A scenic landscape photograph of Ladakh, showing a valley with a forest of green coniferous trees in the foreground and a range of rugged, rocky mountains in the background under a clear sky.

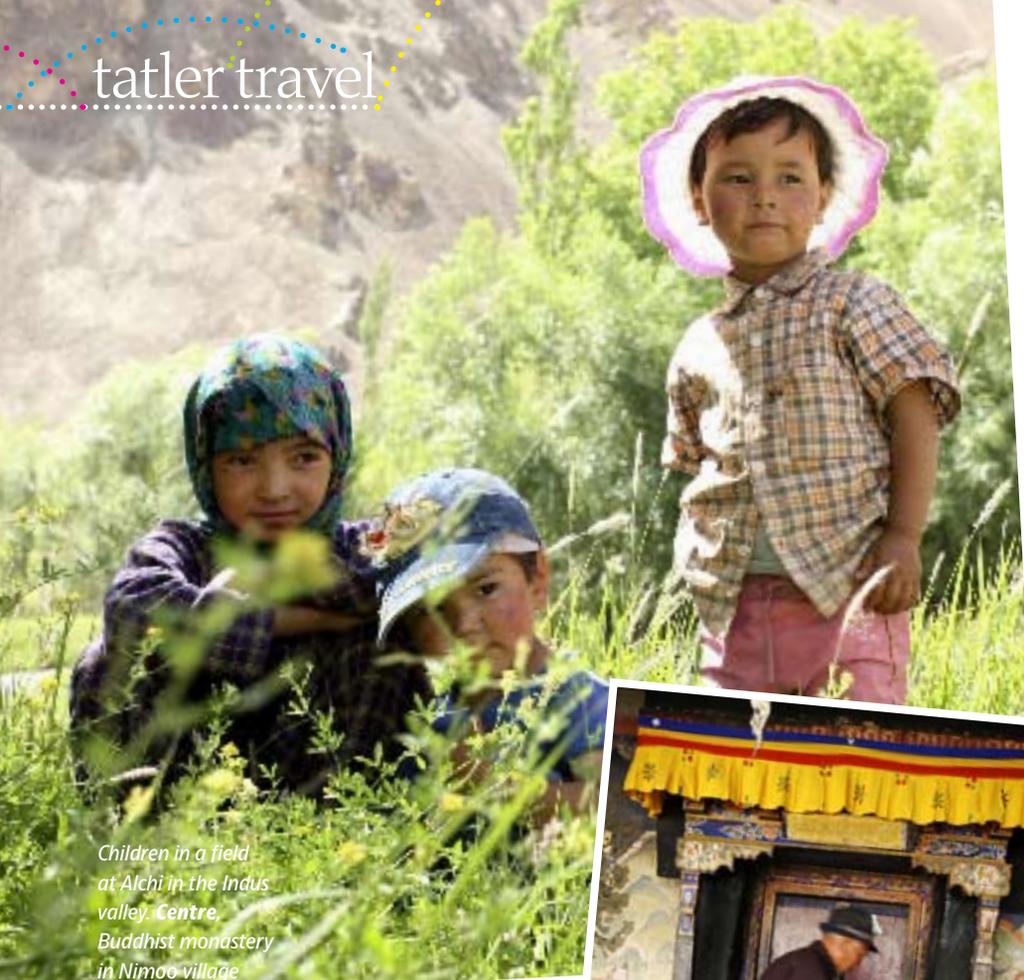
Heavens above

The secret Buddhist land of Ladakh is nirvana for smart adventurers, says Will Gethin

*The Indus valley in
Ladakh, seen
from Stok village*



PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRIS CALDICOTT



Children in a field at Alchi in the Indus valley. Centre, Buddhist monastery in Nimoo village



This is the remote Trans Himalayas, the lunar, otherworldly region of Ladakh – Pakistan to the west of it, Tibet and China to the east. Dubbed ‘Little Tibet’, it’s the last place in the world where Tibetan religion flourishes freely.

It’s an uncharted wilderness with a massive, forbidding landscape that hits you like the sucker-punch of air left in the wake of a speeding train. Once an independent kingdom, it’s now part of India (reached by plane from Delhi to Leh) and the buzz destination of the year. It feels ancient and gentle, utterly at the fingertips of the earth, with a strain of Buddhism that is particularly psychedelic and vibrant. For seekers of edge-of-the-world adventures, this is undoubtedly one of the world’s most treasured final frontiers. Nowhere could be more searing, more soulful.

