



LANDSCAPE OF THE GODS

First published in *RealTravel Magazine*
Western Magazine Award for Travel Writing

“Don’t forget,” the Frenchman had said. “It is essential for you to go by bus. It takes two days to Leh from Srinagar. You will be tempted to fly there. Don’t. I have been down the Amazon, I have spent five weeks in the Sahara ... and they are nothing to those two days going from Srinagar to Leh, up the Kashmir valley into the mountains of Ladakh.”

From *‘A Journey in Ladakh: Encounters with Buddhism’* by Andrew Harvey.

Precisely one day after I came to the end of Harvey’s exhilarating book I happened to read an item in the *Globe and Mail* about the same journey from Srinagar to Leh through the Himalayas of northern India. Buddha, it seemed, had sent me a sign. There was no alternative but to start making plans to leave.

The 434-kilometre journey to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, the remote mountain area in India’s Kashmir and Jammu state, begins in the Silk Road city of Srinagar. The road was built as a result of the 1962 Indochinese conflict. Fearing expansion-minded China would try to snatch Ladakh into its domain, the Indian government constructed the only motor route between Srinagar and Leh. Its purpose: to convey army equipment and personnel to the isolated region.

Apart from our group of 14, ranging from a 19-year-old student to a 65-year-old grandmother, the bus carried: a driver; a conductor, whose presence seemed mysterious since there were no fares to be collected; a cook with two helpers; and six chickens who rode the roof.

Our leader was Steve, a tall blond Canadian; who moved at the relaxed pace found throughout India. ‘Ensh’allah’ (God willing) was his favorite expression, and is the fatalistic maxim attributed for all aspects of life here. Steve alerted us to the likelihood of much dust and grime settling on us during our bus ride.

When the bags and tents were tied on the roof alongside the chickens; the cook’s stove, pots, and pans stowed in the back; the driver, conductor, cook, and two helpers tightly packed into the front cabin, we were ready to depart.

The bus’s bumps and rattles became a chorus along the road, which climbs a total of 2,326 metres from Srinagar to the top of Fatu La, the highest pass. Along the way yellow and orange signs carried warnings to drive carefully. This one was especially poetic:

*Horn for your life,
Your silence may leave your wife
In loneliness and bitter strife.*

The signs also proudly announced the name of the road — the Beacon Highway. To North Americans, whose vision of a highway is a sleek multi-laned, paved thoroughfare, it seems a misnomer to attach such a title to this primarily one-lane, potholed and often crumbling road.

The bus jogged up the Kashmir Valley past maize and rice fields laid out neatly along the roadside. After a brief stop for ‘chai,’ in one of the bustling valleys, we summoned up enough strength to “ooh” and “aah” over the landscape as the bus pressed on. More conifers were appearing in addition to the occasional craggy peak.

By the time we stopped for lunch in Sonamarg, 84 kilometres from Srinagar, we were surrounded by country that some likened to the Swiss Alps and others to the Canadian Rockies. But as I lowered my eyes to the town’s main street, I realized we were in a place unlike anywhere else. Brightly decorated trucks and buses lined the street. Not only had the decorators dipped their brushes in every colour of paint available, but they had strung tinsel wherever they could.

Nearby a man with a pink turban and bright yellow jacket was trying to sell musk glands to two local women dressed in saris and running shoes.

Sonamarg is the last sizeable settlement in the Kashmir Valley. Beyond is the border to the Ladakh region and the approach to Zoji La, the first pass on the road through the Himalayas.

Outside Sonamarg we joined a host of other vehicles waiting for the go-ahead from an army officer to ascend the pass. As a ‘first-class’ bus, and therefore faster than the other vehicles, we were allowed to proceed to the front of what was now a large convoy. With a blast of the ear-piercing whistle that our driver used liberally, and a wave from the army officer, we crawled ahead to start our ascent.

Manoeuvring a series of hairpin turns, each more hair-raising than the last, the mystery of the conductor’s presence was now revealed. As we inched our way around each bend he leapt from one side of the bus to the other and, leaning out of the door or a window, he told the driver exactly how many inches we were from the precipitous edge of the road. At the trickiest points, when a two- or three-point turn was necessary, he jumped from the bus to wedge rocks under the wheels, while the driver changed gears from forward to reverse.

After an hour of this frenzied activity, we inched 789 metres above the tree line along just a few kilometres of narrow, unfinished track. Some travellers shrank against the side of the bus to avoid the sight of sheer precipices below us. Others peered gingerly out of the windows, while the bravest, swept away by the sheer majesty of soaring cliffs, leaned bodily out of the bus.

When we finally came to the last bend, we passed a small shrine by the roadside. Steve explained the shrine was a memorial to the engineer who designed the road. Soon after its completion, the car he was driving plunged into the abyss. Since this unfortunate accident happened at the highest bend, I couldn’t help wondering if it was indeed an accident. I could imagine that the completion of the road — surely the most monumental challenge the remarkable engineer would ever encounter — had drained his will to live, encouraging him into the next life.

