

## **TREKKING IN THE LADAKH RANGE, NORTHERN INDIA:**

### DIARY OF THE YRC EXPLORATION GROUP MEET

Ladakh is the most northerly territory of India, twice the size of Switzerland, strategically sandwiched between Pakistan, China and Tibet. Part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh maintains a separate religious and cultural identity more akin to Tibet before the Chinese invasion and subsequent emasculation of the Buddhist religion.

Geographically in the rain shadow of the main Himalayan range, Ladakh is a high altitude desert, historically riven by extensive glaciation and later incised by melt-water drainage. The Ladakh Range is the group of granite mountains dividing the Indus valley to the south from the Shyok and lower part of the Nubra river valleys to the north. The range is crossed by the "world's highest motorable road", the Khardung La (5602m/18,380ft) and the third highest, the Chang La (5300m/18,280ft). Ladakh was closed until 1994, but now only requires an Inner Line Permit to obtain access. The area has much trekking and climbing potential. It has so far been largely ignored by the mainstream international trekking companies. It was thus an attractive venue for the inaugural Exploration Group meet with both trekking and modest mountaineering objectives.

Our itinerary was to fly to Dehli and then on to Leh after a day's sightseeing. We had four days in Leh (3500m/11,500ft) to ensure acclimatisation. A programme of culture, short walks and white-water rafting on the Indus kept members entertained! Before we started the trek, a detour allowed us to visit Pangong Tso, one of the land-locked lakes straddling the border with Tibet.

The first leg was over a series of passes to the Shyok River valley with an extension to the access limit up the Nubra valley. The second leg of the trek was the return over the Ladakh Range via a little visited area offering the potential of some easy grade mountaineering up to 6000m, before a traverse of the Lasirmou La (5550m) returned us to the Indus valley. A day in hand allowed for any internal flight delays. If all went well, we would have a visit to Agra on the return to Dehli before the flight home.

LOGISTICS - Rimo Expeditions, headquartered in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, was engaged by Albert as the trekking company and their team headed by MD, Motup, made the necessary logistical arrangements and personally accompanied us on the second leg of the trek from Hundar. An experienced nine-strong Nepali trekking crew was provided and two local ponymen accompanied the trek with a string of mules and pack horses. The arrangements and staff were unequivocally first rate and Rimo can be recommended unreservedly as a trekking agency.

#### YRC MEMBERS AND GUESTS

Albert Chapman - Leader,  
Mick Borroff, George Burfitt,  
Jane Butler (guest), David Hick,  
Frank Wilkinson, Chris Hilton,  
Ian Crowther (part),  
Dorothy Crowther(guest: part),  
Paul Dover, Richard Dover,  
Arthur Salmon,  
Peter Hodge (guest),  
Ann Luck - (guest),



## NEPALI TREKKING CREW FROM RIMO EXPEDITIONS

Nir Kumar (Sirdar) Kumar Gurung (Head Cook, Michelin starred in our view!), Ganga Rai (Second Cook) Sangay Phuri and Ang Dame (Climbing Sherpas) Gyalo Sherpa, Pemba Bhote, Jhon Lama, Karma Lama Tsering Tnzemg and Kunchok Gyalen (Ladakhi Ponymen from Tangtse)

### ITINERARY

#### Sat 27/8 Transit to India

We flew to Delhi via Paris arriving in the capital's steamy heat. A coach transferred us to the cool luxury of the Imperial Hotel, just in time for a beer before the bar closed at midnight.

#### Sun 28/8 Delhi

After doing full justice to the Imperial's renowned breakfast buffet, we embarked on a sightseeing tour of Delhi - old and new. Those who had been here before noted the remarkable reduction in air pollution following the government's mandatory conversion of all public transport, taxis and tut-tuts to LPG, especially noticeable in the Old Delhi bazaar. We visited Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India, climbing one of the minarets to admire Delhi's roofscape and the wheeling black kites overhead.

This was followed by a tour round the parliamentary and government buildings of New Delhi and a short visit to the First World War memorial of India Gate. After the de rigour exposure to the sales skills of the Kashmiri carpet dealers, the day was rounded off with a superb Indian meal.

#### Mon 29/8 Transfer to Leh

We were up at 0300 for a 0630 departure from the domestic terminal and soon we were over-flying Himachal Pradesh and then the seemingly endless ridges and glaciers of the Zaskar mountains. After an hour's flight, an exacting approach into Leh airport delivered us into a bright, warm morning with clear blue skies and the clean notes of mountain air. We were soon ensconced in the Hotel Kang-Lha-Chen drinking tea on the lawn, surrounded by dahlias, day lilies and marigolds, being overlooked by the forbidding ramparts of Leh Palace. The altitude (3500m/11,500ft) dictated little more than a gentle stroll around Leh, after an excellent Italian lunch.

#### Tue 30/8 Visits to Monasteries in the Indus Valley

At 5 a.m. the over-amplified, but mellifluous, call to prayer of the Sunni muezzin in the Jama Masjid mosque summoned us prematurely to breakfast. The second acclimatisation day was an exposure to the interesting and colourful culture of Buddhism, the religion of the majority in Ladakh.

The jeeps took us up to Stok Palace, nestling under the trekking peak of Stok Kangri (6153m/20,188ft) and the present day home of the King of Ladakh. Now a titular head without actual political power, he politely bid us good morning, while talking into a mobile phone.



Returning past a field of whitewashed chortens, we were taken via Shey Palace to Tikse Gumpa, where the yellow hat monks were being filmed for movie entitled "The Last Monk", whilst performing their traditional dances to the throbbing accompaniment of drums, cymbals and deep horn blasts.



