (Jul; p391)
- **Thiksey** (Oct/Nov; p381)

**Dosmoche** (Feb; Leh, p367; Likir, p386; Diskit, p384) The Festival of the Scapegoat; Buddhists celebrate the New Year with masked dances – effigies representing the evil spirits of the old year are burnt or cast into the desert.

**Guru Tse-Chu** (Feb/Mar; Stok, p382) Masked dances and predictions of the future from the oracles at Stok Gompa.

**Matho Nagrang** (Feb/Mar; Matho, p382) Oracles at Matho enter a trance and commit daring acts of acrobatics while blindfolded, then carry out ritual mutilations and make predictions about the future.

**Tse-Chu** (Jun/Jul; Hemis, p382) Buddhists mark the birth of Padmasambhava with three days of masked dancing and the unfurling of Hemis' great *thangka* (rectangular painting on cloth) every twelfth year (next on show in 2016).

**Yuru Kabgyat** (Jul; Lamayuru, p387) Another monastic festival to ward off evil, with colourful masked dances in Lamayuru Gompa.

**Phyang Tsedup** (Jul/Aug; Phyang, p380) Phyang Gompa comes alive with *chaam* dances (ritual masked dances to celebrate the victory of good over evil and of Buddhism over pre-existing religions) and the unfurling of a giant *thangka* every third year (next on show in 2010).

**Ladakh Festival** (1–15 Sep; Leh, p367; Nubra, p383) Run by the tourism department, with Buddhist dances, polo, archery, music and sword dancing in Leh and Nubra.

**Chemrey Angchok Festival** (Nov; Chemrey, p383) Masked dances and mystic rituals at Chemrey Gompa.

for perceived transgressions against Islam or mutilated as a warning to families who fail to support the insurgency.

In 1990, Kashmir was placed under direct rule from Delhi, triggering 16 years of bloody unrest. Massacres and bomb attacks by militants were matched by human rights abuses by the Indian army, including the unexplained disappearance of 4000 people. Elections in 1996 led to calls for the division of Kashmir along religious lines, but this was rejected by Delhi.

Following a series of nuclear tests by the Indian government in 1998, tensions in the region rose almost to breaking point. Pakistan responded with its own tests, then mounted an incursion across the Line of Control near Kargil, before the UN talked the two countries back from the brink.

Subsequent elections have led to increasing autonomy for Kashmir, matched by a significant reduction in levels of violence across the Line of Control. India and Pakistan were forced together by the devastating Kashmiri earth-

quake in October 2005 – see the box, p360. As this book went to press, the leaders of Pakistan and India had agreed in principle to abandon their claim to the other portion of Kashmir.

However, militant attacks on soldiers, civilians and domestic tourists continued throughout 2006. Travellers should be aware of the ongoing security risks in Kashmir and plan accordingly.

## Climate

Jammu has a plains climate with heavy rain and humidity during the monsoon (June to August). The Kashmir Valley has a cooler mountain climate. The road from Jammu to Srinagar is usually open year-round, but smaller roads may be blocked by snow from December to March, which marks the ski season at Gulmarg.

## Getting There & Around

Numerous domestic airlines fly to Srinagar and Jammu, and frequent buses and share

### IS IT SAFE?

In 2000, with India and Pakistan gearing up for war, Bill Clinton described Kashmir as the most dangerous place in the world. The two nuclear neighbours have since pulled back from the brink, but violence continues to rock Kashmir on a daily basis and there were militant attacks on civilians throughout 2006, including a series of deadly grenade attacks on Indian tourists in Srinagar and Jammu.

When things are calm, Kashmir is no more dangerous than anywhere else in India, but attacks can occur without warning so it is essential to get reliable information about the security situation before you travel. Be aware that travel insurance policies may not cover you if your home government has issued specific advice against travel to Kashmir. In particular, avoid Kashmir at times of heightened political tension. Political anniversaries, public demonstrations, rallies by political parties and protests after Friday prayers are all potential flashpoints. Be wary around military installations and avoid large crowds, particularly crowds of Hindu pilgrims. Do not assume that travel is safe just because things seem calm on the surface. It only takes a firebrand speech or a controversial arrest for the conflict to flare up again.

Militants continue to stage periodic attacks on army installations, government offices, tourist attractions, markets and public buses. Even when things are peaceful, there is a huge Indian army presence at banks, offices, bus stations and religious sites. Avoid taking photos of anything military – when in doubt, ask. Expect regular bag searches when entering buildings and always carry your passport as soldiers can ask for your papers at any time.

Unfortunately for travellers, people involved in tourism are unlikely to give an unbiased view of the safety situation. Instead, look to local newspapers and news websites. Editorials are invariably skewed, but news reports of clashes and militant attacks can provide a clue to the current level of violence inside Kashmir. Useful news services:

- *Daily Excelsior* ([www.dailyexcelsior.com](http://www.dailyexcelsior.com))
- *Greater Kashmir* ([www.greaterkashmir.com](http://www.greaterkashmir.com))
- *Kashmir Herald* ([www.kashmirherald.com](http://www.kashmirherald.com))
- *Kashmir Times* ([www.kashmirtimes.com](http://www.kashmirtimes.com)).

jeeps provide connections to Ladakh and the plains. Jammu is served by frequent train services, and a new line is being extended from Jammu to Srinagar and around the Kashmir valley – check locally for updates.

No permits are required to visit Jammu or the Kashmir valley, but you should heed the security advice in the boxed text, opposite. Public buses and trains have been attacked during times of political tension – chartered jeeps are usually safer.

## SRINAGAR

☎ 0194 / pop 971,357

It has been 20 years since the houseboats of Dal Lake were last filled with holidaymakers, but the Kashmiri summer capital is slowly coming back to life, to the great relief of the thousands of Kashmiris who depend on tourism for a living. The attractions of Srinagar are myriad – placid Dal Lake with its slumbering houseboats, fabulous Mughal gardens, the historic wooden mosques of the old town. However, security is still a concern. Kashmir is the safest it has been for years, but even a minor shift in the political balance can trigger a new wave of bombings and murders. With this in mind, it would be foolhardy to visit Srinagar without checking the latest security situation thoroughly – see opposite.

## Orientation

Srinagar is divided into neighbourhoods by Dal Lake and the tributaries of the Jhelum River. Most of the houseboats and tourist facilities are close to the Boulevard on the south shore of Dal Lake. The Mughal gardens are strung out along the east shore, and the old town sprawls along the west shore, squeezed between the river and Hari Parbat hill.

West of the boulevard is Dal Gate and the shopping district of Lal Chowk. The tourist office and government bus stand are close to Dal Gate, while the public bus stand is further west along MA Rd. Most banks and offices are squeezed between MA Rd and Residency Rd, divided from the river by the pedestrian Bund.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

Srinagar has just a few net cafés, but all offer fast connections for Rs 30 per hour.

**BBC Online** (Dr Ali Jan Shopping Plaza, MA Rd; ☎ 9am-6pm) Close to Lambert Lane.

**Skybiz Internet** (Dal Gate; ☎ 9am-8pm) Handy for Dal Gate and the boulevard.

## MONEY

The HFDC ATM on Residency Rd is the most reliable place to withdraw cash.

**Jammu & Kashmir Bank** (MA Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques in most major currencies. There's a branch near the Hotel Paradise on the boulevard.

## POST

**Main post office** (Bund, off Residency Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) This post office is heavily fortified, and customers are searched on arrival. International parcels can only be sent from 10am to 1pm on Monday and Wednesday.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Jammu & Kashmir Tourism Development Corporation** (J&KTDC; ☎ 2457927; www.jktdc.org; TRC Rd; ☎ 10am-7pm) At the back of the Tourism Reception Centre; this office makes bookings for its properties statewide.

**Tourism Reception Centre** (☎ 2456291; www.jktourism.org; TRC Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm) Helpful staff and brochures, plus a Rs 10 map of Srinagar and Kashmir.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Kashmir has come a long way since the war-torn 1980s, but political violence is an ongoing problem – see the boxed text, opposite.

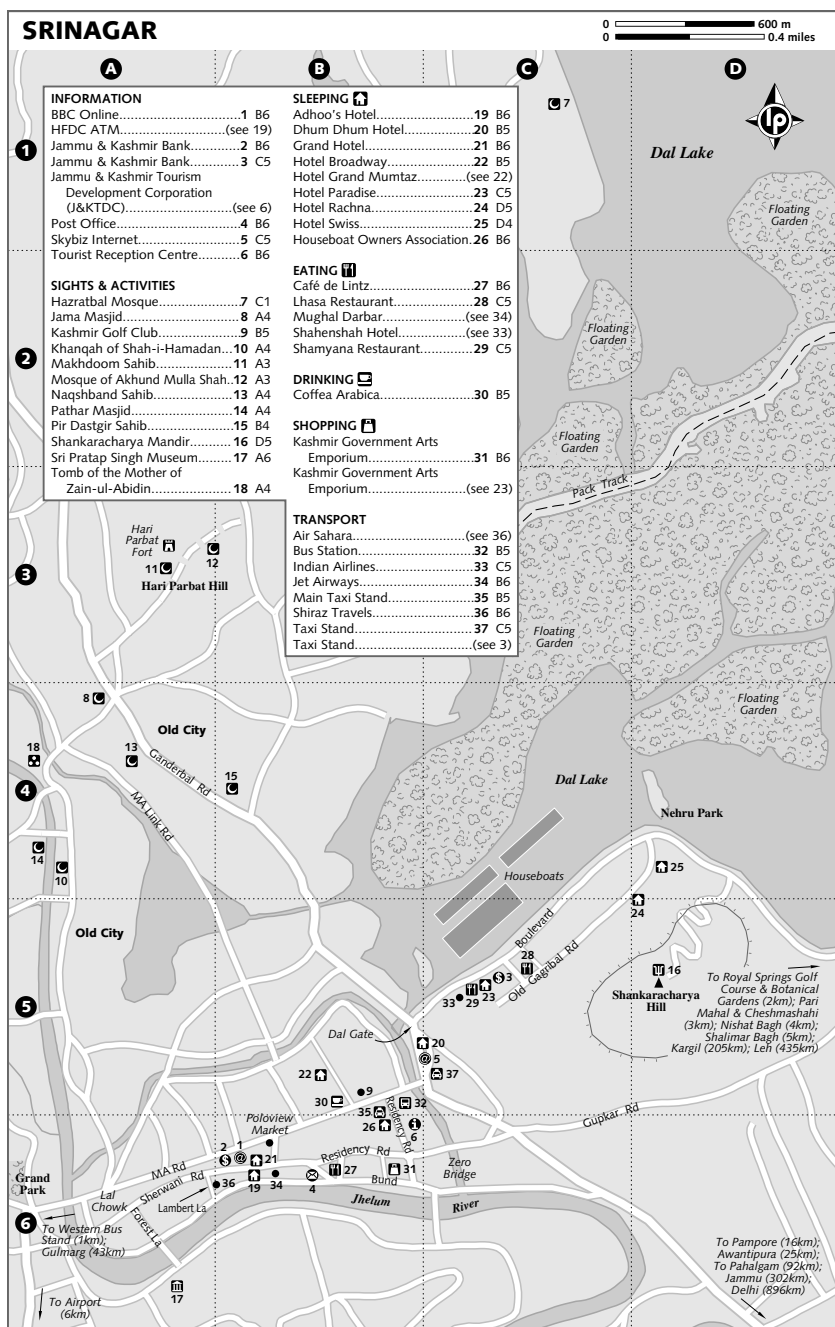
Touts are another hassle in Kashmir. From the moment you arrive, hangers-on will try to steer you towards a commission-paying houseboat. Be polite but firm and they will usually move on to another candidate. Travellers should also be wary of dodgy houseboat packages booked in Delhi – see the boxed text, p357.

## Sights

### DAL LAKE

Dal Lake is Srinagar's jewel, a vast, mirror-flat sheet of water reflecting the carved wooden balconies of the houseboats and the misty peaks of the Pir Panjal mountains. Flotillas of gaily painted *shikaras* (gondola-like taxi boats) skiff around the lake, transporting goods to market, children to school and travellers from houseboat to shore. If you want to photograph the lake, bring a long lens and a polarising filter to cut down the glare from the water.

Most visitors to Srinagar stay out on Dal Lake in one of the delightful houseboats left behind from the Raj, but landlubbers can hire *shikaras*





### BUSINESS HOURS

Srinagar follows normal business hours but most shops, banks and offices shut for several hours at lunchtime on Friday for Muslim prayers. If you have urgent business, get it done on Thursday, just to be safe. Although there is no official curfew, Srinagar is eerily silent after 8pm. Don't rely on being able to find a rickshaw or *shikara* (gondola-like taxi boat) after hours.

for tours around the lake, visiting floating gardens and the floating flower and vegetable **market**. It's a colourful spectacle, but expect plenty of attention from souvenir vendors.

*Shikaras* can be hired from boat stations all along the lakeshore and official rates are displayed on noticeboards. A shuttle from the boulevard to your houseboat will cost Rs 10 to 15, while an hour paddling around the backwaters will cost Rs 100, either on shore or at your houseboat.

Note that detours to commission-paying souvenir shops are routine – be firm if you don't want to spend half your day being bombarded with trinkets.

### PARKS & GARDENS

Srinagar is a city of gardens, many dating back to the Mughal era. Taxis charge Rs 600 for a tour visiting all the following gardens. These gardens are strung out along the road running east around Dal Lake; taxis charge Rs 600 for a tour visiting all the gardens.

The delightful **Shalimar Bagh** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 7am–6pm Wed–Mon) was built for Nur Jahan by her husband Jehangir. Regarded by many as the zenith of Mughal horticulture, the gardens step gracefully up the hillside, shaded by trees and cooled by artificial streams and Mughal pavilions.

Nearby, **Nishat Bagh** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 7am–6pm Thu–Tue) is a broad cascade of terraces lined with mighty *chinar* trees, starting right on the lakeshore and climbing to an elegant mock façade.

High above the lakeshore, **Pari Mahal** (admission free; ☎ dawn–dusk) looks more like a fort than a garden. The flower-filled terraces are divided by tall masonry arches, offering sweeping views down over the city.

Just downhill, **Cheshmashahi** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 7.30am–6.30pm Fri–Wed) offers more topiary,

rosebushes and water features, backing onto a handsome Mughal pavilion.

Down on the lakeshore are the sprawling **Botanical Gardens** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 7am–6pm Sat–Thu), a favourite snoozing and promenade venue for local families.

### MOSQUES & MAUSOLEUMS

The Kashmiri style of architecture is unique in the Islamic world. Kashmiri mosques are handsome, square buildings, ringed by covered balconies and topped by an elegant central spire. Minarets are rarely seen. Instead, the focus is on the inside of the mosque – walls are covered in papier-mâché or *khatamband* (wood panelling) and painted in vivid geometric and floral patterns.

Visitors are welcome at most of the mosques and shrines in Srinagar, but always remove your shoes before entering. As a rule, you can visit these places anytime from sunrise to sunset, except during Friday prayers; however, you should ask permission before entering and before taking any photos inside. Note that most mosques have a dedicated entrance for women (cover your head if local women do the same).

#### Jama Masjid

Srinagar's principal place of worship, the mighty **Jama Masjid** (Nowhatta) was constructed by Sultan Sikander in 1394, but the current building dates from 1672. Built in the classic Kashmiri style, the masjid has room for 33,000 devotees. The 378 columns that support the roof were each made from the trunk of a single deodar tree, and monumental brick gatehouses mark the four cardinal directions. Visitors are welcome at the discretion of the mosque attendants, but bags and cameras are prohibited.

#### Pir Dastgir Sahib

Dominating a busy junction in the old city, this grand Sufi **shrine** (Khanyar Chowk area) looks more like a civic building than a mosque. The graceful white and green exterior hides a glorious papier-mâché interior full of scrollwork, Arabic script and floral motifs, supported by papier-mâché palms. Men and women are welcome and visitors can take pictures with permission from the attendants.

#### Naqshband Sahib

This beautifully proportioned 17th-century **shrine** (Khanyar Chowk area) was built using the same

technique as the tower temples and palaces of Himachal Pradesh, with alternating layers of wood and stone to dissipate the force of earthquakes. Ask the attendants if you can see the wood-panelled *khatamband* ceiling.

### Khanqah of Shah-i-Hamadan

The first mosque ever built in Kashmir, the **Khanqah of Shah-i-Hamadan** (Khwaja Bazar area) was founded in 1395 by the Persian saint Mir Sayed Ali Hamadni. However, the *khanqah* (Muslim meeting hall) has burnt to the ground several times and the current incarnation dates to the 1730s. The frontage and interior are covered in elaborate wood carvings and papier-mâché reliefs. Visitors are welcome to peek through the door but only Muslims may enter.

### Pathar Masjid

Facing Shah-i-Hamadan on the opposite side of the river, the peaceful **Pathar Masjid** (Zaina Kadal area) is a more conventional stone mosque built by Jehangir's wife Nur Jahan in 1623.

### Hari Parbat & Makhdoom Sahib

Hindus believe that towering **Hari Parbat hill** was the island where Sharika (Durga) defeated the lake demon Jalodabhava, while Muslims pay homage at the vast **Makhdoom Sahib** shrine, dedicated to a Sufi saint who helped the spread of Islam in Kashmir. A flight of stone steps climbs up to the shrine and descends towards Dal Lake, passing the ruined mosque of **Akhund Mulla Shah**, built by Shah Jahan's son Dara Shikoh in 1649. The hill is topped by the imposing **Hari Parbat Fort**, now occupied by the Indian Army. Around the base of the hill are the remains of the **old city walls**, built by Akbar in the 1590s.

### Tomb of the Mother of Zain-ul-Abidin

Hidden away in the bazaar streets between Zaina Kadal and the river, this unusual brick **mausoleum** (Zaina Kadal area) marks the final resting place of the favourite wife of Sultan Sikander, built over the ruins of a Hindu temple destroyed by Sultan Sikander. There's an interesting medieval cemetery behind the shrine.

### Hazratbal Mosque

On the lakeshore north of the Old City, this modern **mosque** was the setting for a notorious standoff between armed militants and Indian police in the 1990s. Today it has returned to its peaceful purpose – enshrining a hair of the Prophet Mohammed.

### SRI PRATAP SINGH MUSEUM

This fabulous **museum** (☎ 2312859; Lal Mandi area; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) is laid out in the former summer palace of the maharaja. Highlights include miniature paintings, Mughal papier-mâché and bronzes, Hindu and Buddhist carvings, musical instruments, weaponry, traditional costumes, carpets and embroidery. There's also a large natural history section, though the stuffed animals look like they died of fright.

Photos are prohibited and you need your passport to enter. To get here, take the footbridge at the south end of Forest Lane in Lal Chowk market.

### SHANKARACHARYA HILL

Rising behind the boulevard, this hill (also known as Takht-i-Sulaiman or Throne of Solomon) is topped by the tiny stone **Shankaracharya Mandir**, which predates the arrival of Islam in Kashmir by a thousand years. Taxis and auto-rickshaws charge Rs 300 for the return trip from town or you can hike up from the west end of the boulevard in about half an hour.

### Activities

#### GOLF

Recalling Srinagar's British past, there are several upmarket golf clubs; green fees are Rs 200 and club hire is around Rs 200, plus caddy fees. Try the **Kashmir Golf Club** (☎ 2476677; MA Rd; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) or the **Royal Springs Golf Course** (☎ 2482582; Lakeshore; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm Wed-Mon) near the Botanical Gardens.

#### SWIMMING

In summer, everyone plunges into the cool waters of Dal Lake. Swimming barges are set up near Nehru Park offering private changing rooms for bathers and water-skiing around the lake. Get here by *shikara* for Rs 40 each way.

#### Tours

Any of the taxi stands in Srinagar can arrange sightseeing tours. Expect to pay Rs 1000 for a full-day tour, including the Mughal Gardens, the Shankaracharya temple and the Old City.

