

# Markha Valley Trek Trip Report

## David Money Harris



**Trip:** Markha Valley Trek  
**Dates:** July 28 - August 6, 2007  
**Location:** Ladakh - Indian Himalayas  
**Distance:** 106 km  
**Elevation Gain:** 5000-6000 meters  
**Max Elevation:** 5150 meters  
**Duration:** 8 days

Prices are often given in Indian rupees; Rs 40 = US \$1.

### Location

The treks in this region are accessed from Leh, which, with 27000 inhabitants, is the main city in the semiautonomous Ladakh region of the Jammu & Kashmir state in Northern India. Most of Kashmir has been unsuitable for foreign tourists in recent years because of abductions and murders, although the flow of visitors appears to be starting to resume this year. Ladakh has a heavy military presence because of its proximity to Kashmir and to Tibet, but it receives about 30,000 tourists every summer. Leh is located at about 3500 meters in a valley above the Indus River. The main peaks of the region are over 6000 meters, and the East Karakoram range and

The Ladakh region of Northern India between Kashmir and Tibet is ideal for trekking in July and August when the rest of the Himalayas are pounded by the monsoon. This report describes my impressions from the trip. Some observations are subjective or second-hand and may be controversial; I have not attempted to cross-check my facts. The altitudes and distances are guesses partly based on a guidebook but are probably not precise. Also, some spellings are phonetic and may be nonstandard.

Great Himalayan Range host 7000 meter peaks that may be visible under good conditions.



Stok Kangri over the Indus Valley and Old City of Leh

### When to Go

Most trekking in Ladakh takes place in July and August. The region is in the rain shadow of the Himalayas and avoids the monsoon; it receives about 4" of rain per year. The desert valleys are hot, while the passes and peaks can be cool and windy. June is feasible, but passes will still be covered in snow and river crossings will be more difficult. September is also a time to avoid the crowds, but the weather becomes less stable and surprise blizzards can strike.

### References

Two good guides to the trek are Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya* and Milestone Book's *Trekking in Ladakh - Markha Valley*. Leh is a heavily touristed city and has numerous good bookstores with many guidebooks. The "Spiritual Guides" website on Leh (<http://www.vegetarian-restaurants.net/India-Guide/IndianStates/Ladakh/Leh.htm>) is full of handy free and slightly outdated information along with an advertisement for Yogi Abhaya's Amazing Colon Cleaning Program.

### Maps

Lonely Planet says that maps are not available in India and so I went to significant effort and expense to track down the US military U502 series maps NI 43-08 ref Leh and NI 43-12 ref Martselang from East View Cartographic ([cartographic.com](http://cartographic.com)). These are the only topographic maps that I could locate, but the

topo lines prove unnecessary and not all place names are labeled. Now, most Leh bookstores sell good trekking maps and the Markha Valley trekking book contains an adequate map for Rs 200.

### Trekking Agencies

Somewhere between 100 and 200 trekking agencies are scattered around the main bazaar in Leh. They offer guided treks, jeep tours, whitewater rafting, bike rides, and just about anything else you might want. Trekking agencies are not regulated by the government and anyone can start one. I went with the Ecological Footprint agency ([ladakhecollogicalfootprint.com](http://ladakhecollogicalfootprint.com)). I also had lengthy conversations with Sonam Gyasto at the Lhari Karpo Ecological Trek & Tours agency ([www.eco-ladakh.com](http://www.eco-ladakh.com)). Some of the other large and reputable agencies include Rimo Expeditions ([rimotreks.com](http://rimotreks.com)), Dreamland ([www.dreamladakh.com](http://www.dreamladakh.com)), and Snow Leopard Adventures ([www.snowleopardadventures.com](http://www.snowleopardadventures.com)). In July and August, about 10 agencies depart for the Markha Valley daily, so it is easy to arrange a trip on one or two day's notice.

A group guided trek costs about \$40 / person / day including all meals and gear rental. Bigger agencies charge a little more. The quality of the food tends to be proportional to the price. Higher end agencies bring folding chairs and even tables for the clients, but this strikes me as an abuse of the pack animals. Plan to add 10-20% of the trip cost for tips to the staff.

### Getting to Leh

The easiest way to reach Leh is by air from Delhi. There are several daily flights in the summer by Jet Airways, Indian Airlines, and Air Deccan, and sporadic flights in the off season. My fully refundable tickets on Jet cost about \$200 each way with 3 weeks notice, but careful buyers may be able to do half that with more advanced notice. The early morning flight over the Great Himalayan range is memorable; check in early and ask for a window seat; the A seat faces away from the sun on the flight from Delhi to Leh.



Glaciers merging in the Great Himalaya Range

Book well in advance. Flights are often filled and cancellations for weather are not unusual. Give yourself a few days at either end of the trip in case of delays.

Young and adventurous travelers like to travel to Leh by bus or 4WD from Manali. This involves a long bus ride from Delhi to Manali, and then a two-day trip bumping up the Manali-Leh road through the Himalayas (longer if landslides block the road or if there have been recent rains). The views of the Himalayas and desert are supposed to be remarkable. A ticket on an air-conditioned tourist bus costs about Rs 1200; a jeep is far more expensive but can be shared.

Some travelers come from Srinagar in Kashmir; this is also a two-day jeep trip (or a horrendously long day). A fellow trekker had three flat tires on the 20-hour drive. However, at the time of this writing, the US State Department recommends that US citizens avoid travel in Jammu & Kashmir except in the Ladakh region; westerners have been abducted by terrorist groups and several busses were attacked by grenades in 2006.

### Where to Stay

Leh is full of pleasant and inexpensive guest houses. I stayed at Kailash up the road from Leh Palace. The owner, an elderly gentleman, was very kind. Kailash has a beautiful glass room upstairs overlooking the garden for Rs 500/night. It had a shared bath with limited solar hot water. With some looking, guest houses with clean rooms can be found for closer to Rs 200. In the off season, rates plunge even further.

## My Trek

I was working in Bangalore for the summer and wanted to trek in the Himalayas. Ladakh is the only region sheltered from the monsoon during my time frame, so I chose to go to Leh. I picked the Markha Valley trip because it seemed to be the lowest risk for a solo traveler unfamiliar with the area.

I brought all my own gear and food; this was a fair amount to lug around and many trekkers would have been comfortable renting gear and contributing to the local economy by eating unpackaged local food.

### Day -1: Friday, 27 July 2007

After teaching class, I took a rickshaw to the Bangalore airport and caught the 4:30 flight to Delhi. It was delayed by nearly 2 hours. I found a prepaid cab at the airport for Rs 180 to the Hotel Mohan International - selected because they had internet booking for \$25 and because it was the least far from the airport of any reasonably priced hotel I could find. The drive still took an hour in heavy traffic and I got to bed after 11.

### Day 0: Saturday, 28 July 2007

I woke at 4:15 and took a taxi to the airport. Delhi in the wee hours is a memorable sight. The bellman was sleeping on a mat in the lobby. The receptionist was sleeping behind the desk. The taxi driver was sleeping in the taxi. Most vehicles in the street seemed to have sleeping occupants, and I think I even saw somebody sleeping on his two-wheeler. Two men were sleeping side-by-side on the 4' wide median of the expressway. A covey of spandex-clad cyclists zipped by in the other direction. An officer on an elephant patrolled in front of the gate to the Navy Officer's Mess. Though I'm sure the taxi driver and I agreed on Rs 300 for the ride, he insisted that it was Rs 400 when we arrived at the airport and I eventually paid up. It is best to get the rate in writing.

Only the most experienced captains fly the Delhi to Leh route. The 6:30 flight climbed through layers of clouds, but the sky soon cleared. The fertile plains were dotted with dense circular villages every 10 km or so, surrounded by open farmland with little sign of

farm houses. We passed over two nuclear power plants.



Farmland and villages north of Delhi

The plains rose into green foothills, which transformed into glaciated peaks with knife-edge ridges and hanging valleys above the glacial canyons. The terrain looked familiar, like the Sierra Nevada but taller. We entered IFR conditions in broken clouds on our descent and passed closer to the peaks than I would have done in those conditions. When we broke out, we were over a barren desert dotted with rolling hills and an occasional isolated lake.