### Wed 31/8 Rafting Down the Indus River

The next phase of our acclimatisation was somewhat aquatic with a 26km descent of the Indus River from They to Nimu, negotiating white water rapids up to Grade 3 en route, passing the chilly confluence with the Zanskar River. Our Nepali river guides quickly took onboard that we were all game for a laugh and deftly navigated the rafts accordingly. Multiple side slips into minor rapids ensured we all received frequent soakings, followed by some epic splashing battles, rounded off at the end with an al fresco curry lunch.

The afternoon and early evening was taken up with more sightseeing around Leh, with various members negotiating the 554 steps up to Shanti Stupa, or wandering around the narrow streets and alleys of the old part of Leh and the bazaar. George and Mick made a slow ascent to the fort and temples of Tashi Namgyal, heavy with prayer flags, which overlooked Leh. The effort rewarded us with stupendous panoramic views in the dying sun over the Indus valley to the Stok range.

### Thu 1/9 Leh Festival

We spent the morning amongst the procession of villagers, monks, dance troupes, musicians, polo ponies, yaks and Bactrian camels that comprises the annual Leh Festival. Originally started by the authorities to extend the tourist season, it has clearly matured into a major event for the region and along with the tourists draws Ladakhis from all parts, to participate in or simply watch the show.

After a delicious curry back at the hotel, plastic boots, crampons and ice axes were checked and fettled, with some gear borrowed from Rimo Expeditions where necessary and final preparations made to leave Leh in the morning.

### Fri 2/9 Across the Ladakh Range

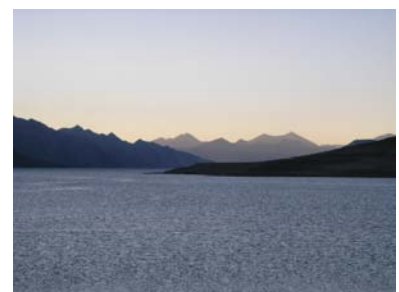
The jeeps took us back up the Indus valley to Karu, where we turned north and began the approach to the Chang La pass.

We stopped to visit Chemre Gompa on another magnificent hilltop setting and had a tour around the various temples and Buddhist icons.

At 17,700ft/5300m, the Chang La is claimed to be the third highest road pass in the world (after the 5602m Khardung La, north of Leh and the Taglang La at 5359m to the south on the Leh-Manali road). We paused to take in the stupendous views of the Eastern Karakorum peaks, before descending to the summer pastures of Muglib, where our camp was being set up on a grassy meadow next to a sparkling stream at about 4338m/14,400ft. A pre-prandial ascent up a rocky side valley provided some acclimatisation exercise and everyone was in bed by 2130 for an early start in the morning.

### Sat 3/9 Pangong Tso

Bed tea at 0430 didn't wake us. The herders' dogs from the adjacent encampment had done that twice already! The jeeps took us along a wide flat valley passing a number of sinuous side streams to reach Pangong Tso, a vast lake 150km long and 4km wide with no outlet, nestling on the border between Tibet and India. Although only a few ducks were in evidence, we admired the ever-changing colours as the sun rose over the mountaintops, bringing much welcome warmth to the chilly morning.



Breakfast was greedily devoured back at camp and the jeeps took us back past Tangse village and up a side valley to visit Nimlung? village, where the locals were introduced to the instant wonders of digital photography. We saw a hoopoe, various ducks and our first golden furred Himalayan marmots. Ian and Dorothy then left us for their mini-trek back in the Indus valley.

Another jeep ride took us to Partee (4640m), the site of our next camp by another mountain stream. The two ponymen and their string of sixteen pack mules and horses arrived from Tangse as arranged.

Pausing for some tea, various parties scaled the slopes above the campsite to prospect the start of the trekking route opposite.

#### Sun 4/9 The Trek Begins - Over the Partee La

This is where we started the soon-to-be-familiar pattern of 0600 bed tea, 0630 washing water, an excellent breakfast at 0700 and departure at 0800. After a five hour climb we reached the circular cairn at the Partee La (5070m) where we disturbed a small herd of bharal (blue sheep) - the principal prey of the snow leopards - and some Himalayan choughs. We drank in the views of the distant Eastern Karakorum peaks before descending the rocky slopes to the Rale valley below for lunch beside the stream.



Our night's camp was established at around 4940m on a flattish area below the Nebuk La, where Kumar and his assistants prepared another stunning dinner.

#### Mon 5/9 Over the Nebuk La

A fairly easy 850m ascent soon had us on top of the next pass, the Nebuk La at 5440m, where we saw a flock of Tibetan sand grouse. A steep descent down a rocky valley followed by the pony train, took us to the next camp below the pastures of Tangyur Phu (4405m), where a pair of sleek, plump marmots provided some entertainment.



#### Tue 6/9 Down to Tangyur

After breakfast the ponies were nowhere to be seen! Tsering and Kunchok took hours to scour the hillsides to round them up from their distant grazing and return them to the camp to receive their loads. Meanwhile we descended to the mani wall and chortens heralding the entrance to the village of Tangyur (3990m). Delightfully set amongst terraced fields of ripe barley and overlooked by its monastery perched above, we waited for the missing string of eight ponies to bring the tents down to set up camp. The village was almost deserted, as most of the occupants were lower down the valley harvesting their barley crops.

Once all ponies were present, their shoes were checked and they were fed on newly purchased barley straw as the grazing close to the village was non-existent. Several clearly had a taste for the grain and six had to be extracted from an adjacent field in the morning much to the dismay of its owner.

#### Wed 7/9 Over the Kyema La

We left Tangyur passing more villagers cutting their barley with sickles and gathering it into stooks to dry in the sun. It was an odd juxtaposition to see government issued solar panels on the flat roofed stone houses, with their piles of dung drying for winter fuel, with tightly corralled goats and sheep, a scene little changed from medieval times.

After a hot, dusty three hour climb from the camp we gained the cairned top of the Kyema La (4590m) and saw Kyema village on the other side of a deep ravine. After lunch, this village was soon reached and we descended a spectacular gorge cut through glacial conglomerate moraine to reach Khyungru, where we camped beside the stream in a lush shady willow grove at 3460m.

