

Mindful Travel in Ladakh

For many centuries, Ladakh evolved according to its own values. Then, in 1974, the area was suddenly thrown open to the outside world. At that time the Indian government started a process of planned development, which included tourism and the introduction of Western-style education, agricultural chemicals and dependence on transport and fossil fuels for all vital needs. This has brought many changes to Ladakh - including junk food, plastic consumer goods, toxins such as DDT and asbestos, pollution and unemployment. Along with the mass media, these changes have also fostered the impression that life in the West is infinitely better than in Ladakh.

One tourist can spend as much in a single day as a whole Ladakhi family might spend in a year, making Ladakhis feel that their lifestyle is poor and backward. Tourists often unwittingly reinforce these feelings and insecurities by expecting Western-style conveniences or expressing horror at comparatively low daily wages, failing to recognize the enormous differences in the cost of living.

These misunderstandings are born of a lack of complete information. We have found that greater knowledge about what is happening around the world, not isolationism, is essential for the Ladakhis to make informed decisions about their own future. Likewise, visitors can learn a great deal from traditional Ladakh and from the changes occurring in the name of development. Paradoxically, fuller information along with closer communication between Westerners and Ladakhis can contribute to cultural self-respect.

If you observe the following guidelines, you will be helping – directly and indirectly – to maintain the respect that Ladakhis have for their culture and way of life, and to minimize the negative effects of tourism on the local environment.

Guidelines for Visitors

Whatever your status may be in your country, in an area like Ladakh you are comparatively wealthy. Make an effort to present a balanced picture by describing everyday life in the West. Mention the realities of inflationary prices, stress, pollution and homelessness as well as the growing movements to



counter them. Communicating your own experience of life in the West is more effective and honest than praising Ladakhi culture, as your impressions of Ladakh will be based on limited experience.

Supporting the Local Economy

- Choose as much as possible, local, organically produced foods, both in restaurants and when shopping in the market.
- Try to avoid multinational corporate products such as Nestle, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, etc., which are destroying local economies the world over.
- Buy locally-made handicrafts and try to support local Ladakhi restaurants, guest-houses, trekking agencies and shops so that the money you spend stays in the region.
- Inform yourself about current rates and prices so that you pay a fair price. By paying too much you contribute to inflation. By paying too little you deny merchants a fair return. Fellow travellers and tourist office personnel are good sources of information on current prices.

Protecting Ladakh's Environment

- Say 'NO' to plastic. Plastic is a huge rubbish problem, and there is no good solution to it: either it is dumped or burned, both of which are polluting and damaging to health. Avoid imported packaged water; refill your bottle with boiled/filtered water, or filter your own with handheld filters or iodine drops. Where possible, avoid plastic-packaged foods or other products.
- Save water: Use traditional Ladakhi compost toilets instead of flush toilets if available (most family-run guesthouses have one). Do not throw anything non-biodegradable or toxic in the toilets. Use natural detergents/soaps and an eco-friendly laundry service.
- Save energy: Use solar hot water showers if available and encourage your guesthouse owner or hotelier to install one if not; support establishments that use electricity from renewable sources of energy.

Cultural Sensitivity

- In general, shorts, bare shoulders and backs etc. are not appreciated, and public displays of sexual affection (holding, kissing) are frowned upon.
- It is polite to give and receive with both hands.
- Point with your whole hand, not just one finger.
- All religious objects, including books, statues and photos, are kept high off the floor. You may cause offence by leaving any postcards, guide-books etc. that contain drawings or photos of religious objects or people, on the floor.
- Don't point your feet at, or step over people, religious objects, tables, food, etc.
- It is impolite to be too quick in accepting offers of food or drink.
- Eating utensils are not shared. It is impolite to taste from a utensil used for cooking.
- Always ask before entering Ladakhi houses, gardens, etc. and before using your camera.
- Do not respond to begging or encourage children to beg by giving money or other things to them, as this is how begging takes hold all over the world.
- The sale and purchase of old thankas, statues and other religious objects is prohibited and there are restrictions on the sale of any object more than one hundred years old.

Responsible Trekking

- Carefully plan your trek with your agency before setting off in order to minimize environmental damage.
- Eliminate the possibility of waste creation on the trail or back in Leh by buying bulk foods in cloth or paper bags.
- Choose trekking agencies that have made environmental responsibility and cultural sensitivity a priority.
- Try to be self-sufficient when you are trekking

through small villages. Since the villagers generally grow just enough food to provide for their own needs, do not expect to be able to buy food or fuel from them.

- Wood is a scarce resource, so don't use it!
- Ladakh has a unique system of traditional medicine. All of its components come from nature and any part of the ecosystem is a potential medicine. Please do not collect any plants, flowers or stones.
- Burn and bury biodegradable waste on site.
- Ask your guide or cook to follow these guidelines.

Monasteries and other religious sites

- The entrance fee at monasteries is used for the upkeep and restoration of the monasteries, as well as for the construction of new shrines etc. Please remember that monasteries are holy places and observe the following guidelines:
- Dress respectfully!
- Always take off your shoes before entering shrines.
- Refrain from smoking, drinking alcohol and spitting.
- Never touch the statues, books, thankas or any other religious objects.
- Do not disturb the monks during prayer. Remember that the monastery "festivals" are not folkdances, but important rituals. If you take photographs, be discreet.
- Respect any signs asking you not to use camera flash in monasteries, since it may damage the frescoes.
- When walking through a monastery or when passing chortens and mani-walls, always go around them in a clockwise direction, keeping them to your right.
- Never remove stones from mani walls.

Support Local Organizations Working to Preserve and Promote the Traditional Culture and Sustainable Living

- Visit the Women's Alliance Centre: See Ancient Futures (every day except Sunday at 3:00pm).
- Visit the Ladakh Ecological Development Group's (LEDeG) centre to learn about renewable energy and other appropriate technologies.

This brochure was produced by ISEC/Ladakh Project. ISEC is an international non-profit organization promoting locally based alternatives to the global consumer culture. The Ladakh Project has been active in Ladakh for more than 3 decades. ISEC's Director, Helena Norberg-Hodge, and the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG) were joint winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize. She is the author of Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh, which together with the film of the same title has been translated into more than 50 languages.

ISEC's programs foster greater understanding about the root causes of cultural and ecological breakdown both in Ladakh and around the world, while exploring strategic solutions at every level: from deep cultural exchange to activities that strengthen community and the local economy.

The focal point of the program in Ladakh is a daily screening of Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh, followed by a discussion led by ISEC staff or volunteers. The film is screened at the Women's Alliance Centre in Leh at 3:00pm every day except Sunday. Please visit the Women's Alliance Centre to learn more about Ladakhi culture and to enjoy authentic Ladakhi food at the WAL Local Food Cafe.

For more information about ISEC please visit our website (www.isec.org.uk) or contact one of our offices.

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MINDFUL TRAVEL IN LADAKH

Some Guidelines for Visitors to Ladakh



International Society for
Ecology and Culture



THE LADAKH PROJECT

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