#### Sleeping

Srinagar has a range of land-based accommodation options, but houseboats are the main attraction.

## HOUSEBOATS

**our pick** The houseboats of Dal Lake offer a window back in time. These flat-bottomed pine barges are basically floating villas, with bedrooms, lounges, kitchens, staff quarters and gorgeous verandas leaning out over the water, decorated with carved walnut panels. Interiors fall somewhere between Mughal splendour and English chintz. Most houseboats are run by individual families, who provide home-cooked meals and *shikara* trips to shore and around the lake.

Standards of houseboats vary – some are damp and gloomy, others are palatial – and the level of luxury is not always clear from the price. Officially, houseboats are divided into five classes and rates are set by the government, but prices vary hugely and massive discounts (up to 70%) can be negotiated. At the time of research the advertised rates were as follows:

Category	Full board per person (Rs)	Lodging only (Rs)
Deluxe	2000	1000
A category	1200	600
B category	800	400
C category	700	350
D category	400	200

The **Houseboat Owners Association** (☎ /fax 2450326; Residency Rd; ☎ 8am–6pm) can make bookings, but there are 1400 boats to choose from. By far the best way to find a houseboat is to rent a *shikara* for an hour and visit several house-

boats to see what is on offer. Touts will try to steer you towards a commission-paying boat, but these are rarely the best or friendliest places to stay. Under no circumstances should you book a houseboat in advance with a travel agent outside Kashmir. We receive regular letters from travellers who have been scammed for hundreds of dollars by unscrupulous operators – see the boxed text, below.

When choosing a houseboat, make sure you know exactly what you are getting. Meals, hot water and *shikara* lifts from boat to shore should be included in the price. If not, you may end up paying a hefty surcharge later. Look for houseboats that offer a choice of meals rather than three daily portions of dhal and rice. Most boats charge an extra Rs 300 in winter to cover the costs of heating oil. Wherever you stay, expect frequent visits from souvenir sellers in *shikaras* – an unavoidable irritation.

The majority of Srinagar's houseboats bob gently on Dal Lake, lined up in front of the boulevard. There are more cheap boats north of the old town on Nagin Lake. Alternatively, you can stay on one of the many boats moored on the banks of the Jhelum River – established in colonial times when the British were prohibited from owning land – which have a boardwalk directly to shore.

## HOTELS

Some hotels in Srinagar are permanently occupied by the army – look for and avoid places wrapped in barbed wire. All the following hotels have TVs and private bathrooms

### HOUSEBOAT HASSLES

For many visitors to Srinagar, a stay on a houseboat is a charming experience. For others it is a waking nightmare. While most houseboat owners are perfectly honest, we receive a lot of correspondence from travellers who have been held as virtual hostages on houseboats by unscrupulous operators.

Most of the complaints relate to package tours booked in Delhi. Travellers frequently arrive to find that the floating palace they booked is a creaky barge, and hidden charges amounting to hundreds of dollars have been added to their bill. Others have literally been held hostage, either through spurious claims about violence onshore or through the physical confiscation of their passports. Single women have also reported inappropriate advances from houseboat staff.

To avoid this criminal behaviour, book your houseboat after you arrive in Srinagar and inspect the boat thoroughly before you agree to stay. Make sure that the fee covers everything promised, including meals and transfers (get this in writing) and make it clear that you do not want unsolicited visits from souvenir vendors. Keep your passport and other valuables with you at all times.

It pays to let the Houseboat Owners Association (above) know where you're staying and the proposed duration of your stay. Although run by houseboat owners, they may be able to arbitrate in any subsequent disputes over fees.

with hot water. Ask about discounts when you check in.

**Hotel Swiss** (☎ 2472766; swishotelkashmir@sancharnet.in; s/d Rs 450/550) Behind the boulevard on Old Gagribal Rd, this well-run hotel has friendly management and a large choice of rooms with spotless bathrooms.

**Dhum Dhum Hotel** (☎ 2450779; Dal Gate; r with hot shower Rs 450-850) Conveniently located for the old town and the boulevard, this is the best land-based budget accommodation. Rooms are dull but clean and there's a good *dhaba* (snack bar) downstairs.

**Grand Hotel** (☎ 2476583; Residency Rd; s/s from Rs 1000/1200; ☹) A solid midrange choice, the Grand offers small but well-loved rooms with thick carpets. Central heating keeps out the winter chill and the restaurant serves excellent Kashmiri food.

**Adhoo's Hotel** (☎ 2472593; adhooshotels@yahoo.com; Residency Rd; s/d from Rs 1400/1600; ☹) This myrtle-coloured block is hidden away in a courtyard off Residency Rd. Inside, you'll find huge, cheerfully dated rooms, some with river views.

**Hotel Paradise** (☎ 2450779; Blvd; r Rs 1800-2200; ☹) Set around a huge lawn, set back from the boulevard, the Paradise has huge, well-lit rooms with balconies facing the garden or lake. The garden-facing rooms are quieter and cosier.

Next to each other on MA Rd, **Hotel Broadway** (☎ 2459001; www.hotelbroadway.com; s/d Rs 3500/4500; ☹ ☹) and **Hotel Grand Mumtaz** (☎ 243184; hotelgrand\_mumtaz@yahoo.co.in; s/d Rs 4500/5500; ☹ ☹) offer sumptuous rooms, elegant restaurants, coffee shops and heated swimming pools.

## Eating

There are dozens of cheap *vaishno dhabas* (vegetarian snack bars) along the boulevard and around Dal Gate, while the old town is dotted with stands serving shashlik (grilled lamb skewers) and grilled lake fish. Most restaurants charge 8% tax on the bill.

**Mughal Darbar** (Residency Rd; dishes Rs 50-120; ☹ 10am-10pm) Close to the Polo Ground, this cheerful restaurant serves a good range of Kashmiri dishes, including *murg mirch korma* (chicken in a clear spicy gravy) and fruit-stuffed naan.

**our pick Shamyana Restaurant** (Blvd; dishes Rs 60-170; ☹ 11am-11pm) Set back from the boulevard, Shamyana serves up top-notch Mughlai and Chinese food in a bright, comfortable dining room. The house *rogon josh* (lamb and tomato curry) is a veritable feast.

**Café de Lintz** (Residency Rd; dishes Rs 60-200; ☹ noon-8.30pm) A decent fill-up stop on the way to Residency Rd, serving all the usual Indian and Chinese standards.

**Lhasa Restaurant** (Blvd; dishes Rs 70-180; ☹ 10am-9pm) A local favourite for *momos* (Tibetan dumplings), noodle soups and Chinese chicken. The dining room is styled after a Buddhist monastery or you can eat out in the walled garden.

## Drinking

Srinagar is a Muslim town so alcohol is in short supply. If you dress your best, you may be able to sneak a cold beer in the bar at the Hotel Broadway or the Kashmir Golf Club on MA Rd.

**Coffea Arabica** (Hotel Broadway, MA Rd; ☹ 9am-7pm) A modern coffee shop serving all your espresso favourites to a soundtrack of Lionel Ritchie and the Backstreet Boys.

## Shopping

The range of Kashmiri souvenirs in Srinagar is unparalleled, but the pressure to buy can be overbearing. Elegantly painted papier-mâché boxes and Christmas-tree decorations make cheap and light souvenirs, or there are bulkier papier-mâché items like lamps and vases. Carved walnut wood is another speciality of the valley, as are cashmere and pashmina shawls, and carpets – see the boxed text, opposite. Shops in Lal Chowk sell cricket bats, saffron, dried fruit and nuts.

Resist the urge to buy shahtoosh shawls and anything else made from animal fur – local furriers do a lively trade in endangered species (see the boxed text, p1147).

The boulevard and Lambert Lane are lined with souvenir shops, but you can find the same souvenirs without the hassle at **Kashmir Government Arts Emporium** (☎ 2452783; off Residency Rd; ☹ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat), all at fixed prices. There's a handy **branch** (☎ 2477466; Blvd) next to Hotel Paradise, but beware of copycat stores in the same building.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Half a dozen airlines offer daily flights between Srinagar and Delhi (from US\$88, 1¼ hours) or Jammu (US\$86, 35 minutes). **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2450247; Shahenshah Palace Hotel, Blvd; ☹ 10am-4.45pm Mon-Sat) flies to Leh (US\$102, 45 minutes) on Tuesday. There are also town offices for **Jet Airways** (☎ 2480801; Sherwani Rd) and **Air Sahara**

## KNOW YOUR CARPETS

Kashmiri carpets are famous for their rich sheen and intricate patterns, but you need to choose carefully as quality can vary tremendously. Most Kashmiri carpets use designs from Iran, knotted by hand in wool or silk, or a combination of the two. Silk carpets look luxurious but they tend to be less durable than wool and fake silk is often passed off as the real thing. When choosing a carpet, look at the level of detail in the design and the range of colours. Turn the carpet over and look at the back – the knots should be small and tightly packed together. Expect to pay upwards of US\$200 for a good quality 3ft by 5ft (0.9m by 1.5m) wool carpet and US\$1000 for a similar sized carpet in silk.

If you can't stretch to a knotted Kashmiri carpet, consider some of the other floor coverings available in the valley. Chain-stitched *gabbas* (floor rugs) in wool or silk cost a fraction of the price of knotted carpets. Also look out for *namdas*, delightfully rustic rugs made from pressed felt embroidered with wool in flowing floral patterns. Whatever you buy, consider the weight – a 3ft by 5ft (0.9m by 1.5m) carpet weighs at least 5kg, a quarter of the standard airline baggage allowance.

Be warned that some carpets are produced using child labour; see the boxed text, p1145.

(☎ 2106750; Lambert Lane) that are open for similar hours. **Shiraz Travels** (☎ 245 5221; Lambert Lane) can book all domestic flights, as well as helicopter trips to Amarnath. Look out for cheap web fares on Spicejet, Air Deccan and other budget airlines.

There's a massive level of security at the airport and foreigners must register on arrival. Allow at least three hours to check in. Check with the airline for specific restrictions on cabin baggage – these change all the time.

## BUSES

Militants have attacked buses in the past, so seek local advice before travelling by bus.

Deluxe government buses run by **J&KTDC** (☎ 2455107) leave from a stand next to the Tourist Reception Centre. Services include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Delhi	890-990	24	8.30am
Gulmarg	160	2½	9am
Jammu	215	12	7.30am (6.30am in summer)
Kargil	240/320 (ord/dlx)	10	8am
Pahalgam	120	2	8.30am
Sonamarg	170	3	8am

From May to late October, the Kargil buses continue to Leh after an overnight stop; the Srinagar to Leh fare is Rs 490/620 (ordinary/deluxe) A few private buses to Kargil and Srina-

gar leave from the chaotic Western Bus Stand in Batmaloo, 1½km west of Lal Chowk.

Buses run twice a month between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, but this route is only open to Indian and Pakistani citizens.

Private buses around the valley leave from the Western Bus Stand. There are several daily buses to Sonamarg (Rs 40, three hours) and Pahalgam (Rs 42, two hours). For Gulmarg, change at Tangmarg (Rs 70, two hours).

## SHARE JEEPS

The easiest and safest way to reach Jammu or Kargil is by share jeep from the taxi stand opposite the tourist office. Jeeps to Jammu (Rs 300 to 400) leave between 6am and 11am; jeeps to Kargil (Rs 500 to 550) leave from 7am. Infrequent jeeps to Leh cost Rs 1000 (18 hours).

## TAXI

By far the easiest and safest way to explore the Kashmir Valley is by chartered taxi. There are unionised taxi stands all over the city, all charging fixed rates. Fares and destinations include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)
Gulmarg	1200 (return)
Jammu	2900
Kargil	3800
Leh	8000
Pahalgam	2000 (return)
Sonamarg	1800 (return)

## THE KASHMIRI EARTHQUAKE

On 8 October 2005, the Kashmir Valley was struck by a massive earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter Scale, destroying thousands of homes and burying whole villages under deadly landslides. A massive rescue effort was immediately launched on both sides of the border, with rescue crews from as far afield as Britain and the USA helping to locate survivors and set up emergency camps for refugees. In total, 80,000 people were killed, most on the Pakistan side of the Line of Control, and 2.5 million were left homeless.

Aid flooded in from around the world and India and Pakistan opened the Line of Control to allow aid convoys to cross. However, hopes that this new spirit of cooperation might calm the insurgency were quickly dashed. As the snows thawed around the refugee camps, Kashmiri militants detonated bombs at the Hanuman temple and train station in Varanasi and on crowded commuter trains in Mumbai, killing more than 200 people. Donations to charities supporting earthquake victims are still welcome but be aware that many phoney charities were set up to channel money to militants.

## Getting Around

A taxi to the airport costs Rs 360. *Shikara* rates are set by the local union – see Dal Lake, p353 for details. An autorickshaw to anywhere in Srinagar will cost under Rs 60.

See p356 for taxi tours of Srinagar.

## AROUND SRINAGAR

There are several interesting detours along the road to Pahalgam, east of Srinagar, all accessible by chartered taxi or local bus – check the security situation before you travel.

About 16km southeast of Srinagar, **Pampore** is the centre of the Indian saffron industry. Every October, the fields along the highway are carpeted with vivid violet crocus blooms (the flower stamens produce the vivid yellow pigment).

**Avantipura**, 25km from Srinagar, has two ruined Hindu temples dating from the 9th century. The huge **Awantiswami Temple** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☞ dawn-dusk), dedicated to Vishnu, has similarities to the Hindu temples of Southeast Asia. About 1km west is the smaller **Awantsvara Temple**, dedicated to Shiva and visited on the same ticket.

The area between Avantipur and Ananatsnag is famous for the production of willow **cricket bats**; the roadside is dotted with stalls offering bats for sale and most will let you peek at the workshops where the cricket bats are made.

At **Ananatsnag**, the main road turns southwards to **Jammu**, while the road to **Pahalgam** branches off to the east. About 7km from Ananatsnag, the 7th-century **Surya Temple** at **Martand** follows a similar plan to the temples at Avantipura. There is a modern temple to

Surya a few kilometres north at **Mattan**, with a holy spring full of teeming fish. **Gardens** from the time of Shah Jahan can be seen in the nearby villages of **Achabal**, **Kokernag** and **Verinag**.

Heading north from Mattan, the road enters the gorgeous valley of the **Lidder River**, which becomes a raging torrent with the spring snowmelt. Jagged mountains rise ahead and the road is flanked by towering *chinars*, Kashmir's national tree.

## GULMARG

☎ 01954 / elev 2730m

About 52km southwest of Srinagar, the pine-fringed meadow at Gulmarg – literally 'Meadow of Flowers' – is a busy ski resort in winter and a popular walking resort in summer. The Alpine landscape is a marked contrast to the flat, poplar-lined fields that cover the bottom of the Kashmir Valley, but don't expect a quiet retreat. Gulmarg is packed with domestic tourists year-round and most of the meadow is given over to a golf course that doubles as a training slope during the ski season.

## Orientation & Information

The meadow at Gulmarg is ringed by a long road that connects the bus stand, the Gondola cable car and the golf course. All the cheap hotels are lined up between the bus stand and the Gondola.

At the golf course, the **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 254487; ☞ 9.30am-5pm) has information on skiing and local attractions. The Jammu & Kashmir Bank ATM at the bus stand takes some foreign cards.



## Sights

About 1km west of the bus stand, the **Gondola Cable Car** (return ticket to 1st/2nd stage Rs 200/700; ☎ 10am-4pm) whisks travellers from the meadow to the heights of Afarwat mountain. The first stage runs to 3930m and the second stage continues to a giddy 4390m. The views are outstanding and you can hike back down to Gulmarg through the forest in a few hours, passing the turf-roofed winter houses of the nomadic Gujar people.

As well as building the golf course, the British were responsible for the 150-year-old **St Mary's Church** now abandoned in the middle of the green. Nearby, the wooden **Rani temple** attracts Hindu worshippers, while Muslims pay their respects at the tin-roofed **Babu Reshi Shrine**, a few kilometres below Gulmarg.

## Activities

In winter, Gulmarg becomes India's premier **skiing** resort, with runs to suit all levels. There are several drag lifts and one chair lift, but electricity is sometimes restricted to 15 minutes every hour. The Gondola provides access to some dramatic high-altitude powder. The ski season runs from 15 December to 15 April, and skis and boots can be hired from the tourist office or the Kashmir Alpine ski shop near Hotel Highlands Park. Expect to pay Rs 300 for equipment and Rs 30 for a ski pass for the day.

Other wintery activities include **ice-skating** on the open-air rink by the Hilltop Hotel and **sledging** on the meadow. Sledge pullers charge Rs 130 per hour. **Pony rides** around the meadow and into the forest cost Rs 120 per hour.

The large and well-maintained **golf course** (☎ 254487; nine holes Rs 100, club hire Rs 100) claims to be the highest in the world.

## Sleeping & Eating

Ask for discounts outside of the peak summer season (June to August) and ski season (December to April).

**Hotel Yamberzal & Restaurant** (☎ 254447; s/d Rs 600/1200) Cheap by Gulmarg standards, this simple place has plain rooms with hot showers and carpets, and a restaurant overlooking the meadow.

**Sahara Hotel** (☎ 254505; r from Rs 800) This incongruously named hotel next door is almost identical to Hotel Yamberzal.

**Hotel Kingsley** (☎ 254415; s/d from Rs 800/1440) Right next to the bus stand, the wood-shingled

Kingsley is faded but comfy. Rooms have reliable hot water and the front lawn faces right onto the meadow.

**Hotel Highlands Park** (☎ 254430; s/d from Rs 3000/4000, ste Rs 5000) The best of the period properties on the far side of the green, this grand hotel sprawls over a dozen British-era cottages on the hillside. Rooms with open fireplaces ooze colonial charm and there's a very *pukkah* restaurant and bar.

**Hotel Hilltop** (☎ 254445; hilltop\_gulmarg@yahoo.com; d from Rs 4000) An upmarket option near the Gondola, this centrally heated place is toasty warm, but rooms are expensive for what you get. There's a bar and restaurant.

All the hotels have restaurants and there are several pure-veg *dhabas* along the road between the bus stand and Gondola.

## Getting There & Away

A return taxi from Srinagar costs Rs 1200. See p359 for information on buses.

## PAHALGAM

☎ 01936 / elev 2130m

Set in a magical valley beside the Lidder River, Pahalgam is framed by pine forests and snow-covered peaks that bear more than a passing similarity to the Rocky Mountains. This was once Kashmir's most popular resort, but today it exists in a state of limbo, empty for most of the year, but deluged with visitors during the annual Amarnath *yatra* (pilgrimage) from June to August (see p362). Outside of the pilgrimage season, this is a fine spot for walking, pony trekking or just enjoying the cool, clean mountain air. However, check the security situation before visiting – pilgrims have been repeatedly targeted by militants.

## Information

On the main street, the **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 243224; ☎ 24hr Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) mainly caters to pilgrims. **Cyber Café** (per hr Rs 50; ☎ 10am-6pm) at the bus stand offers slow internet access.

## Sights & Activities

The most popular destination for short **walks** is the viewpoint at Baisarn, 5km above Pahalgam. From here, you can continue 2.5km to an even better viewpoint at Dhabyan, or walk 7km to the pretty lake at Tulyan. Pony owners will pounce on you as soon as you arrive in Pahalgam offering **pony treks** to the same destinations

for Rs 300 to 500. In winter, sledge rides cost Rs 100 to 300, depending on the distance.

Other attractions include the 11th-century **Mamleshwar Temple** on the west bank of the river, the wooden town **mosque**, a Sikh **gurdwara** and the flower-filled **Club Park** (entry Rs 5; ☎ 8am-7pm).