The murmuring of the stream in the small hours was disturbed by a rather more acute cry as Albert's kidney stones made themselves painfully felt. Fortunately Jane had the appropriate analgesia in the medical kit and competently administered it, providing rapid pain relief.

#### Thu 8/9 Along the Shyok Valley to Khalsar

After breakfast a party was despatched to commandeer a jeep to take Albert and Jane closer to the foot of the Khardung pass, in case an urgent medical evacuation to Leh was needed. Following their departure, our now leaderless party descended to the wide stony Shyok river valley along a newly constructed road. There we turned northwest and began the eleven-mile hike along the highway in the baking heat of the desert.

Whilst opposite the green oasis of Rongdu village, some jeeps were sighted in the distant haze - was it a hallucination or just a mirage? Fortunately real, they had been despatched to collect us. The planned campsite at Ose had insufficient water or grazing for our party and we were soon in Khalsar enjoying a late lunch and a beer under a silk parachute canopy.

The planned rafting trip had to be abandoned because of low water conditions in the liquid-cement-like Shyok river. We camped in a grassy field in Khalsar, where we met our first westerners - three Israeli lads, who were backpacking.

#### Fri 9/9 The Nubra Valley

The jeeps took us further along the Shyok, before turning northwest across a suspension bridge to ascend the Nubra Valley, which drains the Siachen glacier. We stopped at Kyagar (also called Tiggur) where we had one night in the luxury of the Yarab Tso Hotel. Here we caught up with Albert, who was feeling much better in response to Ann's timely nursing care (and the diclofenac!); and Ian and Dorothy.

After taking tea in the flower garden, the jeeps took us to Panamik, the authorised limit of our Inner Line tourist permit. Here we went to inspect the hot springs, where eggs could have been boiled if we had brought them with us!

Variously, we visited the old gompa above Tiggur village, walked up to Samstaling Gompa, explored the village or just chilled out.



Another British party were also staying in the hotel. Relatives of John Jackson, a well known climber and member of the Alpine Club who died recently, had decided to visit Ladakh to scatter his ashes. Subsequently, John Jackson, Jnr attended our Annual Dinner as Albert's guest.

#### Sat 10/9 Ladakh Festival Caravan

Mid-morning saw us back at Panamik where the final part of the Ladakh festival was to start - a caravan journey down the Nubra to commemorate the journeys of the historical travellers along the silk route from Yarkand (now in China), discontinued after the Sino-Indian war. The event was a much smaller affair than the extravaganza in Leh and had the more intimate atmosphere of a village carnival. The local beauties performed their graceful dances in traditional dress to the playing of clarinets and vibrant drum beats. Cups of very palatable chang were handed out to refresh the watching locals and tourists alike!

After lunch, we visited Samstaling Gompa and were taken round several inner temples, with their colourful wall paintings and ornate statuary, followed by taking tea and biscuits with a senior monk.

The jeeps took us back down to the Shyok and west to the small scruffy town of Deskit and onto the village of Hundar, where we rejoined our trekking crew. Ian and Dorothy departed for Srinagar and a houseboat on the peaceful waters of Dal Lake.

#### Sun 11/9 Up to Skarchen and Gogma

We left Hundar and hiked south on a new road still being constructed up the valley towards the higher villages. We crossed the river on a cantilevered bridge and up an increasingly impressive canyon. A

switchback trail led high above the river and we later watched anxiously as the laden ponies were encouraged over difficult exposed sections, where a slip would have been disastrous. Fortunately they were all sure footed and arrived at our lunch stop at the shepherds' shelters at Skarchen.



Crossing the river again we soon reached our camp sited outside Gogma village, where the river divided. We would firstly ascend the Palzampiu river to access our mountaineering objectives, before returning later to traverse the Thanglasgo stream to reach the Lasirmou La.

#### Mon 12/9 Up the Palzampiu River

We walked up the river valley sometimes in the canyon cut through old moraines and sometimes on the canyon's edge to the summer pastures of Palzampiu Dok at about 4600m, where our camp was established, shared with the local shepherds, their friendly dog and a large flock of sheep and long haired goats.



Several members ascended a rocky granite ridge, scrambling up various outcrops to prospect possible routes to the mountains above. A formidable innominate and unclimbed 6000m peak, whose steep north face presented us with a rebarbative prospect, dominated the view to the south. A satellite snow capped peak at the base of its north east ridge looked more feasible, either by continuing up our rocky ridge or by an adjacent snow gully and was taken to be Dawa peak.

Further away and to the south west of the 6000m peak, was a sinuous glacier leading to another triangular snow peak. Due west on the other side of the Palzampiu valley was Ajunglung (6020m), climbed in 2004 by a French party by a mixed route. The views back down the valley were dominated by Saser Kangri (7670m/25,165ft) Ladakh's highest mountain.

#### Tue 13/9 High Camp

Cloudy skies oversaw our departure from camp as we picked our way due south up a side valley to establish our high camp in a blizzard at about 5000m. The unnamed granite peak above us disappeared into the clouds.

After the ponies arrived, camp was set up and a late lunch prepared. Once the snow had stopped, the couple of hours before darkness were spent exploring the start of routes to the snow gully and to the glacier snout. Over dinner, it was decided to climb the nearer of the two snow mountains, which we thought was Dawa peak and we all retired early.

