A diary of a truck ride across Himalayan ranges, a pony trek, and rafting trip along two Himalayan rivers, which is provided as a commentary to...

A Journey To Ladakh

in another time

Frances Jan Scholes

photography by John Blaustein

VISUALS PRESS

For Peter and Michael, my sons
John, my friend
Sarah, a joy, and to Julian, Pete's and Sarah's son
Anne and Sarah
Jake, Tessa, Tegan and Cole
Thane as well

To everybody in the world who is my family
To all my friends at Global Heritage Fund

For Myron, my love

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Front cover: *Much of the transportation across the wild, sparsely populated Zanskar Range in Kashmir is by horse and donkey.*

Back cover: *One of the many gorges the author and photographer rafted along on their way down the Zanskar River.*

Pages 2-3: *Himalayan glaciers feed into the Zanskar River.*

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Leading to Ladakh

This is a love story. I became entranced by Buddhism around 1968. I found a teacher in my hometown, a Zen roshi, which is an honorific title given to an old wise and spiritual man. Soon afterward I fell under the spell of the famous Chogyam Trungpa, a meditation master who was a major figure in introducing Buddhism to the west. It was from Trungpa Rinpoche that I first learned about the mysterious place called Tibet, his homeland and of the recent diaspora of the Tibetan people. When I saw him for the first time at a public hall in San Francisco, he was so alive, that he generated a white aura. And then I met him at Kungpa Gyurme's house. He was there with his wife, and he was totally in love with her. I hoped one day to find a love like that.

I had moved into a Tibetan commune in Berkeley after I graduated. Actually, most of us were wide-eyed Americans, but in the center were two Tibetans, Gyundim, who seemed to be related to someone of high status in Tibet, and Kungpa Kerme, a young Buddhist priest who wore robes the color of plum who quite took my breath away.

For four months, I would bicycle to Mill Valley from Kensington where I was living in a Tibetan commune. I would ride my bike down the street from the Kensington hills, disassemble it at the Richmond Bridge to get on the van, and then be dropped off on the other side of the bay where the bike was reassembled. The process was reversed to go home. It all made for long days, and non-stop hunger. I used to worry every day as I took the bike apart, that I would forget how to put it together again. But I was infatuated and it was fun. It was fun commuting, and fun studying Tibetan and Buddhism with Kungpa, and I was in a wonderful state. From learning Tibetan, to learning how to cook Tibetan foods, together with the prostrations we did upstairs in the temple—it was all so fascinating.

We had two visiting lamas for whom we did 100,000 prostrations, and then meditated for two days. Afterwards the flowers and trees in the neighborhood seemed to radiate beauty, And then there was Chogyam Trunpa, whom I am convinced knew as much about life as I ever will. When he stopped by to see Kungpa and his cousin, I was entranced, and loved the way he seemed to glow. There was also an old lama, who came by and told me I was a tara, the mother of liberation who represents all the virtues of success. I was a "White Tara," known for compassion, long life, healing and serenity. He was a wonderful lama and so old (yet now I must be close to his age).

It seemed easy to fall in love with Kungpa. I was taking classes with him, I was talking to him late into the night about Tibet's history, culture, and religion. It was beautiful. But after we became quite settled into our routine, Kungpa returned from the university one day and announced that he was soon going to Mustang—and he was taking another girl with him. Oh, did that hurt. Kungpa Kerme was going to Mustang, one of the gateways to the Himalayas, and he was not going with me, but with another woman!

That was heartbreak. Yet it only made Tibet even more entrancing. But it did give me some breathing space, and I got a chance to really practice meditation. And, then, my Mom called, and asked me if I wanted to go on the Grand Canyon. She had talked to Martin Litton of Sobek Adventures and he sounded like a real gentleman, she said, and he even said that they didn't need sleeping bags. You could just roll up in a space blanket. She and my Dad were going, and she had booked three places. So it was either me or my sister (and she had two little babies, so of course it was me).

On the river trip, I fell in love with rafting. And I met John Blaustein, who was one of the river guides and already an accomplished photographer. John turned out to be living four houses from my Kensington home. We started to date. And those dates began our affair, and six years later, came a marriage. "John," I said. "I want you to marry me within three months, or I will be leaving."

And then the honeymoon: John had been asked by *Stern* magazine to photograph a Pakistani River and it seemed the perfect place. When we told Sobek that I wanted to go too, they didn't say no, but they said that I could not go on their Indus River trip but that I could go on their earlier, Zanskar/Ladakh trip in India. Ladakh has long had a spiritual affiliation with Tibet, which was a difficult place to visit in the 1970s. Moreover, I had recently passed my bar exams and a law firm I was thinking of working for offered to pay some of the cost. And that is how, I found myself in Ladakh.

Srinagar

34°08' N, 74°79' E

When John and I decided to take a river trip in Zanskar as our honeymoon, we had no idea how high was the altitude, how cold it was, or how remote. To get to the river meant, if we were lucky, a three-day truck ride over a 12,000- and a 15,000-foot pass. If we were not lucky, we would take the truck as far as the road was drivable, and then hire horses to take the gear the rest of the way. The truck ride sounded like an adventure in itself, and was more appealing than the alternative route: a trek over a 17,000-foot pass from Manali, which is the way the other passengers on the trip had chosen.

As it turned out, the truck ride followed by the trek with the horses was the best part of the whole trip. In the brief time we had, we were able to glimpse many of India's different cultures up close.

Our adventure began with flights to Hong Kong, New Delhi and then Srinagar, the largest city in Kashmir. There, we were met by Bob Whitney, an American who would be the guide; he had made the trip once before. A cab took us to the Shaheen Hotel, just outside downtown, where we would stay the night. Srinagar consisted of a cluster of small open-faced shops offering tourist trinkets such as handmade boxes and Indian blouses, little food stores selling dried goods and candies, and open-air markets with fruits and vegetables. The people lived in the floors above the stores. The houses all looked like the witch's candy house in Hansel and Gretel—latticed, ornate and fragile.

The Shaheen Hotel, which stood at the base of a steep cliff, with a tin roof and domed hallways, had, long ago in colonial times, been a hunting lodge for tourists. The rooms were large, sparsely furnished and dimly lit, and smelled musty. Fans hung from the middle of dark, beamed ceilings. The darkness and coolness of the interior was a pleasant contrast to the hot, sunny day outside. We took a short walk in the garden, which was surprisingly well kept, its flowers in bloom. Birds flew everywhere and hawks scoured the heavens. We might have been miles from any city, except for the constant honking horns, which seemed to be a substitute for brakes.

We had dinner in the midst of a lively crowd listening to

American and Indian music and having fun.

We were told to be ready to leave at 5:00, but by 5:30, the bucket of hot water had still not arrived. When it did, that was our shower: I poured water over John and he poured it over me. We tried to luxuriate; it might be the last hot water for weeks.