Beyond the Himalayan rain shadow

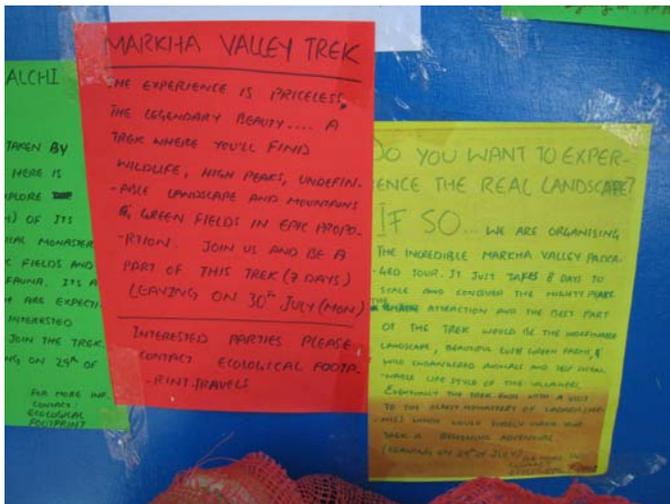
Leh is located in the Indus valley between the Ladakh and Stok mountain ranges. It appeared that we circled twice to lose altitude on our approach. The plane passed closer to huge peaks than I ever have seen on a commercial flight. We approached over the river and past monasteries, then landed fast and braked hard. Everyone clapped.

The airport was heavily guarded by young soldiers with carbines. Foreigners had to fill out a registration form. I found my duffle bag and went outside to the prepaid taxi line. Reaching the window involved clambering over an uncemented brick wall and navigating across loose dirt next to a ditch. The fare into town was Rs 120. I asked to go to the Antelope Guest house, but it was under renovation when I arrived, so we continued to Kailash.

### Arranging the Trek

Unlike Bangalore, Leh is full of foreign tourists. Europeans were most common, especially French. I only met a handful of Americans. Also, unlike the rest of India, shop keepers were friendly but not pushy. I first visited Rimo Expeditions and told them that I wanted to hire a guide for Markha Valley for 8 days leaving Monday and that I wanted to carry my own gear and food. Rimo quoted \$40/day and said I should come back at 4:00 to give them a chance to locate an available guide.

Then I wandered into the main bazaar. Leh reminds me of India blended with Queensland, NZ. Adventure travel agencies on every corner offered every imaginable service, but the prices were Indian and the shops offered the full array of carpets, shawls, carvings, and trinkets. There were numerous signs advertising groups looking for more trekkers. Agencies used these signs to put together parties for a trek. One flier from Ecological Footprint announced a trip leaving on Sunday. I stuck my head in the agency. The trip had two people lined up already and was looking for more. It included a guide and ponies to carry gear. The manager, Stanzin, was charging \$40 including food and gear rental, but offered \$20 because I had my own.



The Incredible Markha Valley Packaged Tour

I thought about it over wonton soup at the Golden Dragon and decided that I could endure a pony trip for half the price. When I returned, Ecological Footprints said two more clients were likely to come. I suggested paying half in advance and half after the trip, but the agency insisted on the full \$160 up front because they would have to pay for the ponies; I figured I couldn't go too far wrong.

When I returned to Hotel Kailash, I met a Ladaki walking near the guest house who commented on my Thoreau Sauntering Society shirt (actually loaned from Jenn). He turned out to be starting a guide company and had a French client looking to climb the 6400 meter Kang Yaze peak, the biggest trekking peak in the region. It is only a few kilometers from the route I planned to follow along Markha Valley, so I was tempted to meet him for the summit attempt near the end of my trip if the timing worked out. The guide's name was Sonam Gyatso and he had founded Lhari Karpo Ecological Trek & Tours. I didn't think the climb was practical because I would have to delay my return flight and get an axe and crampons. But I had a change of heart later in the afternoon and emailed Sonam and the Frenchman. Sonam lived near Kailash and came by in the evening. We walked over to the Frenchman's hotel and Sonam gave me a remarkable full-moon tour of the old city along the way. He was involved with a preservation society that is offering matching funds to property owners to renovate the beautiful but crumbling buildings. He also told me that the Dalai Lama was visiting Ladakh and would be in Leh while we were trekking. Unfortunately, it appeared the Dalai Lama would be teaching elsewhere by the time we returned. We eventually located the other climber. He had found a

French group for a longer trek and wouldn't be back to climb until after I left Leh, so I scrapped the mountaineering idea.

### Day 1: Sunday 29 July 2007

Despite the good bed, I slept poorly and awoke before 6. I scampered up to slopes to the monastery on the mountain above Leh Palace. The sun was rising through broken clouds on the eastern horizon, casting beautiful light over the Indus valley and Stok range. Three young Westerners were camped outside the monastery, enjoying the view from their sleeping bags.



Prayer flags at dawn

I descended past Leh Palace and found doughy but delicious croissants at the German bakery in the bazaar, then fetched my pack and checked out of Kailash. A creek followed the road; it was full of trash, especially plastic bottles. Children were washing clothes in the water using the traditional Indian method of beating the clothes against a rock. A young man was bathing.

Arriving at Ecological Footprints for the 8 am departure, I found that everyone else had canceled except a woman from California. The agency expected that one or two of the trekkers would start the next day by driving up a road to join the trek. I met the other trekker, Rebecca, and our guide, Chandra. The agency took about an hour to load a truck and get things together. They did a "special favor" of procuring box lunches for our first day, including one for me even though I wasn't paying for food.

We had a short drive to the departure point at Spitok near the banks of the Indus. While the pony man loaded the gear, Chandra started us marching across the bridge and into the desert on the western side.

### The Cast of Characters

Our crew consisted of six: Rebecca, me, Chandra, the "pony man," the "boy," and the "other man." Apparently, a staff of four is normal for any trek with at least two customers.

Rebecca was a scientist at a pharmaceutical company who was laid off when the company was acquired by a larger one. She began a business as a scuba diving instructor, but left the business in her partner's hands to spend a year touring the world on her severance package. She had been to Morocco and Egypt in the heat of the summer for diving, and then went to Kashmir and now Ladakh. She was next headed to Turkey, then back to India and Nepal after the monsoon for the Anapurna circuit and yoga. Then she planned to tour Southeast Asia and the south Pacific researching dive sites for her new business.

Chandra was a 24-year-old Nepali who worked the monsoon season in Ladakh. He was just over 5' tall and looked young, but proved to be a strong hiker and an outstanding guide. Chandra was quiet at first, but spoke excellent English and we got to know him well over the trek. This is his story as best as I understand it, retold with his permission. He was born in a remote farming village with no school. At age 9, his parents sent him to live with a Sherpa family in Kathmandu, where he would go to school in exchange for taking care of the family's baby boy in the mornings and evenings. The family reneged on their agreement and kept Chandra as an unpaid servant without sending him to school. The sherpa's wife beat him when she was drunk. At age 13, Chandra ran away and found a job in a restaurant in Kathmandu. After two years, he had saved a little money to try to return home, but didn't know where his parents lived. He returned to the Sherpa to ask directions. The Sherpa gave him directions but suggested that he stay as an apprentice guide to earn more money to bring home. Chandra worked for three years, learning the trade, and then returned to his village. He found his father. His mother had departed for Kathmandu to look for him nine years back, shortly

after he had been sent there. He was her favorite and she couldn't bear for him to be gone. Nobody had heard from her since.

Chandra usually earned Rs 400 / day plus tips working as the guide and cook, or as much as Rs 800 / day working for bigger groups at the larger agencies. With just two of us, he was only going to receive Rs 300/day. His travel expenses from Nepal were Rs 10,000, and anything he earned beyond that during the three month Ladakh trekking season was money to bring home. In the spring and fall, he would work as an assistant in Nepal (where the requirements for full-fledged guides were much higher). He painted houses in the winter, and in some summers when he would stay in Nepal. Compared to farming, guiding was a much better source of hard cash. He would send some back to his family. This year, his father was remarrying to his mother's widowed younger sister. His father had written asking for Rs 6000 for the wedding expenses. An interesting world, where the son pays for the father's wedding! However, Chandra said that guiding is no job for old men and that his ambition was to save enough to open a restaurant in Kathmandu when he got older.

Four years ago, a Scottish couple had given Chandra an extra large tip so that he could study English. He took a morning course that summer in Kathmandu while painting in the day. Chandra made the most of the course. He can read and his spoken English is good enough to convey complex ideas. His next goal was to take a writing class because he has trouble with spelling and felt that good writing would be important to succeed in business.