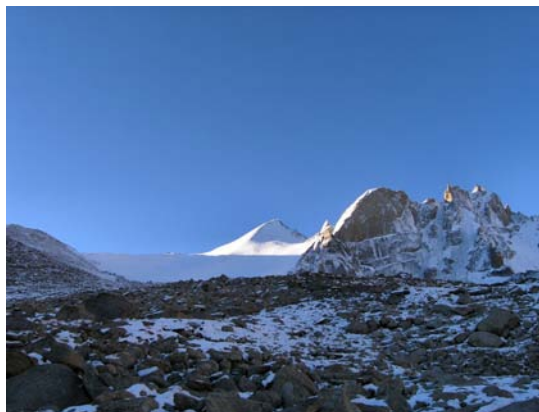


#### Wed 14/9 Ascent of Samgil Peak



The weather improved to its usual blue sky and after a substantial breakfast, the climbing party set off from the camp and picked their way up the steep stony slopes to the snow tongue noted the previous day. Three ropes were eventually formed (1: Sangay, Mick, Chris, George, Richard and Arthur; 2: Ang Dame, Jane, Frank, David and Peter; 3: Motup, Ann, Albert and Paul) and all finally made it to the summit, where a cairn was erected at (5811m/19066ft). The view over to the adjacent north wall and unremittingly steep ice gullies of the unclimbed peak was still intimidating.

On the descent, we met up with the Jackson party who had established their high camp just above ours. Their Nepali Sirdar told us that we had just climbed Samgil peak, named after the Sherpa who made the first ascent. He identified Dawa peak, which had also been climbed by a Sherpa, as the peak above the twisting glacier at the end of the valley.



SAMGIL PEAK

#### Thu 15/9 Ascent of Dawa Peak

The alarm went off at 0200 and lips were scalded on the hot tea thrust under three flysheets. We - Mick, Chris and Richard - blinked sleep away over breakfast in the chilly dining tent, before accompanying Sangay and Ang Dame out into the cold starlit night at 0300. We climbed up to the terminal moraine and picked our way up the granite boulder slope onto the bare glacier snout, leading to the snow slopes above. We fixed traction control devices and roped up, we made steady progress uphill as the dawn broke into a cloudless blue sky.



The warmth of the sun was welcomed as we continued to crampon upwards towards Dawa Peak (5875m), summiting uneventfully at about 0800. The views were stunning, from the Saser Kangri peaks looming above the distant Nubra valley, to the brown granite spires and snow capped peaks in the Ladakh range. In high spirits, we retraced our steps and stopped at the Jackson's camp for lunch at midday (they were ascending Samgil Peak and our encampment was now on the ponies' backs to be re-erected at the summer grazing site of Palzampiu Dok). Three hours later we joined the rest of the party at camp for a celebratory beer and a welcome rest.

#### Fri 16/9 Descent to Hundar Dok

Leaving the two shepherds and their dog guarding the communal flock of 300 goats and 50 sheep belonging to the Hundar villagers, we began our descent. We returned down the Palzampiu river back to Gogma, where we turned south into the Thanglasgo valley to follow the river up to the pastoral village of Hundar Dok, where a lesson in the open air was underway for the children at the primary school.

Passing the confluence with the Sniamo river, which drains another wild valley with unclimbed 5-6000m peaks to the south-west, we followed the sparkling stream through increasingly beautiful scenery to an idyllic riverside camp at Tsopu Cse.



#### Sat 17/9 Up the Thanglasgo River

The fine weather continued as we ascended the lovely unspoilt alpine valley to gain the approach to the Lasirmou pass across the Ladakh range, which would return us to the Indus valley, camping by the river at about 4960m.

#### Sun 18/9 Over the Lasirmou La

We made an early start under now cloudy skies, which developed into snow showers as we ascended lengthy moraine fields before gaining the snow slopes leading to the prayer flagged cairns at 5550m. A steep stony descent down the moraines on the other side was made, in weather more suited to Scotland.

After lunch in a rough stone shelter, Chris, George and Mick survived a confrontation with a belligerent one-horned yak, which, after pawing the ground, thankfully deflected his charge in the face of combined shouts and a few well-aimed stones!

Our final camp was established at the road head at Morabuk pastures, above the village of Phiang. Balloons were inflated, flags unfurled and the dinner tent readied for the final festivities. The trekking crew had challenged the YRC to an after-dinner singing competition and Arthur led our rehearsals. Kumar and his team pulled out all the stops and provided a tremendous farewell dinner, thoroughly deserving our unanimous praise for the consistently good food, the best any of us had ever eaten on a Himalayan trek.

After dinner, and quite a few beers later, the singing began. A rousing Ilkley Moor Baht 'at was countered by an equally rousing Rasem Kili (now almost the Nepali national anthem) and so on into the night, before Motup decided it was too close to call and judged it a draw.

#### Mon 19/9 Return to Leh

After breakfast we all posed for the team photographs and presented each member of the trekking crew and the ponymen with a token of our deep appreciation for their unstinting efforts on our behalf. The gear was loaded into jeeps and we said our goodbyes.

Back in Leh, George, Paul, Richard and Mick had decided to tackle the descent from the Khardung La by mountain bike and had negotiated a lift up to the high point. The pass has time-bound access restrictions to allow transit of military convoys. Fettleing the brakes on all the bikes delayed us and we were somewhat late for the access cut-off at 1100. We were stopped by the military at the checkpoint of South Pullu 25km from Leh, still shy of the summit. Still, the descent from there to the capital was an excellent downhill ride.

#### Tue 20/9 Dehli and on to Agra

The early morning flight took us back over Zaskar and delivered us to the humid hubbub of Dehli and a coach whisked us off to Agra, for a tour of the Red Fort before dinner and a party with Agra's hoteliers.

#### Wed 21/9 Agra to Dehli

Sunrise saw us admiring the splendour of the Taj Mahal, still impressive despite the hype. We then returned to Dehli for our farewell dinner with Motup and his family, before a late flight returned us overnight to Europe.

#### POSTSCRIPT

The scenes of destruction following the earthquake in Pakistani Kashmir resonated with many members, who could understand only too well the consequences for the survivors in the hill villages. We heard by e-mail that the tremors had not been felt in Ladakh and that the areas we visited were thankfully unaffected.

Mick Borroff.

