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India's Best Kept Secret

We are hurtling along the Highest Motorable Road in the World in a beat-up Jeep. The young Ladakhi driver, who seemed so kind and friendly back in the capital city, Leh, is clearly mad. He swings around blind hairpin turns on this single lane road carved out of a mountainside without the customary horn blaring. The almost continuous use of the horn is the way that people drive on these one-lane mountain roads in the high Himalaya without having frequent head-on collisions. Our driver likes the aspect of Himalayan driving custom that requires hurtling along at preposterous speeds, but does not accompany this reckless behavior with anywhere near the requisite amount of horn usage. Himank, the road's authority here, has even painted large signs black letters against a yellow background, on the bare rock walls above us that read, "Horn please."

Immediately to my left and thousands of feet below lies the rocky brown bottom of a ravine. There are only intermittent guardrails. I try to imagine that the window overlooking the precipice is actually a television screen. I breathe deeply and try to let go of my attachment to life. We are among Buddhists, after all. Perhaps our driver gains his cavalier attitude from a firm belief in reincarnation, a belief that I don't share, although I am suddenly reevaluating the possibility.

The beginning of the trip, several hours ago, was jocular, and the five of us, thrown together for just a few days, introduced ourselves. Michael, a heavyset, balding, ever-cheerful Brit, had been the first person to answer the ad I left at the Instyle German Bakery in Leh, requesting travel partners for a jaunt to the remote Nubra Valley. I couldn't afford

the Jeep on my own, and the infrequent bus didn't fit into my other travel plans, so I posted the ad. Soon Samara, a tall, confident Israeli woman in her thirties, and Helga, a rather remote Swiss woman in her fifties, phoned my guest-house. We all met at a travel agency, and a day later we were on the road to the Nubra Valley.

Now we all lapse into silence, partially brought on by terror.

"Well, if we survive, it should be a fantastic view," Michael says suddenly, after a particularly harrowing turn. We were only yards from a head-on collision with an army transport.

"It's not very funny, Michael. We really could die," Helga says in a clipped Swiss German accent.
Silence reigns again. Helga is not the life of the party.

Gradually, miraculously, without one single head-on collision, we wind our way up to the Khardung La pass, the entrance to the Nubra Valley in Ladakh, India. There is a military checkpoint here on the rooftop of the world. While the crazy driver takes our permits and passports to be checked by the Indian Army guys with the big guns, we get out of the cramped Jeep to stretch. Unfortunately, the World's Highest Motorable Pass has been littered with discarded oil drums and heaps of rotting prayer flags.

Spread below us is a view of China and Pakistan, with the tiny finger of India that is the Nubra Valley stuck delicately up the middle. Michael points out the second highest mountain in the world, K-2, over in Pakistan. After a while our driver is still not back, so we visit a small shrine. It is a tiny wooden building full of pictures of every sort of religious teacher imaginable. A candle is burning. I suspect that the army guys are not responsible for this, but begin to wonder, because there does not appear to be anyone else around to take care of the shrine.

Samara has a headache. This is hardly surprising at an altitude of exactly 18,380 feet, as a yellow and black

Himank sign informs us. This is around the same altitude as Everest base camp. We began the day in Ladakh's capital city, Leh, which is at an altitude of about 11,000 feet. Our rapid ascent, 7,000 feet in a matter of hours, is about twice the maximum recommended ascent for one full day, and it has not given us time to acclimate. There is no other option when you travel on the Highest Motorable Road in the World, because there is nowhere to stay between the outskirts of Leh on one side of the pass and the Nubra Valley on the other side. As it is, Samara will just have to hope her headache dissipates when we rapidly descend into the valley below us.

I cannot believe that I am not dreaming. Coming into this place from the pass is like finding a hidden fertile valley on the moon. The floor of the valley is brilliant green, in sharp contrast to the many browns of the mountainsides and their snow-capped white peaks. The sky is a brilliant blue with wispy white clouds. It almost never rains here. All the houses are made of mud brick, and the crops are irrigated with glacial streams that flow down from the tops of the imposing snow-capped mountains that are ever-present in Ladakh.