The next morning the truck arrived before dawn. Our driver, the white-turbanned Omkar Singhan Bali, or Bali for short, was a devout Sikh, and one of the friendliest, warmest people we would meet in all of India. He wore a big grin, even at 6:00 in the morning. The interior of his truck was decorated with every type of Indian memorabilia one could imagine. There was an incense holder to the driver's left, a picture of his guru just above his eyes and a silk fringe all the way around the windshield. Bob assured us that Bali was the best driver in the business. He had to be or he would not be allowed to take the truck where we were going, which was over two mountain passes, the Zozila, at 12,000 feet, and the 15,000-foot Pensila.

We left just as the sun was coming up, carrying five rubber rafts, five wooden raft frames, twelve oars, our sleeping and cooking gear, and food for twenty people for ten days. There would be no place to buy food along the river trip.

Our first stop was Bali's temple. He told us that the temple was holy ground, but that we were welcome to come inside. He explained that the temple was built on this ground because, a hundred years ago, a blind holy woman had regained her sight on this spot. As we entered the temple grounds, we noticed some water dripping from a rusty faucet. Bali said that this was holy water, duly washed his hands and face in it, and then requested that we do the same.

Across the top. Left: *Bali's truck creeps ever higher along the single lane rocky trail. Passing requires negotiation.*
Center: *Permits are proudly displayed.*
Right: *The truck carried seven people and all our gear: rafts, oars, tents, and food, including a live chicken for the first night's dinner.*

Below: *Our driver Omkar Singhan Bali, happy, generous—and always careful*

We took off our shoes in the rocky courtyard and walked up a couple of steps into the temple, where the head guru and some of his acolytes were sitting in the front. We bowed respectfully, then sat down cross-legged facing the guru but some distance away. Bali also bowed beside us and started to pray. We placed an offering with the old guru sitting with his fan of feathers, while three musicians played beside him.

After a few minutes we left, washing ourselves with the same holy water. When we went to put our shoes on, we found a young girl touching the shoes and rubbing her forehead in the dust from the shoes. Bali said this was a very holy act because Sikhs believe that there is much power in the feet and by rubbing their heads in the dust they will gain some of this power. Bali also told us that a devout Sikh, or "sardat," must always have five things—his comb, his hair, which is never cut, his sword, his special underwear and his turban.

Now, we were finally on our way, honking all the way to the next village and constantly swerving to get around the goats, dogs, people, carts, cars and trucks. Our next stop, at Bali's insistence, was a small teahouse where he could drink some "40-mile tea," an especially strong tea that would allow him to drive 40 miles without a stop. (That 40 miles was considered a good distance gives some idea of how fast we could travel.) This teahouse was special for Bali. He had not taken tea at the hotel, because he believed that he must stop at this particular teahouse if he was to complete the trip successfully. All the teahouses consisted of little rooms with cement walls and furnished with wooden benches. They were lit by the filtered sun and by the light from the fires under huge woks filled with grease where

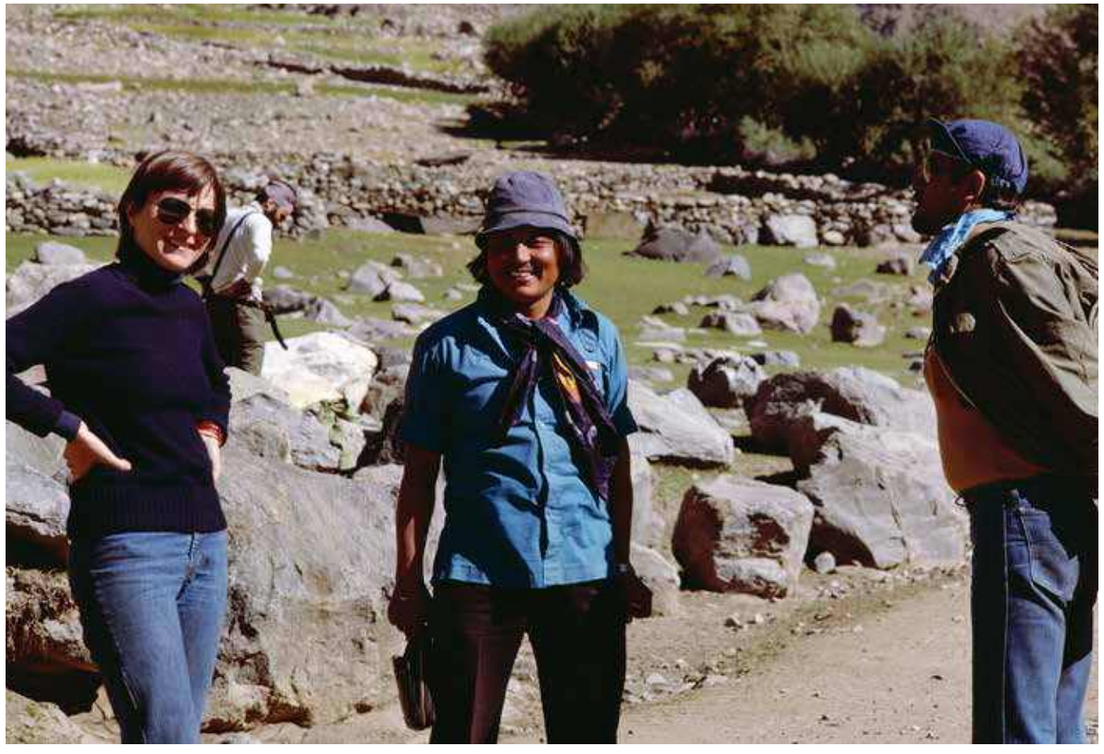
pastries are cooked, and under the equally huge caldrons of tea that are kept boiling throughout the day.

After tea, we climbed back on the truck and drove higher into the mountains, passing nomadic families complete with goats and gear, coming down from the mountains. They didn't look like anybody we had seen. Bali was sleek, dark, thin and cheerful. His assistant driver, another Sikh, was thin, sour and very religious. Ravi, a Hindu, was rotund, prosperous and modern. The nomads, in contrast, were skinny, poor and wrapped up in rags and reminded me of gypsies. Ravi explained that when it gets colder in the mountains, the nomads move to lower elevations. As they passed us, the truck brought to a halt by the animals, Bali teased one man yelling, "If you can't use that stick, let me have it." The man whacked the stick gently against one of his goats, and they both laughed.

Along with us in the truck besides Bali and his assistant was Chultim, a Ladakhi guide who came with us because none of the others spoke Ladakhi. Chultim was a professional guide who had been on many expeditions with Japanese, American and other mountain climbers. He had climbed some of the highest peaks in the area, including an assault on Nun, or was it Kun, a pair of mountains in the Himalayas. Chultim was also the Vice-President of Ladakh district governing council, although one could not have guessed this from his lively, cheerful demeanor. Ravi, a rather upper crust Hindu completed the party. He had arranged the trip and hired the others. This was a pilot trip, and he was hoping to make a successful business out of bringing Americans into Zanskar to trek.