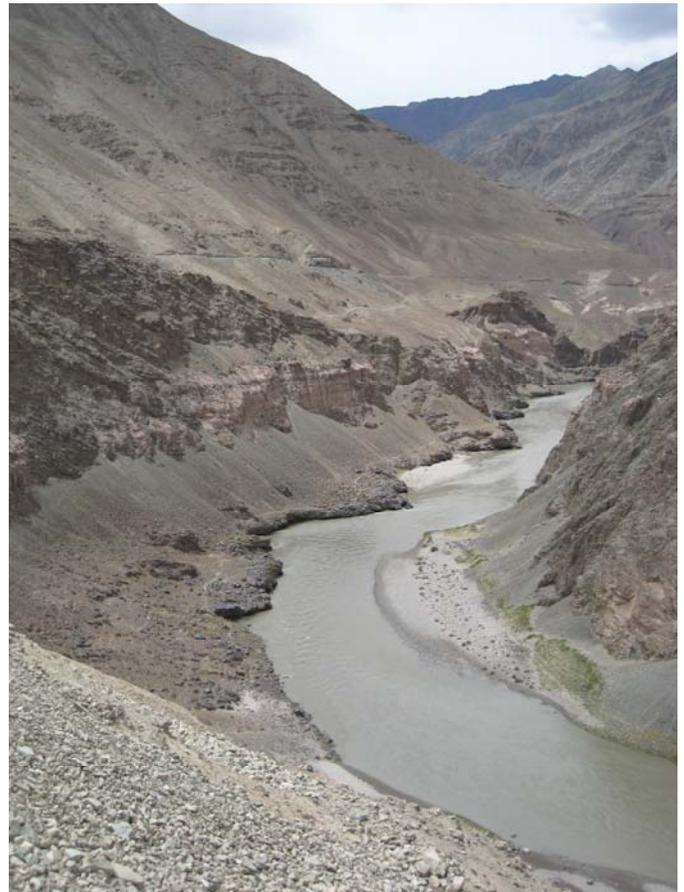
"The boy" was a Ladaki student named Tashinurgu. As best as I understand, he was on summer break and wanted to see the mountains and earn some money. "The boy" is apparently a standard title given to an apprentice / assistant on these treks. Apparently the job pays Rs 150 - 200 / day plus food. Chandra usually disliked working with Ladaki boys because they tended to have an attitude about working in their own homeland for a Nepali foreigner. But Tashinurgu was diligent and did a particularly good job of keeping the cookware clean, which was of great importance to our health. He was studying English in school and apparently understood some, but lacked the confidence to try to speak it.

The "pony man" never was called by any other name. Through Chandra's interpretation when we were all huddled in the tent on a blustery evening, we learned that he was 28 years old, married with a 2-year-old and a 3-year-old. He had a small farm where he kept his horses, but it didn't produce enough to feed his family. Another man sometimes helped the pony man and evidently was part of the staff, but we seldom saw him and never got to know him. The pony man and boy would load up in the morning after we started, then would usually pass us during the day and make camp before we arrived.

### The Trek Begins

We spent the morning walking up a dirt road parallel to the Indus. The desert was hot and I soon shed my gaiters and long pants. A thin stretch of green marked the banks of the Indus; the remainder of the scene was just rock, as empty of life as the Atacama Desert. No plants broke the monotony and a solitary lizard was the only animal I saw. On the far side of the river, the Indian Army had built one base after another to fortify this lonely corner of the country.

After several hours, we passed an experimental solar energy research station and entered a canyon carved by the river. The gorge reminded me of the Colorado river near Canyonlands, while the desolate mountains and alluvial fans reminded me of Death Valley. We stopped for lunch. The box had a sandwich with meat, vegetables, and mayonnaise, a potato, a candy bar, and a 200 ml fruit drink carton. I had part of the potato but it tasted funny and I realized that I had been making a point of only eating fruits and vegetables that had been cooked after the skin was removed. I skipped the sandwich and just drank the juice and ate another croissant from the German bakery. I had a banana and was told to leave the skin on the trail. Sure enough, as the next pony passed, it leaned over and gobbled the skin in one bite.



Indus river gorge

Somebody had dropped an empty juice box on the roadside. I got a quizzical look from Chandra when I picked it up and stuck it in my pocket to carry out.

After about 10 km, we reached the confluence with the Jingchan river and headed up its canyon. The rock formed layers that had been wildly tilted and folded. Some parts had decomposed into thin shards of scree that would be abysmal for climbing. Other muddy sediments resembled the Mecca Hills, complete with mud stalactites from the occasional rainstorm. In another five km, we came to two campsites in the village of Jingchan at 3500 m. The first was too crowded with trekkers, so the pony man had stopped at the second, which was none too quiet either.



Camp at Jingchan

The campsite was beside a particularly beautiful stretch of the river and just above a stone farm house. The farmer charged Rs 50 or 100 per tent; this arrangement was common on the trek. The agency had wanted to pass the camping fee on to me, but I reminded them that we had agreed that my \$160 was fully inclusive for the trip.

The tents were located in a dirt field. Several irrigation ditches collected water from a higher elevation upstream and brought them through camp and to the farmhouse to provide a convenient source of water. This ingenious arrangement of ditches and aqueducts proved to be ubiquitous in Ladakh and was central to cultivating productive fields in the desert where only glacial runoff was available. The outhouse was located at the bottom end of camp less than 20 feet from the river. It was vile and Rebecca pointed out that it was a serious health hazard so close to the river. Worse yet, in my opinion, the ponies were hobbled at the top end of camp. They could drink from the irrigation ditch. Their whole space was covered in shit and I'm certain a large amount of it flowed into the ditch as well. One unfortunate group pitched their tent in the midst and had to endure the smell all evening. I had to keep chasing ponies away from my tent and bag.

The boy set up Rebecca's rental tent and watched me to learn how to set up mine. I tried to persuade him that I was happy to put it up myself, but each day he would try to erect it before I reached camp. One day it was pitched with the head down and I had to take it down and change it. He never got the hang of putting down my ground cloth first. The staff also set up a green triangular canvas cook tent that looked

like something from World War II. It was too short for me to comfortably enter, but Chandra's height worked to his advantage. The staff had forgotten to bring a sleeping bag for Rebecca. Chandra was going to hike back to town and fetch it for her by the next morning, but somehow managed to get word to the agency, and they sent it up in a jeep.

I asked what to do with my lunch leftovers. The staff said to leave the box by the cook tent and that the food would be given to the ponies. I don't know if sandwiches are good for them, but in a country where so many people are hungry, I gather that horses get the leftovers.

The staff made tea for us each afternoon after arriving in camp. The hot drink tasted good after a day of walking.

I sat by the creek and dangled my feet in the cold water, washing the dust off my legs. The water bubbled over the rocks. As I sat and meditated, I was struck how animistic societies could imagine that each river had a spirit or god. I saw some plastic and bottles in the river and decided to pick them up because they spoiled such a beautiful spot. As I was bringing them back, I noticed our lunch boxes. After removing the food, somebody had tossed them over the embankment onto the side of the river. I brought them back up and explained to Chandra that I didn't want the trash thrown around the campsite. He said he would explain it to the rest of the staff.

Then I noticed the boy washing the dishes in the ditch next to the cook tent. It was just a few yards downstream from the horses. I asked where the water for tea came from. I couldn't understand the answer, but made it clear that I wanted all cooking water to come from upstream of the horses.

Over the afternoon I got to meet some of the other parties at the campsite. There was a group of five Indians from Bangalore, two women and three men. They were mostly recent engineering graduates from top universities. At least one worked at a multinational management consulting company, which is the pinnacle of prestige and pay for this new generation of Indians. Others worked for large successful family businesses. They were well traveled and highly informed about politics and economics in India and the world. They invited me to

join them for a game of Uno. They had taken a jeep up to the campsite and were doing the trip in six days of walking rather than eight by shaving off the roads at each end.

Another huge group had a line of elaborate tents set up. They were mostly older women in a bird watching club from Bombay; they were the most westernized-looking Indians I saw on the trip. They were on a tour looking for rare birds north of the Great Himalayan Range and had spent time at the desert lakes. Now they were looking for a species found in the Hemis National Park and through some misunderstanding had driven to this site. The birds lived in the forest in the park. The camp was just a few kilometers from the park boundary, but the forested sections of Hemis were tens of kilometers away over high passes, well out of range of the tour.

There were also three French groups. One was a young couple who worked for biotech. Another was an older couple who walked very quickly and wore New York Marathon shirts. A third, guided by the Wild East agency, had somewhere around 20 trekkers, mostly older, who kept to their own group.

I went to bed when it got dark, before 8:00, and slept well until after light at 5:00.

## Day 2: Monday 30 July 2007

In the morning, Chandra cooked a huge breakfast for Rebecca while I polished off my croissant. They kept offering more as she said she didn't like walking on a full stomach. We waited until 9:30 for our additional trekkers as the rest of the parties packed up and headed out. Nobody showed up, so Chandra declared it was time to go. We hiked up the canyon, crossing the Jingchan on wooden bridges, one of which looked particularly dubious but proved to be sturdy.



Bridge over the Jingchan

We soon reached the unmanned shack marking the entrance to Hemis National Park. Hemis is famous as the snow leopard capital of the world, but snow leopards are clever enough to clear out well before the hordes of trekkers appear. A bulldozer was parked nearby and was evidently pushing the road further up the canyon. The rock is so unstable and the river is unpredictable; apparently the roads undergo major repairs each spring after the snows melt.