About 1km south of the centre, the **Jawahar Institute of Mountaineering and Winter Sports** (☎ 243129; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) offers mountaineering and trekking courses (April to November) and ski courses (January to February). Custom-made treks cost Rs 150 per person per day – the four-day trek to the Kolahoi Glacier and Tarsar Marsar Lake is a popular option.

From April to September, white-water rafting on the Lidder can be arranged through **Highland Excursions** (☎ 01942488061; www.highlandoutdoors.com) on the road to Aru.

## Sleeping

Pahalgam has dozens of pilgrim hotels, but most shut down for the winter. Unless otherwise stated, the following hotels are open from April to November.

**Hotel New India** (☎ 243365; d Rs 300) One of half a dozen no-frills pilgrim hotels by the bus stand, offering bare rooms with bathrooms.

**Brown Palace** (☎ 243255; r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 200/800, cottage Rs 1500) Run by a charming Muslim family, this homy, wood-panelled guesthouse is 1km north of Pahalgam in the quaint village of Laripura.

**Hotel Tulyan** (☎ 243096; s/d Rs 1500/2000) A sparkling new place full of marble and polished pine, just above the bus stand. It fits the Alpine setting perfectly.

**Hotel Pahalgam** (☎ 243252; www.pahalgamhotel.com; s/d Rs 4000/5500) The best choice in town, Hotel Pahalgam is spread over several wooden Raj-era buildings in a gorgeous garden right next to the Lidder. Rooms have thick carpets and toasty wood-burning stoves, and you can stay here year-round.

**Hotel Nataraj** (☎ 243225; d Rs 2400, cottages Rs 5500-7000) Rooms at this midrange hotel are only so-so, but the cottages in the garden are delightful. Each has a kitchen, two bedrooms, a bathroom with hot shower, and a garden with a swing and balcony overlooking the Lidder.

## Eating

All the hotels have restaurants and there are *dhabas* and bakeries near the bus stand.

**Log Inn** (snacks Rs 20-60) In front of Hotel Pahalgam, this log-cabin coffee shop serves cakes, real espresso, hot chocolate and warming mugs of herbal tea.

**Nathu's Rasoi** (mains Rs 40-100) The fast-food restaurant at the Hotel Tulyan serves tasty Chinese and Indian veg food quicker than you can say onion pakora.

**Hotel Paradise** (mains Rs 50-150) Right on the main road; a solid choice for Kashmiri curries and Chinese, Indian and continental standards.

## Getting There & Away

Government buses leave for Srinagar (Rs 120, two hours) at 4pm and Jammu (Rs 250, 12 to 14 hours) at 8am, but only if there are enough tourists. Private buses to Srinagar (Rs 42) leave three times a day, or take a local bus to Ananatnag (Rs 20, one hour) and change.

## AMARNATH

elev 13,800m

Every year 500,000 Indian tourists make the annual *yatra* (pilgrimage) to the **ice lingam** at Amarnath. This is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in India, but pilgrims have been targeted by militants on numerous occasions, so check things out carefully before visiting. The cave at Amarnath is reached by a three-day, 36km trek from the town of Chandanwari, 16km north of Pahalgam. Some pilgrims complete the journey by pony, helicopter or *dandy* (palanquin). Inside the main chamber is a natural stone lingam that becomes encrusted with ice from May to August. Pilgrim numbers peak during the Shivrani Festival in July and the military presence can be overpowering.

During *yatra* season, the tourist office in Pahalgam runs shuttle buses to Chandanwari and makes arrangements for the three-day trek to Amarnath. Ponies cost Rs 2650; palanquins cost Rs 10,000.

## SONAMARG

☎ 0194 / elev 2740m

Set in a sweeping, forested valley, Sonamarg was once a popular trekking destination, but the town now has a heavy military presence. The road to Leh and Kargil passes through Sonamarg, so you can enjoy the scenery from the bus, even if you don't stop over. For those who do stay, **J&KTDC** (☎ 2417208) can arrange ponies for day trips to beauty spots like the spectacular **Thajiwass Glacier**, 4km above town.



For accommodation and meals, try the well-run **J&KTDC Tourist Huts** (☎ 2417208; dm Rs 150, r Rs 400, 2-bed hut Rs 1800) or the superior **Hotel Glacier Heights** (☎ 2417215; r with bathroom Rs 1200), backing onto the forest.

Government buses from Srinagar to Kargil or Leh pass through Sonamarg (Rs 170, three hours), or you can take a private bus from Srinagar's Western Bus Stand. Buses heading on to Ladakh are often full by the time they reach Sonamarg; you may have to return to Srinagar to get a seat.

## SONAMARG TO KARGIL

The road from Sonamarg to Kargil passes through increasingly rugged terrain as it struggles over the 3529m Zoji La – the pass that separates Kashmir from Ladakh. Unfortunately, this route passes close to the Line of Control and the road has been shelled on several occasions. Check things are calm before you visit.

Even when things are safe, this is not a journey for the fainthearted. The road is barely wide enough for a single vehicle and it clings to the side of precarious drops, wedged in by a saw edge of mountain peaks. Travel from Sonamarg to Kargil is only possible from June to October and the pass is only open to Kargil-bound traffic in the afternoon. If you arrive at the wrong time, you'll have to wait in the gloomy **Baltal Camp** at the foot of the pass.

Beyond the Zoji La, the landscape is barren and eerily silent after the birdsong-filled hills of Kashmir. Foreigners must register at the similarly gloomy **Gumry Camp** on the Ladakh side of the pass.

From Gumry, it's 37km to the bleak outpost at **Drass** – allegedly the coldest inhabited place on earth after Oymyakon in Siberia. Although most villagers are Muslim, there are some ancient Buddhist carvings on the roadside. From Drass, the road stretches another 56km to Kargil, the gateway to Buddhist Zanskar and Ladakh.

## SOUTHERN KASHMIR

The population of southern Kashmir is mainly Hindu and Sikh, but the region sees regular attacks from Muslim militants who slip across the border from Pakistan. Tourist sights and train stations are favourite targets – investigate the security situation thoroughly before you decide to visit.

## Jammu

☎ 0191 / pop 2,718,113

If Srinagar is the City of Gardens, Jammu is the City of Temples. The winter capital of Kashmir is awash with Hindu *shikharas* (temple towers) and Sikh *gurdwaras* (temples). Founded in 1730 as the capital of the Dogra Rajas, Jammu is the main bus and railhead for Kashmir, and an interesting place to break the journey from Delhi to Srinagar. Unfortunately, the city is also a major target for extremists – make sure things are calm before you come.

## ORIENTATION

Jammu sprawls along the banks of the Tawi River. The train station and airport are on the south side of the river, while the bus stand and old town are on the north bank. Most of the cheap hotels and restaurants are near the bus stand on Jewel Chowk or Vinaik Bazaar.

## INFORMATION

### Money

The **Jammu & Kashmir Bank** (Shalimar Rd; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm Sat) can change major currencies in cash and travellers cheques. The most reliable ATM is at the HFDC Bank by the bus stand.

### Tourist Information

The Tourist Reception Centre is located on Residency Rd.

**J&K Tourist** (☎ 2548172/2544527; ☎ 10am–4pm)

Provides information on the whole of Kashmir. There's a booth at the train station.

**J&KTDC** (☎ 2549065; www.jktcdc.org; ☎ 8am–8pm)

Makes bookings for J&KTDC hotels statewide.

## SIGHTS

For security reasons, you may need to leave your bag, camera and mobile phone with security guards when visiting any of the following places.

Close to the main bazaar, **Raghunath Mandir** (Residency Rd; ☎ 6–11.30am & 6–9.30pm) was constructed by Maharaja Gulab Singh, founder of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The temple has a gilded *sikhara* and dozens of shrines to different incarnations of Vishnu. Pavilions around the main shrine contain thousands of *saligrams* (ammonite fossils) representing the myriad deities of the Hindu pantheon.

Crowning the hill on the south bank of the Tawi River, the **Bahu Fort** was constructed

by the Dogra Rajas in the 19th century. Inside, the **Bawey Wali Mata Mandir** is thronged by devotees of Kali, particularly on Tuesdays and Sundays. Pilgrims pour water from the temple over tethered goats, who shake themselves dry, showering the devout in sacred droplets.

Below the fort are the peaceful **Bagh-e-Bahu Gardens** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-9pm), laid out on a classic Mughal plan overlooking the river. A huge, fish-shaped aquarium is under construction at the top of the hill.

There are more interesting temples dotted around town, including the gaudy **Har-ki-Paori Mandir** near the fort and the towering **Ranbireswar Mandir** on Shalimar Rd, with its giant stone lingam.

About 5km northeast of the centre, the stately **Amar Mahal Palace** (☎ 2546783; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/45, camera Rs 10; ☎ 9-12.50am & 2-5.50pm, till 4.50pm Apr-Sep) was the last official residence of the Dogra Rajas. It's styled after a French chateau and inside you can see the Rajas' state rooms and a collection of portraits and miniatures.

Nearby is the **Dogra Art Gallery** (☎ 2678610; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun, 8am-1.30pm in summer), displaying 800 miniature paintings in a wing of the fading but fabulous Mubarak Mandi Palace.

## TOURS

Taxis at the train station and tourist office charge Rs 410 for a four-hour sightseeing trip.

## SLEEPING

Most of the sleeping options are close to the bus station, though theft is rife in the cheaper hotels. Note that accommodation can be in short supply during the Vaishno Devi *yatra* season (September to October).

**JDA Hotel** (☎ 2576825; Below Gumat; dm Rs 50, d Rs 250-300) Above the bus stand off BC Rd, this rough and ready place is OK if you just need a bed before catching a morning bus.

**ourpick Diamond Hotel** (☎ 2577792; Vinaik Bazar; s/d with cold shower Rs 200/250, r with hot shower, TV & AC Rs 300-400) Head and shoulders above the competition, the Diamond offers a good choice of budget rooms, with the option of air-con and hot water.

**Vardaan Hotel** (☎ 2573212; Vinaik Bazar; s/d from Rs 990/1090) A smarter option near the bus stand. Come here for good soundproofing, steamy hot showers and icy air-con.

**KC Residency** (☎ 2520770; www.kcresidency.com; Residency Rd; s/d from Rs 1900/2300) The poshest choice in town, with a revolving rooftop restaurant, a disco, an Ayurvedic spa and elegant rooms with all mod cons.

## EATING

The road running up to the bus stand has several cheap vegetarian *vaishno dhabas* and Kashmiri Muslim restaurants serving tasty *wazwan* (meat thalis).

**Jewel's Fastfood** (Jewel Chowk; Rs 30-100; ☎ 7.30am-11pm) A friendly snack house with plastic chairs and good-value dosas, curries and thalis (Rs 75/90 veg/nonveg).

**ourpick Paradise Bar & Restaurant** (Jewel Chowk; mains Rs 50-160) Next door, this cheerfully chintzy 1980s-style bar serves cold beers and good tandoori chicken, *seekh* kebabs (spicy meat kebabs, cooked in a tandoor) and veg curries.

**Falak** (☎ 2520770; Residency Rd; mains from Rs 200; ☎ 12.30-11pm) The revolving restaurant atop the KC Residency Hotel is the best splurge in town, with a broad and enticing Indian menu.

## SHOPPING

**Kashmir Government Arts Emporium** (☎ 2542946; Residency Rd; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) The full range of Kashmiri souvenirs can be found here.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Half a dozen airlines fly between Jammu and Delhi (US\$161, one hour) or Srinagar (US\$86, 35 minutes). **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2456086; Tourist Reception Centre; ☎ 10am-4.45pm Mon-Sat) also flies to Leh (US\$112, 45 minutes) on Thursday and Saturday. **Jet** (☎ 2574312; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) has an office at the KC Residency Hotel. **STC Travel** (☎ 2574080; Jewel Chowk) handles bookings for other airlines.

### Bus

The bus stand is north of the river, just off BC Rd. Within Kashmir, buses leave for Srinagar (Rs 110 to 150, 10 to 12 hours) hourly from 5am to 8am. There are also regular buses to Katra (Rs 25, two hours) and Ransoo (Rs 110, four hours). The bus stand also has regular services to Delhi (Rs 315, 12 hours), Amritsar (Rs 97, six hours) and Pathankot (Rs 47, 2½ hours). One bus leaves daily for the following towns (inquire locally for times):

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)
Chamba	160	7
Dalhousie	145	6
Dehra Dun	300	11
Dharamsala	115	5
Haridwar	295	12
Manali	295	12
Shimla	260	12

### Share Jeeps

Fast share jeeps to Srinagar (Rs 300 to 400) leave from the highway in front of the bus stand from 4am to 8am. A charter taxi costs Rs 3200 to Srinagar and Rs 710 to Katra.

### Train

Jammu Tawi is the main station in Jammu, but check the security situation as there have been attacks on trains. Useful services to Delhi include the *Jammu Mail* (4034) at 3.35pm and the *Shalimar Mail* (4646) at 8.55pm. Fares are Rs 948/669/248/154 in 2A/3A/sleeper/2nd class.

The rail line is being extended all the way to Srinagar; check locally for updates.

### GETTING AROUND

Auto-rickshaws are plentiful; journeys around town cost Rs 50 to 60. Stretch minivans shuttle between the bus station and train station for Rs 5 per head. A taxi to the airport costs Rs 150.

### Around Jammu

There are loads of interesting sights in the hills around Jammu, but this area is particularly prone to insurgent attacks. Be sure to check the security situation before venturing into the hills.

Probably the most famous sight close to Jammu is the Hindu temple of **Vaishno Devi**. From September to October, thousands of pilgrims join the daily convoy of jeeps and buses heading north to Katra, start of the 12km hike to the temple complex. The temple enshrines a revered image of Mata Vaishno Devi, representing the goddess incarnated as Kali, Saraswati and Lakshmi. As usual, check things are safe before you visit.

About 110km northwest of Jammu, **Shiva Khori** is visited by thousands of Hindu pilgrims during the Shivaratri Festival in February and March. At the end of the kilometre-long cave is a revered Shiva lingam, formed from a natural stalagmite. The caves are a 3km walk from

the village of Ransoo, accessible by public bus from Jammu.

About halfway between Jammu and Srinagar is the green and pleasant hill station at **Patnitop**, with several hotels and forest walks. All Srinagar–Jammu buses pass this way.

## LADAKH

Ladakh is bound by mountains and made up of mountains. Sheer walls of rock and ice divide the Indus Valley from Tibet, Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, and human habitation is restricted to narrow strips of greenery clinging to the rivers that drain down from mountain glaciers. This rugged region is home to one of the last undisturbed Tantric Buddhist populations on earth, protected from colonial interference, rampaging Mughals and the ravages of the Cultural Revolution by sheer force of geography.

From November to May, Ladakh is almost completely cut off from the outside world. Even in summer, getting here involves crossing the highest mountain passes in the world, or a hair-raising flight that weaves between the peaks. Isolation has preserved an almost medieval way of life, dictated by the changing seasons. However, change is coming to this mountain Shangri La. Tourism and hydro-electric power are flooding the region with money, and global warming is altering rainfall patterns, threatening farming cycles and Ladakh's traditional mud-brick architecture.

Unlike the rest of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh has seen little violence since Independence. Most Ladakhis are Buddhist, with smaller communities of Shia and Sunni Muslims in Leh and the valleys surrounding Zaskar and Kargil.

### History

Ladakh's earliest inhabitants were nomadic yak herders, but permanent settlements were established along the Indus by Buddhist pilgrims travelling from India to Mt Kailash in Tibet. Buddhism soon became the dominant religion, though the minority Brokpa tribe still follows Bonism: the religion that preceded Buddhism in Tibet (see the boxed text, p388).

By the 9th century, the Buddhist kings of Ladakh had established a kingdom extending all the way from Kashmir to Tibet, protected by forts and dotted with vast Buddhist gompas

(monasteries). Different sects struggled for prominence, but the Gelukpa (Red Hat) order was introduced by the Tibetan pilgrim Tsongkhapa in the 14th century, and it soon became the major philosophy in the valley.

Simultaneously, Muslim armies began to invade Ladakh from the west. In the 16th century, the province fell briefly to Ali Mir of Balistan, but Buddhism bounced back under Singge Namgyal (1570–1642), who established a new capital at Leh. Ladakh was finally annexed into the kingdom of the Dogra Rajas of Jammu in 1846.

Since then, Ladakh has been ruled as a sub-district of Jammu and Kashmir. In response to anti-Buddhist discrimination, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) was formed in 1996, lobbying for the creation of a Union Territory of Ladakh. Since then, candidates from the Ladakh Union Territory Front have led the field at elections, but with the state government profiting heavily from Ladakh's tourism industry, autonomy is likely to remain a distant dream.

## Climate

The sun shines in Ladakh for 300 days a year, but rainfall levels are on par with the Sahara and winter temperatures frequently dip below -20°C. The extremes of cold create a short tourism season in Ladakh; the mountain passes are only open from July to October and few tourists visit for the desolate winters. For locals, winter is the season of celebration. All the food and fuel for winter has been stacked and stored and people are free to spend their days making merry at Ladakh's many festivals.

If do you visit in winter, bring serious winter gear. Running water is in short supply, and hot water and heating costs extra at hotels because of the limited supply of fuel. For more tips, see the boxed text, opposite. In recent years, global warming has caused a significant shift in rainfall patterns, altering the growing season and increasing erosion by wind and rain, affecting buildings and roads across the region.

Average summer (June to September) and winter (October to May) temperatures follow:

Region	Summer	Winter
Kargil	0° to 38°C	-17° to 12°C
Leh	-3° to 30°C	-20° to 13°C
Nubra Valley	-3° to 28°C	-15° to 15°C

## Language

Ladakhi, written in the Tibetan script, is the main language of Ladakh and Zaskar. If you only learn one word, make it *jule* (pronounced *joo-lay*) – meaning 'hello', 'goodbye', 'please' and 'thank you' – derived from the Tibetan greeting *tashi-delek*.

## Information

### PERMITS

To visit the Nubra Valley, Pangong Tso and the Rupsu Valley, you need an Inner Line Permit, which can only be obtained through a travel agent in Leh. Most agents can arrange the permits in one working day for around Rs 100, plus a daily visitor tax of Rs 20. Permits are valid for seven days and you're required to travel in a group of four, though agents can sometimes get around this with creative paperwork. It's possible to obtain a permit and travel independently, but border police have turned back groups of less than four, even with the proper papers. You'll have to show your passport and hand over copies of the permit at numerous checkpoints, so carry half a dozen copies.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Most of Ladakh lies above 3000m and fly-in visitors invariably suffer mild symptoms of AMS (p1188). Avoid strenuous exertion for the first 24 hours and drink plenty of water. Thereafter, always consider the effects of altitude when making steep ascents, particularly over mountain passes. Trekkers should take extra care – make sure you are properly equipped and acclimatised.

Leh and eastern Ladakh see none of the trouble that affects the rest of Jammu and Kashmir, but the road between Kargil and Srinagar has been shelled in the past, so check things are safe before you travel; see p352.

Avoid using charcoal heaters in unventilated hotel rooms because of the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning; see p1126.

### Activities

Ladakh is an adventure playground for outdoor types and Leh abounds with tour operators offering trips up into the mountains.

### TREKKING

From July to October, Ladakh and Zaskar offer some fantastic high-altitude trekking routes. For more information see Trekking in Ladakh (p379) and Trekking in Zaskar (p391).

## A MOUNTAIN TOOLKIT

There are special considerations for travel in harsh mountain conditions. Warm, insulating clothing is essential, even in summer, and sunburn is an ever-present risk because of the altitude. Bring a hat, sunscreen and lip salve, as well as UV-proof sunglasses. A mountain medical kit should include paracetamol for symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness, but only as an aid for retreating to lower altitudes – see p1188 for more on this potentially deadly condition.