As we journeyed into higher and higher elevations, the country become more beautiful with steep hills covered with pines and rushing mountain streams alongside the road. But the Indian army became more evident, which dampened everyone's spirits. We were traveling along the border where the Indian-Pakastani war had been fought not long ago. In fact, because of its strategic location, Zanskar had been reopened to Westerners only recently. As we left our second stop, where we have eaten "rhoti" (a bread made of stoneground flour) and drunk apple juice, and where the waiter, a Sikh, had squirted some water on a Muslim sitting in the café, an army truck pulls us over. The officer was a Muslim, and he yelled something at Bali who, in turn, yelled back and jumped out of the cab. Chultim, our Tibetan guide, soon followed. After some negotiation, and payment of a "nationalite" tax of 20 rupees, probably for being

Outside Padum, a dramatic wall rises from the valley floor.



foreigners, we are allowed to proceed. We stopped to watch an army platoon doing maneuvers; the men were using ropes to climb up the side of a rock. It seemed ominous. After a few moments, we were told to move on.

Our next stop was a checkpoint where we were told to pull over and wait for an army convoy that was not scheduled to arrive until 2:00 pm, two hours away. We were told we had to wait because the road was so narrow that it would be difficult for two trucks to pass. Since a convoy tends to travel faster than many of the overladen trucks on the road, the army stops traffic at the checkpoint to let the convoy go through first. To avoid having to wait, Bali tried offering the officer in charge "baksheesh," in this case a live chicken we had carried with us in the back of the truck, but the officer refused. If he let us go, he said, he would have to let everybody go. Bob explained that the rest of our party was in Kargil, a town on the other side of the pass, and that they would have no food or tents if we did not arrive by evening, but the officer was adamant: we must wait with everyone else.

When the convoy arrived, Bali insisted that we jump into the cab so that he could be the first truck on the road behind the convoy.

He told us that if you are not at the front of the caravan, you would spend the rest of the trip trying to pass slow, overloaded trucks on the road, which was built to accommodate a single lane of traffic. As we wound up the steep mountain, heading to the Zozila Pass at 12,000 feet along a switchback trail, we saw little markers here and there along the road erected in memory of the people who had died when their trucks fell over the cliff.

The going was slow. Some of the trucks ahead of us were so overladen that it would take them hours to get over the pass. Sometimes they just stopped, and their assistants would jump out of the cab, put rocks behind the tires and then push the trucks up the mountain. To pass these trucks, Bali would creep up behind them and honk the horn; then he would pull out and try to pass. Often the rear right tire would be off the road, hanging over a cliff.

Once over the pass, we were in Minamy, which means "little valley," where the road smoothed out and wound through a broad, pastoral valley. We saw shepherds with their white tents camped beside a river close to the Indo-Pakistani border, while sheep and goats wandered on either side grazing on lush green grass. The army didn't want us camping so close to their activities, but let us stop at a

Left: *The author with Chultin, a Ladakhi guide and the vice-president of the Ladakhi governing council, and Ravi, who had made all the arrangements for the trip. Behind us are stonewalls inscribed with "Om Mani Padme Hum."*

Above: *A convoy of army trucks climbs the mountain heading for the 12,000-foot Zozila Pass.*

Below: *The assistant driver, also a Sikh*

teahouse alongside the road. It was just a wooden hut, with no one inside except for a person serving the tea, and no other houses nearby. We drank some tea and then returned to the truck.

We were exhausted when we pulled into dusty Kargil as the last sunlight disappeared. Traffic was bumper to bumper in the middle of the town. Bali asked Bob, John and me to jump out because it is illegal for foreigners to ride in trucks. The Indian government thinks the road is too dangerous—they're probably right—and is afraid it will be sued if a Westerner is injured.

I had been looking forward to sleeping in a hotel, as a welcome break from camping, but I soon changed my mind. We first tried to stay at a Dak house, which is a tourist hotel run by the Indian government, clean if austere, but the only available rooms were at the Green Mountain Hotel which was also austere but not clean. Our room was just four cement walls. Although there was a bathroom with the room, it had no water, nor could we order any. We did order dinner. When it came, we were unable to recognize the food we had ordered. The "one-half chicken" looked like two burnt chicken livers. And still no water. Ravi suggested that we order a bottle of water, but when it came it had a beer cap as a cover. We didn't drink it, but we were still charged $2.00 for the bottle.

Left: *Local traders pass by during a lunch break.*

Right: *These pack animals are dzos, offsprings of male yaks and cows. They are friendly and lively, sometimes jumping like lambs.*

At 10:15 p.m, while we were still having dinner, the electricity in Kargil went off, as it does every night, Candles were lit. We could tell the electricity had gone off not only because the lights went out, but because the constant hum of the town's electrical generator, which sounded like a nearby helicopter, stopped. John and I wandered back to our room and slept in our sleeping bags, hoping that no bugs would crawl over us. We awoke at 4:00 a.m. and were soon happy to be back on the road again.

Because we had such an early start, there were no trucks in front of us and we made relatively good time. One turn in the road brought us, suddenly in sight of the spectacular Panikar valley. It looked like a green and gold Shangrila. In the middle of the valley were silver mosques that gleamed in the sunlight. And off in the distance were the two 23,000-foot plus mountains, Nun (glass) and Kun (tree) in shades of blue and white. We saw our first black yak and some dzos, which are male offspring of a yak and a cow and dzomos (female). Many goats the size of little dogs wandered along the road.

Our first stop on this second day was at a village in the middle of the valley. After having the requisite tea in a little teahouse built half above ground and half below, we crossed the road to the local police station, which was a simple unadorned room atop a

wooden ladder where we obliged to check in. The police officer, a Ladakhi, insisted on speaking to us in French.

John and I could speak a little French, so we understood when the officer explained to us that although he could speak English, he preferred speaking French. We wrote out our passport numbers, voicing each numeral in French much to his delight, and yelled "*au revoir*" as we left.

The next event was The Bridge. This was the spot that Bali knew would be the critical point of the trip. If he could not drive the truck over the bridge, we would have to rent horses in the village for the rest of the journey and he would have to return to Srinagar. The bridge consisted of just two logs across a mountain stream, with slabs of flat rock resting across them. Bali thought there was a good chance the truck could not cross.