Eventually, we reached a point named the ‘Gates of India,’ where the road cuts through a wall of rock to mark the end of the ascent, and the entry into the pass itself.

After the drama of the ascent, the low, flat plain of the pass is a welcome relief. Though bare rock and rubble make up the mountainsides, upon careful inspection I noticed clumps of herbs growing. These small islands of life among the seemingly barren landscape were the first clues to the tenacious life that abounds throughout the region. When my eyes became more attuned to the subtleties of the landscape, a herd of goats emerged from their camouflage of rocks.

From the heights of the pass the road descends to join the Drass Valley. Meadows appear along the river as the valley widens. It was now late afternoon and we settled on a riverside campsite within sight of a cluster of houses. There was some negotiation between a fine-looking old man with only one visible tooth and our team of driver, cook, and helpers. Negotiations — presumably for permission to camp — went on at some length. Finally, permission seemed to be granted, an event causing great jubilation to a cluster of small boys, fascinated by our every move. Tents were unpacked and erected while our cook, Galfar, started preparations for dinner. The crowd dispersed, leaving only the curious boys to gape and giggle.

Some passengers wandered off to stretch their legs, while others rinsed off the dust of the day’s journey in a nearby stream. As we carried out our ablutions the local boys grew braver and inched closer. In our ignorance we asked a boy his name in the tone of voice used when incomprehension is expected. To our astonishment the lad replied, “My name is Ashrif.” He told us he was learning English at the local school. Young Ashrif was quite able to keep up his end of the conversation, explaining it was very cold there in winter, and the snow sometimes covered the houses. (I later discovered that the local dialect is Hambabs, which means snowfall.) Ashrif also told us the name of his village was Bhimbet, and he’d never travelled below the Zoji La or above Kargil — in other words no more than 40 or so kilometres in either direction. He lingered until it grew dark then melted into the gathering darkness.

After a hearty three-course meal concocted by Galfar on his two-burner stove, we sat admiring a domed roof of brilliant stars overhead.

The whole of the next morning the bus labored up and down steep passes and through narrow gorges alongside a swiftly moving muddy river. Even in this arid moonscape there were signs of life. Log and rope bridges stretched across the river, and faint trails led upwards through the rocks and boulders. It seemed we might carry on endlessly through this immense rock pile when the road burst out into a green valley with a patchwork of fields. Among them was the Shiite town of Kargil.

Once the scattering of buildings was left behind we crossed the religious border, leaving Islam behind us and entered the realm of Buddhism. We soon passed our first Buddhist monastery, or gompa. We stopped for ‘chai’ near a huge figure of the Maitriya (future Buddha) carved into rock, thought to date back to the time of Christ’s birth.

As we boarded the bus after our tea break we faced the Fatu La, the highest point (4,094 metres) of our journey. To get there the road climbs from the valley through a sand hill landscape to the Namika La Pass. The arid features reminded us we were passing through one of the world’s deserts.

This stretch of road is not quite so terrifying as the approach to the Zoji La, but the landscape is disquieting in its strangeness. The mountains appear to have been poured from heaven — their sides made up of light perched between two worlds. At the sign marking the highest point, frayed Buddhist prayer flags flap in the wind. Looking ahead from such an elevation it was easy to believe we were entering a lost kingdom sealed off from the world by the layers of treacherous mountain ranges we had crossed.

A few miles farther Lamayuru appeared — the monastery and its village fit my mind’s image of a Buddhist gompa in the Himalayas. Lamayuru monastery sits atop a huge plug of rock. Tumbled at a distance from its buttresses is the village, whose squat houses border the green meadows at a river’s edge.

As a change from sleeping another night in a tent, some of us opted to sleep in the monastery. In the darkness after dinner we made our way down a stony path to the courtyard, where a monk ushered us in to a long, low room lined with cots. He indicated we should make ourselves comfortable quietly since there were figures already sleeping in some of the cots. He stood and watched as we rolled out our sleeping bags. When we were all bedded down, he bowed once and disappeared with the lamp.

The next day whisked us through more mountainous scenery until late afternoon when at last the landscape began to flatten out. We picked up speed and the ride became smoother. With every mile the mountains were receding, and eventually we rattled across a bridge over the Indus River. Ahead we could see a wide valley and, on our left, the town of Leh, our destination.

As the bus drew closer I could make out the 16th century eight-storey palace of the kings of Ladakh overlooking the town, and the Leh Gompa, perched high above the palace.

At that moment I realized the Frenchman in Andrew Harvey’s book had been right — no other journey can possibly compare to that two-day bus ride over the Himalayas from bucolic Kashmir to the rugged mountain kingdom of Ladakh.