Border of Hemis National Park

The rock kept changing as we ascended the hot canyon. We reached a section of solid-feeling rock with incut holds that looked to offer lengthy 5.5 climbing potential. We took our first break at some prayer flags on the side of the trail.

The Buddhists build mani walls in these canyons; the tops of the walls are covered in sacred rock carvings. In particular, many tablets are carved with the

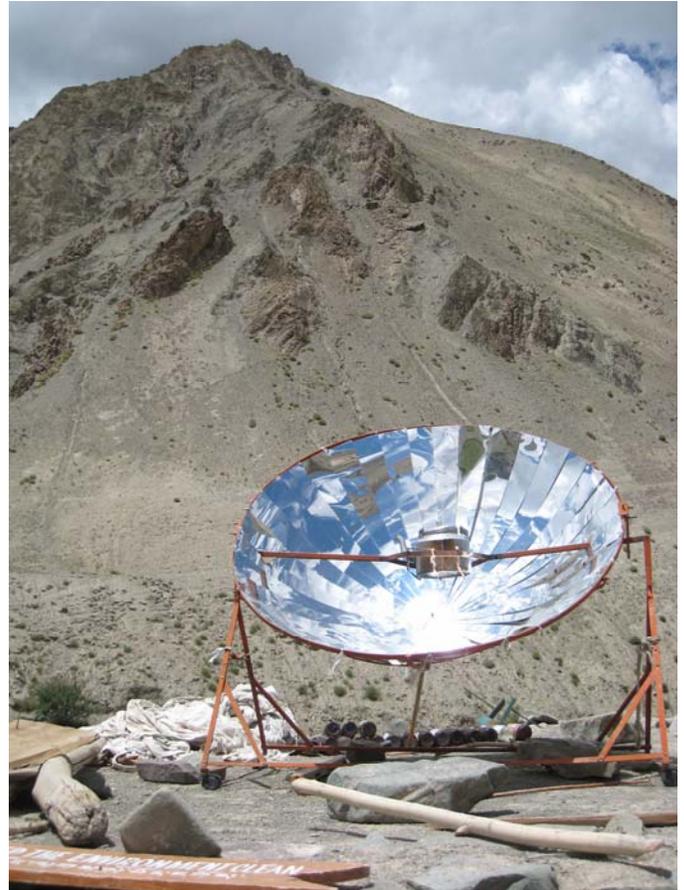
mantra *Om mani padmi hum*, Tibetan for "Ah! The jewel is indeed in the lotus."



Circular mani wall

We reached a second break at a tea tent near the village of Rumbak. Two weathered older women were selling tea and snacks. Tea tents are common throughout the region; they are made from surplus army parachutes supported by poles and guy lines. The women had a solar reflector that they used to boil a pot of water in about an hour on a clear day like this one.

Tea tents at Rumbak



Solar water boiling system



Ponies carry up to 60 kg of baggage

The canyon grew hotter as we trudged up to the hamlet of Yurtse at 4200 meters, marked by a solitary but stately three story home above lush fields and shrines.



plenty of room for the ponies to graze up the valley. The outhouse was away from the river and less foul.



Stok Kangri above Ganda La base camp

Rebecca's stomach still bothered her; she attributed it to the excessive breakfast. Some hills took on a purple hue, occasionally marked with green strata, presumably rich in copper. Scattered vegetation began to appear on the mountains and the snowy 6100 meter summit of Stok Kangri came into view over a ridge. We encountered some black and white mocking birds and numerous chuker partridges. The partridges are chubby birds like ptarmigans and can only fly downhill, though I saw them hop up ledges in a spirited fashion. A family of mountain sheep called Bharal or "blue sheep" careened down the slope behind us and crossed the trail to descend to the river for water. They blended in to the rocks so well that I could only see them while they moved. We also began seeing Himalayan marmots, which are slightly smaller than the infamous fat marmots of the Sierra Nevada.

I joined the Indian crew for another game of Uno, but one of them stayed in his tent with a bad headache. They had only spent one night in Leh and it was too rapid of an ascent for a city dweller to reach a height comparable to Mt. Whitney. His guide didn't seem to know what to do so I went and asked about his symptoms. Thankfully it was only a headache, without nausea or vomiting, but he was looking pretty miserable. I gave him some aspirin to treat the symptoms and Rebecca had some Diamox to help him acclimate faster. I got him to drink as much as he could. When he was still feeling bad in an hour, I told him that we should pack up his tent before dusk and descend to Yurtse for the night, then return in the morning when he'd had a chance to acclimate. He was stubborn with his friends but agreed to go along with me before dark. When evening was settling in, I started taking down my tent. But remarkably he came out of his tent looking much better with his headache cleared up, and he decided to stay for the night and ride a pony over the pass in the morning.



Chukor partridge

Between the altitude and Rebecca's stomach, we hiked slowly up the last kilometer to our camp below Ganda La ("La" means "pass") at about 4400 meters and 8 km up from the last camp. This was a much better camp, with great views of Stok Kangri and

Meanwhile, Rebecca was beset with a violent bout of diarrhea. She promptly took a strong antibiotic. I lent her my Pepto-Bismol and she went through nearly half of it that evening between regular runs to the outhouse. I hoped it wasn't caused by bad water that would get me shortly. Thankfully, the medicine settled her stomach and she was able to make it through the night. Chandra said that about half the clients on a typical trip got sick, either from food, water, or altitude. We had met our quo

### Day 3: Tuesday 31 July 2007

I slept soundly for a change, waking up after 4 am. The night was crisp but above freezing.

In the morning Rebecca had no appetite but was doing better. However, her sleeping bag provided had a bad zipper and was inadequate for the chilly night. The Indians were also feeling ok. We started walking slowly at 7 am, climbing through the meadow and the tundra above. In three hours we reached the 4900 meter (16,000') Ganda La marked with a string of prayer flags.



Some of the teeming hordes climbing Ganda La

There was a peak to the north about 400 meters higher than the pass. I asked Chandra if he thought it would be safe to leave my pack on the pass and scramble up the slopes. He thought so; many previous trekkers had done so and the marmots were scared away by all the pony traffic. Rebecca borrowed my map and guide book to study. I ate some chocolate put a water bottle, my passport and wallet, and emergency kit into my fanny pack, and dumped the rest, including my parka, other water and food, headlamp, iodine, sunscreen, regular glasses, and toilet paper into the body of the pack, which I propped against the rocks on the pass.

It felt great to be unloaded and I strode rapidly up the slopes, which were covered in tundra and delicate flowers. Some were bluish-purple, reminiscent of polemonium flowers from the Sierra, but bigger. I reached the rocky summit in 45 minutes, feeling only mildly light headed. There were grand views of the peaks, including the snow-clad Stok Kangri to the

south, the Ladakh range to the east, and the jagged but mostly snow-free Zanskar range to the west. The wind was cold, but moving kept me warm enough. I heard a great bellow or growl of some sort from the deep canyon north of the summit, but saw no motion. The descent took another 30 minutes, with time for many pictures.



View west to Zanskar Range



Stok Kangri

When I reached the pass, the Bangalore crew had all arrived. Their guide had drunk a bottle of rum the previous night and was not feeling well in the morning, so he had sent the group ahead with the pony man while he rested. One pony had carried the daypacks so they were able to walk up unburdened and were feeling fine.

Rebecca and Chandra had headed down and my pack was not where I left it. I took a careful walk around the prayer flags to see if they had moved it, then figured that Chandra probably carried it down to

keep it safe from the animals. I found my stride at about 6 km/hour down the east side of the pass into the Shingri creek canyon. I was soon passing pony men and caught my team at the tea tent about 1000 vertical meters down the canyon



Shingri creek canyon west of Ganda La

When I arrived, Chandra asked where my pack was. I explained that I had looked and hoped he took it. He said that he'd moved it a few feet and put a rock on it for safety; I'm pretty sure I would have seen it because I took a good look around. Then again, I've been blind to things in front of my face at times. A pony man was leaving the tent going up, and we described the pack to him and offered a reward in case he found it and returned it to the agency.

Chandra was sad that I had lost the pack and asked what was in it. Thankfully I had my wallet and passport and all the gear I would need to complete the trip, but the replacement cost of everything was about \$600. He thought there was a slim chance that our pony man might have picked it up and brought it down to camp while I was on the mountain. He figured it was more likely that some other pony man, finding the pack unattended on the pass, might have taken it and stashed it somewhere. I could understand; the pack, sitting unattended, could be resold for a summer's worth of pay. It was asking too much for everyone to be honest.