## RAFTING ON THE INDUS

On the 31st of August, after a leisurly breakfast we were driven down to the banks of the Indus river at Fey, where we arrived at 10:00. After donning lifejackets and helmets, which fitted snugly over baseball caps gifted from Motup of Rimo Expeditions, our "need to know" trek advisers, we had a quick lesson on the commands that we could expect including "DOWN" which meant getting off the gun'le (gunwhale) into the bottom of the raft as the raft is about to drop into a hole in the river. All the cox'ns were from Nepal and would be going home in a couple of weeks at the end of the season.

We embarked at 10:30 and set off. Being in the last boat with the International set, it was interesting to observe the juvenile antics going on between boats one and two. Obviously discipline was at a premium.



However that aside, all the grade 2 "rapids" were easily negotiated. We stopped for a pee and camera shoot after 2 hours and then proceeded on to the confluence of the Indus and the Zanskar river which seemed to be bigger and faster than the Indus whose name the combined rivers took. (The Indus comes out to sea just south of Karachi). Not long after this we came ashore near the village of NIMU and were served an excellent hot lunch. Subsequently all the meals were of this high standard. From there we were driven back to LEH and the hotel.

There was very little vegetation on the scree slopes and rocky mountains beside the river, not even close by the water. Sometimes scrubby trees and then way up at the top of the scree a bright green dot of vegetation. The odd pair of pigeons were seen and wagtails were quite common, also several deer like animals. Otherwise it was mountains of moraine that the river had cut through and high craggy peaks of mainly red/brown stratified slates. In places these reds near the river appeared to be shiny and smooth as though they had been wax and heated and left to cool or could even have been water worn. I was informed by one of the Indian ladies in our boat that this shininess was mica in the rock.

The water was not too cold as some of the party took the chance of a dip, but before the confluence. The Zanskar was much colder. It was a thoroughly satisfying day and a good training for the trip that we should have had on the Shyok, which was cancelled because of low water. When we got to the Shyok the water looked like liquid cement so would not have been very pleasant to play in.

Crew of boat 1: George Burfitt, Albert Chapman, Mick Borroff, Dace Hicks, Richard Dover, Paul Dover, Chris Hilton and Arthur Salmon.

Crew of boat 2: Frank Wilkinson, Jane Butler, Ann Luck and others.

Crew of boat 3: Ian Crowther, Peter Hodge, 3 Indian ladies, 1 Israeli guy and 2 Irish girls.  
Dorothy stayed ashore.

Peter Hodge

## CYCLING DOWN THE KHARDUNG LA (19.09.05)

Not content with 13 days trekking, 17 nights under canvas and a days rafting four members of the group, namely Mick, Chris, Paul and Richard, decided they needed one final new experience. As the Khardung La (5602m) is the world's highest road pass and descends to Leh we requested that we ought to be taken to the top of the pass by motor vehicle in order to cycle the 43 km back to Leh, a descent of 2100m (~6900 ft). Motup, M.D. of Rimo Expeditions, arranged for us to be picked up from our final camp early in order that we could return to Leh, pick up some bikes and pass through the control gates halfway up the pass before it was closed to public access.

Conscious of the descent ahead of us, we all required some adjustment to the cycles we were offered back in Leh. Mike took the prize by totally rejecting his first bike and needed a total brake overhaul and a replacement wheel for his second. Tying four bikes onto the roof of the Jeep type vehicle with no cycle rack also proved to be a tricky operation. Eventually the intrepid four supported by Frank left Leh for the ascent of the pass. The first problem we encountered was just out of Leh when the driver didn't have the correct paperwork. Negotiation and gesticulation eventually bore fruit and we were allowed to continue. The temperature decreased significantly as we climbed and on reaching the control gate at South Pula we had to wait for a lorry loaded with road workers to come in front of us. Unfortunately this marked the end of public access to the higher pass and we were unable to go any further. The road was closed for maintenance. We were at a mere 4850m and 24 km from Leh, thus missing out on the top 10km of unmade road.

Undaunted, we unloaded the bikes and added a few layers of clothing before Frank photographed the group and waved us off.

The concerns over braking efficiency back at Leh proved to have been unfounded. The gradient was gentle at an average of 1 in 20 and at times it was necessary to actually pedal, brakes only being necessary when entering the many hairpin bends. Several stops were made to photograph the splendid views of the Indus valley and the greenery of the Fuchu Chu surrounding Leh.

Paul and Richard decided a little more adventure was required and took to a more direct descent using tracks and open ground, thus reducing the overall distance considerably. Probably the trickiest part of the ride was navigating from the outskirts of Leh back to the Hotel, but this was accomplished by all and we made it back to base in time for lunch.

Not quite what we had envisaged, but nevertheless a very pleasant morning's exercise.

Richard Dover.

## LADAKHI PEOPLE AND CULTURE

The climate of Ladakh is cold and inhospitable, unlike the inhabitants! Wrinkled faces with sunny smiles greet you everywhere with a nod of the head and the greeting 'Jhuley'. Ladakhis are renowned for their unrestrained hospitality that people on the trip were to experience time and time again.

The people of Ladakh are hardy and tough like the rugged mountains which surround their homes and yet very soft and plain at heart. With round faces, short noses, and chinky eyes they resemble the people of Tibet and central Asia. The original population is believed to have been the Dards, an Indo-Aryan race from further down the Indus. But over the years, a huge influx from Tibet overwhelmed the culture of the Dards and obliterated their racial characteristics. In eastern and central Ladakh, today's population seems to be mostly of Tibetan origin. Further west, in and around Kargil, there is much in the people's appearance that suggests a mixed origin. The exception to this generalization is the "Arghon", a community of Muslims in Leh, the descendants of marriages between local women and Kashmiri or Central Asian merchants.