Also carry a course of antibiotics (available in larger towns) and dehydration salts for stomach upsets, plasters for blistered feet, a chapstick and a tube of cold sore cream containing aciclovir – wind-chapped lips are particularly vulnerable to cold sores. Campers should bring a sleeping bag rated to three or four seasons, and photographers should carry a polarising filter to reduce glare. A good-quality torch is essential for finding your way home along unlit village streets.

## MOUNTAINEERING

Ladakh is a mountaineers' paradise, but you must pay mountain royalties and climbing at this altitude is a serious endeavour – see p95 for more advice. UK-based **Adventure Peaks** ([www.adventurepeaks.com](http://www.adventurepeaks.com)) is one of several companies offering mountaineering packages in Ladakh. There are also several high-altitude trekking ascents, including the popular four-day climb up Stok Kangri (6121m) and treks to the base of the Nun Kun Massif (7135m) – see p379 and p391.

## WHITE-WATER RAFTING & KAYAKING

From July to September, rafters and kayakers can enjoy epic white water on the Indus and Zaskar Rivers. Grades vary from I to III on the Indus and II to IV on the Zaskar. The most popular trip is the short but thrilling run from Phey to Nimmu near Leh (Grade II to III) – see p372.

## Getting There & Around

Leh receives year-round flights from Delhi, Srinagar and Jammu. Buses and share jeeps run from Srinagar to Leh from May to November, and from Manali to Leh from July to mid-October. See the Getting There & Away sections for Leh, Manali and Srinagar for details. Transport within the valley is mainly by local bus, chartered taxi or rented motorcycle.

## LEH

☎ 01982 / pop 28,100 / elev 3505m

On one level, Leh is a tourist town, with all the travel agencies, souvenir shops and pizza restaurants you would expect to find in a bustling backpacker centre. On the other hand, how many other tourist towns back onto ruined palaces in the lee of the Himalaya? The sky overhead is a vivid dark blue from

the altitude – a breathless 3505m above sea level – and the modern town melts into a crumbling old city of timber and mud bricks. The Indian Army maintains a large military base near the airport to patrol the borders with China and Pakistan, but their main job is repairing roads and bridges and keeping the mountain passes clear of snow.

## Orientation

The main landmark in Leh is the Royal Palace, overlooking the crumbling alleyways of the Old Town and the Polo Ground. Most hotels and restaurants are southwest along Main Bazar and Fort Rds, or northwest in the village of Changspa. There are more village guesthouses further north in Karzoo and Sankar.

The bus stand and post office are 1km south of Main Bazar, and the airport is 7km southwest on the road to Kargil. The road to the Nubra Valley and Khardung La runs uphill behind the Polo Ground.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

The following bookshops are well stocked with maps and books on Ladakh and Zaskar.

**Ladakh Bookshop** (Map p371; Main Bazar) Good for novels, guides and glossy picture books.

**Leh Ling Bookshop** (Map p371; Main Bazar) Novels and a decent selection on Ladakh and Tibet.

### EMERGENCY

See Medical Services for health emergencies.

**Police** (☎ 252018; Zangsti Rd)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Leh has dozens of internet cafés offering reasonably fast connections for Rs 100 to 120 per hour. However, power cuts are common.

**Get Connected** (Map p371; Main Bazar; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Faster connections than most, plus a LAN network for laptops and CD burning.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

For medical advice on AMS phone ☎ 253629 (24 hours) and see p1188. For any serious health problems, head to **Sonom Narbu Memorial Hospital** (☎ 252360/252014), about 1km south of the bus stand. There are a few *amchi* (traditional Tibetan medicine) clinics.

**Het Ram Vinay Kumar pharmacy** (Map p371;

☎ 252160; Main Bazar; ☎ 9.30am-8pm) Dispenses antibiotics and other essential medicines and Western toiletries.

**MONEY**

Leh has two 24-hour ATMs that take international cards, and both have generators as protection from power cuts.

**Jammu & Kashmir Bank Foreign Exchange Office**

(Map p371; Himalaya Complex, Main Bazar; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques in major currencies; also has an ATM on Main Bazar.

**Paul Merchant** (Map p371; ☎ 255309; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Exchanges cash and travellers cheques and also offers Western Union transfers.

**State Bank of India** (Map p371; Main Bazar; ☎ 10am-

4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Exchanges currency and travellers cheques, and has an ATM on site.

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

Several places along Fort Rd and Main Bazar sell print film; slide film and memory cards are hard to find. Most internet cafés will download your pictures onto a CD for around Rs 80.

**Sonu Colour Lab** (Map p371; Main Bazar; ☎ 9.30am-6pm) For one-hour printing and processing.

**POST**

The main **post office** (☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) is 1km south of the centre on the airport road. The central post office is currently under renovation; there's a temporary office by the tourist office.

**TELEPHONE**

There are numerous PCO/STD/ISD offices in Leh, charging the standard Indian rates for international calls. Mobile phone users will find a citywide signal for Airtel and BSNL mobiles, but expect trouble getting a line for calls inside Ladakh.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

Noticeboards all over town have adverts for tours, treks and activities, and local news is provided by the magazines *Ladags Melong* (Rs 20) and *Magpie* (Rs 2). Useful websites include [www.reachladakh.com](http://www.reachladakh.com), [www.jktourism.org/cities/Ladakh](http://www.jktourism.org/cities/Ladakh) and [www.excursionsindia.theindiancenter.com/gompas-of-ladakh](http://www.excursionsindia.theindiancenter.com/gompas-of-ladakh).

**RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IN LADAKH**

The culture and pristine environment of Ladakh is under threat from commercial exploitation for tourism. Do your bit to preserve Ladakh by observing the following guidelines:

- **Respect local culture** Stick to long trousers or skirts and tops that cover the shoulders, especially when visiting monasteries.
- **Avoid plastic** Purify your own water or refill your water bottle instead of buying water in plastic bottles. Avoid plastic bags and goods packaged in plastic.
- **Conserve water** Never leave taps running and use composting Ladakhi toilets instead of flush toilets where available. Use environmentally friendly laundry services and don't wash directly in streams.
- **Save energy** Turn off lights when not in use and support guesthouses that use renewable electricity.
- **Support local communities** When you shop and eat, look for places that use locally sourced ingredients or materials and employ local people in production. Drink local *tsestalulu* (sea buckthorn) juice instead of packaged soft drinks.
- **Trek responsibly** Aim to minimise your impact on any areas you pass through; see p98 for tips on responsible trekking.
- **Support local organisations** Visit the Women's Alliance Centre (p370) and the Ecology Centre (p370) to find out more about local issues.



**Jammu & Kashmir Tourist Reception Centre**

(☎ 252094; Old Leh Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat)

Handles bookings for Jammu and Kashmir Tourist Bungalows in Ladakh.

**Tourist office** (Map p371; ☎ 253482; Fort Rd;

☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) Has limited brochures on Ladakh.

There's a booth at the airport, open for incoming flights.

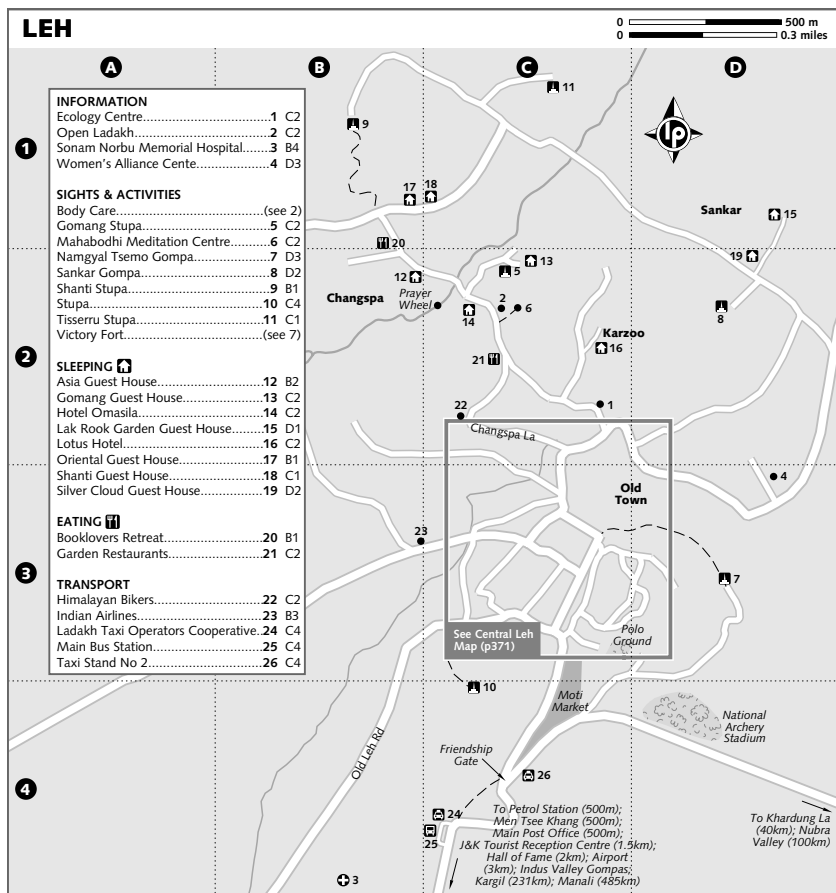
**Sights****LEH PALACE**

Rising above the old town, the ruined **Leh Palace** (Map p371; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ dawn-dusk) was built in the 17th century by the Buddhist kings of Ladakh. It bears more than a passing similarity to Potala Palace in Tibet and the views from the roof are stunning. The Archaeological Survey of India is restoring the

palace, but it's debatable whether the restoration is moving faster than the rate of decay. So far, only the palace prayer room gives any sense of the grandeur that must once have filled these corridors. Carry a torch and watch out for holes in the floor.

**NAMGYAL TSEMO GOMPA**

A giddy climb above the palace, this mud-brick **gompa** (Map p369; admission Rs 20) was built in 1430, enshrining a three-storey-high image of Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha. The steep path to the gompa starts from the palace, or you can take a taxi most of the way for Rs 115/168 one way/return. To avoid AMS, don't come up here too soon after arriving in Ladakh.



**FILL UP!**

If travellers keep on drinking purified water from disposable plastic bottles, Leh will vanish under a sea of plastic. Fortunately, help is at hand, courtesy of **Dzomsa** (Map p371; ☎ 250699; Main Bazar; ☎ 8am-9pm), an environmental organisation that provides refills of purified, pressure-boiled water for just Rs 7. Dzomsa also offers an environmentally friendly laundry service, a recycling and disposal service for paper and batteries, and a small shop selling delicious *tsestalulu* (sea buckthorn) juice and organic apricots.

Behind the gompa are the lofty ruins of a medieval **victory fort**, badly damaged by hordes of backpackers scrambling over the walls. If you come up here, watch your footing and try not to hasten the destruction.

**OLD LEH**

Behind the Jama Masjid, the crumbling streets of Old Leh are lined with eroded chortens (Tibetan for stupas) and traditional mud-brick Ladakhi houses. After centuries of neglect, locals are now preserving the remaining buildings with help from the German-run **Tibet Heritage Fund** ([www.tibetheritagefund.org](http://www.tibetheritagefund.org)).

Immediately below the palace are a series of ceremonial buildings belonging to the former royal family, marked on the Central Leh map (p371). The **Soma Gompa** is used for traditional dances on summer evenings. Nearby is the small red **Chamba Lhakhang**, and the interesting **Chenrezi Lhakhang**, with rediscovered medieval murals between the inner and outer walls.

A free brochure and map listing other interesting buildings and monuments in the old town is available from local travel agencies.

**SANKAR GOMPA**

Hidden away in the tangle of streets behind the Women's Alliance, the **Sankar Gompa** (Map p369; admission Rs 20) is maintained by a small order of Gelukpa monks. Inside, you can see some ancient murals and statues of Maitreya, the future Buddha, and Avalokitesvara, the thousand-armed god of compassion. Across the road is the *photang* (official residence) of the head lama of Ladakh.

**CHOWKHANG**

Right in the centre but hidden away behind Main Bazar, this small modern **gompa** (Map p371; admission free; ☎ 24hr) is the headquarters of the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Masked *chaam* dances (ritual masked dances) take place here as part of the Ladakh Festival in September.

**BUDDHIST STUPAS**

Reached by a long winding road or an equally exhausting flight of steps from Changspa, the gleaming **Shanti Stupa** (Map p369; ☎ 5am-9pm; ☎) was built by Japanese monks to promote world peace. The stupa offers stunning views, but don't rush up here too soon after arriving in Leh because of the risk of AMS.

Just north of the Shanti Stupa are the ruins of the 11th-century **Tisseru Stupa** (Map p369; admission free; ☎ 24hr) made from mud bricks laid in geometric patterns over a core of poplar trunks.

Closer to Changspa is the striking **Gomang Stupa** (Map p369; admission free; ☎ 24hrs), built in the 9th century in a similar style to the Bodhi stupa in Kathmandu and flanked by Buddhist rock carvings.

Reached by a path from Old Leh Rd is another prayer-flag cloaked **stupa** (Map p369) balanced on a rocky outcrop overlooking the bus stand. The 360-degree views over Leh are superb.

**HALL OF FAME**

About 2km south of Leh on the airport road, this small **museum** (Indian/foreign Rs 10/50; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm) has displays on Ladakhi culture and the war with Pakistan over the disputed Siachen Glacier.

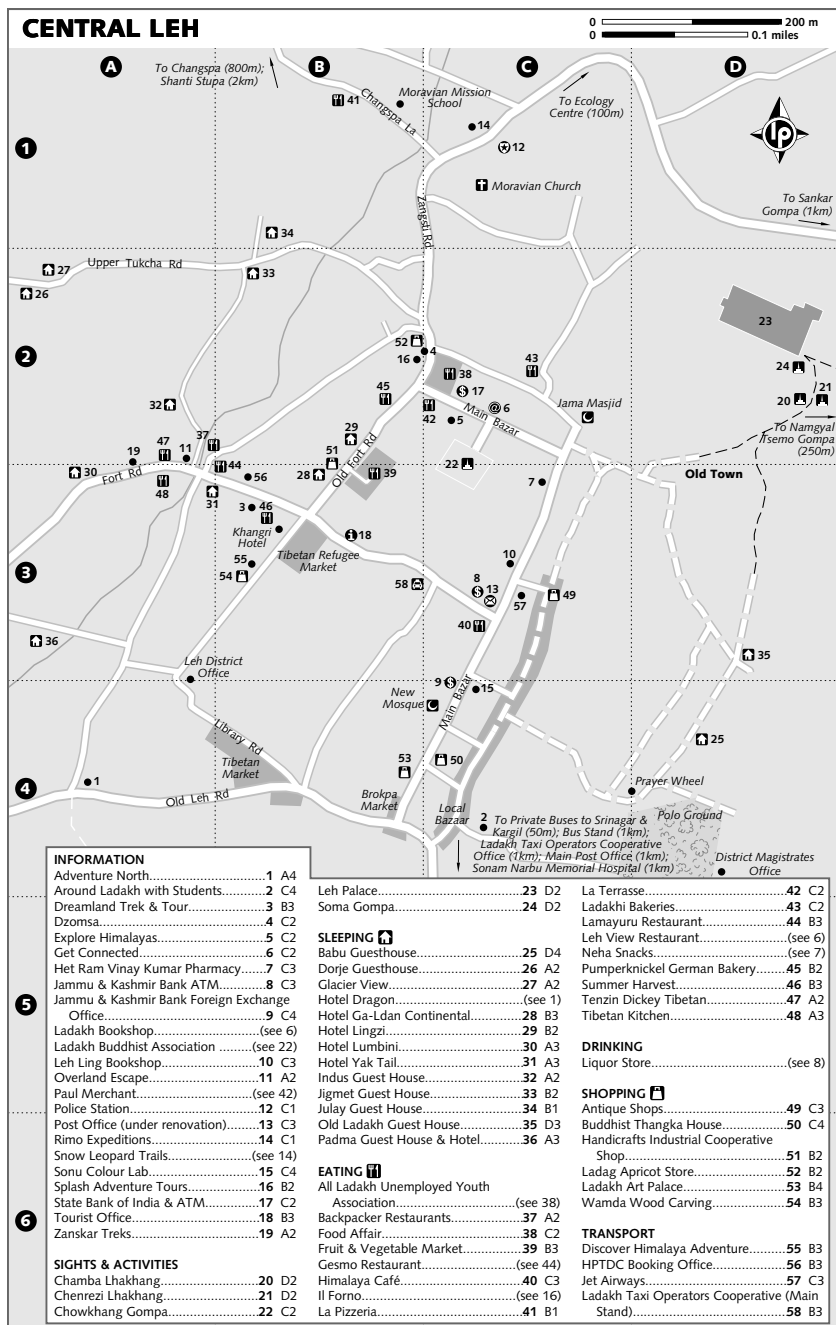
**ECOLOGY CENTRE**

In Changspa, the **Ecology Centre** (Map p369; ☎ 253221; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) has a library and an exhibition on current environmental issues, plus a shop selling handicrafts produced by village cooperatives.

**WOMEN'S ALLIANCE CENTRE**

Run by village women, this **community centre** (Map p369; ☎ 250293; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) campaigns for sustainable development and the preservation of Ladakhi culture. The centre screens the excellent documentary *Ancient Futures* at 3pm from Monday to Saturday, and other films on request. Donations are appreciated.





## MEN TSEE KHANG

About 2km below the centre on the airport road, this Buddhist **cultural centre** (☎ 253566; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5.30pm, till 4.30pm winter) was established to promote traditional Tibetan medicine and astrology. There's a small museum and you may be able to arrange a life horoscope.

## Activities

### YOGA, MEDITATION & MASSAGE

Numerous places offer yoga and meditation classes, and massages and rubs after long treks in the hills. Standards vary so check noticeboards and the traveller grapevine for recommendations. The going rate for an hour of traditional or Ayurvedic massage is Rs 350 to 500. Also see Courses (opposite).

In Changspa, **Body Care** (Map p369; ☎ mobile 253350; Changspa Lane) has a sauna and a wide range of massages and herbal rubs.

### RAFTING & KAYAKING

From July to September, Ladakh's rivers offer some of the best white-water rafting and kayaking in India. **Splash Adventures** (Map p371; ☎ 254870; gangakayak@yahoo.com; Zangsti) has all sorts of trips around Ladakh and Zaskar. One day's rafting on the Indus is Rs 900, while the five-day run on the Zaskar River – known as the 'Grand Canyon of Asia' – is Rs 1000 per day. Kayak, paddle and lifejacket hire costs Rs 1500 per day.

### TREKKING

See opposite for reliable trekking operators and p379 for information on routes.

## ANATOMY OF A GOMPA

Ladakh is famous for its atmospheric gompas (Buddhist monasteries), but Buddhist mythology is incredibly complicated and you can spend hours exploring a gompa and still understand only a fraction of what is going on. Fortunately, many Buddhist monks speak English and will gladly explain things if you ask.

The focal point of a gompa is the *du-khang*, or prayer hall, where monks assemble for the morning *puja* (literally 'respect'; offering or prayers, recitals from the Buddhist sutras). The walls may be covered in vivid murals or *thangkas* (cloth paintings) of *bodhisattvas* (enlightened beings) and *dharmapalas* (protector deities) depicted in frightful poses to symbolise the eternal fight against ignorance. By the entrance to the *du-khang* you'll find a mural depicting the *wheel of life* – a graphical representation of the core elements of Buddhist philosophy (see [www.buddhanet.net/wheel1.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/wheel1.htm) for an interactive description of the wheel of life).

Almost all gompas hold masked *chaam* dances (ritual masked dances to celebrate the victory of good over evil and of Buddhism over pre-existing religions) to celebrate major festivals. Dances to ward off evil feature masks of Mahakala, the Great Protector, a diabolical-looking figure with a headdress of human skulls. The Durdag dance features skull masks depicting the Lords of the Cremation Grounds, while Shawa dancers wear masks of wild-eyed stags. These characters are often depicted with a third eye in the centre of their foreheads, signifying the need for inner reflection.