When we arrive in Diskit, our destination for the day, it is late afternoon, and the main guesthouse in town is full. Helga and Samara take the last available room. Our driver confers with the guesthouse proprietor in Ladakhi and then takes Michael and me to a small white house. We go through a lopsided gate that protects the vegetable garden and into the kitchen.

A small woman in a colorfully embroidered black robe greets us. This is her home, and she lets out a few rooms when there is some demand. It is unclear to me if these are usually rooms that her family members use and she is just doing us a favor, or if she usually lets them out. Michael and I take a room with two twin beds. The sheets are fairly fresh and have colorful flower patterns on them. I

imagine two young girls telling secrets in the dark on a cold winter's night, long after the tourists are gone. We drop our bags on the floor, discuss the price of the room and what we want for breakfast with our hostess, meet her cheerful young son who tries out his English on us, and set off for the near-by town of Hunder in the Jeep.

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At 4 a.m. we find out that our guesthouse is right next to the mosque. A small percentage of Ladakhis are Muslim. Although there are not Muslims in every village, there must be quite a few here in Diskit, based on the intense volume of the call to prayer. After the muezzin finishes rousing the faithful, I fall back to sleep for a few more hours. When the sun rises, we get up and have breakfast. I drink the sweet Indian-style milk tea with spices and nibble on some delicious homemade biscuits. Our hostess cooks these fresh for us in her wood-burning stove. We meet a young Frenchman who came to Diskit by the local bus. We ask him if he has seen any of the camels in the dunes, since he has been here a few days, but he has not. We wonder aloud if the camels really exist, but our hostess assures us that they do.

"Good morning," her young son says, appearing from the back of the house, ready for school.

"Good morning," we all say.

"Where are you from?" he asks us, just as he did yesterday afternoon.

"America," I say.

"Britain," Michael says.

"You have already asked me that, every day," the French guy says.

The boy grabs a biscuit, having exhausted what is apparently his entire stock of English on us, and races out the door to school.

We ask our hostess about the wintertime in the valley. She speaks very good English and tells us that it is difficult to get out in the winter, but usually the family hitches a ride

on an army convoy before the snow has completely blocked the pass. They fly to Delhi from Leh, using the proceeds from the room rentals, and then they spend a few months going on pilgrimages to Buddhist sacred sites. In the same way, with tourist money, she has sent several of her children to school in Delhi and Jammu.

"Do you think they'll come back to live here?" I ask her.

"No, they like the city life. They want to get good job, live in Delhi, maybe Leh," she says, sighing. "No one to help with the farm now. I don't know who will take care of the farm many years from now."

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Today we drive to Sumur, where we stop at the Stakray Guest House. Samara and Helga stick around long enough to secure a room, and then they leave for the hot springs to the north for the afternoon. Once again, Michael and I are left without lodgings. The owner of the guesthouse, a very cheerful man in his late forties, who is also the headman of the village, offers to let us stay in one of the eating rooms. We will have to sleep head to toe, or perhaps toe to toe, on carpets over thin cushions along the wall. This is a typical Ladakhi- or Tibetan-style set-up, and the mats are often used both as seats and beds, especially in the winter when everyone wants to sleep around the stove. We agree. Nothing seems nearly as serious now that I have gotten over my attachment to life, thanks to our insane Jeep driver. Not that I don't treasure every minute, since I could easily die on the road back tomorrow. I accept this and the room-less sleeping mat situation with equanimity, and Michael and I set off in search of a famous local monastery, the Samstem Ling Gompa, on foot.

It is much faster, the headman tells us, to take the footpath up through the village rather than the road. This is the first large Ladakhi village I have walked around. Small dirt paths intersect with the irrigation streams at regular

intervals. There are many orchards and small fields of wheat and barley. High mud walls, built mainly to keep the animals in at night, surround the houses. The paths seem almost like a walled maze in the densely populated areas.