Buddhism reached Tibet from India via Ladakh and there are ancient Buddhist rock engravings all over the region, even in areas like Drass and the lower Suru valley, which today are inhabited by an exclusively Muslim population. The approach to a Buddhist Village is invariably marked by 'Mani' walls, which are chest-high structures faced with engraved stones bearing the mantra "Om Mane Padme Hum". Many villages are crowned with a Gompa or monastery, which may be anything from an imposing complex of temples, prayer halls and monks' dwellings, to a tiny hermitage housing a single image and home to a solitary Lama.

Islam too came from the west. A peaceful penetration of the Shia sect spearheaded by missionaries, its success was guaranteed by the early conversion of the sub-rulers of Drass, Kargil and the Suru Valley. In these areas, Mani walls and Chorten are replaced by mosques, often small unpretentious buildings, or Imambaras, imposing structures in the Islamic style, surmounted by domes of sheet metal that gleam cheerfully in the sun. In the Leh area women of both the communities, Buddhist and Muslim, enjoy a greater freedom than other parts of the region. They not only work in the house and field, but also do business and interact freely with men other than their own relations. In Kargil and its adjoining regions on the other hand, it is only in the last few years that women are merging from semi-seclusion and taking jobs other than traditional ones like farming and house-keeping.

Monastic and other religious festivals, many of which fall in winter, provide the excuse for convivial gatherings. All over the region, summer pastimes are archery and polo. Among the Buddhists, these often develop into open-air parties accompanied by dance and song, at which Chang, the local brew made from fermented barley, flows freely. The most important element is the rich oral literature of songs and poems for every occasion, as well as local versions of the Kesar Saga, the Tibetan national epic. This literature is common to both Buddhists and Muslims.

Ceremonial and public events are accompanied by the characteristic music of Surna and Daman (Oboe and drum), originally introduced into Ladakh from Muslim Baltistan, but now played only by Buddhist musicians known as Mons. The first year of childbirth is marked by celebrations at different intervals of time, beginning with a function held after 15 days, then after one month, and then again at the end of year. All relatives, neighbours and friends are invited and served with Tsampa, butter and sugar, along with tea by the family into which the child is born. There is a mix of music and dance, joy and laughter in the air whenever a marriage is held. The first day is spent in feasting at the bride's house, the second at the groom's place. After the wedding, the bride goes to live in the house of the bridegroom. Boys are usually married or promised for marriage at about 16 and girls at about 12. To make a proposal, a relative of the boy goes to the house of the girl and gives a ring together with presents of butter, tea and Chang. If the gifts are accepted then the marriage follows some months later. The boy offers a necklace and clothes to the girl. The parents of the girl give the couple clothes, animals and land if they are rich. These gifts are known as a Raqtqaq or dowry.

When the father of the family dies, his place is taken by the eldest brother. The other brothers must obey the eldest brother. All inheritance of the family goes to the eldest brother and then to the next brother when he dies. If the family consists of all girls, then the father will bring the husband of the eldest daughter into the house and all land stays in the daughter's name and passes to her first son. Both sets of parents must accept the proposal of the boy for the girl. Usually the marriage is set by both sets of parents, who will choose a suitable partner for their child on the basis of manner, health and ability to earn income and look after a house.

Polo and archery are the two favourite pastimes. In Leh, and many of the villages, archery festivals are held during the summer months, with a lot of fun and fanfare. Different teams from surrounding villages compete with each other in these archery festivals, and the shooting takes place according to strict etiquette, to the accompaniment of the music of surna and daman. As important as the archery are the interludes of dancing and other entertainment. Chang, the local barley beer, flows freely, but there is rarely any rowdiness. Unlike the international game, Polo in Ladakh is not exclusively for the rich. Traditionally, almost every village had its polo ground. Probably introduced into Ladakh in the mid-17th century by King Sengge Namgyal, Polo played here differs in many respects from the international game. Here, each team consists of six players, and the game lasts for an hour with a ten minute break. Notwithstanding the altitude, the hardy local ponies, the best of which come from Zanskar, scarcely seem to suffer, though play can be fast and furious. Each goal is greeted by a burst of music from surna and daman; and the players often show extraordinary skill. For example, when starting play after a goal the scorer gallops up to midfield holding the ball and mallet in the right hand, and throws the ball, hitting it in the same movement towards the opposite goal. Unfortunately, we weren't lucky enough to see a polo match, but we did see some of the players and their horses at the festival in Leh.

The whole trip was a very special experience. I didn't know what to expect and didn't have any expectations. I felt very privileged to be able to go and will treasure my memories forever.

Jane Butler

## AGRICULTURE AND FOOD PRODUCTION

The approach to Leh by air passes over the Indus valley and reveals an extremely arid climate giving the impression of a moonscape, only land along the riverbanks looked to have any vegetation. In fact, the annual rainfall in Leh is 114 mm, approximately 25% of that in the driest parts of England.

### CROP PRODUCTION

When we took our first walk round Leh it was very surprising to see the wide range of high quality fruit and vegetables on sale by local women squatting along the kerbs of the high-street and from market stalls. These included apricots, the main local tree-fruit and the wide range of familiar vegetables

including fresh peas, brassicas notably cauliflower, potatoes and carrots. All appeared to be very healthy and free from the problem pests and diseases commonly found in British produce unless appropriate control measures are taken. This aspect was not surprising in view of the dry climate, high altitude (3500m-11,500 ft) and complete isolation from any other crop production areas. However, it posed a big question in my mind as to where they might be grown in such an arid climate? All was revealed when we walked up the valley above the town two days later, a range of cereal, forage and vegetable crops were being grown on small plots with the aid of surface irrigation.

The water comes from the rivers and streams flowing from the snowfields. These are dammed and the water diverted to the field or crop where it was most required. This is the essential feature of crop production throughout the area of our visit. In the high mountain valleys where we trekked, much of the crop production was on plateaux often hundreds of metres above the valley floor. These involved bringing water from the rivers and streams in aqueducts for long distances contouring along the mountainside.