It’s dawn and, on the top of a ruined wall rising out of a towering cliff, two young boys swathed in magenta robes and Mohican hats blow conch-shell trumpets studded with silver and turquoise stones. As the haunting sound – pwoooooarh, pwoooooarh – ricochets across the desolate plains and snow-capped mountains, purple figures, robes flowing, ascend the mountainside for early-morning prayers. Inside Thikse monastery the monks,

We have our eyes peeled for wolves and snow leopards

aged three and upwards, are murmuring holy incantations. On the walls are colourful frescoes full of wrathful deities being licked by orange flames. Between the tables moves a fierce, cloaked warrior-figure swinging incense like a dark lord from *Harry Potter*. Boys are play-fighting with drumsticks. Little ones with urns of buttermilk scamper up to their brothers to fill their bowls of barley flour. Intermittently the monks erupt into a chorus of chanting, drumming, blaring horns and clashing symbols. And then, a

crescendo, a wild cacophony, a jarring mass of sounds – as the sun hits the sky, the atmosphere inside the monastery hits carnival intensity, like Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

Only backpackers used to make it this far but now a local company, Shakti, is putting this mysterious zone on the map, in comfort, in style – lunch-spots in the shade of gazebos, riding the rivers, picnicking on the banks, staying in romantic Tibetan lodges on the way. It’s a trip, in other words, rare and precious.

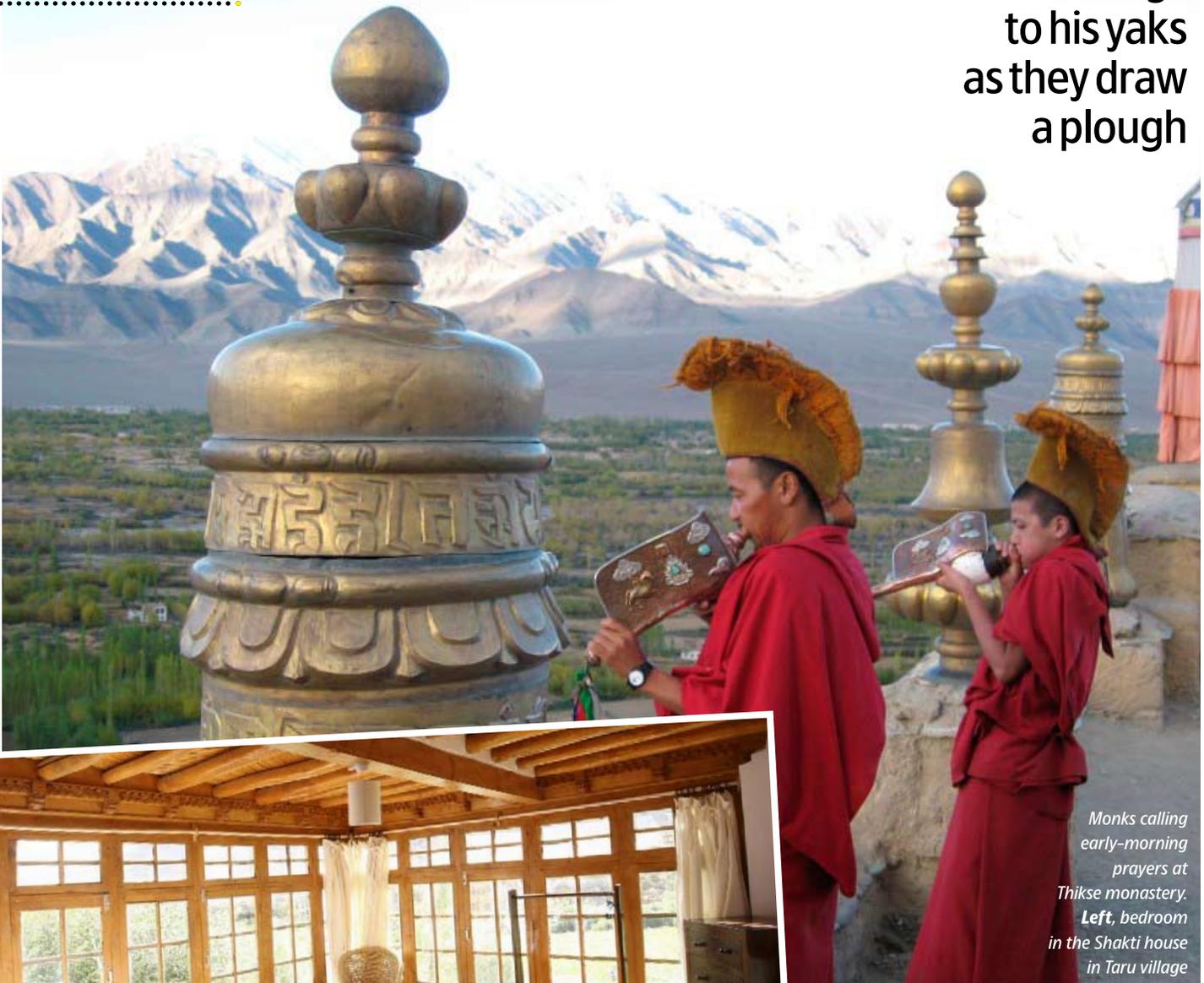
And yet Ladakh’s beauty is bleak – its myriad mountains cut like wild diamonds, their multiple sides rutted by the wind. It is also something extraordinary, a high-altitude desert, one of the largest, coldest, remotest and most sparsely populated regions in India.