The main *chaams* take place for **Losar** (Tibetan New Year) in December/January, **Dosmoche** (Festival of the Scapegoat) in February, and the smaller festivals of **Gu-Stor** and **Tse-Chu** (different dates at different monasteries). If you can't visit when a *chaam* is taking place, ask a monk to show you the room where the masks and costumes are stored.

Another unusual activity at Buddhist monasteries is the production of butter sculptures, ornate and slightly psychedelic models made from coloured butter and dough. The sculptures are deliberately built to decay, symbolising the impermanence of human existence. Many gompas also produce exquisite sand mandalas – geometric patterns made from sprinkled coloured sand, then destroyed to symbolise the futility of the physical plane.

Gompas are typically open from sunrise to sunset, but you may need to find a monk to open the doors. The best time to visit any gompa is during the morning *puja*, when monks and novices gather to chant passages from the sacred scriptures, sometimes accompanied by clanging cymbals, booming drums and honking Tibetan horns. Visitors are welcome to watch, but try not to disturb the novices. The first *puja* takes place at around 7am and attendants often come round with salted butter tea to keep out the morning chill.

### VOLUNTEERING IN LADAKH

Schools across Ladakh need experienced volunteer teachers to teach English and other subjects to local children. You may be able to find a placement by approaching schools and monasteries directly. Alternatively, several international agencies place teachers in Ladakhi schools, including **Beautiful World** ([www.beautifulworld.org.uk](http://www.beautifulworld.org.uk)) and **Mondo Challenge** ([www.mondochallenge.org](http://www.mondochallenge.org)).

Many travel agencies in Ladakh offer cut-price tours to volunteers who are willing to help clear rubbish from vulnerable natural areas like the Rupsu Valley and Pangong Tso; check local noticeboards for departures. The Directory (p1157) has more information on volunteering in Zaskar and Ladakh.

### Courses

In summer the **Mahabodhi Meditation Centre** (Map p369; ☎ 253689; [www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org](http://www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org); Changspa Lane) runs yoga and meditation sessions from Monday to Saturday.

In Changspa, **Open Ladakh** (Map p369; ☎ 9419179917; [www.openladakh.com](http://www.openladakh.com)) has meditation classes at 4pm weekdays and a variety of longer courses and Buddhist retreats. Look for the sign on Changspa Lane.

### Treks & Tours

Dozens of tour operators offer treks and jeep safaris around Ladakh, from daytrips to gompas to high-altitude week-long treks. Agencies all charge similar prices, but the cost of any given tour will depend on the number of people, the type of vehicle, the kind of accommodation and food, and the destination – as well as the number of ponies, guides and porters on trekking tours.

Expect to pay around US\$60 per person per day for a three-day (two-night) jeep trip to the Nubra Valley, Pangong Tso or Tso Moriri, and a similar price for a trekking trip to the Markha Valley or Stok Kangri, based on four people trekking together; see p379 for more information.

Travel agents can arrange permits for Nubra, Pangong Tso or Tso Moriri for around Rs 100 plus taxes (see p366). Officially, foreigners must travel in a group of four, but travel agencies can often find extra travellers to make up the numbers. Check the notice-

boards around town for ‘travellers wanted’ notices. The taxi stand offers fixed-rate tours as far as the Nubra Valley (p376), but you still need a permit.

Listed here are some long-established and reputable trek and tour operators, but it pays to seek out recommendations from other travellers. Look for companies that minimise the environmental impact of remote tourism and be sure that your travel insurance covers helicopter evacuation in case of accidents at altitude.

**Adventure North** (Map p371; ☎ 252139; [www.travel-ladakh.com](http://www.travel-ladakh.com); Hotel Dragon, Old Leh Rd)

**Around Ladakh with Students** (Map p371;

☎ 254863; [www.secmol.org](http://www.secmol.org); Ridzong Labrang Complex)

**Dreamland Trek & Tour** (Map p371; ☎ 250784; [www.dreamladakh.com](http://www.dreamladakh.com); Fort Rd)

**Explore Himalayas** (Map p371; ☎ 252727; [www.indiamart.com/explorehimalayas](http://www.indiamart.com/explorehimalayas); Main Bazar)

**Overland Escape** (Map p371; ☎ 250858; [www.overlandescape.com](http://www.overlandescape.com); Fort Rd)

**Rimo Expeditions** (Map p371; ☎ 253348; [www.rimoexpeditions.com](http://www.rimoexpeditions.com); Hotel Kanglhachen Complex)

**Snow Leopard Trails** (Map p371; ☎ 252074; [www.snowleopardtrails.com](http://www.snowleopardtrails.com); Hotel Kanglhachen Complex)

**Zaskar Treks** (Map p371; ☎ 252153; Fort Rd)

### Festivals & Events

Most of Ladakh’s festivals take place in winter, but plenty of people attend the **Ladakh Festival** (1 to 15 September) in Leh – a touristy but entertaining package of sports and cultural activities, including masked *chaam* dances, archery and polo. In February, locals celebrate the New Year with the two-day **Dosmoche** fair. A giant pole is erected outside Leh and effigies representing the evil spirits of the old year are ceremonially burnt or cast out into the desert; see the boxed text (p351) for more festivals in Ladakh.

### Sleeping

Unless otherwise stated, the following places are closed in winter (exact dates depend on how many visitors are still in town). From 15 September, rates plummet everywhere, then increase again slightly to cover the cost of heating once the snow arrives.

In budget places, bucket hot water is the norm. Most midrange and top-end places have running hot water in the morning and evening. Rates at hotels in Leh include tax; a 10% service charge applies at more expensive hotels.

## HOMESTAYS IN LADAKH

A growing number of village farmhouses around Ladakh and Zaskar are opening their spare rooms to paying guests, providing a fascinating window onto the Ladakhi way of life. Facilities are modest – a pile of rugs and blankets for bedding and candles for light – but the rooms are surprisingly cosy and everyone eats together in the family kitchen, with all the pots and pans proudly on display. You may even be able to help with the harvesting and planting work in the family fields.

Homestays around the Indus Valley can be arranged through **Himalayan Homestays** ([www.himalayan-homestays.com](http://www.himalayan-homestays.com)) for around Rs 350/600 per single/double. For bookings, contact **Snow Leopard Trails** (Map p371; ☎ 252074; Hotel Kanglhachen Complex) or **Overland Escape** (Map p371; ☎ 250858; Fort Rd).

## BUDGET

### Central Leh

**Babu Guest House** (Map p371; ☎ 252419; near the Polo Ground, Old Town; r with shared bathroom Rs 150-200) An old village house just downhill from the Polo Ground, this appealing guesthouse is run with unashamed hospitality by a local Buddhist family. Rooms are simple but clean and good value.

**Old Ladakh Guest House** (Map p371; ☎ 252951; near the Polo Ground, Old Town; r with shared bathroom Rs 200-350, with private bathroom Rs 500-600) Just north of the Jama Masjid in the old town, this rustic mud-brick place has village-style rooms arranged around a hop-vine strewn courtyard. This is also a family home, so noisy groups may not be welcome.

**Dorje Guesthouse** (Map p371; ☎ 253460; dorje\_guesthouse@hotmail.com; Upper Tukcha Rd; r with shared bathroom Rs 250) A tall white house in a flowery garden, lulled by the sound of a stream. Rooms are simple but good value and the setting is beautifully quiet.

**Indus Guest House** (Map p371; ☎ 252502; masters\_adv@yahoo.co.in; r Rs 300-500) Down a narrow alley off Fort Rd, the Indus offers large, light-filled rooms arranged around a courtyard and there's a pleasing homy vibe.

**Julay Guest House** (Map p371; ☎ 251163; gm\_sheikh@vsnl.net; Upper Tukcha Rd; r without/with bathroom Rs 300/400; ☹ closed Nov-Apr) One of several cheap and cheerful options down the alley opposite Jigmet. It's run by an engaging family and guests have a choice of shared or private bathrooms.

**Glacier View** (Map p371; ☎ 253503; Upper Tukcha Rd; r without/with bathroom Rs 350/400) A smart, modernised village house, with enthusiastic owners and a small, sun-soaked front terrace. Upstairs rooms get plenty of light and hot water is available 24 hours.

### Changspa & Sankar

**Oriental Guest House** (Map p369; ☎ 253153; [www.oriental-ladakh.com](http://www.oriental-ladakh.com); Changspa; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 100/200, with private bathroom Rs 350-800; ☹ year-round; ☑) Spread over three huge Ladakhi houses in a sprawling garden and run by a very welcoming family, this is a charming place to stay. There's a restaurant and travel agent, and water is piping hot 24 hours.

**Lak Rook Garden Guest House** (Map p369; ☎ 252987; agyal123@yahoo.com; Sankar; r without/with bathroom Rs 150/350) Run by an energetic old couple, this endearingly haphazard place is set in a huge organic vegetable garden. The shower is solar powered, there are composting toilets and meals are taken in the traditional Ladakhi kitchen.

**Gomang Guest House** (Map p369; ☎ 252651; Changspa; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 170/200) Behind the Gomang Stupa, this is a nicely modernised village house with a traditional Ladakhi kitchen and scruffy but bright rooms in a quiet, village setting.

**AsiaGuestHouse** (Map p369; ☎ 253403; asiaguesthouse@yahoo.com; Changspa; r with shared bathroom Rs 200-300, with private bathroom Rs 500-600) A huge white house near the Shanti Stupa, with an overflowing vegetable garden, a cosy café and big carpeted rooms with sit-down flush toilets. Look out for the stuffed yak in the lounge.

**Shanti Guest House** (Map p369; ☎ 253084; shatit@sancharnet.in; Changspa; r without/with bathroom Rs 250/450) A gleaming white Ladakhi house below the Shanti Stupa, with huge, lino-floored rooms, and a handy location for the Shanti, Tisserru and Gomang stupas.

## MIDRANGE

**our pick Jigmet Guest House** (Map p371; ☎ 253563; jigmetguesthouse@yahoo.com; Upper Tukcha Rd; r with shared bathroom Rs 200-300, s/d with private bathroom Rs

600/700; ☎ year-round) Moving upmarket, but still delightful, Jigmet is one of our favourite guesthouses in Ladakh. It's run by a friendly family, rooms are large and clean, and you can read your book under an apple tree in the kitchen garden.

**Hotel Lumbini** (Map p371; ☎ 252528; www.hotellumbiniladakh.com; Fort Rd; s/d Rs 600/800) A big institutional place at the far end of Fort Rd, with a large courtyard shaded by apple trees. Rooms have carpets, TVs and chintzy lamps, and some squeeze in a view of the mountains.

**Padma Guest House & Hotel** (Map p371; ☎ 252630; www.padmamadakh.com; off Fort Rd; guesthouse r with private bathroom Rs 700-800, hotel r Rs 1700; ☑) A real gem, hidden away in the alleys below Fort Rd. Guests have a choice of bright, carpeted rooms with shared bathrooms in the old house or modern hotel rooms with nice fabrics in the new hotel block. The rooftop terrace offers views towards the peaks.

#### TOP END

**Silver Cloud Guest House** (Map p369; ☎ 253128; silvercloudstd@rediffmail.com; Sankar; r with private bathroom Rs 500, ste Rs 2000) The sun provides natural central heating at this cleverly modified family home in Sanker. All the rooms are inviting, but the four luxurious corner suites have lounges that soak up the rays.

**Hotel Yak Tail** (Map p371; ☎ 252118; www.hotelyaktail.com; Fort Rd; s/d from Rs 1300/1800) Chintzy but charming is the best way to describe this big courtyard hotel on Fort Rd. It's open all year, and trees and vines add colour to the communal spaces. Welcoming rooms come with TV, carpets and a slight smell of mothballs.

**Hotel Dragon** (Map p371; ☎ 252139; www.traveladakh.com; Old Leh Rd; s/d from Rs 1430/1840) A big upmarket place catering to tour groups, the Dragon has large, fluffy rooms with the usual conveniences, and wide terraces facing the mountains. There's a great gompā-style restaurant and bar.

**Hotel Lingzi** (Map p371; ☎ 252020; lingzihotel@yahoo.co.in; Old Fort Rd; s/d Rs 1600/1900) A stylish refurb has done wonders for this tour group-friendly hotel. Rooms have considerate details like wooden toilet seats (a blessing in cold weather), and the suites have Ladakhi-style lounges with views of the Chowkhang or mountains.

**Hotel Ga-Ldan Continental** (Map p371; ☎ 252173; hotelgaldan@yahoo.co.in; Old Fort Rd; s/d 1690/1842) Next door to Hotel Lingzi and similar to it but less grand.

**Hotel Omasila** (Map p369; ☎ 252119; Changspa Lane; s/d from Rs 2000/2200) A comfortably traditional midrange hotel with a great garden terrace and rooms in several converted village houses. Bedrooms have flowery bedspreads and carpets, plus mod cons like TV and running hot water.

**Lotus Hotel** (Map p369; ☎ 250265; hotellotus@vsnl.net; Karzoo village; s/d from Rs 2200/2700; ☑) You can sense the good vibe at this place as soon as you walk in the door. A sunny raised garden leads onto a tasteful rooms with thick carpets and little Tibetan details. There's also a good restaurant.

#### Eating

Banana-pancake breakfasts and pizza suppers are de rigueur in Leh, though you can also find *tingmo* (steamed Tibetan bread), *momos*, chowmein (fried noodles) and *thukpa* (noodle soup). As well as the following places, Changspa and Fort Rd have numerous garden restaurants, open from July until September, when the owners decamp to Goa.

The following restaurants open daily from early morning to late at night unless otherwise mentioned.

Sharing a courtyard next to the Bank of India on Main Bazar, Food Affair and the All Ladakh Unemployed Youth Association serve cheap snacks and chai to an eager crowd of penny-watching travellers.

**Pumpnickel German Bakery** (Map p371; Main Bazar; snacks Rs 15-60) A useful noticeboard, cheap cakes and sandwiches, and low, low prices keep this place full of travellers through the season.

**Lamayuru Restaurant** (Map p371; Fort Rd; mains from Rs 30) An old traveller hangout, complete with old travellers. Come here for inexpensive Indian, Chinese and international snack meals and a good noticeboard.

**Tenzin Dickey Tibetan** (Map p371; Fort Rd, mains from Rs 30) For travellers who can't get enough of *momos* and *thukpa*, this vegetarian Tibetan restaurant pushes all the right buttons.

**Hotel Neha** (Map p371; Main Bazar; snack meals under Rs 40) Locals flock to this Punjabi place for pure-veg snacks like *channa puri* (chickpea curry with bread) and Indian sweets.

**La Pizzeria** (Map p371; Changspa Lane; pizzas & mains Rs 50-200) A popular drinking hole and dinner spot for the Changspa crowd, with above-average pizzas and a roasting open fire in the evenings.

**La Terrasse** (Map p371; Main Bazar; dishes Rs 50-200) A stalwart of the traveller scene, serving cold beers and food from an eclectic Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, European and Israeli menu. As well as the roof terrace, there's an indoor dining room for cold nights.

**Gesmo Restaurant** (Map p371; Fort Rd; snack meals Rs 40-180) A reliable coffee shop and travellers restaurant that stays open late into autumn – cakes and hot drinks are the main attractions.

**Booklovers Retreat** (Map p369; Changspa Lane; meals Rs 40-100; ☎ 7am-11pm) A surprisingly sophisticated option for old Changspa, this place serves a full range of coffees, teas and snacks, and there's a bookshop, in case you didn't bring your own.

**Leh View Restaurant** (Map p371; Main Bazar; mains Rs 60-130) A Kashmiri-owned place, with meaty Kashmiri curries as well as the usual traveller fare. Go up to the roof terrace for dinner with a view.

**our pick Summer Harvest** (Map p371; Fort Rd; mains Rs 50-120) Top-notch Indian and Chinese food, cold beers and international sports on the TV attract travellers to this inviting restaurant.

**Himalaya Café** (Map p371; Main Bazar; mains Rs 60-120) One of several top-floor restaurants at the south end of Main Bazar, serving good Chinese and Indian fast food in calming modern surroundings. There's also a roof terrace.

**Il Forno** (Map p371; Zangsti Rd; pizzas Rs 80-120) This unassuming rooftop place serves the best pizzas in town, washed down with icy cold beers, but only until late September.

**Tibetan Kitchen** (Map p371; Fort Rd; mains Rs 60-180; ☎ 11am-10.30pm) Evening tables should be booked in the afternoon (in person) at this classy restaurant at the Hotel Tso-Kar. The menu has lots of Tibetan specialities such as *sha bakleh* (bread stuffed with meat) and *ruchowtse* (cheese and vegetable *momos* in soup), but no alcohol.

## QUICK EATS

There's a fruit and vegetable market (Map p371) at the junction with Fort Rd and Old Fort Rd. You can buy freshly baked Tibetan bread from the traditional wood-fired Ladakhi bakeries (Map p371) behind the Jama Masjid.

## Drinking

Most of the garden and rooftop restaurants serve beer but it never appears on the menu so ask the waiter. There's also a liquor store near

the Jammu & Kashmir Bank. *Chang* (rice beer) is hard to find beyond festival time; try asking at your hotel or in the vegetable market.

Popular drinking holes include Summer Harvest and La Terrasse – see Eating.

## Entertainment

### CULTURAL PERFORMANCES

Dance troupes put on shows of traditional Ladakhi song and dance at around 5.30pm on summer evenings (spectators pay Rs 50) in front of Kangri Hotel (Map p371) and the courtyard of the Soma Gompa.

### SPORT

Local teams play weekly matches at the polo ground on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

## Shopping

Leh is packed with souvenir shops. There are some wonderful things on offer – from *thangkas* and Ladakhi hats to heavy turquoise jewellery and wooden *choktse* (Tibetan tables) – but be aware that many souvenirs are trucked in from China, Kashmir and Nepal, providing little benefit to local people.

Probably the best selection in town is at **Ladakh Art Palace** (Map p371; ☎ 252116; Main Bazar; ☎ 9am-7.30pm), but prices are somewhat inflated. Nearby, **Buddhist Thangka House** (Map p371; ☎ 255669; Main Bazar; ☎ 9am-6pm) has a good range of *thangkas*, starting at Rs 1500.

The Ecology Centre (Map p369) and Women's Alliance (Map p369) sell locally produced crafts and clothes. Wooden *choktse* tables carved with images of mythical beasts are available from the **Handicrafts Industrial Co-operative Shop** (Map p371; Old Fort Rd; ☎ 9am-6pm) and **Wamda Wood Carving** (Map p371; Old Fort Rd; ☎ 9am-6pm).

Brokpa women sell dried apricots, apples and nuts along Main Bazar, or head to **Ladag Apricot Store** (Map p371; Old Fort Rd; ☎ 9am-6pm) and **Dzomsa** (Map p371; ☎ 250699; Main Bazar; ☎ 8am-9pm) for packed apricots and delicious 'apricot leather' (dried sheets of pounded apricot pulp).

It's also worth checking out the local bazaar (Map p371), between Main Bazar and the Polo Ground, for traditional Ladakhi robes, machine-made carpets and antiques.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The dramatic flight into Leh is the only way to reach Ladakh in winter, but flights may



be cancelled at short notice because of bad weather. It can take days to rearrange your booking, so build some flexibility into your plans.

Security at Leh airport is tight and no hand luggage is allowed on flights leaving Leh. You can take your camera and laptop in the cabin, but only if the battery is placed in the hold. If you want aerial photographs of Ladakh, there are no restrictions on cameras on flights into Leh.

Both **Indian Airlines** (Map p369; ☎ 252076; Fort Rd; ✈ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm) and **Jet Airways** (Map p371; ☎ 250999; Main Bazar; ✈ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, till 3pm Sun) have at least one daily flight between Delhi and Leh (US\$170, one hour). Both airlines operate a reduced service in winter. Indian Airlines also flies to Srinagar (US\$102, one hour) on Wednesday and Jammu (US\$112, 45 minutes) on Friday and Sunday.