The lower Nubra valley around Tiggur at around 3000m (10,000 ft) is a wide flood plain with more fertile areas interspersed with rocky moraines. This enables a wider range of crops to be grown although vegetables were only seen in the hotel garden. In the nearby fields, wheat seemed to be the dominant cereal and the presence of a few ubiquitous wild oat plants was notable, suggesting that seed is imported from more productive arable regions. The cereal crops were sown in April/May and were being harvested during our tour by family or village groups using short handled sickles, although many of the plants appeared to be torn up with the roots still attached. The cut/pulled stems were very neatly laid in rows base-up to dry. This communal activity was often signalled by a chorus of happy chanting. After drying in the field, the crops were carried home in bundles on peoples backs, usually so large, that from behind only the lower legs and feet were showing. The grain was typically threshed in small 'village' threshing yards in late September. Mustard crops were only seen in Tiggur, it had been harvested and was being winnowed, ineffectively, in the field by an elderly couple.

Surprisingly, considering its origin is in the high Andes, potatoes were not widely grown and only seen around Leh and Tiggur. Here, the crops were being de-foliated, again by sickle, and the haulm carried home presumably for livestock feed, although this is poisonous in the fresh state. The crops appeared free from the notable haulm diseases, potato blight and viruses no doubt due to the severe winter climate and crop isolation. They are grown on the flat rather than in ridges as here. More importantly for us, when cooked they were delicious!

Legume crops such as sainfoin provided the forage for livestock. This had mostly been harvested by early September and was stored around the edge of the buildings above the walls, a common characteristic in all the rural villages. These crops are deep rooted thereby more drought tolerant and enrich the soil by fixing nitrogen and hence increase the soil fertility for following cereal crops.

At higher elevations, above about 3500m (11550 ft), the dominant crop was a 6-rowed barley, which at the highest elevations in the summer villages was harvested green due to the summer being too short for it to ripen. In such situations, it then had to be carried, often long distances, on yaks to the winter village.

On our return to Leh above the Indus valley, we passed a small thresher, the only agricultural machinery seen in Ladakh.

## LIVESTOCK

In common with other areas of India, cattle commonly wandered round the town of Leh, grazing on waste and rubbish along the streets; strangely, their faeces were rarely encountered!

On the outskirts of Leh, I visited a Government cattle-breeding centre, more a demonstration farm to show good breeding and husbandry practice. My visit coincided with that of the local government vet who was also the cattle inseminator and who was collecting semen straws for use with local herds. I learned that the preferred milk cows are a 3-way cross based on a first-cross indigenous cow mated to a Jersey or Holstein bull, the farm had small herds of both crosses. On 1<sup>st</sup> September, 17 cows in milk produced 70 litres and was keenly sought by local people. It was ladled out from buckets and carried away

in all types of containers; they had sold out by 07.30. The cows were fed a ration of Sainfoin hay and cereals. By contrast, heifers were seen eating dried leaves from coppiced trees similar to poplar in the village above Leh.

Cattle are crossed with Yak to cope with the harsher climate at higher altitudes. The resulting hybrids females are called Dzomo, which are fertile and males are Dzo, but are infertile. They are robust hardy animals and the Dzo are used for draft tasks.

Very few cattle were seen in the Nubra valley although crops of sainfoin had been harvested, suggesting that most cattle were housed. At higher altitudes a number of small 'village' herds were seen grazing on extremely modest vegetation. These were typically a mixture of cattle, yak- hybrids, mules and donkeys and herded by groups of villagers. Yak were only seen above 4,000m (13,200 ft) where they were herded by families living in temporary summer camps.

In the upper Palzampiu Tokpo, the site of our base camp, a 'village flock' of around 1000 sheep and 300 goats grazed from April to late September. These came from a village below Hundar in the Shyok valley. The shepherds, of whom there were about four at a time, worked on a 15-day rota. Their 'accommodation' was a polythene sheet secured to four stone walls. This contrasted with the herders in Muglib and Changtung, the sites of our first and second camps, where families lived under 'parachute tents'. Each night, all herded livestock were brought in to small compounds adjacent to the shepherd's accommodation. In addition to the herding dogs, the shepherds used slings to propel stones towards the animals to move them on. Feed was exceedingly sparse and so the flocks covered vast areas to sustain themselves.

## DELHI TO AGRA

Agra is on the river Jumna and our route followed this wide valley near the western boundary of Uttar Pradesh. Land use is primarily for crop production but flocks of sheep and herds of cattle were in evidence, usually walking down the dual carriageway-in the wrong direction! The crops included sugar cane in the drier areas with rice on the lower areas capable of being flooded. There was also evidence of banana and cotton production. Field cultivations were mechanised although there were few activities at the time of our visit. There were numerous small thatched round-houses dotted throughout the landscape but it was not clear whether these were family accommodation or used for other purposes.

The visit provided an interesting insight into the rural lifestyles. The consistent feature was their cheerful nature.

Paul Dover

## LADAKH WILDLIFE

Newcomers to Ladakh may be excused for thinking that they were arriving in a cold desert with rugged mountains and serrated ridges running down to flat glacier-fed river valleys. In fact, the members of the YRC trip to this remote part of the Indian Himalayas were able to observe interesting animals, birds and flowers.

A white-water rafting trip on the River Indus provided the means to approach a small herd of antelopes, possibly chiru, an endangered animal hunted for the fine wool from its underbelly used to make shahtoosh, a soft woollen fibre used for shawls and scarves. On another occasion a bharal, or blue sheep, ran straight towards our camp and closely skirted our tents before standing on a small hill behind us outlined against the sky. We also observed marmots and other small rodents.

We saw golden eagles, lammergeyer vultures and buzzards. Black kites, which we observed in their hundreds over Delhi, could be seen over most villages and towns. Hoopoe, black redstarts and white-browed wagtails kept the twitchers among us on our toes.