There are many intersections, and we stop frequently to ask for directions. Most people recognize the words "Samstem Ling Gompa" and point in one direction or another. Every few minutes we run into someone on the path, and we notice, for the first time since arriving in Ladakh, that people almost invariably raise their hand so that their thumb is on a level with their forehead, and their fingers are together and say "Joo-lay" whenever we walk past. While asking a young woman with a basket full of sticks on her back for directions, we also ask her about the hand-Joo-lay thing. "It's just like hello," she says. "Or good-bye, or how are you, or thank you," she adds.

"So what do we say in return?" Michael asks.

"Just say 'Joo-lay,'" she smiles.

"Thanks," we say.

"Joo-lay," she says, raising her hand to her forehead, and we part ways.

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After about an hour, mostly uphill, we arrive at the Samstem Ling Gompa. The courtyard is covered in intricate sand paintings. We walk around them, examining them from various angles. A monk appears while we are doing this. A couple of German tourists also show up.

"You want to see Buddha?" the monk asks.

A bit perplexed, we agree to see Buddha.

"Moment, please," the young monk says. He is dressed in a maroon robe like all monks in Ladakh, who follow the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, and his head is shaved almost completely bald.

He reappears in a minute with a key chain and gestures for us to follow him farther into the large monastery complex. We go up a rickety wooden staircase, and he

unlocks a large, ornately carved wooden door. He slips off his sandals and waits while we unlace our dusty boots. Then, we enter a large shrine, with a golden statue of the Buddha and some beautiful, old Thangkas, traditional Tibetan Buddhist religious paintings on cloth, hanging along the walls. The smell of incense lies heavy in the air, and the monk lights a new stick. There is a small plate for donations below the altar of the Buddha. We leave rupee notes on the plate. I feel it is especially wise to leave a small donation for the Buddha now, since he is the only religious figure I will have contact with before the drive back tomorrow.
The monk is standing by the door, with his eyes half-closed.

"Okay?" he asks as we move past him toward our shoes.

"Thank you," we say.

"Do you think this is an appropriate situation to use Joo-lay in?" Michael asks me under his breath while we are putting our shoes on.

"I don't know," I whisper back.

The monk smiles at us.

When we get back down to the courtyard, it seems very bright.

Another monk, older than the first, comes out of a low building to the right of the entrance. "Welcome to our monastery," he says loudly, beaming at us.

"Joo-lay," Michael says.

"Hello," the rest of us say.

"Would you like some tea?" the monk asks us.

We all agree to have some tea and follow both of the monks into the low building, which turns out to be a big kitchen. We sit on carpets around the edge of the room. A few other monks, including one who is clearly the cook, are sitting around in the kitchen. Things are cooking in big pots on the stove. I realize that it isn't a wood-burning stove at all. Every now and then the monks are feeding what looks like large, dried pats of mud into it.

"What is that?" I finally ask the cook.

The young monk answers instead, "From the yak."

Of course, dried yak dung! This is the fuel source of the high Himalaya. Hardly any trees grow up here, and the ones that do grow are cultivated to produce fruit. I'm not sure how I feel about this morning's biscuits now.

Soon steaming hot cups of milk tea are served to us. The monks speak very little English, but we get involved in a discussion about the dunes between Diskit and Hunder. The fact that all of us, monks and tourists alike, have visited the dunes has been communicated, but now Michael and I want to convey our disappointment about not seeing any of the wild camels. The main problem here is the word *camel*, which meets blank stares, as does the more obscure word *dromedary*.

"You know," Michael says, reaching around to hit himself on the back and then drawing two hills in the air, "Camel."

The monks look at each other, converse briefly in Ladakhi, and shake their heads.

"Don't know," the one who invited us to tea says. We all sit for a minute, sipping our tea. Then one of the Germans draws a crude two-humped camel in the dirt of the floor. The monks gaze at it for a moment, then smile and nod vigorously. They point at it and say a word that clearly means camel in Ladakhi.