## BUS

Local and long-distance public buses leave from several stands at the main bus station (Map p369), 700m south of the centre (on foot, cut through the bazaar by the Friendship Gate). Double-check times before traipsing down here with your bags.

## Local Villages

Villages buses tend to leave Leh in the afternoon and return the following morning. The minibus stand at the main bus station

has services to destinations mentioned in the boxed text, left.

## Manali

The road to Manali is officially open from 15 July to 15 September but private buses run until mid-October if the road is clear. The journey takes two cold and gruelling days, and buses stop for the night at Keylong. Travellers heading to Lahaul and Spiti should change at Gramphu.

In season, **Himachal Pradesh Tourist Development Corporation** (HPTDC; ☎ 252297/252095) buses leave at around 4.30am daily; the fare is Rs 1600, including tented accommodation at Keylong. The Himachal Rd Transport Corporation (HRTC) and Jammu & Kashmir State Road Transport Corporation (J&KSRTC) offer ordinary buses at the same time for Rs 525 (accommodation in Keylong is extra).

Privately owned buses leave around 3.30am, costing about Rs 1000, including tented accommodation at Keylong (or Sarchu). You can book with any travel agency in Leh.

## Nubra Valley

Buses to Nubra leave from the **Ladakh Bus Operators Cooperative** (☎ 252792) booth at the main bus stand. There's an 8am bus to Diskit (Rs 102, six hours) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, returning the following day at 7am. A single bus to Sumur (Rs 101, 6am) leaves at 6am on Thursday and Saturday only, returning the next morning. Note that groups of less than four may be turned back, even with a Nubra permit.

## Western Ladakh

Buses to the west of Ladakh leave from the **Ladakh Bus Operators Cooperative** (☎ 252792) at the north end of the main bus station. Bus times and fares are listed in the boxed text, p378 – all services go via Nimmu (Rs 20, one hour) and Basgo (Rs 24, 1½ hours). To reach destinations west of Khalsi, take any bus from Leh to Kargil or Srinagar – see 'To/From Kashmir & Kargil', below.

## Kashmir & Kargil

The Leh to Srinagar road is usually open from the end of May to early November. The trip takes two days with an overnight stop in Kargil (or occasionally Drass). Buses bound for Srinagar have to clear the pass by 5am, forcing a 2am start from Kargil.

### BUSES TO/FROM LEH

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration	Departures
Chemrey	30	1hr	half-hourly
Choglamsar	7	15min	every 10min
Hemis	32	2hr	9.30am & 4.30pm
Karu	25	50min	half-hourly
Matho	17	40min	9am, 2pm & 6pm
Phyang	16	30min	six daily
Shakti	35	1¼hr	half-hourly
Shey	12	25min	half-hourly
Spituk	7	15min	six daily
Stakna	20	40min	half-hourly
Stok	15	30min	8am, 2pm & 4.30pm
Thiksey	15	30min	half-hourly

**BUSES TO/FROM WESTERN LADAKH**

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Alchi	54	3	8am, 4pm
Khalsi	78	4½	3pm
Lamayuru	101	5½	6am (Kargil bus), 8am
Likir	33	2	4pm
Mulbekh	190	8½	6am (Kargil bus)

**J&KSRTC** (☎ 252085) buses leave from the government bus stand at the main bus station at 6am for Kargil (ordinary/deluxe Rs 240/320, 10 hours) and Srinagar (Rs 490/620, Monday to Saturday). Book the day before. Private buses to Srinagar (Rs 800) and Kargil (Rs 500) leave from behind the Polo Ground at 5am.

**MOTORCYCLE**

Several places on Changspa Rd and Main Bazar rent out motorcycles for local exploration, but the only petrol stations are at Leh, Choglamsar, Phyang and Kargil. Always check that you are insured for third-party claims.

**Discover Himalaya Adventure** (Map p371; ☎ 250353; Main Bazar) rents mopeds for Rs 400 per day and various 100cc to 125cc motorcycles for Rs 500 per day.

**SHARE JEEPS**

Share jeeps to Manali and Kargil run from July to mid-October. Once the public and private buses stop running over the Rohtang La, this is only way to reach Manali by road.

The **Ladakh Taxi Operators Cooperative** (☎ 252723) at the north end of the main bus station sells advance tickets for Manali (Rs 1000 to 1500, 14 hours). Check the night before to find out your taxi number; taxis leave at around 1am.

Regular jeeps to Kargil (Rs 500, 12 hours) leave from the old bus stand near the Friendship Gate. A few jeeps leave for Srinagar (Rs 1000, 18 hours) at around 3.30pm.

**TAXI**

Near the tourist office, the **Ladakh Taxi Operators Cooperative** (☎ 252723; Fort Rd; ☎ 7am-7pm) offers drop-offs and jeep tours as far afield as

Nubra, Kargil and Manali. The union sets the prices; popular tours include Shey, Thiksey and Hemis (Rs 1047), Alchi, Likir and Rizong (Rs 1910), and the Nubra Valley (two/three days Rs 5542/6931). Ask about discounts in the low season.

Other fares include the following:

Destination	One-way Fare (Rs)	Return Fare (Rs)
Alchi	1084	1336
Hemis	868	995
Lamayuru	2260	2737
Likir	855	1083
Matho	575	747
Phyang	454	572
Shey	242	305
Spituk	168	248
Stakna	595	732
Stok	329	468
Thiksey	382	463
Kargil	4272	-
Keylong	11,000	-
Manali	11,729	-

**TRUCK**

Goods trucks pick up paying hitchhikers throughout Ladakh, but this is rarely cheaper than the bus fare. Bear in mind that drink driving is a serious problem, particularly on trucks between Manali and Leh.

**Getting Around****TO/FROM AIRPORT**

The prepaid taxi stand offers transfers to central Leh for around Rs 110, or you can walk to the highway and flag down a public bus for Rs 5. Some drivers tout for hotels but most give up if you stand your ground.

**TAXI**

Taxis charge Rs 50 to 70 for short trips around town. Arrange a taxi the night before for early morning trips to the bus stand.

**BICYCLE**

The gompas of the Indus Valley are easily accessible by rented bike. In Changspa, **Himalayan Bikers** (Map p369; ☎ 250937; www.thehimalayanbikers.com; Changspa Lane) rents out mountain bikes for Rs 250 to 500 per day. It also arranges cycle tours to Pangong Tso and the Khardung La (jeeps take you up, gravity takes you down).



## TREKKING IN LADAKH

The mountains of Ladakh provide some inspirational trekking country, but many routes climb above 5000m, so proper acclimatisation is essential to avoid AMS – see Health (p1188). Treks are possible throughout the summer, but independent trekking is risky; trails are unmarked, food and water can be hard to find, and there are few people to help if you get into trouble. Unless you are experienced with navigation and survival at altitude, play it safe and join an organised trek. Whichever way you go, make sure that your travel insurance covers you for emergency helicopter evacuation.

Trekking agencies in Leh offer inclusive treks with a guide, packhorses, food and supplies for around US\$60 per person per day. See p373 for a list of reliable operators. Check the gear provided before setting out and make sure that you are clear what the fee is covering; if any of the services you have paid for are missing, demand that the agent fixes things before you leave.

Food supplies should be carried from Leh, as there are few places to stay or eat on trekking routes. Carry a gas or liquid fuel stove to minimise your consumption of firewood and carry out all your litter with you – see p98 for more on responsible trekking.

The following are some of the most popular routes. Serious trekkers should refer to Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya*.

### ASCENT OF STOK KANGRI

This dramatic 6120m peak looms over the village of Stok, across the valley from Leh. Despite the elevation, pre-acclimatised trekkers can complete the ascent in four to five days. However, you should carry clothing for cold conditions above the snow line and allow plenty of acclimatisation time.

Starting from Stok, the trail passes through green pastures then rugged desert to the Stok Kangri base camp at 4800m, with an overnight acclimatisation stop at Mankarmo. From here, you can achieve the summit and return in one gruelling day, or play it safe with a second stop above the snowline at Stok Kangri High Camp (5300m).

Trekkers are normally roped together for the ascent to the snow-blanketed summit, which is marked by billowing prayer flags. On clear days, the views across the Indus Valley and Himalaya rival what you see from the airplane on the flight into Leh. The descent

### ASCENT OF STOK KANGRI

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)
1	Stok to Mankarmo	4-5
2	Mankarmo to Stok Kangri Base Camp	3-4
3	Stok Kangri Base Camp to High Camp	3-4
4	High Camp to summit to Stok Kangri Base Camp	6-7
5	Stok Kangri Base Camp to Stok	4-5

from the base camp to Stok can be completed in one day. See the boxed text, above, for details of trek.

### SPITUK TO MARKHA VALLEY & HEMIS

The trailhead for this popular eight- or nine-day trek is Spituk Gumpa, though taxis can take you as far as Rumbuk, shaving a few hours off the first leg of the journey. It is also possible to start this trek from Stok, or from Chiling on the west bank of the Zaskar River, crossing by cableway.

From Spituk, the route follows the Zingchen Valley for two days to Ganda La (4920m), with a one-day acclimatisation stop en route. On the far side of the pass, it's a steady descent to the Markha Valley and the village of Skiu. Another day will take you to Markha village,

### SPITUK TO MARKHA VALLEY & HEMIS

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)
1	Spituk to Zingchen	7-8
2	Zingchen to Yurutse and camp	4-5
3	Yurutse to Skiu via Ganda La	6-7
4	Skui to Markha	7-8
5	Markha to Hankar	7-8
6	Hankar to Nimaling	6-7
7	Nimaling to Shang Sumdo via Kongmaru La	6
8	Shang Sumdo to Martselang	4-5
9	Martselang to Hemis	3-4

where the trail climbs again to rolling yak pastures at Nimaling.

From Nimaling, the path strains upwards again to Kongmaru La (5030m), a lofty eyrie with knee-trembling views north and south. After crossing the pass there's another camp at Shang Sumdo before you descend to Hemis Gumpa. This last stage can be completed in one long day or two days with a stop in Martselang. See the boxed text, p379, for details of trek.

Parachute-tented camps offer basic accommodation and meals through the Markha Valley during the trekking season. An alternative is to sleep at the homestays springing up along the route (see the boxed text, p374).

### LAMAYURU TO CHILING VIA DUNG DUNG LA

Starting from Lamayuru Gumpa, this trek traverses the Zaskar Range and returns to the Indus Valley via the Zaskar River. Alternative trekking destinations from Lamayuru include Alchi, Stok and Padum in Zaskar.

Heading to Chiling, the trail crosses the valley and climbs over Prinkiti La (3750m) to the ancient gumpa at Wanla. Another day takes you to Hinju at the base of Konze La (4950m), where an acclimatisation day is recommended before crossing the pass. From Konze La there are impressive views of the East Karakoram Range before a short descent to Sumdo Chinmu.

The following stage ascends the 4820m Dung Dung La, offering giddy views of the Zaskar Range and river. You can complete

the journey to Chiling in a long day and be back in Leh by evening. See the boxed text, left, for details of the trek. Some people combine this trek with the Markha Valley trek.

## AROUND LEH

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The Indus Valley is strewn with small villages and medieval monasteries that make interesting day trips from Leh by rented motorcycle or public bus (see p377). Spituk and Phyang are reached via the Kargil road, while Choglamsar, Thiksey and Shey lie on the road to Manali. The back road from Choglamsar to Karu provides access to the gompas on the west bank of the Indus.

The gompas in the following villages are usually open to visitors from sunrise to sunset, but you may have to find a monk to open the doors.

### Spituk

Crowning a small hill behind the airport, **Spituk Gumpa** (admission Rs 20) was built in the 15th century by the Gelukpa order. The prayer halls feature fine murals and some impressive statues of the protector deities, including Vajrabhairava and bull-headed Yamantaka. *Chaam* dances are held for the **Gu-Stor festival** (p351) in January. Be cautious of taking photographs out over the airport army base.

Spituk is the main trailhead for the seven-day Markha Valley trek to Hemis (p379).

### Phyang

About 5km past Spituk, a track runs north from the main road to picturesque **Phyang Gumpa** (admission Rs 25), founded in the 16th century. The main chamber has impressive statues of Avalokitesvara and Amitabha, while the smaller *gokhang* contains statues of Mahakala and other protector deities. Every third year, a giant *thangka* is unveiled here as part of the **Phyang Tedup festival** (p351) in July and August.

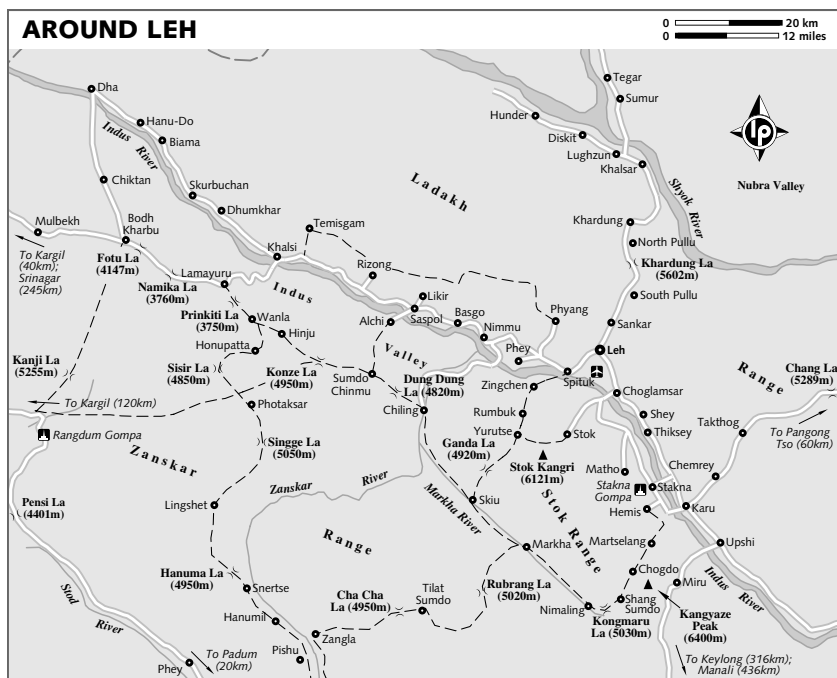
Life in the village farms and orchards moves at a serene pace dictated only by the seasons. **Hidden North** (☎ 226007; www.hiddennorth.com; tent Rs 60, s/d with shared bathroom Rs 150/250) is a delightful guesthouse, set in lovely lawns and gardens in the middle of Phyang.

### Choglamsar

Almost a suburb of Leh, Choglamsar is home to thousands of Tibetan refugees and the Dalai Lama has a *photang* (ceremonial residence)

### LAMAYURU TO CHILING VIA DUNG DUNG LA

Stage	Route	Duration (hrs)
1	Lamayuru to Wanla via Prinkiti La	3-4
2	Wanla to Konze La base camp	4-5
3	Konze La base camp to Sumdo Chinmu via Konze La	5-6
4	Sumdo Chinmu to Dung Dung La base camp	3
5	Dung Dung La base camp to Chiling via Dung Dung La	6



here for official visits. Sights include the large **Karma Dugpyud Choeling Gompa** on the main road and the refugee camp itself, which has a traditional Tibetan *amchi* clinic and a centre for Buddhist studies. Choglamsar is also the turn-off for the back road to Stok, Matho, Stakna and Hemis.

Travellers with a spiritual inclination can take three- and 10-day residential courses in *vipassana* meditation at the **Mahabodhi Meditation Centre** (☎ 264372; www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org; dm Rs 150, r 350-500; ☒); the website has details. You can stay here even if you don't take a course.

There are plenty of roadhouse-style restaurants serving beers and *momos* on the main road.

Near the gompa, this spic and span **Buddha Garden Guesthouse** (☎ 244074; dm Rs 100, r Rs 200-300; ☞ Apr-Sep) is run by a friendly, mothering, Tibetan lady. Bathrooms are shared but the water is hot and home-cooked meals are available.

## Shey

About 15km southeast of Leh, Shey was once the summer capital of Ladakh. Although

damaged by time and the elements, the **Royal Palace** (admission Rs 20; ☞ 8am-7pm May-Oct) is still a place of worship and the prayer room contains a two-storey gilded copper statue of Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha), installed in 1645. Behind the palace, reached by a precarious scramble along the ridge, the ruins of **Shey fort** offer heart-stopping views over the Indus Valley.

Just east of the palace is a field of giant white chortens, surrounding the tiny **Shey Gompa**. The gold-roofed building on the edge of the valley is the *photang* (official residence) of the local lama.

Down a lane opposite the palace, the tidy **Besthang Guest House** (☎ 264081; r with shared bathroom Rs 200) offers a warm, family welcome and there's a sunny, flower-filled garden.

## Thiksey Gompa

About 2km south of Shey, glorious **Thiksey Gompa** (admission Rs 20) is practically a town inside a monastery. Hundreds of monks live and work in the whitewashed huts that cover the hillside. The main gompa has two prayer chambers – the eastern chamber contains a

mesmerising 14m-high statue of Maitreya (the future Buddha) in a magnificent jewelled headdress, while the western chamber has wonderful statues of *dharmapalas* – enlightened humans who have adopted a fearful aspect to show their detachment from the ignorance of the physical world. A rear chamber contains murals of flayed human beings and treasures dating back to the founding of the gompa in the 15th century.

Most people come here for the early morning *puja* (literally ‘respect’; offering or prayers) at 7am, which features synchronised chanting from the *sutras* (Buddhist books). Every year in October and November, Thiksey holds extravagant masked dances for **Gu-Stor** (p351). Sand mandalas are often prepared here for smaller local festivals.

Run by the gompa, the genteel **Chamba Hotel** (☎ 267011; kthiksey@vsnl.com; r Rs 300) is the only place to stay. Rooms have private bathrooms and there’s a small garden and a restaurant serving Indo-Chinese meals.

## Stok

Crossing over the Indus, Stok is the official home to the Ladakhi royal family. Stripped of their power in 1846, the royals now live a comparatively modest life, dividing their time between stately **Stok Palace** (admission Rs 25; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-7pm May-Oct) and a private mansion in Manali. Many of the family treasures – including ceremonial robes, jewellery, votive objects, *thangkas*, photos and the Royal tea service – are displayed in the palace museum.

In February/March, Stok holds the important **Guru Tse-Chu festival** (p351), where the royal oracles make predictions about the future. Behind the palace, peaceful lanes wind past whitewashed farmhouses and fields with the peak of Stok Kangri (6120m) looming overhead. About 1km north of the palace is tiny **Stok Gompa**, with retouched murals and statues of Mahakala and other deities.

Close to the palace and set in a humble village house, **Kalden Guesthouse** (☎ 242057; r with shared bathroom Rs 150; ☎ May-Oct) has simple, carpeted rooms overlooking the kitchen garden.

Downhill from the palace are the very similar **Hotel Highland** (☎ 242005; r from Rs 1000) and **Hotel Skittsal** (☎ 242051; www.skittsal.com; r from Rs 1800), upmarket Ladakhi-style buildings with comfortable ensuite rooms and good restaurants.

## Matho

About 10km southeast of Stok, monumental **Matho Gompa** (admission Rs 20) soars high above the valley on an impregnable rocky buttress. The views over the valley are stupendous and this is the only monastery in Ladakh belonging to the obscure Sakya sect. The prayer rooms contain some striking murals and statues of Sakyamuni, Avalokitesvara and Maitreya.

During the annual **Nagrang festival** (p351) in February and March, the monastery oracles carry out daring acts of acrobatics while blindfolded, then engage in ritual acts of self-mutilation before making predictions for the coming year.

## Stakna

Across the floodplain from Matho, little **Stakna Gompa** (admission Rs 20) crowns a hillock overlooking the Indus. The monastery was founded by a lama from Bhutan, and the Bhutanese influence is obvious from the murals inside. There are three, interlinked prayer rooms, some with frescoes dating back to the 16th century.