We all hopped out and Chultim directed Bali across, inch by inch. The rocks ground together and the logs creaked, but the truck made it. Bali jumped down from the cab happy and relieved and we congratulated him. It was time for a break and a celebration, so we drank water from the stream, while John took pictures of the conquering truck driver with his sword. We had no time to delay,

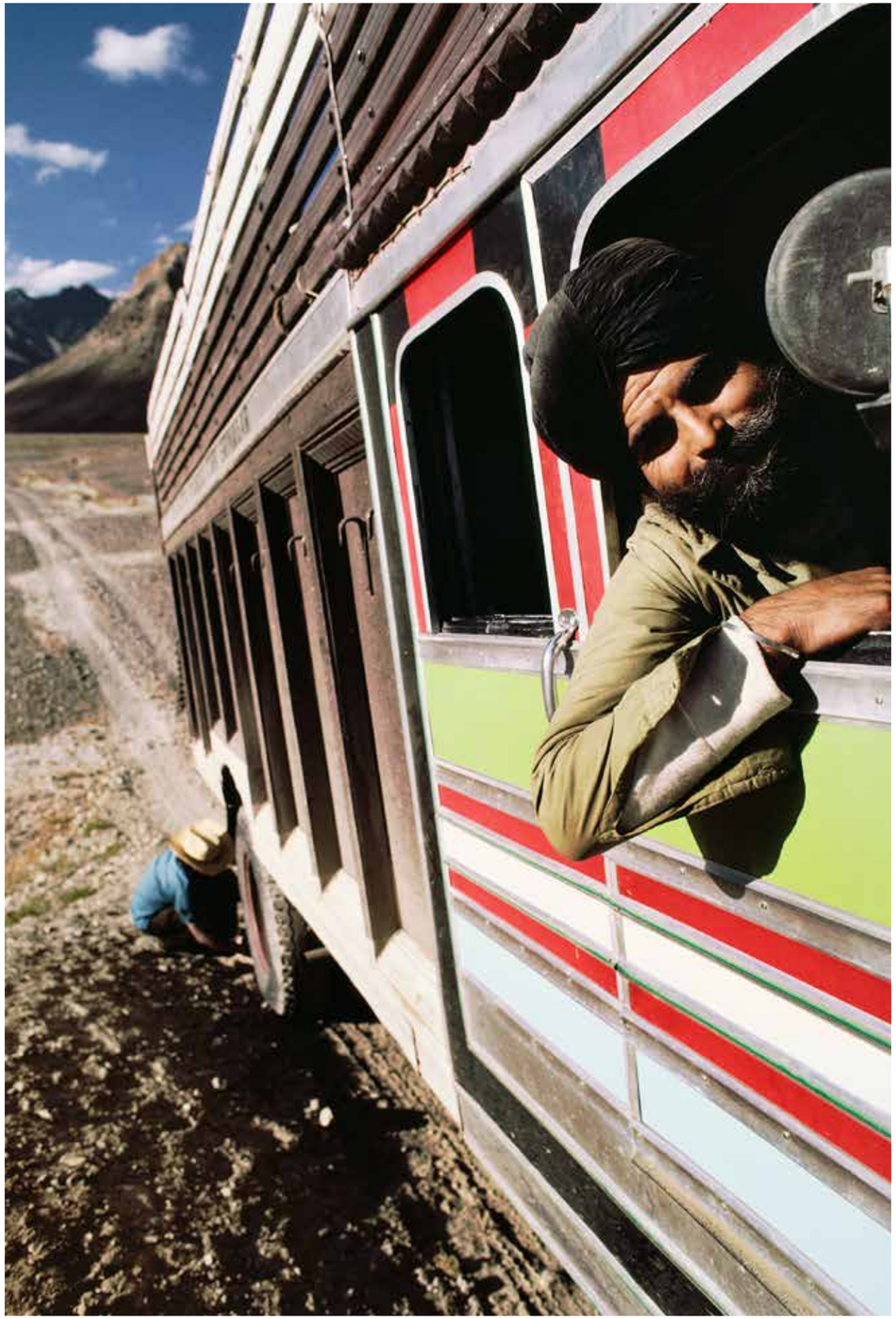
Left: *The Muslim village of Shimani at 10,000 feet.*

Right: *The village is surrounded by healthy fields growing the staples barley and wheat.*

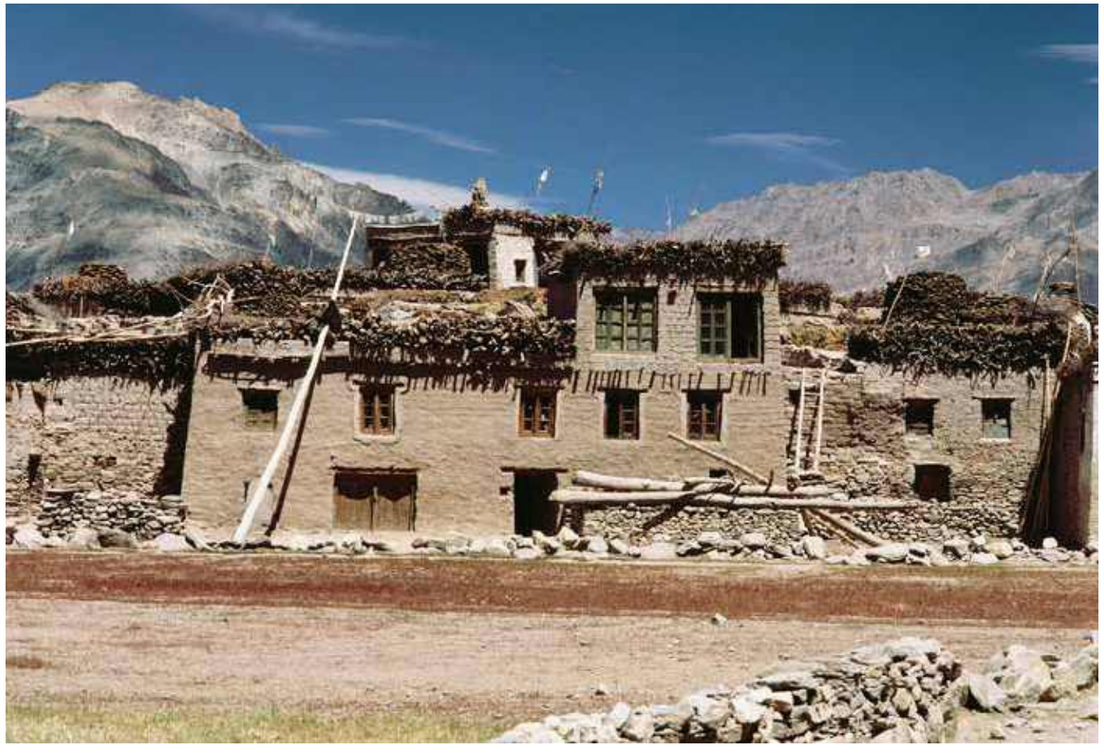
according to Bob, so it was into the truck again and back on the road.

This was the hardest day of the truck ride. Our backs and shoulders ached, and with every bump, our insides moaned. It was difficult to see anything other than the road, because if you took your eyes off it, you could not brace yourself for the next bump. Everyone's sense of humor vanished. We kept looking for Tungri and Bob kept saying it was around the next bend, but that bend would come and no Tungri.