As we descended, Chandra asked pony men if they had seen the pack on the pass, but nobody remembered passing it. I asked other trekkers to keep a look out and to let me know if their teams reported discovering a pack. I went ahead down the canyon to try to catch our ponies in case our team

had picked up the pack. The temperatures rose steadily as I descended and soon I was feeling the lack of food and water. I treated some water with a potable aqua tablet from my emergency kit and let it act as I continued down. The trail was also littered with innumerable plastic wrappers and soda bottles. The garbage in the creek and otherwise pristine canyon really began getting to me, and I began picking it up whenever I easily could.

I started to mull over the notion of an ecopledge. Despite the name Eco in so many agencies, the trail was in much worse shape than the John Muir trail in the Sierra. There is too much garbage, and a 50% chance of getting sick on a trip is way too high. Within a decade, I think the trek will be completely ruined unless something changes. It seemed possible to prepare a pledge about properly handling trash, food, and water that would be both good marketing for agencies that chose to subscribe as well as good for the environment and clients.

The trail passed the small village of Shingo, crossed the creek many times, and entered a canyon beneath a wildly rocky peak before reaching the confluence with the Markha river at the village of Skyu (3700 meters, 16 km from the last camp).



Canyon mouth near confluence with Markha river

The pony man had selected a campsite at Skyu situated just below a 1000-year-old gompa (Buddhist monastery), but the site was in awful condition. The ponies were kept immediately outside the gate of the camp, so I had to wade through their manure every time I exited the site. In particular, I had to pass the ponies to reach the outhouse. Nevertheless, the outhouse was too close to camp. The pony man had

not seen my pack either, so I resigned myself to getting by without. Most of the stuff could be replaced with money, but I was sad to lose my hot pink hat that my aunt had knitted years ago as a gag and a poem from my wife that she had stashed in my glasses case about five years back and that I had been carrying there ever since.

The afternoon sun was intense, but thankfully I could wander down to the Markha river and take a bath in the water, which was less frigid than at the previous two camps. Rebecca arrived in camp and we pumped water with her pump, so I didn't have to drink my nasty brown potable aqua. Then the Bangalore crew arrived. Their guide had not made it over the pass and their pony man didn't know how to cook, but they prevailed on Chandra to cook for both groups.



Chandra at the cook tent with the kerosene stove

Rebecca still had no appetite, so cooking for our group was trivial. But the food is usually prepared from raw ingredients rather than anything prepackaged, and it takes some skill to do. Rebecca realized that it must have been the lettuce, tomato, or mayonnaise on her sandwich that made her

sick, and that this had been the underlying reason for feeling queasy the previous day.

The staff still didn't have a trash bag going. They were burning the paper trash such as the lunch boxes, but they must also have been burning plastic if they weren't carrying it along. I told Chandra how I didn't think it was a good idea to burn plastic. He agreed, but said that the pony man resisted putting more weight on the animals and would burn trash after we left. I pulled a heavy duty garbage bag from my emergency kit and designated it for our garbage and for what I found on the trail. We decided to make this a garbage trek and to carry out some of the trash we found along the way. The Bangalore group heard about the idea and decided that they wanted to help too.

Rebecca and I went to visit the Skyu gumpa on the hill. It was originally constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Rinchen Zangpo, the scholar who translated many Sanskrit Buddhist texts to Tibetan. The structure had been rebuilt recently, but apparently some of the artifacts and art inside were original.



Skyu gumpa

Chandra made a point of boiling water for at least five minutes and gave us confidence that we would have safe drinking water. As an extra precaution, he would boil a pot in the evening, then we would pump it the next morning to purify our drinking water supply for the day.

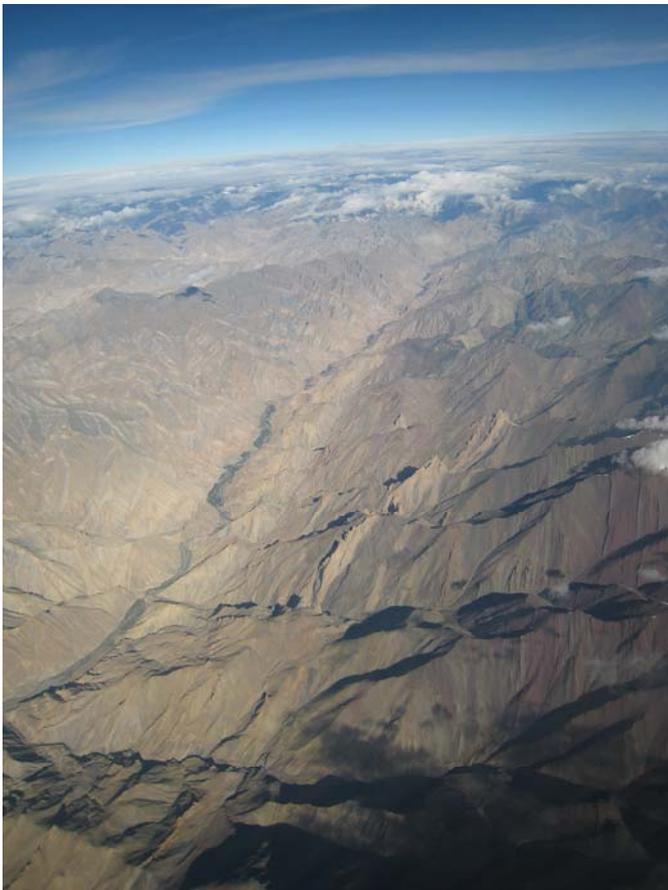
Getting to sleep was difficult. The group of four young men camped a few yards away seemed to talk interminably about their exploits smuggling drugs

across international borders. The outhouse stank, and the manure did too.

#### Day 4: Wednesday 1 August 2007

The Bangalore party's guide still had not arrived. Rebecca and I began walking at 7 and Chandra said he would catch us after helping cook and dismantle camp. We passed another site on the far side of the village that looked better than where we'd been, but it was crowded with a huge group including many teenagers. A good trail lead up the gently sloping Markha valley and we made good time; Chandra caught us in about an hour.

By now we had mastered the most important word in the Ladaki language: "Julay." Said with gusto, it is a universal greeting as well meaning "thank you." The Markha valley is full of small villages and tea tents and we had plenty of opportunity to exclaim Julay.



Markha valley from the air, between the Zaskar and Stok ranges

We passed numerous slot canyons that had been carved by floods pouring down the steep mountains.

We also saw some stone buildings and caves built into the cliffs. Apparently, some of the caves are used to store hay or barley during the long snowy winters.



Cliff dwelling

We also passed numerous mani walls and old chortens, stone structures used to ward off evil spirits, gain merit, and occasionally serve as tombs.



Mani wall and chorten

The Markha river is strong, especially in early season, so several bridges were placed at crossings.



Bridge over Markha river



Boys at a tea tent in the Markha valley

At one tea tent, a boy was very interested in my Markha Valley guide book. He could recognize the pictures of the valley and of people he knew from nearby villages. I bought a package of coconut cookies at his tent for Rs 10. It is incredible that the cookies can be packed in all the way by pony and yet sell for so little.

The Markha valley contained many open areas separated by short narrow gorges between the mountains on both sides. The rock was mostly reddish and was eroded into outlandish shapes.



No caption needed



Chortens above the Markha river

The last river crossing before the village of Markha has no bridge and must be forded at a wide spot. It was knee high in places and the current was swift and cold. The river presented no serious dangers, but the risk of losing balance and dunking a camera was real. One of Chandra's overconfident clients had ruined a very expensive professional camera during a crossing in June when the water was higher.



I filled my pockets with wrappers from the trail and picked up a number of empty bottles, but that only scratched the surface of all the garbage we were passing. How do people get the idea that throwing their wrappers on the ground is the right way to treat such a magnificent place? Most trekkers are Europeans and the Alps are far cleaner. Is it a few bad visitors? Is it the trekking staff to blame?

Villages were learning about taking care of trash. Apparently even large Indian cities lack basic landfills. The rapid influx of plastic packaging has changed life in a culture that traditionally left nothing to waste. The Markha village had dug some pits for trash and students were making signs asking trekkers to carry out their garbage. I was told that the Women's Alliance in Leh was responsible for teaching some of this to the village children.



Sign outside Markha village



Fields below Markha village

We passed two ugly crowded campsites before Markha village, and then walked through the village to an empty site on a meadow on the far side. We had covered about 20 km and We waited more than an hour for the ponies to arrive. Then the boy showed up. He said that the pony man had stopped and unloaded at the earlier campsite because there was insufficient grass at this one. We picked up and walked back. The ugly site the pony man had picked had no better fodder. The horses were again kept upstream from the drinking water supply and the ground was covered with manure. It looked like a power struggle between the guide and pony man and I decided to stay out of it. There was further tension between the two because the pony man was supposed to have brought his own food but did not. Fortunately, with the absent third trekker and Rebecca's minimal appetite, we had a great surplus. In fact, Chandra sent some of the vegetables up to the lamas at the monastery because they would have

spoiled before we could eat them all. I went up to the monastery as well. The views of camp and of the valley were great; Buddhists have a keen eye for picking the best locations for their monasteries.



