



Demand for hotels and guest houses with urban amenities is causing severe pollution

Travel with a conscience

Do you travel responsibly, in harmony with your destination? Experts weigh in on how your choices can help conserve Ladakh, which stands under threat from a steady tourist influx

TRAVEL

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

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IT'S that time of the year when, if you are not headed to Europe, you are probably planning to tick off Ladakh from your travel bucket list. Turquoise lakes nestled amidst rugged mountains, ancient monasteries and stupas, rainbow-coloured prayer flags fluttering away in nippy air, water sports, exotic wildlife and the distinction of being home to the highest motorable road in the world — Ladakh makes for an ideal offbeat destination, which is fast catching up with modern amenities for the urban tourist. Sounds perfect?

But that is precisely why Ladakh is no longer the pristine Eden it once was. "A cold, arid region, the Ladakhi way of life is woven around the resources available to its people," explains Vinod Sreedhar, founder of Mumbai-based Journeys with Meaning, whose focus is on taking travellers on responsible trips to Ladakh, Meghalaya, Spiti Valley and other regions, where they live like the locals do, giving environment due respect.

"While Ladakh was a backpacker's paradise mostly visited by foreigners, in the last few years, especially after the release of the film 3 Idiots, it has become a popular tourist destination within India too. This has brought in more revenue, but irresponsible tourism has given rise to a slew of problems that are causing environmental damage and disrupting local self-sufficient economies," he adds.

"In these four months [June to



Homestays are a win-win for the economy and nature. **PICS COURTESY/FARMSTAYS LADAKH**



The Pangong Lake, where the climax of 3 Idiots was shot, is a popular tourist spot

Eco-friendly in Ladakh

- Consider the age of your co-travellers. The harsh climate of Ladakh may not be ideal for a child
- Look at places other than Leh when planning your itinerary
- Travel in smaller groups of no more than 15 people
- Carry your own water instead of stocking up on mineral water bottles. Filtered water at one-third the cost of bottled water is readily available. Ladakh produced negligible plastic waste until recently. Today, beautiful valleys are turning into landfills
- Try to cover feasible distances on foot, instead of travelling in SUVs throughout
- Avoid air-conditioned vehicles and hotels — Ladakh has a pleasant climate in peak summer
- Stick to designated trails, instead of venturing with your vehicle into shallow lakes that teem with precious flora and fauna
- Avoid feeding marmots and other animals
- Consider living in homestays — they support local economy.



A typical Ladakhi mud house

The structures are made of mud and do not require external heating or cooling. Cement and other construction material have to be brought in from far off areas, which adds to pollution

- Eat local fare as far as possible; everything else is procured from outside, adding to the food miles
- Use dry toilets; they are ideal for the region and perfectly functional. With no need for sewage treatment until the tourist industry boom, there is barely any system to cope with Western sanitation, which means all waste ends up in the very streams and rivers that attract tourists

Inputs courtesy journalist and mountaineer Anusha Subramanian, Sonam Wangchuk and Vinod Sreedhar



The interiors of a Ladakhi mud house

September], two lakh tourists descend on the capital, Leh, which is no bigger than five sq km. This onslaught is killing both the city and Ladakhi villages, because while Leh explodes with a huge demand on its resources, the rural areas implode with youths migrating to Leh, leaving behind ageing parents to tend to their farms," explains innovator-engineer Sonam Wangchuk, who founded The Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh and The Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh.

In collaboration with the residents of Phyang and Phey villages, he started Farmstays Ladakh, which aims to take the tourist load off Leh, and distribute it uniformly in the picturesque Ladakhi countryside. It also promotes travelling in winter, when tourist activities see a slowdown.

"Local families play host to travellers, who get a taste of life in Ladakh. They savour regional home-cooked meals, get to participate in farming activities, visit lesser-known places, and spot wildlife, while contributing to the rural economy, which also helps prevent migration," he says.

Both Wangchuk and Sreedhar point out the difference between responsible travelling and mindless tourism. While the former calls for respecting and adapting to local ways, the latter demands the destination to mould itself to tourists, who are set in their ways and wouldn't consider giving up luxuries even at a huge environmental cost.

"People come chasing film stories, and turn villains in the process," laments Wangchuk. "Ladakh needs real heroes."

LADAKH TRAIL HOP



Sustainable escape

Sign up for an 11-day trip to the Himalayas, where you will not only soak in the beautiful landscape, but also learn the sustainable practices followed by Ladakhis, and how tourism impacts the environment. The trip will include a two-day trek through Sham Valley, rafting on the Zaskar river, cycling from Khardung La to Leh, and more.

ON August 22 to September 1

CALL 9819154365 **EMAIL** journeyswithmeaning@gmail.com



A village getaway

When in Ladakh, stay with a local family in the countryside with this homestay. Not only do the hosts earn income from this, but you also get to learn about the traditional lifestyle. Participate in farming activities, go on hikes, walk along the Indus river, and visit the Ice Stupas, which are natural innovations designed to conserve water.

CALL 9622224947 **EMAIL** farmstaysladakh@gmail.com



For and by women

Sign up for a trip through Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, which is owned and operated by Ladakhi women. They organise treks through the Sham region and Hemis National Park, which are led by female guides and porters. The aim is to encourage the women of Ladakh to showcase their skills. You will be accommodated at a homestay, which is an eco-friendly way to discover Ladakh as the system puts less pressure on natural resources.

CALL 9469158137 **EMAIL** ladakhiwomenstc@gmail.com