"We know this word; how do you say in English?" the cook asks.

"Camel," Michael says.

"Camel," they all repeat, laughing.

"In Hunder," Michael points in a direction that may or may not be toward Hunder, "No camels." He makes a sad face.

"Yes, there are camel," the young monk tells us.

"Yes, yes," I say, "but we can't see them."

"Ah, too bad," the monks commiserate.

We try to finish our tea. Whenever we are close, the oldest monk, without asking, deftly fills our cup. Our protests do not affect him. Finally, one after the other, we put our hands over the tops of the cups. The Germans begin speaking in German. After a few minutes, they say, "Okay, we must go now."

"We should get going too," Michael says.

We say good-bye to the monks both by bowing and by raising our hands to our foreheads and cheerfully saying Joo-lay. They respond in kind, and we are off, back through the streams and tempting orchards. It strikes me that it is a bit like Eden here. There are even apple trees, with the most delicious apples. Michael's presence in Eden would have obviated the need for a serpent. I feel guilty when he stops to pick the tiny apples. They are tart and delicious.

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In the evening a group of us from the guesthouse, at the prodding of our host, take flashlights and wend our way through a maze of streams and paths to a village festival. Homemade barley wine, called chang, fresh apples and dried apricots all flow freely. At least a hundred people are here, and the elders are dressed regally. The women are most impressive, and their appearance echoes old photos I have seen of Native Americans. They wear black cloth headpieces with long flaps that come down to their waists, and these are covered in pieces of turquoise. They also wear long black elaborately embroidered robes and handwoven shawls. Their felt shoes look positively elven, with long pointed toes that curl up at the end.

Everyone sits in a large circle, drinking chang out of tin cups, and people take turns in the center singing traditional songs and dancing. A few drummers keep the beat. We join the circle and accept mugs of chang from a friendly, middle-aged woman. Five young boys come and sit behind us. They giggle and tap our shoulders.

"Hello," some of us say. I still can't get used to using Joo-lay.

“Hello, hello,” the boys say, giggling some more. They offer us apricots warmed in their clenched fists. As soon as we accept them, they run away.

I think alcohol hits you harder at a high altitude, or maybe the chang was just strong. During a long, slow circle dance, almost like a conga line in slow motion, but with intricate, shuffling steps, somebody gets the idea that the tourists should join in. Some of the people from the guest-house laugh it off; but a bunch of us, maybe ten people, join in to claps and shouts of what I hope is approval. I’m behind an older Ladakhi man in a long brown robe. Most of the older men are wearing a robe like this in a shade of brown. I shuffle around the circle, trying to keep the slow, strange rhythm. The effect of the monotonous music, repetitive movement, and alcohol is hypnotic. Except for the Western-style clothing of the tourists and some young Ladakhis, this celebration could be taking place any time in at least the past thousand years. Time stops on the rooftop of the world, and we all keep dancing.

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Time starts up again the next morning. We have to leave after breakfast, to make it back over the pass before dark, and Samara decides that she wants to stay in paradise until her permit expires. Jacob, a young Israeli photographer who came in by bus, replaces her.

The ride back seems to take less than half the time that the ride over the pass took. We are saying good-bye to one of the most remote places in the world, a place that we will probably never visit again. I am suddenly so jealous of the people who live here. The people who don’t need a special one-week permit to come and go from this place.

We have already seen K-2, and the shrine, and the abandoned oil drums on the top of the world, so we mill around, and Jacob takes photos with a polarized lens while our permits are checked.

Michael and Jacob and I sit in the back most of the

time, talking about everything under the sun, while Helga sits silently in the front. Every so often she says to the driver, who is blaring Indian dance music, “Could you turn it down please?” Each time he smiles, nods, and fiddles ineffectually with some dials. The volume never changes one bit.

I don’t even notice if he is using the horn.