September is not the best month to spot wild flowers in such an arid landscape, but on the northern slopes of the high passes we crossed, winter was just releasing its grip and summer flowers were making the most of the short growing season.

Edelweiss were quite common, as were gentians with long striped trumpets. Hairy bluebell flowers poked through snow patches, while ground-hugging yellow star-shaped flowers and vivid red sedum clumps were to be found near rivers. The scent of herbs crushed underfoot by our passing will long be remembered.

Are yaks domesticated tame creatures? Three of our group would contest this having been attacked on the descent from our last pass by a grumpy, shaggy long-horned juggernaut.

We didn't see a snow leopard, but Ladakh proved to be anything but a sterile desert.

David Hick

## REFLECTIONS ON THE TREK

'God made Ladakh and we connect it to rest of the world' or so the road maker's sign would have us believe. This I now believe. Just as I now believe that it is possible to experience heat exposure in desert temperatures above 30°C one day and to be snow bound the next. Perhaps I am even beginning to believe that a female can thrive in the all male society that is the YRC. Such was the emotional impact of India. Everyone should have the opportunity to trek the Himalaya at least once in their lifetime. I was fortunate to be making my 6<sup>th</sup> journey to this phenomenal range. This particular trip was to be one of the most poignant as it followed a 5 year absence from the Indian sub-continent. It was to provide me with the peace I had sought since the untimely death of my mother last year. I left feeling comfortable in the solace I gained from tying a khata, as a memorial to her, around the newly built cairn on the top of our 6,000m peak. I thank my YRC companions for this, and by way of recompense promise never to become the first female to request membership of the club - long may it remain male!

From the luxury of the Imperial Hotel in Delhi to the discomfort of the mess tent floor at advanced base camp, the extreme contrasts of this experience will live long in my memory. Whilst the generosity and smiles of the people we met reminded me of why I needed to keep returning to this part of the world, the majesty of the scenery and the beauty of its monuments created a separate powerful attraction. So, thank you Albert for inviting me to join you on this journey. Long may your kidneys, knees and teeth survive!

Ann Luck

Now a septuagenarian novice-trekker, I joined the YRC in 1957, simply because it facilitated my desire to go potholing; a desire I cannot fully explain, nor can I explain why I took to walking and climbing, but throughout my life these activities have been a vital safety valve, and really an escape from normal life. Now that I am retired and the routine of work has been removed, I often find myself searching for the elusive meaning to life, and getting no answer. However, I feel one is closer to the answer in the wilderness than in a supermarket.

There I was, living in a world that had changed and not to my liking, unable to do anything about it and keeping sane principally on a one-day-per-week, longish, walk in Calderdale, when the opportunity to go trekking in the Himalayas came up. My activities in the YRC have extended to camping meets in Scotland, a few trips to the Alps and one or two high level camps, but no day-after-day walking in far off places. My wife made the decision; I had to go.

I am writing this several months after the trip and, as my memory is certainly failing, my impressions, I am sure, have lost their immediate effect.

Albert was running the trip and tried to give guidance on health, equipment etc., but there is nothing like experience. I got the usual injections, and bought malaria pills but fell foul of the NHS in so far as my first visit resulted in my being told I was too early, and my last in being too late. Thus I went without protection from Hepatitis B or Rabies. I did not suffer health wise. Yes, I had the mild runs, some sunburn, due to forgetting my lips, but no dehydration problems to my knowledge. I bought some new gear but the only items I really needed were an adequate sleeping bag, and a down jacket for the cold.

Overall, walking or climbing wise, the trip was in a way, nothing new. It was cold at night - it is in Glen Etive in February, the sun was strong - it is in the Alps, but there was the continuous altitude effect. I must have acclimatised to some degree, but shortness of breath with exercise was always there. I had some other altitude affects, but nothing severe. Perhaps I didn't sleep as well as normal and I had some headache, but the worst night was in the hotel in Ladakh where the power was turned off. I couldn't find a light and had no idea of the time.

Ladakh is classed as an arctic desert. It was pleasant to have a low risk of rain, but we did have two days of snow; not unlike Scotland in winter. The terrain is impressive with deep gorges cut through mile thick moraine debris. Access is on foot or horse back, although roads are being built in the most amazing places. The impression of being in a wilderness, miles from anywhere, was not severe. We would walk several hours in a barren valley and then turn a corner and see a young child on his or her way somewhere. We had seen almost nothing all day and then 500 sheep and goats were herded by. We were trekking, rather than mountaineering and so essentially it was like climbing to an Alpine hut day after day, but without the problem of carrying your gear.

This was the most amazing part of the holiday. It was a time warp. We were looked after by our Sherpas to the extent of having tea in bed, hot water for washing (-5C outside), no chores of any kind and were fed in regal style. We had to keep to a schedule. We got out of bed and washed, dressed, and packed all our gear, other than that required during the day, and breakfast was ready. We set off walking and the ponies were loaded and passed us before lunch. We had a hot lunch and then walked for the afternoon, arriving at camp to find it already erected and a hot drink waiting. This highlighted the other aspect of the trip.

We, from the rich west, were able at reasonable cost to travel half way around the world, and be pampered by virtue of the vagaries of the world economy. We were able to dine in such a way as to waste more than the locals survived on, and the population density and poverty we saw in old Delhi, and while motoring to Agra could not be comprehended and had to be pushed to the back of one's mind and ignored. But this is part of the big question and should not be ignored.

The trip was a memorable experience, which I hope time will allow me to repeat. The hardships we survived, including the toil of going uphill at high altitude, were taken stalwartly. A month spent in the company of helpful friends, and friendly helpers. An experience I must certainly try to repeat.

Frank Wilkinson.



SUNSET ON  
INNOMINATE PEAK  
(660m)

TASHI NAMGAL  
FORT  
ABOVE  
LEH