Another turn in the road brought us to a whitewashed village, where most of the people appeared to be Buddhist, rather than Moslem as was the case in Srinagar. There were women on the street, which was a pleasant change from the other towns we had travelled through. They even stopped to talk to us. Also, the people looked different: they were bigger, rounder-faced and cheerier. They also wore different dress. Men, women and children alike wore ankle-length woolen robes, heavy woolen boots and strands of necklaces. One woman had on a goatskin headdress that started at her forehead and dropped down the back of her head. It was inlaid with turquoise and coral. Ravi told us the Ladakhis keep their wealth on the heads of their women. He estimated this woman's headdress to



We creep over the last bridge into Tungri, the end of the road for Bali and the truck. Here ponies are waiting to take us the rest of the way to the river.



Left: *The momo-momo house, a restaurant where we ate momos, delicious crescent-shaped dumplings filled with meat.*

Right: *Bringing goods to Padum market. Wood is scarce and often has to be carried long distances.*

be worth twenty and thirty thousand dollars.

Although it was only 11 o'clock in the morning, the people offered us a couple bottles of "chung," the local beer, thick and bitter, but nourishing and mildly alcoholic. We all drank from the same bottle, while other villagers wandered across the fields to join the party. Lunch that day was potato curry, the best meal we had in India. (Dinner was a chicken we carried in the back seat until it was time to eat.)

The village was made up of small white houses surrounded by fields, which were delineated by stone fences, built rock upon rock in long piles. Apparently, constructing the fences was an act of religious devotion, as the top stones were engraved with prayers and pictures of Buddhas. There were miles and miles of fences with these engraved stones, many with "om mani padme hum," a favorite (but not easily translatable*) Buddhist chant. They are called "mani" walls. Ravi pointed out that one of the reasons for the stone fences was that the stones had to be removed from the land anyway so that food could be planted. Ravi, of course, was Hindu.

Bali urged us back into the truck because he wanted to drop us off in Tungri village and get back across the pass while it was still daylight. Tungri was where we would pick up our horses.

In the distance we saw dark houses nestled into a crevice between two mountains. But here the road ended abruptly at a wide river. A bridge, similar to the one we had previously crossed, spanned the river, but it was much flimsier and only fit for people and horses. No trucks could go over it, although there were some carpenters who were working to improve it. Bali turned the truck around and we unloaded.

Chultim wanted to return with Bali because his sister was in the hospital in Leh, the capital city of Ladakh, and he was anxious to see her. Bob was annoyed because if Chultim left, we would be in Ladakh without anyone who spoke the language. A compromise was reached. Chultim agreed that he and Bali would stay with us that evening and make sure we got off safely in the morning. He then arranged to have the Tungri villagers bring twelve ponies at 3:00 a.m.

** According to Buddhism, it is good to recite the mantra Om mani padme hum, but while you are doing it, you should be thinking on its meaning, for the meaning of the six syllables is great and vast. The first, Om symbolizes the practitioner's impure body, speech, and mind; it also symbolizes the pure exalted body, speech, and mind of a Buddha. The path is indicated by the next four syllables. Mani, meaning jewel, symbolizes the method: the altruistic intention to become enlightened, compassionate, and loving. The two syllables, padme meaning lotus, symbolize wisdom. Purity must be achieved by an indivisible unity of method and wisdom, symbolized by the final syllable hum, which indicates indivisibility.*

Tungri

33°55' N, 76°98' E

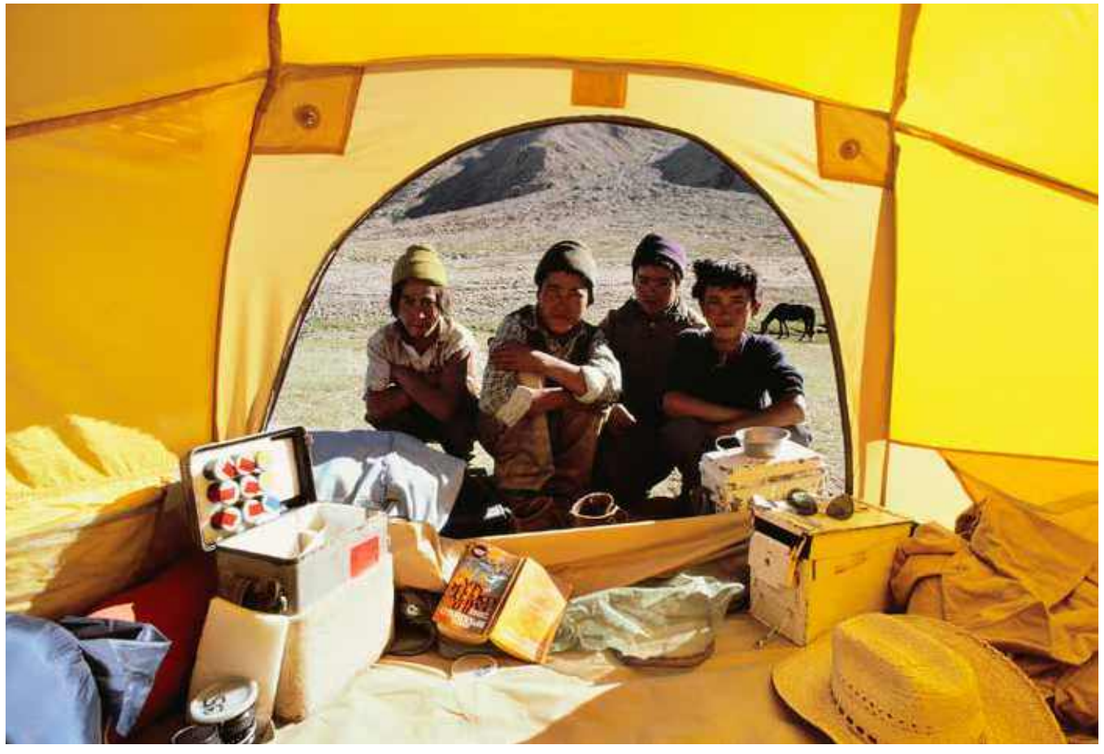
Come the dawn, there were eight horses and one villager. We started to pack. Chultim had warned us that the Tungri horses are notoriously unruly. We loaded the eight horses with the oars and two of the rafts, but still had three rafts, black bags, four stoves, four ice chests, five raft frames, 20 life jackets and our gear to go. It was clear that even twelve horses, four more having joined the original eight, could not carry all our equipment. Moreover, the horses were objecting strenuously to the burdens, exhibiting their famous Tungri tempers by rolling on the ground complete with their loads. We added two more horses, but that still wasn't enough. Bob sent for more. Meanwhile, the horses that had been loaded grew restless and began the journey to Padum without us—or anyone.