Camp near Markha village

That evening I asked Chandra to call a counsel with the pony man and to translate into Ladaki for me. Rebecca joined in too. I explained how the valley and mountains were a beautiful and sacred place. He seemed to be impatient for me to get to my point. I said that we were collecting trash and that it was important to carry out the plastic and metal rather than throwing it in a fire. I said that I understood he was concerned about the weight on his ponies and I offered him Rs 200 to compensate for the extra baggage. Chandra said afterward that the pony man was quite pleased. Rebecca and I left it unsaid that the rupees were coming out of the amount that we would have otherwise tipped at the end.

The Bangalore team arrived with their guide in tow. He had suffered altitude sickness, perhaps exacerbated by the alcohol, and had rested a day before hiking hard to catch up.

We had a beautiful sunset beyond the jagged peaks. The color and light in the Himalayas were one of my favorite parts of the trip. I went to bed and slept well.



Sunset in Markha valley

The boy woke me late in the evening. He said that an old man from Umlung village up the valley had found my pack on the pass and had carried it two days down to return it to me. The boy had suggested that the man give it to me in person and likely collect a reward, but the man had declined and continued walking. Everything was in my pack just as I had left it. The water bottle was still full. The integrity and kindness of the Ladaki villagers and of this man in particular is truly remarkable.

#### **Day 5: Thursday 2 August 2007**

This was the best day of the trip so far. Even though the trek only involved about 12 km and 500 meters of elevation gain, we took eight hours and explored numerous sights along the way.

We forded the Markha river in sandals six times over the day. Two crossings were essential and the others were for convenience. In early morning, the water was numbing, but by lunch, the crossings felt refreshing.



Chandra crossing the Markha river

In another 1.5 kilometers, we reached the tea tent at Umlung. With Chandra's help, I made inquiries about the old man who returned my pack, but got no conclusive answer. A boy about 10 years old who spoke a little English volunteered to show us his village and I went in hopes of locating the man. We climbed up to his hillside dwelling, home to his extended family. An old woman was roasting barley in a large metal pan over a fire. We tried some kernels and it was delicious. He took us into his house, which had two stories and a maze of passages. One room was devoted to the family's shrine, and another was quarters for the family lama. There were separate kitchen, living, and storage rooms. He even had a toy, a stuffed animal cat, hanging in the house. I asked if it was his and he gave me a sheepish grin. Barley and fodder were bagged in a storeroom for the long winter. It looked like the family was prosperous and happy. He checked the neighbor's house, but nobody was home. We couldn't find the old man. Back at the tea tent, I bought a bag of roasted barley for Rs 50. The tents sell a variety of locally produced products, and the Women Alliance seems to be promoting economic opportunities for women from the villages.

In a little over an hour, we reached the Techa gumpa perched atop a mountain. If I understood correctly, there is a legend that wishes made at the gumpa come true. If I misunderstood, then there should be such a legend - I know of no more suitable location for a wish-granting monastery. We climbed the winding trail to the summit and visited the buildings hanging off the cliff edge. A young lama was chanting and beating a drum. When he finished his prayer, he showed me the interior. Afterward, I sat outside, took in the views, and made my wish.



Roasting barley



Techa gumpa

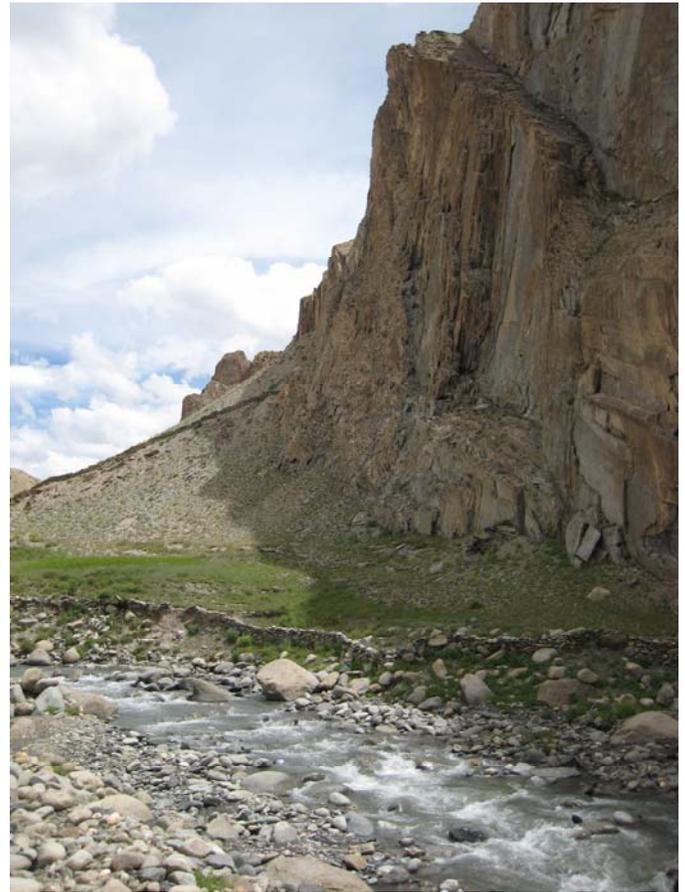
We had lunch at the next tea tent near Hankar, and then climbed up onto a plateau. On a rocky hill between the plateau and river sat the ruins of the ancient fortress in which a king once lived. I scrambled up the steep slopes and through a notch to find the old stone battlements. The main tower was perched on the tallest cliff. To reach it, I scrambled up a short wall, crawled along a ledge, and came to a narrow wooden bridge spanning a five foot gap above a 30-foot drop. I inspected the bridge, then carefully crossed it and climbed another short wall to

a 3-foot tall doorway into the bottom of the tower. In the days before gunpowder, a small group of defenders in this tower could have held off a large army. Inside the tower, I zigzagged up through about four levels of crumbling floors and gingerly emerged on the roof, taking care not to step on anything that might collapse. On the return, I found Chandra scrambling up. He had never been in the fortress and he wanted to explore it too.



Hankar fortress

Beyond the fortress, we passed more farm houses in the village, with well-irrigated fields and many miniature goats. Following the river, we saw a large herd of blue sheep swarming like an ant colony on the cliffs on the opposite side. The rocks were thick with movement; perhaps 100 sheep leapt up and down on the rocks. But they are so well camouflaged that I could only see them when they moved.



Herd of invisible sheep playing on cliffs

We passed another band of mudstone, eroded into mushroom-shaped hoodoos where harder rock caps blocked the rain.



Hoodoos

By midafternoon, we arrived at Thachungtse camp on a rocky meadow. It was another fine camp. The pony men took the stock up into the hills to graze, so we were free of animals. A large rock was perfectly positioned in the river for bathing. In fact, it was so well arranged that I could arch my spine and wash my back without getting my shorts wet! Several springs

provided drinking water. Unfortunately, every depression in the campground was packed full of trash. Worse yet, the hole from which the best spring emerged was full of cans and plastic. In dozens of the little pits, tin cans were scorched and coated in partially melted plastic from where crews had tried to burn trash.

I went to explore one of the cliff bands above camp. It appeared to offer a long pitch of 4<sup>th</sup> class or easy 5<sup>th</sup> class climbing. When I tested the rock, however, some parts were crumbly and other flakes sounded disturbingly hollow, so I opted not to solo anything technical. I enjoyed the view from a perch part way up, and then hiked up the hill to a grand overlook above camp.



View from above Thachungtse camp

When I returned, I helped the Bangalore crew fill our garbage bag with trash from in and around the spring. We had an interesting conversation ranging over politics, environment, and economics. One of the women had spent time working for a nonprofit in Bangalore looking for solutions to waste management in the city. It had been an education for her in dealing with the Indian bureaucracy. They were seriously interested in the EcoPledge notion and we brainstormed some points.

#### Day 6: Friday 3 August 2007

The evening was chilly and it rained lightly for about 20 minutes during the night. The sky was overcast at dawn. I felt chills for part of the night and was queasy drinking my coco in the morning.

We had a short day climbing to Nimaling, a long valley nestled at 4800 meters between Kang Yaze peak and Gongmaru La. Though the walk was less than 3 kilometers and 500 meters of gain, it took about three hours.

Along the way, we passed a pair of small lakes. Though the breeze disturbed the surface, the lake still reflected the 6400 meter snowcapped summit of Kang Yaze.