You can get here by bus along the Leh–Manali Hwy – ask the driver to let you down near the Stakna turn-off and walk across the miniature suspension bridge.

## Hemis Gompa

The revered **gompa** (admission Rs 30) at Hemis is screened from the rest of the valley by a narrow gorge, but as soon as the monastery comes into view, you’ll understand what the fuss is about. This is one of the largest and grandest gompas in Ladakh, with three *thangka*-filled prayer halls fronting onto a vast courtyard, used for masked dances during the **Tse-Chu festival** (p351) in June and July. Every 12 years, the largest *thangka* in Ladakh – a massive 12m-wide and four-storeys high – is unfurled from the top of the monastery. The next ceremony is in 2016. Upstairs is an 8m-high statue of Padmasambhava in all his poeeyed glory.

In the basement of the gompa, **Hemis Spiritual Retreat** (☎ 249011; r Rs 200; ☎ Jun-Sep) offers rudimentary but clean monks’ cells with shared bathrooms. Just downhill from the gompa, **Hemis Restaurant & Camping** (camping per tent Rs 100) has a basic camping plot and simple meals.

If you come by motorcycle, turn off the Leh–Manali road at Karu and make a left near the winding *mani* wall (made from stones carved with mantras).

## CHEMREY VALLEY

At Karu, a side road branches north towards Chang La (5289m), the third-highest motorable pass in the world. The lower reaches of the Chemrey Valley are accessible by bus or taxi, but you need a permit to cross the pass and visit the serene lake at Pangong Tso.

**Chemrey** village is dominated by the beautifully proportioned, but little visited, **Thekchok Gumpa** (admission Rs 20). Built in the 17th century, the main prayer hall contains murals of the 1000 Buddhas and a chamber on the 4th floor has a 3m-high statue of Padmasambhava. There are masked dances here in November for the **Chemrey Angchok festival** (see p351).

Beyond Chemrey, the road climbs to **Shakti**, a sprawling farming village with a large army base and the ruins of a huge **fort**, just north on the road to Takthog.

Some 7km north of Shakti, tiny **Takthog Gumpa** (admission Rs 20) is the only Nyingmapa monastery in the upper Indus. The prayer chamber is set in a cave where the great sage Padmasambhava meditated in the 8th century. From here, the road climbs to the Wari La (5273m), a possible starting point for treks into the Nubra Valley.

The only accommodation in the valley is the basic **J&K Tourist Bungalow** (s/d Rs 200/350) at Takthog, but you'll have to find the *chowkidar* (attendant) to open the doors. Book with the **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 252094) in Leh.

Buses to Shakti (Rs 35, 1½ hours) leave regularly from the main bus station in Leh, or you can hire a taxi for the day for Rs 1100.

## Pangong Tso

Beyond Chang La, another breathtaking valley system opens up, backing onto the Karakoram Mountains. Most of the valley floor is covered by the gently rippling waters of Pangong Tso, which runs east for 130km into Tibet. The lake is brackish with mineral salts and the wind-blown shores have a wild, melancholy beauty.

You can only visit with a permit, arranged through a travel agent in Leh, and visitors must turn back at Spangmik, about 7km along the southwest shore. Most visits are during a long day trip, but you may be able to find accommodation in **Tangtse** village, 40km before the lake.

## NUBRA VALLEY

☎ 01982

From Leh, a rough road runs north over the awesome Khardung La, the highest motorable pass in the world. Even in summer, the cross-

ing is crusted in permafrost and the Border Roads Organisation faces an ongoing battle to keep the pass open through winter and autumn. Beyond the pass is the wide, flat Nubra Valley, crisscrossed by the winding channels of the Shyok and Nubra Rivers.

At first glance, the valley seems parched and dry, but this is prime farming land by Ladakhi standards. Farmers grow apples, apricots and barley and harvest the orange berries of the *tsestahulu* (sea buckthorn bush). Dotted around the valley are ancient gompas and ruined palaces, and villages are close enough together to make this magnificent walking country.

However, you do need a permit, which only allows travel as far as Hunder and Panamik for a maximum of seven days – see the boxed text, p366. You must hand over photocopies of your permit on both sides of the Khardung La and also by the bridge to Sumur.

Note that guesthouses are often booked up by tour groups in summer – arrange a room in advance unless you fancy a chilly night under the stars. In all the sleeping places listed in this section, bucket hot water costs Rs 10 to 20.

## Getting There & Away

Traffic towards Nubra can only cross the Khardung La from dawn until 10am; vehicles heading to Leh then have exclusive use of the road from 1pm to 6pm. From November to May, Nubra-bound traffic can use the road on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings, while Leh-bound traffic is restricted to Wednesday, Friday and Sunday mornings (the road closes every Monday for repairs).

Because of the requirement to visit in a group of four, most people visit on a tour arranged through a travel agent in Leh. Expect to pay US\$60 per day, including accommodation. Alternatively, you can arrange the permit through a travel agent and then travel independently by jeep or bus – see p376. However, soldiers have been known to turn back groups of less than four at the Khardung La, even with the correct permit.

## Getting Around

There's a limited public bus service around the valley, Monday to Saturday. Buses leave Diskit for Sumur (Rs 25, two hours) at 8am and 3pm, returning at similar times the following day. The 8am bus continues to Panamik (Rs 45, 2½ hours). Local buses run every few hours between Diskit and Hunder for Rs 10.

Jeeps at Diskit bus stand charge Rs 250 to Hunder, Rs 1035 to Sumur, Rs 1775 to Panamik and Rs 3300 to Leh,

## Leh to Diskit

The road to Nubra is officially open year-round, but snow and rockfalls can close the road for days between October and May.

The first stop on the route is the military camp at **South Pullu**, where foreigners must register and show permits. From here, the road is a crudely drawn line of gravel and dust right up to the **Khardung La** at 5602m. This lofty cleft in the mountain wall is chilly and desolate, but the views are what eagles see as they soar over the Himalaya and you can pat yourself on the back for surviving the highest motorable road in the world.

On the far side, the road slips and slides to the military camp at **North Pullu**, where foreigners again register and hand over a copy of the Nubra permit. If you misjudge the timing, you may end up stuck in either North or South Pullu until the road opens in your direction of travel.

From North Pullu, the road winds down to **Khardung**, a yak-herding village with a small but friendly gompa hidden behind a baffle of scrubby trees.

Beyond Khardung, the road dives to the valley floor and the dusty village of **Khalsar**, which has a few teahouses for truckers. Beyond Khalsar, the road forks; the left branch follows the Shyok River to Diskit and Hunder, while the right branch follows the Nubra River to Sumur and Panamik.

## Diskit

elev 3144m

Sprawling over the floodplain on the south bank of the Shyok River, Diskit is the main town in the Nubra Valley, which means it has several government offices in addition to the usual cluster of whitewashed farmhouses. The main attraction here is the 17th-century **Diskit Gompa** (admission Rs 20), reached by a winding road or the dirt track starting near the stream in the middle of the village. Stone steps climb to the main prayer hall, which enshrines a huge Maitreya statue and a giant drum. Upstairs is a dramatic lookout, and a second chamber with effigies of demonic protectors. The gompa holds a major festival for **Dosmoche** (see p351) in February. Downhill is the *photang* (official residence) of the head lama

of Nubra, dwarfed by an enormous **statue** of Chamba (Maitreya).

## SLEEPING & EATING

Most guesthouses in Diskit are south of the main road, around the whitewashed *mani* wall that cuts through the middle of the village.

**Kharyok Guest House** (☎ 220050; camping per tent Rs 70, r without/with bathroom Rs 150/300) On the main road, this big white house doubles as the village shop. Rooms are large and there's a big private courtyard.

**Karakoram Guest House** (☎ 220024; camping per person Rs 100, r from Rs 200) Downhill from the prayer wheel and off to the right, this is a family farmhouse with a new block of rooms. The welcome is warm and you can pitch your tent in the garden.

**Sunrise Guest House** (☎ 220011; r without/with bathroom Rs 250/500; ☞ year-round) Nearby, Sunrise offers an eclectic mix of rooms, set in a shaded sunflower garden facing the *mani* wall.

**Olthang Guest House** (☎ 220067; own tent Rs 70, permanent tent Rs 250, d/tr with shared bathroom Rs 200/250, d with private bathroom in old/new bldg Rs 300/700; ☞ year-round) A rapidly expanding place on the main road through Diskit, with rooms in an old mud-brick farmhouse and a newer hotel block, plus a peaceful meadow campground across the road.

## Hunder

Beyond Diskit, the highway passes through a wide area of rolling sand dunes before reaching the sprawl of farmhouses and scrubby trees at Hunder. Foreigners can only travel as far as the bridge at the west end of the village. Immediately before the bridge is the squat **Hunder Gompa**, containing a large gilded statue of Chamba; ask around for the monastery attendant. Across the road, a crude trail climbs to two crumbling Buddhist temples and the ruins of a vast compound of pilgrims' quarters. The **fort** at the top of the ridge offers inspirational views, but the exposed scramble up here is not for the fainthearted.

## SLEEPING & EATING

The guesthouses in Hunder are strung out below the highway, on the winding main road through the village.

**Snow Leopard Guest House** (☎ 221097; camping per tent Rs 100, r without/with bathroom Rs 200/400) A plush affair on the way into the village, with several buildings in a flower-filled garden. More ex-



### GETTING THE HUMP

Left behind from the days of the Silk Route, there are still some shaggy Bactrian (two-humped) camels in the sand dunes of the Nubra Valley. These inscrutable beasts of burden can be hired for sand-dune safaris between Diskit and Hunder, or longer excursions around the valley. Ask at local guesthouses – rates start at around Rs 500 per hour.

pensive rooms have geysers (hot-water heaters) in the bathrooms.

**Jamshed Guest House** (☎ 221158; tent Rs 75, s with shared bathroom Rs 300, d with private bathroom Rs 350) A short stroll from the gompa, this well-tended place offers large village-style rooms in the family home and several outbuildings, or you can camp in the garden.

**Moon Land Guest House** (☎ 221048; r from Rs 200) Signposted off the road, this pretty white-washed farmhouse offers rustic rooms and the sound of trickling streams. The owners speak limited English.

**Goba Guesthouse** (☎ 221083; r without/with bathroom from Rs 200/500) A newish and bright abode.

**Milky Way Guest House** (☎ 221041; r without/with bathroom Rs 300/350) Even closer to the gompa, the Milky Way is another village house that has been sensitively modernised. Rooms are tidy and clean.

The monks at Thiksey Gompa run a luxury tented camp at Hunder in the summertime; contact the gompa committee on ☎ 267011 for details.

### Sumur elev 3096m

On the far side of the valley, another dramatic gorge runs north along the Nubra River. Sumur is the largest village here, a pretty, green settlement with some interesting Buddhist relics. About 1km uphill from Sumur is the huge **Samstemling Gompa**, with a school full of friendly novice monks and a number of old and modern prayer halls full of quite distinguished murals.

Further north on the main road is the small village of **Tegar** (Tiger), with a small, adobe gompa enshrining a giant prayer wheel. Above the road are the burnt-out ruins of the **Zamskhang Palace**, a former residence of the kings of Nubra, surrounded by tiny stupas filled with

thousands of votive clay tablets left here by pilgrims on the Silk Rd. There's another medieval gompa a few kilometres north at **Pinchmik**.

### SLEEPING

Most of Sumur's guesthouses are spread out along the lane striking east from the prayer wheel on the main road. Bucket hot water costs Rs 10 to Rs 20.

**Largyal Guesthouse** (☎ 223537; camping per person Rs 50, r with shared bathroom Rs 250) Right at the back of the village, this place benefits from a quiet location and a working farm atmosphere.

**A0 Guesthouse** (☎ 223506; r Rs 250) Next to the Jammu & Kashmir Bank, this place has a decent restaurant and a range of plain rooms with bathrooms, plus a family room with low Ladakhi beds.

**Hotel Yaratso** (☎ 223544; r with private bathroom Rs 1000-1800) North of the centre in Tegar, this tastefully converted village house caters to tour groups looking for a little more luxury. The soft beds are enticing after a day on the road and the garden is a riot of colour.

North of the high school are **Namgyal Guesthouse** (☎ 223505; camping per person Rs 70, r without/with bathroom Rs 300/400) and **LP Namgail Guesthouse** (r without/with bathroom Rs 250/300), both friendly village houses with spacious rooms and huge gardens.

### Panamik elev 3183m

About 28km north of Sumur, the village of Panamik is the most northerly point open to foreigners in India. Although not particularly scenic, there are some dingy hot springs and you can trek 8km to the river bridge at Hargam and on to the stunningly remote **Ensa Gompa**.

Opposite the hot springs, **Hot Springs Guesthouse** (☎ 247043; r without/with bathroom Rs 200/300) offers decent rooms and hot meals to the few visitors who stay overnight.

### RUPSU VALLEY

Framed by humbling mountain scenery, the serene lake of **Tso Moriri** winds along the bottom of the Rupsu Valley, tucked against the Western Himalaya about 240km southeast of Leh. The waters are mildly brackish from mineral salts dissolving out of the surrounding rocks and the area is inhabited by nomadic Khampa people, who migrate across the Himalaya with herds of goats, cows and

yaks. Wildlife is plentiful – you stand a good chance of seeing rare Himalayan birds, as well as kiang (wild ass), foxes and marmots. There's a 19th-century gumpa in the village of **Korzok**, just west of the lake, which also has a striking *photang*.

About 50km north of Tso Moriri is the smaller lake of **Tso Kar**, accessible by jeep or a four- to five-day trek. Overlooking the lake-shore, the wind-scourged village of **Thukse** has a small but atmospheric gumpa.

All visitors to Rupsu need a permit arranged through a travel agent in Leh; the only accommodation for independent travellers is the informal campsite by the gumpa in Korzok. You'll need to bring everything you require from Leh, including food and potable water, and take *everything* out with you when you go. Jeep trips from Leh cost US\$60 per day; many people visit the lake as a detour on the way to Manali or Keylong.

The road to Korzok is OK for off-road cycles but difficult for motorcycles because of drifting sand. However, there are no good maps and the route is very poorly signposted.

## WEST OF LEH

☎ 01982

Beyond Nimmu, the road to Kargil enters a barren wasteland that stretches most of the way to Kashmir. This is rugged country, but the dun colours of the desert are occasionally broken by small islands of green, where farms and villages cling to the sides of small rivers and streams. All the villages along the valley are accessible by public bus from Leh; see p377. Passports are checked at Khalsi, and motorcyclists should be aware that there are no petrol stations between Phyang and Kargil. For more information on getting to the following towns, see p377.

## Basgo

About 40km west of Leh, Basgo was the capital of lower Ladakh before the kingdom was united at Leh. Until recently, this fascinating World Heritage site was crumbling into dust, but Unesco and the Basgo Welfare Committee have joined forces to restore the ancient citadel compound.

Today, Basgo's **Chamba Gumpa** (admission Rs 20) is one of the highlights of the Indus Valley. The mural work inside has been spectacularly restored using traditional colours and techniques; images of bodhisattvas and celestial beings even cover the ceiling. The main build-

ing contains a two-storey statue of Maitreya, and there's a second gumpa just downhill with another outsized Maitreya statue. The ruins of the **citadel** are scattered across the surrounding hills.

Basgo has nowhere to eat or sleep but there are roadhouses for meals in nearby **Nimmu**, 2km back towards Leh near the confluence of the green Indus and the murky brown Zaskar River. A road is slowly being built from here to Padum in Zaskar.

## Likir

☎ 01982

About 68km from Leh and tucked into a side valley, the village of Likir is home to the 11th-century **Klu-kkhyil Gumpa** (admission Rs 20), reached by a 40-minute trek along the river. Inside, you can see several prayer rooms full of statues and murals and an interesting **museum** (☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6pm, till 4pm winter) with *thangkas* and religious objects – including a *kapala* (ceremonial bowl) made from a human skull and a *kangling* (ceremonial flute) made from a human femur. In front of the gumpa is a gaudy 7m statue of Maitreya. *Chaam* dances take place in February for the **Dosmoche festival** (see p351).

Farmhouses above the gumpa rent basic rooms for Rs 200 to 300; camping is possible in the garden of the Likir Monastery School.

Reached via a small track off the main village road, the roomy **Norboo Spon Guest House** (☎ 227137; tent Rs 50, s/d half-board Rs 200/400) offers standard village rooms in a gigantic garden. Rates include breakfast, lunch, dinner, and free Indian or Tibetan tea. The same owners run a second guesthouse further north on the way to the gumpa.

Further along the village road, **Gaph-Chow Guest House & Camping** (☎ 227151; liker@rediffmail.com; camping per person Rs 90, s/d Rs 350/400) is moving up-market. There's an old-fashioned guesthouse and a pleasant campground under the apricot trees, plus a new complex of semi-permanent tents, set to open by the time you read this.

## Alchi

Clinging to the edge of a narrow gorge just south of the Kargil road, the temples of Alchi represent the crowning glory of Indo-Tibetan art in Ladakh. The complex was founded in the 11th century by the Great Translator, Ringchen Zangpo, who bought in artists from the Buddhist monasteries of Kashmir to create the amazing murals and sculptures at Alchi.



The **Chhoskhor Temples** (admission Rs 20; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6pm) are at the end of the main cobbled street through the village. First is **Sumrtsek Temple**, with astounding murals depicting thousands of Tantric deities and huge wooden statues of Maitreya, Manjushri and Avalokitesvara. Next along is **Vairocana Temple**, with a rear chamber full of gigantic mandalas. At the rear of the compound are the **Lotsa Temple**, with more mandalas, and the **Manjushri Temple**, enshrining an enormous four-sided statue of Manjushri. Also check out the unusual chortens in the grounds; the plain mud exteriors hide vivid paintings inside. Photography is banned inside the temple compound.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Most of the guesthouses in Alchi are on lanes leading off from the main road to the gomba. In summer, Alchi can get very crowded, but almost everything closes for winter.

**Choskor Guest House** (☎ 227084; r without/with bathroom Rs 200/300) On the way into Alchi, beneath a rocky buttress, this traveller-oriented place has a nice village mood and large square rooms overlooking the garden. Tasty local meals are prepared in the traditional Ladakhi kitchen and it's open through the winter.

**Lotsava** (☎ 227129; dorjeystanzin@yahoo.com; r without/with bathroom from Rs 200/300, permanent tent with meals Rs 2200-2700) Down a lane on the way out of the village, this huge square farmhouse has cosy Ladakhi-style rooms with bucket hot water. Curtains add a homy touch and corner rooms get light from two sides. In summer, the owners run a luxury tented camp on the edge of the village.

**Alchi Resort** (☎ 252520; s/d from Rs 850/1150) This compound of two-room huts is unlovely from the outside, but rooms are better than average and the solar-heated hot water is a blessing.

**Samdupling Guest House** (☎ 227104; s/d Rs 1300/1800) A good midrange choice just above the bus stand, with large, bright bedrooms and the luxury of 24-hour hot water. Generous discounts are possible out of peak season.

### Rizong

North of Saspol, a narrow gorge cuts north to the imposing **Rizong Gomba** (admission Rs 20), a stack of dusty monks' cells crammed into an arid, rocky amphitheatre. The two prayer halls have soot-darkened murals and gilded statues of Sakyamuni and Maitreya. Experienced teachers may be able to volunteer at

the monastery school; contact **Beautiful World** ([www.beautifulworld.org.uk](http://www.beautifulworld.org.uk)).

Set in orchards downhill from the gomba, the **Chullichan Nunnery** provides an education for girls from local villages. You're welcome to visit, but a donation is greatly appreciated.

There's no accommodation at Rizong, but Saspol has several upmarket resorts.