The Ladakhi children ran after them and pulled them to the ground. Then they led them back to the little peninsula formed by a meander in the river where we were still loading new horses. John held two horses, as I held two others, each one pulling in a different direction. The children held some more, but the rest of them wandered around and kept falling over because the gear was so heavy.

Suddenly, one of the horses bolted, and then another, By the time the children got to them, one had turned over on his back with a pack and two ice chests full of eggs. Then a pony laden with oars fell over. Bob finally told Chultim that we needed still more horses. So we took the horses back to the beach, unpacked them while we waited and let them go. One immediately jumped into the river and tried to swim across and her colt tried to follow her. The children headed the colt off to the side just in time, while the mare struggled across the icy water, only her head sticking out above the waves.

By this time, the Ladakhis in charge of the horses were afraid they were going to lose some of them, so they said they would return tomorrow with 24 horses, enough for the luggage but not for us to ride. We would walk all the way to Bardan Gompa, our destination eighteen miles away.

We unpacked our bags and put up the tent again, to spend the day on our little peninsula along the Dorda River. We rested, and visited with the young boys and two girls going about their daily



business, which was picking up yak dung from the hillsides and putting it in baskets on their backs. Because there is so little wood in Ladakh, the Ladakhis must import wood from the other side of the mountain, but their basic fuel is yak dung, which they dry and burn in fires. There is an art to building a yak dung fire, which consists of placing the dung in a circle around sticks, lighting the sticks and putting each piece of dung on top of the fire until it starts to burn. The dung burns slowly but gives off much heat. By the time we left Ladakh, we had become adept at building yak dung fires.

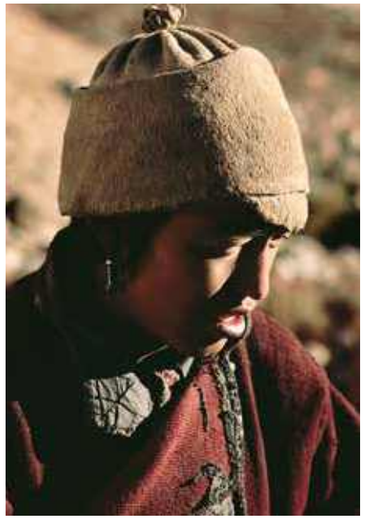
One of the little girls, Chiri Drokal, joined me to watch me write my diary. She looked at what I was doing, and I gave her some cream, which she rubbed on her face. Her brother came over and we had a stone-skipping contest. He tried to communicate, and when I didn't understand, looked very thoughtful and tried again. There was a big space between us. It was like seeing someone you care for very much after a long absence. But that shadow passed, and we talked—told each other our names and rubbed hand cream into our hands. I couldn't get over how rough and tough their skin is. My skin was beginning to look like it too. It's a rough life out there.

The pony men who were going to travel with us the next day

Left: *While we wait for ponies our new Ladakhi friends try to converse, and, above, teach me how to make a yak dung fire.*

were camping nearby. Their gear consisted of some thick old rugs and blankets, which they drew up around their shoulders as they cuddled in fetal positions for warmth. For dinner, they brought out a big pot, which they filled with water and boiled over a fire. Then, the father of one of the pony boys pulled a cloth bag from his hip and emptied flour into the water. We were told this was "*tsampa,*" barley flour used to make everything from tea to porridge. Tonight it was porridge, which all the boys scooped into their cups and drank. As a final touch, the father added some yak butter for additional nourishment. Despite this unvarying and meager fare, none of the Ladakhis looked undernourished or even particularly thin.

The next day was an early start. There was excitement in the air, because we had the feeling that the day could not be as frustrating as the previous one; there was more organization and more horses. John woke up at 4:30, and lit a fire from the embers of the night before. There were three little pony boys huddled in their blankets where the fire had gone out. They stretched and smiled and climbed out from underneath the ancient rugs that smelled of many fires and of many horses too, since the blankets double for saddle blankets during the day. Although we thought we were experts at dung fires,

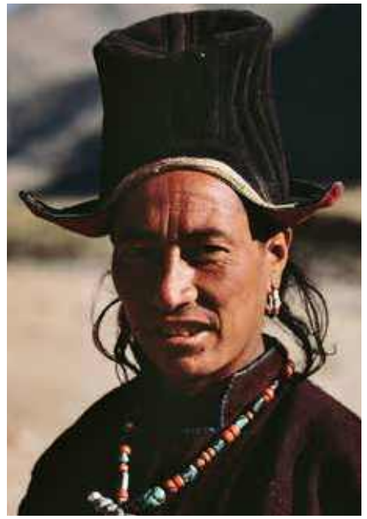


the boys laughed when they watched John trying to start the fire and ran towards the river to pick up a few more sticks to kindle the blaze. The hills were dark blue as a white yellow sunlight began to streak through the eastern valleys. The morning air was cold and clean, and the fire was a welcome companion.

As we sat around the warmth, everyone sniffling, we could hear more horses approaching. Up the hill, we saw a cloud of dust and the tinkle of pony bells. When they arrived we had twice as many horses as the day before, so the loads were much smaller. When eleven horses were loaded, it seemed best to get on the road, because even with the lighter loads, the ponies were getting restless. So with eleven horses starting the trip to Padum by themselves, Bob ordered Ravi and me go with them and to keep our eyes open. Chultim had warned us that we should keep a circle around the ponies and the pony boys as one of the Ladakhis might try to run off with some of our gear. So with this suspicion (which was difficult to entertain because of the good nature of the Ladakhis we had met) and my nervousness growing as John grew smaller and smaller against the mountains, Ravi and I trudged off. The path was a dusty road, no more than a smudge on the valley floor. I had no idea where we were going except we seemed to be headed straight down the valley towards a wall of mountains.

The first break in the road was at a little village of whitewashed houses. The road and the houses were tidy and so quiet it seemed like no one was home. Although we were walking right next to the houses, no one looked out and no windows opened. The village ended and the road returned to being a vague trail along the





The open friendly faces of Ladakh. We did not see many girls in the villages. These two beautiful sisters were the exception.

middle of the valley. Abruptly, a mountain stream appeared, blocking our path. Without missing a step, the ponies plunged in to swim and wade across while the pony men rolled up their pants. John, who had caught up with me, and I both just looked. We had on our Levis, and we felt it would be impossible to walk with wet levis or, in my case, to take them off. So we were relieved when one of the pony boys shouted to us to follow him. He pointed to a precarious bridge much farther up the stream. It hung twenty feet above the water, swinging from woven ropes. But it looked more inviting than the stream.

We climbed up along the side of the river to the bridge. Unlike on the valley floor, here there were enormous boulders to walk around and clamber over. As we climbed higher, we could see the horses as dots crawling through the valley ahead of us and behind us. The bridge swayed and bounced as we walked across. Once on the other side we were out of sight of the ponies we were guarding, but we could see the second pack of ponies just then crossing the river.