Kang Yaze reflection

The Nimaling plains are the summer pastures for thousands of sheep, goats, cows, dzo, and yak raised by the Markha valley villages. A dzo is a yak-cow hybrid, larger, stronger, and shaggier than a normal cow, and better suited to the high pastures. As we made camp on the meadow, a woman led her flock to pasture. I was told that the pastures rotate from day to day to prevent overgrazing the tundra.



Leading sheep and goats to pasture

It was too cold to sit around when the clouds obscured the sun. I retreated to the tea tent, then

my own tent with a book. I developed a headache that got worse over the day, and felt lethargic. I alternated reading and napping through the afternoon. By 5:00 I finally roused myself enough to take an aspirin, bundle up, and lumber up the slope toward Kang Yaze. The glaciated summit was especially impressive from this angle.



Yak grazing beneath Kang Yaze

I returned for dinner and my headache subsided. The sunset was spectacular, casting a golden glow over the valley and Gongmaru La. We ate in the cook tent, which was battened down tightly against the chill wind. With several stoves running, I kept alert for symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, but apparently this is standard practice for the staff. None of the staff had heavy jackets and I would have been cold the way they dressed, but they seemed to be fine (perhaps the weather is balmy compared to Ladakh winters).



Aplenglow in Nimaling valley

## Day 7: Saturday 4 August 2007

For the first night, I slept with my winter bag fully zipped. The temperature in the tent was 5 C when I awoke. A few flakes of snow fell from the overcast skies. The high peaks in the Stok range seem to have gotten a dusting of snow overnight.



Stok range from Nimaling

It was too cool to stand around, so we left camp before 7 and slowly hiked to Gongmaru La, arriving on the 5200 meter crest within 1.5 hours. The sky cleared at first and the sun warmed us, but before we reached the panoramic views at the pass, clouds poured back in and socked in the top of Kang Yaze. Unfortunately, the high peaks of Sasser Group in the East Karakoram were also lost in the distant clouds.



Prayer flags on Gongmaru La

The top of the pass was above the tundra line, but the bluish-purple flowers were plentiful. Chandra explained that they were poisonous to horses, and

pointed out the skeleton of a horse down the slope. The trail dropped steeply into the purplish valley beyond. On the descent, we passed a small group of blue sheep cavorting on the hill side.

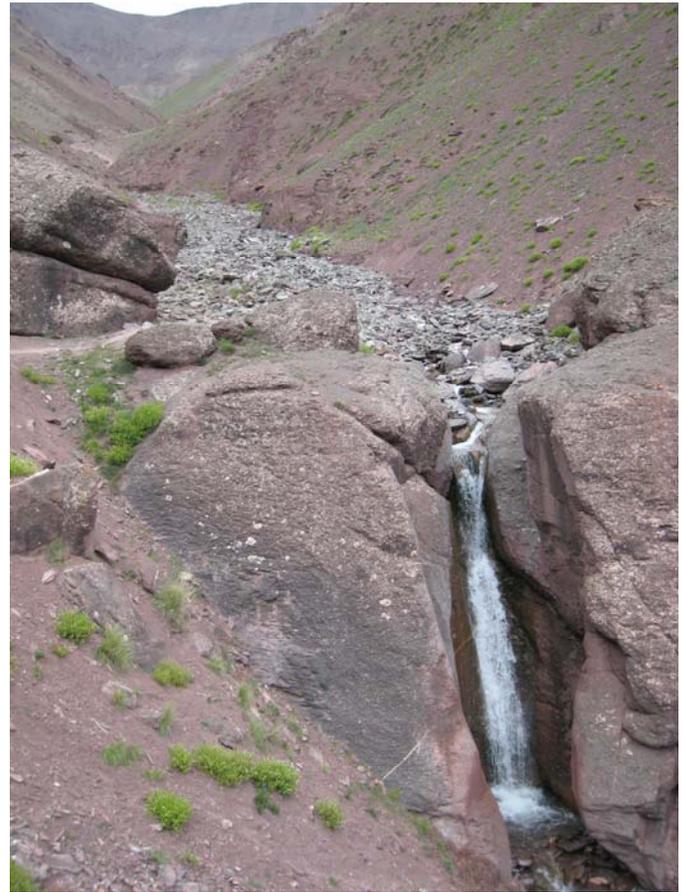


Canyon east of Gongmaru La



Blue sheep

When the trail reached the canyon bottom, we passed a waterfall and beautiful rock formations in green, red and tan, as well as purple. Most rock was in tilted and folded strata, but some was high-quality conglomerate like the Crestone range of the Rockies.



Waterfall on Martselang creek

A team of ponies passed us, but slowed down on the narrow and rocky trails. Two nearly stumbled off the hill side. I eventually passed them and picked my way down the rocky stream bed for a distance to get a change of pace and scenery.



Ponies navigating the switchbacks

Soon we arrived at the tea tents of Chuskyurmo at 4200 meters. A few sprinkles had fallen and the sky threatened rain but eventually cleared.



Rock formation above Chuskyurmo

The river valley widened and we reached the village of Chogdo at 4000 meters. We were nearly back to civilization. Power poles, some metal and some improvised, brought electricity to the village. I saw a solid-looking schoolhouse and inspected it from the outside; only one room appeared to be in use. Just beyond, an old man and young boy were selling subscriptions to keep the school open during the winter. Chandra knew the man from the village (perhaps the teacher?). The man said that there were three children at the school, though this was vacation time.

Chandra told us more of his guiding adventures. On one trek to Anapurna base camp, a client in a big group fell and broke an arm or shoulder. The head guide asked the assistants to escort him to a rescue point, but Chandra was the only one willing to go. He brought the man down to a village, and then ran on to another village with a phone where he could arrange a helicopter rescue. He returned and hiked hard to rejoin the group after the man was safe. A New Zealand woman was sufficiently impressed that she offered to get him guide work in NZ for a season and to pay his airfare. He has been trying to get a visa ever since, but is repeatedly rebuffed because he is young and unmarried.

Eventually, we reached the village of Shang Sumdo where the pony man had established our final camp (3700 meters, 18 km). Again, it was a poor camp with a walk past two barbed wire fences to get water away from the ponies. The boy from Umlung village was at the tea tent. He had hiked all this way with his father, who was apparently a pony man. A garishly painted bus pulled up to the village in a cloud of black smoke. The hood hung part way open and on closer

inspection I found it was supported by a can of mushrooms for better ventilation. Out piled a crowd of people including a number of young monks.

I visited the Bangalore crew in the adjacent camp and heard more about Indian economics. A study for HP predicts wage parity between India and the US by 2037. Professors are badly underpaid and some compensate by teaching badly, then offering private for-pay "tuition" at their homes in the evening where they reteach the material more clearly. We brainstormed the Eco-Pledge. When I returned, Chandra had baked a cake in a pot over the kerosene stove to serve for dessert!

### Day 8: Sunday 5 August 2007

The night was hot and I slept poorly with a barking dog and the stink of the ponies right near my tent. A donkey decided to wake us all before 5 am with enthusiastic and copious braying. It was not the first time that donkey had woken us, but thankfully it would be the last time.

We followed the dirt road down the river, passing a boy and his yak out for a walk. In about 7 km, we reached Martselang (3450 meters), which is the usual end of the trek. From here, a jeep would pick up our baggage and the pony man would take his animals back through the valley. But we decided to walk another hour across the desert to the next canyon, where Hemis monastery is located. Along the way, we saw a crew loading a huge Soviet-era dump truck with boulders from the dry wash. I went over and joined the line with two young women and an old man. One would pick up a rock, pass it to the next, pass it to me, and I would give it to the old man who hefted it into the truck. They were chanting a work song as they went; it had a few syllables and each person was out of phase from the next. I helped for about 10 minutes and they got quite a laugh out of it. Apparently they were bringing rock for construction in a village or town.

Established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and supported by patronage of Ladaki kings, Hemis is the most famous gumpa in the area. The paintings, some old and some restored, were brilliant and fascinating.



Hemis monastery

Hemis is also the site where many young monks are trained. They start as young boys and live in dormitories on the hill. If my students ever complain about their dorms, I will have to show them that the monks have it tougher.

Hemis was a place of curious contrasts. I stepped over an empty condom box on the stairs leading in. The monks wore their traditional red robes, but some of the young ones were chewing gum and one had a red Mickey Mouse shirt instead. An old monk wore a red North Face fleece jacket over his robes.



Dorms at Hemis

We tipped the crew 20% because we were a small group. We gave Chandra an extra bonus and asked him to save it to cover his tuition for his writing class.

