

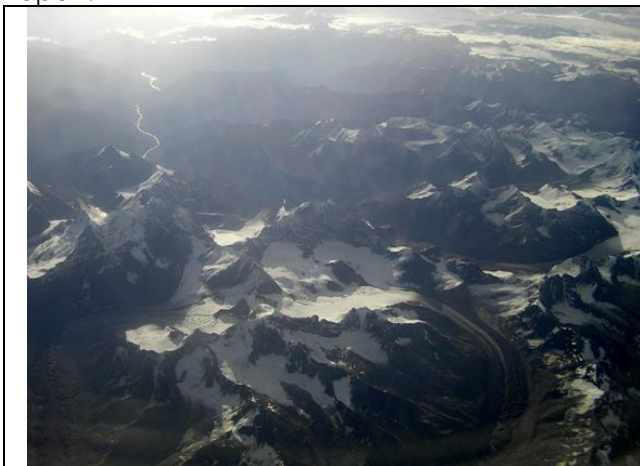


# Cinda Hunter

Ladakh and Nepal 2007



Ladakh is a province of India to the North of Kashmir, running along the Chinese border. You fly over the Himalayas, over the Indus river, to reach Leh, the capital of the region. Leh is located in a valley surrounded by mountains. North lies the Karakoram mountain range, home of K2, the second highest mountain in the world at 8610m. Leh is situated at around 3600m, so altitude sickness can be a problem. The area has a short hot summer and only for three months of the year is the region accessible by road. There are endless mountains to cross and only for this brief period are the passes open.



*Flying over the Himalayas*



*Glacier...*

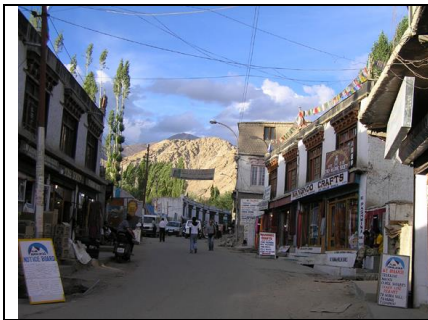
The tourist season is short and the people have only a little time to take advantage of the sudden influx of visitors. Despite this, there are lots of hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, shops and tour businesses all aimed at the tourists who so briefly invade this otherwise sleepy and laid back small town. Not only do the tourists invade the area, but the season also brings with it visiting Kashmiri traders who set up shop, manically competing with the laconic locals to milk the seasonal bounty.... Interestingly Leh is on the old silk route – the route the trading caravans used through China, Tibet, Nepal etc, so it has a long history of trade.



*Coming in to Leh*



*View from my hotel window*



*Up the road to the market...*



*A Kashmiri shop*



*Insulated roof top*

I decided to see a bit of the surrounding area and hired a car for the day to go and visit the Nubra valley in the North, 125 km from Leh. We left at 5am and went up 2000m over "the highest motorable pass in the world", Khardung-La, which is 18380 feet or around 5600m! (Just to give you an idea, Mount Kilimanjaro is only a bit higher at 5895m!) The first 30 km took 2 hours (5 hours to do 125km) on extreme "roads". Precipices, narrow, boulder strewn - these are some of the adjectives to describe the track that is only open a few months in the summer and has to be frequently cleared of boulders by bulldozers. One looks down over the edge of the road and dotted all the way along are the mangled metal corpses of bulldozers, buses and trucks (car wrecks probably being too small to be seen!)



*Dawn over the mountains*



*Spot the truck on the road in the valley*

The scenery is breath-takingly beautiful, diverse and totally awe-inspiring. You think you are high (and the valley below has trucks moving like dinky toys at the bottom) and then you climb yet another mind blowingly huge mountain.