**Uley Ethnic Resort** (☎ 253640; [ulecamp@sancharnet.in](mailto:ulecamp@sancharnet.in); r or tent with meals Rs 3000; ☎ closed Sep-May) Hidden away amongst apple orchards, this rather grand place offers a choice of semipermanent tents or tasteful rooms in mud-brick cottages, arranged around a safari tent restaurant.

No buses run to Rizong, so hire a taxi (Rs 1570 return) or take any bus heading to Khalsi or beyond, and walk the steep 5km up the valley.

### Lamayuru

☎ 01982 / elev 3390m

About 125km from Leh, Lamayuru is set amongst eroded badlands at the mouth of a narrow gorge. According to legend, this was once the bottom of a deep lake but a Buddhist saint prayed to the guardian spirits and the water miraculously drained away. Geological deposits around Lamayuru do indicate the presence of a vanished lake, perhaps drained by a receding glacier. The remaining silt has been sculpted into a bizarre moonscape of towers and ravines by the wind and rain.

The main attraction in Lamayuru is **Lamayuru Gomba** (admission Rs 20), the oldest in Ladakh, dating back to at least the 10th century. Perched atop a towering cliff, pockmarked with manmade caves, the gomba has few murals but the prayer halls contain jewelled chortens, statues of *bodhisattvas* (Buddhist saints) and ancient *chaam* masks. Masked dances take place here in July for the three day **Yuru Kabgyat festival** (p351).

### SLEEPING & EATING

Lamayuru's guesthouses all come with shared bathrooms.

**Siachen Guesthouse & Camping Site** (tent Rs 100, r Rs 250-350) A simple village house, offering home-cooked meals and traditionally furnished rooms with carpet beds and *choktse* tables, plus a basic camping site.

**Dragon Hotel** (☎ 255323; r Rs 150-300) The Dragon Hotel is in a charming family home with tidy rooms and a fabulous Ladakhi kitchen piled with pots and pans. Upstairs

### LOST TRIBES

Also known as Drokpa or Dards, the Brokpa people inhabit the Dah-Hanu valley, north-west of Khalsi. The origins of the tribe are lost to history, but their Aryan features and fair complexion have led many to conclude that the tribe was descended from the invasion force of Alexander the Great. Most Brokpa follow the ancient Bon religion, which provided the basis for Tibetan Buddhism. Travel agents in Leh offer tours to Dah-Hanu, but you can see Brokpa women most days selling dried fruit and vegetables at the south end of Leh's Main Bazar – just look for the ornate head-coverings, made from silver, beads and artificial flowers.

rooms have gompa views and colourful Buddhist murals.

**Hotel Niranjana** (☎ 224001; anghok1@rediffmail.com; dm Rs 100, s/d Rs 800/1000) This upmarket option is run by the monastery and a 15m-high *thangka* is hung from the roof during festivals. Showers are hot and the restaurant serves good food, but rooms are expensive for what you get.

### Mulbekh

From Lamayuru, the road climbs over Fotu La (4147m) and Namika La (3760m) before descending Mulbekh – a dusty string of tea-houses along the hwy. Across the road is the tiny **Chamba Gompa** (admission Rs 10), centred on an 8m-high rock-cut statue of Maitreya dating to AD 700. Uphill from town are the gompas of **Serdung** and **Gandentse**, the last Buddhist monuments before Muslim-dominated Kargil.

About 1km on the Leh side of the statue, the less unobtrusive **J&KTDC Tourist Bungalow** (r with private bathroom Rs 100) can be booked in Kargil. Rooms are clean and the *chowkidar* (attendant) can arrange meals.

Directly opposite Chamba Gompa, the basic roadhouse, **Paradise Hotel and Restaurant** (☎ 270010, r with shared bathroom Rs 150), has plain, grungy rooms with shared squat toilets in an outdoor block.

### KARGIL

☎ 01985 / elev 2817m

The administrative centre for four surrounding valleys, Kargil marks the easternmost extent of the Muslim incursion into Ladakh. Before

Partition, Kargil was an important trading post for caravans travelling between Baltistan and Zaskar, but today it stands on the faultline between India and Pakistan. A famous battle was fought here during the 1999 Indo-Pakistan War and the town remains heavily fortified.

Most visitors only come here to break the journey between Srinagar and Leh, or change buses for the trip to Zaskar. If you do stop over, there are good views from the peaceful village of Goma (Upper) Kargil, a steep walk above the hospital. Local traders sell dried Kargil apricots in the bazaar (usually with the stones still inside). Be aware of anti-Indian and anti-Jewish sentiments in the valley.

### Orientation & Information

Kargil is Ladakh's second-largest town but everything is arranged along the highway, or the lanes branching down to the river. Hotel Siachen will change cash at a poor rate and several internet cafés offer slow connections for Rs 120 an hour.

The **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 232721; ☎ 10am–4pm) is behind the share-jeep stand, down the lane near the Shashila restaurant. You can arrange guides and camping gear for treks and make bookings for J&KTDC Tourist Bungalows in the Suru Valley.

### Sleeping & Eating

Unless mentioned otherwise, rooms have private bathrooms and geysers.

**J&KTDC Tourist Bungalow** (☎ 232328; off Main Bazar; dm Rs 20, r Rs 100–150) The main tourist bungalow is next to the tourist office. The dorms are a steal for the price. There's a nicer annexe up the hill behind the hospital.

**Popular Chacha Hotel** (☎ 233390; Main Bazar; s/q Rs 100/400; ☎) A real rock-bottom choice on the main road – just a couple of rooms and basic shared bathroom facilities with cold water, plus an internet café downstairs.

**Hotel Greenland** (☎ 232324/233388; off Main Bazar; r from Rs 350) Down an alley beside the small local taxi stand, this place is simple, cheap and reasonably clean. The local taxi union has an office here where you charter jeeps to Zaskar.

**Hotel Siachen** (☎ 232221; off Main Bazar; s/d Rs from 1300/1800) This upmarket chalet-style place, down an alley behind the taxi stand, has rooms on three floors set around a garden, with a travel agency, restaurant and parking. Rates are usually discounted by 30% to 50% and the manager can change foreign cash (at a low rate).

**Shashila** (Main Bazar; dishes Rs 30-100) A more formal Kashmiri restaurant, serving cheap portions of dhal and rice and *rogon joshi* (lamb and tomato curry).

Half-a-dozen Muslim *dhabas* along Main Bazar offer Kashmiri and Ladakhi food and trekkers can pick up fruit, biscuits and freshly baked bread in the bazaar.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The government bus stand is below the highway – take the alley opposite the road to the hospital. Buses leave for Leh (semi-deluxe/deluxe Rs 240/320, 10 hours) at 4.30am and for Srinagar (semi-deluxe/deluxe Rs 240/320, 10 hours) between 1am and 2am. You'll pay Rs 30 as far as Mulbekh (1½ hours) and Rs 100 to Lamayuru (4½ hours). Book the day before and check that the road to Srinagar is safe before boarding.

The minibus stand, about 500m back up the road to Leh, has services to Panikhar (Rs 50, two hours) at 7am and 2pm, passing through Sanku (Rs 30, one hour). Buses to Zanskar are notoriously unpredictable; even the tourist office doesn't know the schedule. The bus to Padum (Rs 300, 14 to 18 hours) should leave on alternate days at around 3am, stopping at Rangdum (Rs 150, seven hours), but often there is no bus for days on end.

### JEEP/TAXI

A chartered jeep will cost Rs 8000 to Padum (Rs 12,500 for a three-day round trip) and Rs 3800 to Srinagar or Leh, with room for four or five passengers. You can make a day trip to Mulbekh by taxi for around Rs 1000. Book with the office at the Greenland Hotel.

Share jeeps leave from a separate stand near the tourist office. Jeeps to Leh (Rs 500, 22 hours) leave at 7am; jeeps to Srinagar (Rs 500 to 550, 10 hours) leave at 3am.

## ZANSKAR

When it comes to splendid isolation, Zanskar is about as isolated as you can get. This rugged Buddhist valley can only be reached by an arduous week-long trek or a 14-hour drive along a pitted and potholed track along the Suru River. Although Zanskar is administered from Kargil, the people of the valley are predominantly Buddhist. The valley even

has its own king, though the role is mainly ceremonial.

From November to May, Zanskar is cut off entirely from the outside world. Ice chokes the mountain passes and the valley sits under a silent blanket of snow. Farmers in the valley spend the whole summer storing up fuel and food for the long winter months. A few hardy travellers trek here in winter along the frozen Zanskar River to see the valley at its most beautiful and uncrowded. For more information on activities in Zanskar, see p366.

Zanskar's days of isolation are numbered. A road is slowly being built along the valley of the Zanskar River, linking the capital, Padum, to Nimmu on the Leh–Kargil road. When it opens, it may change the mood of the valley forever. However, most locals are looking forward to a shift of administration from Muslim Kargil to Buddhist Ladakh.

Trekkers can find limited provision in the villages along the valley. There are no petrol stations in Zanskar, so motorcyclists should bring all the fuel they need in spare cans. Trucks may pick up hitchhikers for a fee. See p367 for more details.

## Kargil to Rangdum

The main road into Zanskar follows the Suru Valley. There are J&K Tourist Bungalows in most villages, but you'll need to find the *chowkidhar* (attendant) to open the doors. All offer basic rooms for Rs 100; the bungalows at Purtickchay, Tangole and Rangdum also have dorm beds for Rs 20.

The first part of the valley is green and fertile. About 40km from Kargil, the village of **Sanku** is the starting point for treks to Drass and Mulbekh, and you can stop over at the tourist bungalow and visit the **mausoleum** of the Sufi saint Sayed Mir Hashim.

From Sanku, the road climbs slowly to the pretty village of **Panikhar**, set beneath the looming peaks of **Nun** (7135m) and **Kun** (7087m). This is a scenic area for walks and treks, and you can stay in the tourist bungalow or the friendly **Khayoul Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 259110; r with shared bathroom Rs 100).

The road continues to **Tangole**, with a tourist bungalow used by trekking and mountaineering groups attempting the ascent of Nun and Kun. Further east, the **Parkachik Glacier** crumbles dramatically into the Suru River.

The countryside becomes wilder and more barren as the road enters the wind-scoured

plain at **Rangdum**. The village itself is just a small cluster of white houses, centred on a group of teahouses and a good **J&K Tourism Bungalow** – the only place to stay unless you arrange a homestay with local villagers. Around the valley's edge, geographical strata has been twisted into a 3-D abstract painting by plate tectonics. From Rangdum you can trek east over the Kanji La (5255m), linking up to the Leh–Kargil road at Lamayuru.

About 5km south of the village, **Rangdum Gumpa** (admission by donation) is perched atop a low hill overlooking the plain. The 25 monks who live here are outnumbered by the monastery donkeys, who sleep inside at night, and the prayer halls contain some fine muralwork.

After Rangdum, the road climbs the rugged Pensi La (4401m), which forms the border between the Suru and Zaskar Valleys. Marmots abound on the grassy patches between the rocks and the pass offers jawdropping views of the **Drang Drung glacier**, a perfect tongue of glistening white, snaking down between steely grey moraines.

On the far side of the pass, the valley opens up into a broad, flat plain at the meeting of the Zaskar and Stod Rivers. This is Zaskar proper, a sweeping sheet of farmland ring-fenced by a sheer mountain wall. On the final descent to Padum, you can detour to the historic **Zongkul Gumpa** at Ating, where you must also show your passport. There's another small gumpa at **Sani**, just outside Padum.

## PADUM

☎ 01983

Basking under an endless sky, Padum is the capital of Zaskar, but don't expect more than a few dusty streets and a bus stand. Around Padum, the Zaskar valley shimmers in the wan desert light. Yaks and *dzo* graze calmly in the fields and the plain is dotted with small farms and villages. Padum has a little town **mosque**, catering to a small community of Sunni Muslims, and two ruined **gompas**. A short walk across the valley is the medieval monastery at **Pibiting**, topped by a massive chorten with views over the plain.

The **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 245017; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Sat) can advise on trekking routes and arrange guides and porters for Rs 250 to 300 per day. Alternatively, you can make arrangements through **Zaskar Trek** (☎ 245136) on the road to the mosque. See opposite for popular routes.

## Sleeping & Eating

Most hotels shut up from late October to June, except for tour groups on winter treks. Hot water by the bucket costs Rs 10 to 15. Campers can set up at the simple **campground** (tent Rs 50) opposite the tourist office.

**J&K TDC Tourist Bungalow** (☎ 245017; r with shared bathroom Rs 100) Sharing a compound with the tourist office, this simple place is a good choice for travellers watching the pennies after expensive jeep trips around the valley.

**Changthang Hotel** (☎ 245166; r without/with bathroom from Rs 150/250) Around a courtyard with a trickling stream, Changthang has an inviting restaurant and rooms are good for the price.

**Mont-Blanc Guesthouse** (☎ 245183; r without/with bathroom Rs 250/350) At last, a proper village-style guesthouse in Padum! Mont-Blanc offers bright, traditionally furnished rooms in a family home on the road to the mosque.

**Hotel Ibex** (☎ 245012; d Rs 350) The choice of tour groups and older travellers, this well-kept place has snug rooms arranged around a sheltered garden courtyard, plus a restaurant with a good cook but a limited menu.

**Kailash Hotel** (☎ 245074; d from Rs 400) This hotel, next door to Changthang Hotel, is similar but slightly grander.

**Marq Guest House** (☎ 245021; d Rs 500) Just off the main road, this big white house has big white rooms with geyser hot water in the showers. There's an ISD call centre on site and nice views from the garden.

**Gakyi Café** (dishes from Rs 30) Facing Hotel Ibex, this large, Buddhist-run place serves the best food in town, with an emphasis on – you guessed it – *momos* and noodles.

**Kailash Hotel & Bar** (beer Rs 80, snack meals from Rs 40) Not to be confused with the Kailash Hotel on the main road, this truckers' restaurant serves the only alcohol in town.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Until the road to Nimmu opens, bus transport in Zaskar will continue to be slow and unpredictable. In summer, a bus is supposed to leave Padum for Kargil (Rs 300, 14 to 18 hours) between 2am and 3am every other day, but it can be cancelled for days on end. You need to book tickets the day before. Drivers will let you off wherever you want, but there could be a two-day wait for the next bus to pass by.

**TAXI**

By taxi, it's a steep Rs 8000 from Kargil to Padum, or Rs 12,500 for a three-day return trip; jeeps have space for four or five passengers. The trip can be done in one gruelling 14-hour drive, or you can stop on the way at Rangdum.

**Getting Around**

The Padum Taxi Union office, between the Hotel Ibex and the bus stand, charges high rates: Rs 800/1000 one way/return to Karsha Gumpa and Rs 6000 to Rangdum. Those who have time: trek.

**AROUND PADUM**

Like a smear of whitewash on the mountainside across from Padum, **Karsha Gumpa** is Zanskar's largest and oldest Buddhist monastery, dating back to at least the 10th century. Around 150 monks maintain the gumpa, helped by the French charity **Solidarijeune** ([www.solidarijeune.org](http://www.solidarijeune.org)). There are two main chambers, both containing stunning murals and old treasures. The annual *chaam* dances are held in July as part of the three-day **Gu-Stor festival** (see the boxed text, p351). Experienced teachers may be able to volunteer at local schools for girls through the US-based **Jamyang Foundation** ([www.jamyang.org](http://www.jamyang.org)).

The best place to stay is the appealing **Thieur Guesthouse** (tent Rs 70, r with shared bathroom Rs 200-250), set in a pretty garden just uphill from the Rural Development office. You can reach the gumpa from Padum by (expensive) taxi or a two-hour walk across the exposed plain to the new bridge over the Zanskar River.

There are more historic gompas in the small villages of **Pishu**, **Stongde** and **Zangla**, accessible by taxi or on foot from Padum. A more challenging destination is the isolated gumpa of **Phuktal**, squeezed into a cave clinging to the side of the near-vertical Shadi gorge. Inside you can see a sacred spring and some 700-year-old murals in the Alchi style. The gumpa can only be reached by walking – typically as part of the Padum to Darcha trek (see right).

**TREKKING IN ZANSKAR**

The main trekking season runs from late June to October, though a few people specifically come here for the famous winter trek along the frozen Zanskar River. Storms occasionally interrupt itineraries in August and September. As many treks climb over 5000m, proper ac-

climatisation is essential to avoid AMS – see Health (p1188).

Most people make advance arrangements in Leh (agencies charge around US\$60 per person per day all-inclusive), but you can also organise guides and porters in Padum (opposite) and Kargil (p388). Going without a guide is not recommended – see p97 for more advice.

The following are some of the most popular routes. Serious trekkers should refer to Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya* for further details.

**PADUM TO DARCHA VIA SHINKUN LA**

This extremely popular seven- to eight-day route follows the Tsarap Valley east towards Darcha on the Manali-Leh hwy in Lahaul. A road is slowly being built along the valley, allowing trekkers to cut out several stages at the start and end of the trek. Starting from Padum, the route runs east to Raru (on foot or by jeep) then up to Purne in two moderate days.

Most trekkers then detour north to the cave monastery at Phuktal and spend a second night in Purne to prepare for the sustained climb to Shinkun La (5090m). There are more overnight stops at Sking/Kargyak and Lhakhang before the trail crosses the Great Himalaya Range and descends to meet the main road at Darcha. Exhausted trekkers can arrange transport for the final stage from Ramjak.

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)
1	Padum to Raru	5-6
2	Raru to Pepula	5
3	Pepula to Purne	4-5
4	Purne to Phuktal Monastery to Purne	5-6
5	Purne to Sking/Kargyak	6-7
6	Sking/Kargyak to Lhakhang	6
7	Lhakhang to Ramjak over Shinkun La	8
8	Ramjak to Darcha	5-6

**PADUM TO LAMAYURU VIA SINGGE LA**

This tough trek begins in either Padum or Karsha Monastery (in reverse, it's the most trekked route into Zanskar). From Padum, the route follows the left bank of the Zanskar River before diverting north to the whitewashed tower of Lingshet Gumpa over Hanuma La (4950m). Or, you may be able to travel by jeep to Zangla and cross to Pishu via Zanskar's longest cableway.

From Pishu, the trail crosses the Zanskar Range via the Singge La (5050m), with swoon-inducing views. It's not overly demanding and the gradual descent to the village of Photaksar can be completed in one stage. From Photaksar the trail crosses Sisir La (4850m) to the village of Honupatta and continues mostly downhill to Wanla. The final leg to Lamayuru can be done on foot or by pre-arranged jeep.

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)
1	Padum to Karsha	2
2	Karsha to Pishu	4-5
3	Pishu to Hanumil	4-5
4	Hanumil to Snertse	5
5	Snertse to Lingshet via Hanuma La	5-6
6	Lingshet to Singge La base camp	5-6
7	Singge La base camp to Photaksar via Singge La	5-6
8	Photaksar to Honupatta via Sisir La	6
9	Honupatta to Wanla	5
10	Wanla to Lamayuru	3-4

### THE CHADAR TREK

A few hardy souls fly into Ladakh in winter to attempt the unique Chadar Trek along the frozen Zanskar River. While there are no high-altitude stages, conditions are testing and expeditions need serious equipment for winter camping. Experienced local guides are also required to lead a safe passage across the ice.

The starting point is Chiling, accessible by jeep from Leh. The route follows the river for seven days through a surreal canyon landscape, with camping stops in rock caves along the riverbank. The majority of people time the trek to coincide with the Losar celebrations in Padum and Karsha. Home-stays are available in the last few villages before Padum.

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)
1	Chiling to Tilat Sumdo	5/6
2	Tilat Sumdo to Paldar Sumdo	6-7
3	Paldar Sumdo to Nerak Pullu	5-6
5	Nerak Pullu to Hanumil	5-6
6	Hanumil to Pishu	4-5
7	Pishu to Karsha	4-5
8	Karsha to Padum	2

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