We climbed back over rocks to a trail which we followed until it joined the main road along the valley floor, where we were relieved to see the first pack of ponies grazing in a green marsh below and the pony men, who had deftly scampered ahead through the rocks, waving at us to hurry up.

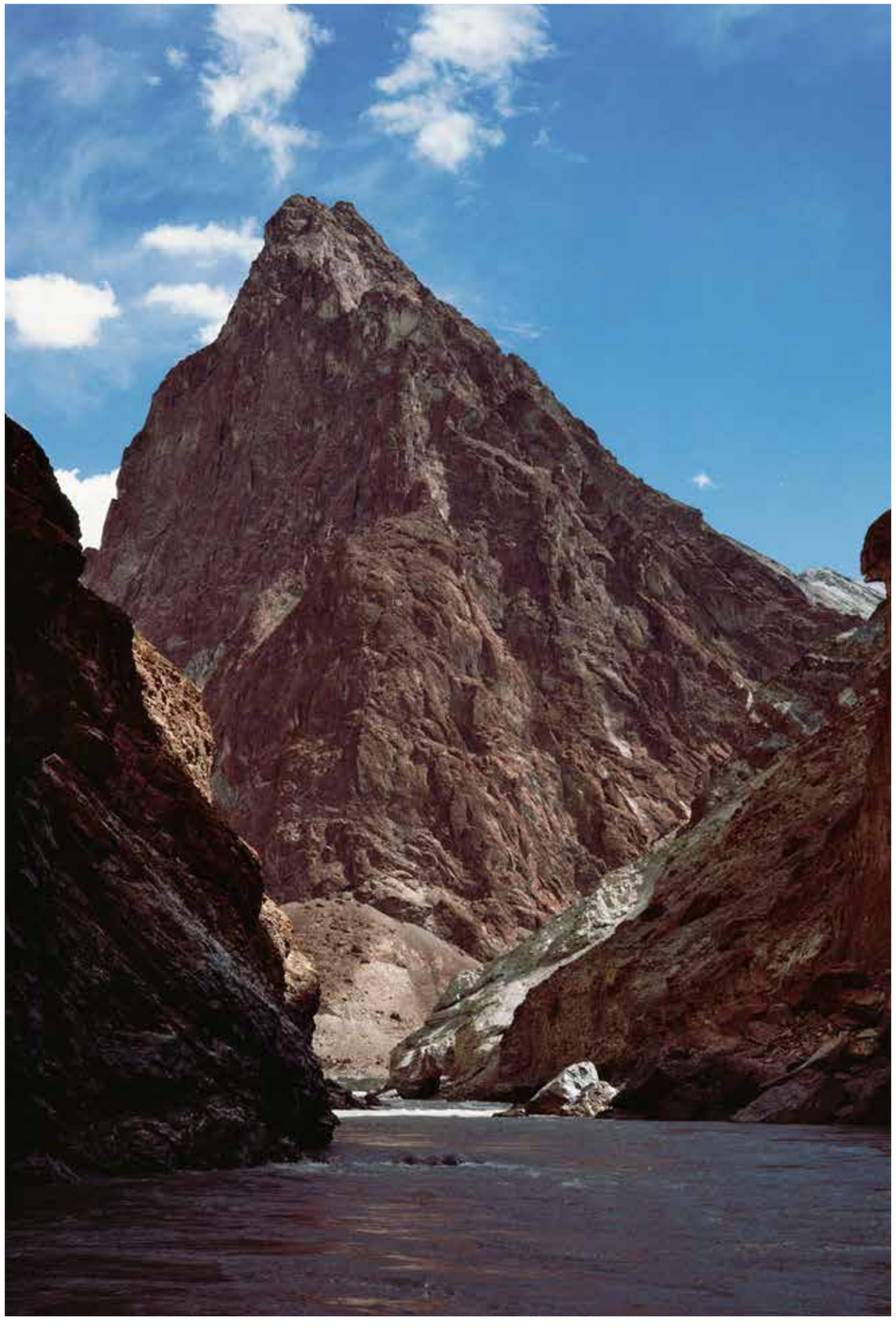
We walked as fast as we could and arrived just as the second pack of ponies was joining the first group. All of the ponies needed water and fodder. As they grazed, we counted them to be sure they were all there. We had started with 23 but there were only 22. Were

Huge wooden planks such as these, transported many miles on foot, are very valuable and used to build bridges.

It took two days to round-up the 24 ponies we needed to transport our boats, food and camping gear over the last few miles. The animals were not accustomed to these loads. One tried to roll over and get rid of his load of eggs. Another pony lay down on an uninflated raft when it slipped round under its stomach.

we hallucinating, or had Chultim's advice been wise? The horses kept shifting while the sunlight was so brilliant that the images of the animals kept wavering and shifting against the bright green grass and reflecting silver puddles of water. We finally figured by trial and error that we had 22 ponies, so, which one was missing?

The loss should have upset us, but we just decided to keep walking. After checking out each of the ponies as we trudged along, Bob figured out that the missing pony was carrying two of the rubber rafts. That, at least meant we didn't have to worry about the possibility that one of the Ladakhis had taken the pony and absconded. Certainly no Ladakhi would want rubber rafts; they didn't even know that we were going to take boats down the river, and they probably wouldn't understand why anyone would want to. The more logical explanation was that the pony had drifted behind the rest because of the weight of its load.



Padum

33°47' N, 76°88' E

The procession continued. We were told we were approaching Padum, the capital of Zanskar. At least we had been told that it was the capital, but we saw nothing to suggest we were close to anywhere special. Only the roadside becoming greener and lusher, and we began to see people working nearby. The greenery must have been barley, the staple of the region, since we saw ladies in their long robes pulling the long stalks out of the ground. Children ran to the roadside to watch us pass, and soon men, women and children were raising their hands to wave in greeting and shout "*Jule!*" Jule is the most important word in the Ladakhi language. It means "hello," "goodbye," "thank you" or "how are you," depending on the context. To us, it was like a talisman—whenever we waived and shouted "*Jule,*" people responded with smiles and interest. Using the word seemed to indicate our goodwill.

Rather than an enchanting fairy city, Padum was a town of crumbling dwellings built on a pile of rocks. The town was slightly higher than the valley floor, but not high enough to give it any strategic advantage. Its architecture was as bare and uninteresting as the rocks on which the town rested.

Padum, however, was located in the middle of our path. There was no way around the town, only through it. I wondered why it was placed where it was. Historically, Zanskar must have been important strategically, yet the culture seemed to have been undisturbed for the past 2,000 years. The story we were told was that Buddhism had been introduced in 200 B.C. and had thrived in the region. Either Padum as the capital served its purpose in protecting the region, or nobody, including the Chinese or the Tibetans wandered by to test its mettle. The Tibetans of course must have had some influence (or was it the other way around?) since the language, food and dress of the regions are so similar.