*Precipitous, boulder strewn "road?"*



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*Spot the houses!*



*The Shayok river*

There are lots of rushing streams and waterfalls from the snowmelt, even now at the very end of summer. The region is peculiar particularly in terms of landscape. Ladakh lies in a rain-shadow and is basically a desert. Water comes from snow melt - streams and waterfalls joining to form wide, flat rivers flowing through the valleys. Even in August, the end of summer, there is a lot of water. There is a huge, muddy fast flowing river in the Nubra valley itself, called the Shayok. On each bank is a narrow strip of spiny scrub, then desert all around. There are snow-covered mountains, rock strewn hillsides, desert sands and then odd patches of lushly green cultivated ground where villagers have siphoned off water to create artificial oases. They channel the water from the snow melt or the rivers into furrows to irrigate crops. There are fields of wheat, vegetables, huge fruit orchards (especially apricots and plums which are a speciality of the region) and groves of poplar trees, mainly grown for wood. Houses are whitewashed and flat roofed and they usually cover the roofs with straw/grass in a half metre layer for insulation. The scenery is bizarre as there are these incredibly verdant green patches surrounded by the roughest boulder strewn terrain and desert sand, in blistering heat with snow topped mountain peaks all around!

Apparently there are some rare animals found only in this region, but all I saw were marmots - yellowy coloured critters a bit like a giant dassie (the size of a small seal!) Very endearing, they toast themselves in the morning sun then sit up on their back legs to call alarm before running off down burrows. I did see some of the two humped camels indigenous to the area (sadly in the role of tourist rides). There are also lots of donkeys and cattle - the cattle are tiny - only about 1m tall to their backs. The donkeys are still shedding their old winter fluff and the new winter hair is already starting to grow in!



*Sunbathing marmot*



*Two humped camel*



*Small, furry bull!*

There was one cyclist who made it the 30km from Leh to the pass. Apart from riding up 2000m, he did it from (approximately) 3600 to 5600m. While I am sure he is far from the first, I am surprised people survive this. Most people can barely breathe at 5600m and your heart is definitely labouring, without any exertion at all! I saw a whole lot more cyclists who had all turned back about 10km out of Leh as it

was just too much, both altitude and heat.... Even after 5 days in Leh, I was still puffing as soon as I exerted myself e.g. walked up a hill!

## NEPAL

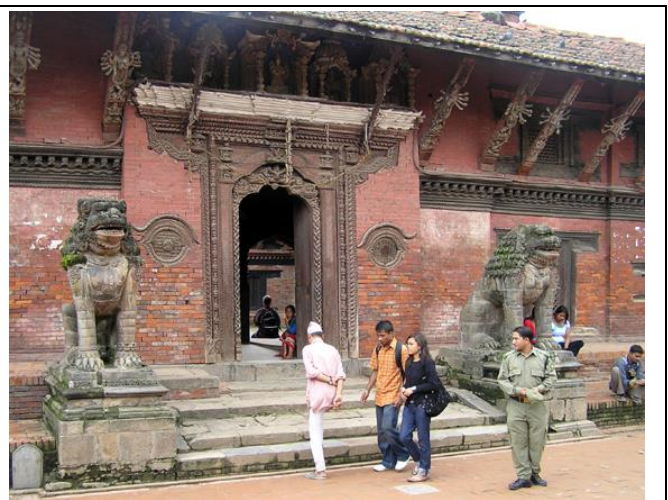
After Ladakh, I flew on to Kathmandu. Security is hectic in both places and six hand baggage and body checks are the norm! Nepal is still one of my favourite places to visit even at this time of year when the weather is vile. It is very hot and humid and it rains almost all the time. The streets flood and wading through unmentionable muck is the norm! (I needed gumboots!) If anyone is under the illusion that traveling to these amazing places is all fun, think again!