The jeep picked us up at Hemis and took us about 1.5 hours back to Leh. It crossed the Indus river and

followed the Manali-Leh road. We passed the International Meditation Center where the Dalai Lama was staying for part of his visit. It was decked out in new prayer flags. The road was posted with unique safety signs:

*Darling, I love you, but not so fast.*

*Better be Mr. Late than a Late Mr.*

*This is a highway, not a runway.*

I was dropped at Kailash and took a much-needed shower using a bucket of warm water. I used a hand-pump in the back to draw water in another bucket to wash my clothes. The seat of my hiking pants seems to be permanently stained orange and red from the rock dust.

I invited Sonam Gyatso to join Rebecca and me over dinner. The Indians were going to join us but did not show; later, we found they were on a rafting trip that returned much later than their guide had promised. We picked his brain about how the EcoPledge would be received and whether it could be sustained after we left. He was enthusiastic about the idea and felt that it was important for agencies to hear that clients care about sustainable environmental practices. We worked out a draft pledge and a plan to run it by large agencies for feedback, and then make copies for all who wanted to subscribe. He also recommended that we talk to ALTOA (the All Ladakh Tours Operators Association) and the Ecological Center as well as the Women Alliance to find sustaining organizations. Our draft pledge read:

## We subscribe to the Ladakh Eco-Pledge

To promote sustainable and healthy ecotourism, we:

- Pack out all nonbiodegradable trash
- Ensure safe food and drinking water
- Train our staff in environmentally sustainable practices
- Educate our clients about the unique and fragile Himalayan environment
- Strive for continuous improvement

We need your help!

Our goal was to create a pledge that was not controversial and that could be good marketing for agencies that chose to display it, yet that would reduce the amount of trash and the number of sick tourists on the trips. We hoped that clients would see the Eco-Pledge and hold their staff to the promises. It should be general enough to cover all activities, not just trekking, and should be adaptable as the needs of Ladakh change.

### After the Trek: Monday 6 August 2007

I woke up at dawn energized to go. I took a walk to the top end of town and around to the Shanti Stupa, a temple opened by the Dalai Lama in 1985. Along the way, I passed elderly ladies walking the other way dressed in their finest traditional clothes. The edge of the hill-top patio proved to be a wonderful place to meditate and watch the sunlight creep across the valley. I then descended hundreds of irregularly spaced steps to the street and followed a road back toward town, eventually wandering through a maze of alleys and footpaths.



Shanti Stupa

I emerged at an intersection near Kailash where prayer flags and a big welcome banner were erected and a crew of monks and the old ladies lined up on the side of the road. Opposite them were a swarm of Western tourists with cameras. One explained to me that the Dalai Lama would be driving past at 8:00, a few minutes hence. I pulled out my camera and joined the swarm.



The Leh Dalai Lama Greeting Committee

The monks had two incense pyramids going, and another monk was burning a heap of cow dung on the side of the road. From time to time he would douse it in kerosene to make it burn better. Periodically, ancient diesel trucks and busses would grind up the road, emitting noxious clouds of black smoke. Everyone, tourists, monks, old ladies, and young kids, would hold their noses and cover their mouths until the cloud dissipated. Shortly before 9 am, a car drove by announcing the imminent arrival of the Dalai Lama. The ladies picked up their flower pots and the tourists primed their cameras. A huge long of police cars and SUVs went by. In one, the Dalai Lama sat in the front, beaming and waving to the onlookers and looking remarkably similar to photographs of the Dalai Lama.



After the auspicious start to the day, I met Rebecca and called the Bangalore crew, who came and met us after their breakfast. Rebecca devoted her iBook to

write the pledge, and we burned it on a CD and printed some copies.

We went to Dreamland, Ecological Footprints, and Rimo. All of the managers were supportive of the idea of the Eco-Pledge and said they would be pleased to display it. We visited several copy shops before finding a Xerox that could produce clean enough copies to display. Then we split up and visited a huge number of agencies. Among over 50 agencies that promised to display and practice it, we received cards from:

Lhari Karpo Ecological Trek & Tour  
Dreamland  
Rimo  
Ecological Footprints  
KangYaze Expeditions  
Shangri-La Experience  
Sky Pillar  
Active Adventure  
Rigo Adventures  
Moonlight Travels  
Silk Route  
HIT Expeditions  
Alps Adventure  
Indus Himalayan Explorers  
Skywalker  
Paradise Trek  
Adventure Travel Mark  
Moonlight Travels  
Himalayan Summits  
Himalayan Frontiers  
Alps Adventure  
Skywalker  
Silk Route Travels  
Wild East Adventure  
Pioneer Tours  
Juniper Tour & Travel  
Gesar Travel  
K-2 Adventure  
Sky High

Only one agency was not interested; the manager apparently was working on his computer and did not want to talk to the Bangalore crew. The Bangalore crew really got into the project with youthful vigor and earnestness and I felt proud to watch them canvass the agencies.

We were told a host of reasons why the Markha Valley was such a mess. The big agencies blamed independent trekkers who just hired a horseman. Some agencies sent cleanup crews at the end of each season and felt that was enough to do their part. Some said that there were too few pony men and they didn't have the leverage to insist that pony men

carry out the trash. Some said that many agencies were owned by corrupt politicians, who were to blame. But despite all of this, all of the agencies we talked to agreed that Ladakh needed better care. Many were happy to hear the message coming from visitors.

We also met with the Women Alliance, ALTOA, and the Ecological Center. I missed the meeting at the Ecological Center; apparently there was some underlying politics and they didn't feel they could help. We met the president of ALTOA, P.T. Kunzang, at his office at Pioneer Tours. He was willing to take extra copies of the Eco-Pledge and provide them to interested agencies. He emphasized the work that ALTOA does at the end of the season in cleanup. He made vague promises to promote sustainability in the future. I had trouble reading what he was really thinking. The depth of ALTOA's commitment may be seen in future years.

The Women Alliance shared offices with the International Society for Ecology and Culture ([www.isec.org.uk](http://www.isec.org.uk)), which proved to be a promising sustaining organization. ISEC already has fliers promoting sustainable trekking and liked the notion of the Eco-Pledge. They emphasize consumption of local food over multinational brands and elimination of plastic packaging rather than proper trash management; they felt that those items should be added to the pledge. N. Louchet, the coordinator at ISEC, was willing to keep copies, send volunteers to promote the Eco-Pledge, and refine and sustain the pledge in future years. I left them with more copies and a cash donation for future printing expenses. The interests of ISEC and ALTOA sometimes coincide and sometimes conflict and I can imagine a tension as issues are sorted out. I hope the organizations can work together to make positive changes in the trekking routes.

ISEC invited me to stay after the meeting to watch a video about Ladakh. The video, *Ancient Futures*, was based on a book by Helena Norberg-Hodge, the founder of several organizations in Ladakh. It argued that before tourism started in 1974, the Ladaki people were self-sufficient and joyous. Now, subsidized imported grain costs less than locally produced grain so farmers are losing their jobs. The school systems are not serving the children properly and 95% are failing. The changing values and cash economy are disrupting society and separating people

from their families and land. If Thomas Freedman's *The World Is Flat* represents an extreme in favor of globalization, *Ancient Futures* represents its polar opposite. Remarkably, both are set in India.

In the evening, I revisited some new friends. Sonam is working on his Web site and was teaching himself HTML from a 1997 issue of *PC World*. He ordered us some cups of tea and I helped him with HTML. Stanzin, at *Ecological Footprints*, wanted to talk more about sustainability. He pointed out some of the difficulties. I sensed that there is much going on under the surface, but his speech was guarded and I don't think I fully understand the nuances. An agent from next door invited Rebecca and me in and wanted to talk at length. A Buddhist monk was with him; I was unclear whether the monk was a friend or relative. The two of them were promoting sustainability by teaching in the Ladakh schools. They were looking for ideas from the West, but I got the sense that they were full of great ideas and only needed the self-confidence to carry out more of their own ideas.

The next day at dawn I took a taxi down to the airport, then flew back to Delhi and eventually back to Bangalore, concluding my Himalayan adventure. The cover story on *Time* magazine was about the bright future of India at its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The back page essay was from a writer musing on global jetsetting concluding with his visit to Ladakh.



Himalayan peaks from the return flight

Overall, the Eco-Pledge created a remarkable opportunity for us to meet the people of Leh and see some of the forces working beneath the surface of society. I don't know if it will make a long term

positive change, but I don't think it caused any harm. If future visitors read this and go to the Markha Valley, I would appreciate reports on the conditions and whether the Eco-Pledge is still on display. I feel some irony becoming an environmental activist in India while staying out of the fray in my own country. Overall, the experience was one of the richest and most rewarding I have ever had as a traveler.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am deeply grateful to my wife Jennifer and son Abraham for their patience and fortitude sending me to Bangalore and Ladakh for the summer.

I also thank all the wonderful people I met in Ladakh and hope that I did not misrepresent their stories too badly.