In Stok, our first Tibetan lodge is like a rustic Ladakhi palace, with its flat roof, mud-plastered walls and carved wooden lintels. We lie among the cushions on the roof-terrace soothed by juniper incense, fluttering prayer flags calling out to Buddha on the breeze. Below us, villagers are gathering wheat into golden bundles, and furry dzos – a kind of cow-yak hybrid – graze before the yellowing poplars. As the sun dips, the air chills instantly and, weary and short of breath from the altitude, we decide to feast. There are dumplings with almonds and squash, delicious local dhal – banoffee pie for pudding – all served on beaten-copper platters atop candlelit tables scattered with wild-flower petals. What bohemian splendour. That night, as we snuggle under cosy linen duvets, warmed by a wood-burning stove, a fierce wind whips up and the house begins to moan and rattle.

And then, a royal welcome, an audience with the king. Sitting on his throne in the dilapidated Stok palace, is the vanquished HE Raja Jigmed Wangchuck Nymgyal, with his grey-flecked hair and eyes looking out from glasses in different directions. Dressed simply in a red crew-neck jumper and blue blazer, he has an ornamental teacup and a silver-cased scroll placed before him, just so. The palace, built by the Nymgyal dynasty’s last ruler in 1825, has now been partly converted into a museum containing the family’s heirlooms. Jigmed shares his sense of responsibility for preserving his ancestors’ heritage, a challenging task given the family’s diminished power and wealth. ‘I can’t build lavish marble buildings, but I can help conserve the rich culture they created,’ he says.

The village of Taru is reached by a gravel track weaving through boulder-strewn mountainsides and sun-soaked fields. There are scurrying Tibetan antelope, camouflaged against the sandy scree. We have our eyes peeled for wolves and snow leopards but, >

A man sings to his yaks as they draw a plough



Monks calling early-morning prayers at Thikse monastery. **Left, bedroom in the Shakti house in Taru village**



< after hiking through a vertiginous gorge of craggy boulders, we only spot argali sheep and an old man in a skull cap and robe, murmuring mantras and spinning a prayer wheel. 'Jullay!' he barks, his merry face dissolving into a thousand wrinkles.

It's medieval this place, shot through with a roof-of-the-world magnificence. On the river, we go rafting in the Zaskar gorge, crashing through rapids, choppy and splashy, gargantuan purple cliffs like knives stabbing into the waters from the sky. And then, as we emerge, it goes silent, with just the sound of oars working the water, gently creaking. At Chilling village we picnic in a hidden garden away from the blistering heat in the

shade of apple and apricot trees; we lie on quixotic carpets before handpainted low tables listening to nothing but birdsong and the trickling of the streams. Sometimes at night the locals dance for us wearing shiny top hats, dangling silver earrings, fat beads and pixie boots.

At our final village, Nimoo, a man sings to his yaks as they draw a plough, while women dig up potatoes and chatter like birds. Darshi, the venerable village head, medicine man and water manager, in trilby and brown robe – fit and lean for his 65 years – walks tall across the fields, hands clasped behind his back.

People have so little here and the climate is harsh (there may be scorchingly hot

summer days, but in winter temperatures can drop to minus 40 and the entire kingdom is snowed in for six months, cut adrift). And yet, whether they're high on their trippy Buddhism or content on sucking up these mighty vistas, the lush pockets among the desert plains, the winnowing of a successful wheat harvest or the fact that we have now walked where others will most certainly follow, from Darshi's perspective the Ladakhis are blessed with everything they need. 'Buddha says that when you have so much, you should be happy all the time,' he says, and grins. □

An eight-night trip to Ladakh with Cazenove + Loyd (tel: 020 7384 2332; cazloyd.com) costs from £3,687 a person, staying one night at the Imperial in Delhi, with breakfast, and seven nights in Ladakh, full board, and including return international and internal flights with Jet Airways, an accompanying guide, porters, up to three rafting trips, walks and drives. In Delhi, Will Gethin also stayed at the ITC Maurya (tel: 00 91 112 611 2233; itcwelcomgroup.in).