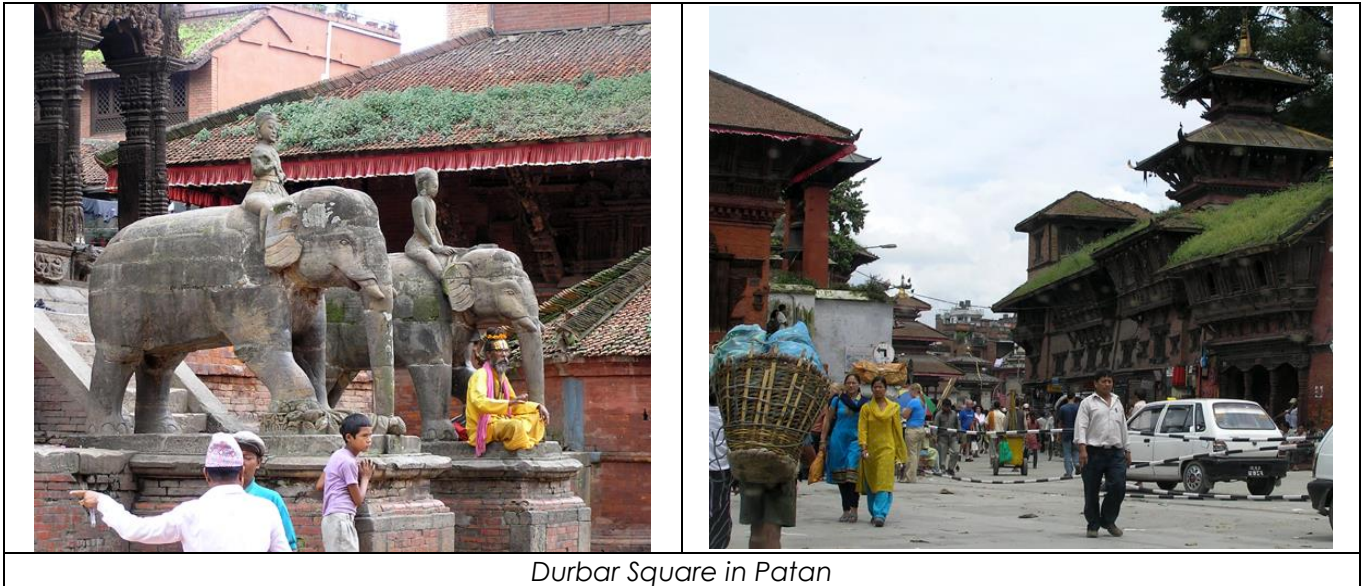
### Bouddha and the burning tyres:

I decided to re-visit the neighbouring area of Bouddha (normally a 15-30 minute trip), site of a Tibetan Buddhist Stupa (a solid edifice that the Buddhists circle around while chanting). What I and my local expert did not know was that there was yet another "strike" on the go - actually a political rally with endless blockades, burning tyres and "toy-toying" activists. (20+ years ago in SA revisited!) Since the King was deposed, this is apparently pretty much a daily occurrence in the Kathmandu region but it is a moveable feast and can be around any neighbouring town/area, the idea being to cause as much disruption as possible. There are two groups - the communist Maoists and the Student Congress party - both blockading (different) roads into the same area. Only with a bizarre mind-set can one contemplate political rivals conspiring against everyone else and not doing each other in...! They very kindly limited the insurrection on this day to 10am to 1pm, but sadly this is when we were trying to get past! We tried every possible back, side and drainage tunnel route to try and get there, only to have to give up and wait the final half hour in sweltering sun and humidity until a road was opened up! Two and a half hours later, completely sweated out (no air-con) we got there! It then bucketed with rain so no chance of any pics of the stupa! Sorry....

Kathmandu has a power outage in the evenings for 3 hours, so a lot of the shops just close instead of staying open for business until the usual 9pm. Makes it hard when you are there on business! The restaurants (which are diverse in type/origin but generally excellent) are all geared for this and keep on cooking. Unfortunately no aircon or fans, so hanging out a window to breathe is the only option! Walking down the road one morning, one of the electrical pylons exploded just in front of me with sparks and flame, which had me thinking "bomb!"

Another day I visited Patan, another nearby town. This has a particularly beautiful central square with wonderful old buildings. This time the rain let up long enough for pics! If you look at the roofs you will see that one could grow a vegetable patch on them!





Durbar Square in Patan



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