So there was Padum, sitting on its little pile of stones, the whitewashed houses indistinguishable from the stones themselves. And there was not much action in the noonday sun. Just one uniformed man standing in the road in a military outfit of beige khaki. He asked us for our travelling permit and where we were going.

We traversed over mountain passes and across ancient bridges.

The young pony men always came to our rescue, while the pony bells played beautiful music.

Bob handed him the permit and explained that we were going two miles further up, to Bardan Gompa, where we would begin a river trip with our rafts down the Lingti Serub Chu, which then flowed into the Zanskar River, back past Padum, through the wild countryside and then into the upper Indus River.

"Oh no," he said, "You can't do that."

"But why not?" asked Bob, "We have our permit."

"But you can't do it, it's impossible."

"What do you mean 'impossible'?" we asked.

"Well," he said, "No one has done it before, and you can't take a boat down the Lingti, the waves are too big."

Bob smiled. "But we can do it. We did it last year and we'll do it this. That's our business."

The King of Crime, as he called himself, looked dubious.

"Can I watch?" he asked.

"Of course," said Bob. "We'll be coming through Padum in three days. It will be about noon. Just look for us."

We then asked him who he was. It turned out that he was the local constable, sent there by the government of Kashmir to keep the peace. He showed us that he carried no gun, but said he did own one and that there were very few in Ladakh. His main job was to be sure that visitors to Zanskar did not get lost.

We asked the King of Crime where the local restaurant was. He pointed to a dusty street, at the end of which was a handmade wooden ladder. "At the top of the ladder," he said.

We climbed the ladder to three small rooms, all of which had a small balcony. In one of the rooms there was a low wooden table, which everyone was huddled around. We ordered tea and momos, a crescent-shaped dumpling stuffed with meat. While we were eating, the King of Crime climbed up the stairs to join us. He and another official wanted to see our passports. Bob had his passport with him, but John and my passports were packed with our gear, which was on its way to Bardan Gompa with the pony men who had passed through Padum and were then lunching outside of town. So we made up passport numbers and gave them to the King of Crime. He was perfectly satisfied.

Once we stopped, we realized how tired we were. My legs tingled as we sat around the table and sipped tea. Bob asked the King of Crime if he could find us some horses. Of course he could, and he disappeared out the door and down the ladder. A while later,

we heard the tinkle of pony bells and a shout below, and there were two horses. Unfortunately, there were three of us who wanted to ride—Ravi simply refused to.

"No problem," said Bob to John. "I'll take one horse and you and Jan take one. The pony men will catch up to you on the trail with a third."

With that, he and Ravi took off, leaving us behind with one horse, almost no money, and no idea where we were going, other than to Bardan Gompa. So John and I started up the hill with our horse. We figured that we had to go through town in the opposite direction from which we had come. There were two paths, however, so we chose the most worn. I was worried because we were taking off with someone's horse in a strange country. Surely we would be caught and tried as horse thieves. I had heard the Ladakhis placed a high value on their horses.

John let me ride first. It was slow going—we kept watching over our shoulders for the man who owned the horse, and the horse itself insisted on picking its steps like a prima ballerina. As we continued, a little boy and a white pony came running around a corner behind us. The boy and pony were followed by a man who was running after them, his red robes flapping behind him. John and I tried to explain that we had left Padum because we did not want to get too far behind the rest of our party. The man did not understand because we had no common language. But John tried one of the universal languages, money, and the man calmed down. We paid him 100 rupees, about $8.00, which was expensive, but neither he nor we had any change. The man then indicated that he and the boy would travel with us to Bardan Gompa so that they could bring the ponies back to Padum. John and I were relieved, since there could be no question but that he knew the way. The horseman grabbed the reins of my horse, the little boy took the reins of John's horse, and we proceeded up and down along the path.

The hillside petered out, and from our perches we could see a green marsh, glistening with water and filled with goats, sheep and yaks all munching on the lush grass. The horses sniffed expectantly. They were tired and wanted to stop, drink and graze. As we reached the marsh, the little boy ran off with our water jugs. Both John and I would have loved to have drunk the water too as our throats were parched, but we shook our heads when the jugs were offered us. We could not risk getting sick at this early stage of the trip.

Bob Whitney was in charge of our expedition. The trek was slow going, but we had learned there was no point in hurrying.

Across the river from the marsh, we could see the town of Skala, a small village on the side of the mountain. A waterfall cascaded down the rocks and through the trees to the right of the town. Once the ponies and our companions had refreshed themselves, we were on the road again. On the other side of the marsh, the hills arose once more and we began to climb until in front of us we saw a group of ponies scattered along the path and the hillsides. Bob and some of the original pony men were wandering behind them off the path, muttering to themselves. Some of the ponies seemed disinclined to move, at least not in the direction we were traveling. The pony men were doing their best trying to restore discipline, but without much success. Bob told us that he had rounded a corner to find a horse asleep on the side of the hill on top of an uninflated rubber raft. The raft had shifted from the horse's back to its belly, and it had just sat down and made itself comfortable.

Now that we had arrived, Bob decided to let us bring up the rear, as he trotted ahead to help the pony men organize the party. So John and I became pony men ourselves, shouting "*shot*" and "*adazo*" ("hurry up," I assume) at the horses, and running up the hillsides to chase them down on to the path. We were moving along at a lively pace when the ponies ran into a pair of yaks, wandering down the path at their own pace. We tried to coax them out of the way, but they were slow to understand our gestures and shouts. Eventually, that obstacle was cleared, but then the trail dipped down to a stream that was rushing across the path. The road continued across the stream by means of a bridge made of logs and filled in with loose, large boulders. The ponies we were riding crossed the bridge without a second thought, but some of the other ponies that were carrying gear refused to cross. John stayed behind to coax them while I continued on with the horseman and the little boy.

Suddenly I heard our horseman behind me yelling. I turned around to see him waving at me and pointing up the hill. I stood up trying to determine what he was so frantic about, but all I could see was a cloud of dust. Then I heard a rock tumbling down the hill and I started to run towards him. A second rock bounced right beside me, missing my head by inches. I could feel the breeze it created as it whizzed by. When I reached the horseman, he pulled me down beneath a large boulder where he and the little boy were huddled. When the dust cleared, he pointed out a herd of sheep and goats at the top of the ridge. As they moved, they had disturbed the rocks

We arrived at the beach where we were to begin the raft voyage. But first we had to wait for the rest of the group who were hiking over the mountains.

and sent them tumbling. After the goats and sheep moved on, the horses at the bridge finally decided it was safe to cross. We waited for them to catch up to us, and then our little caravan started off again.

As we rounded the next corner, we caught sight of the monastery of Bardan Gompa, perched high on a cliff, the striking sunlight setting it apart from the rest of the barren hillside. Our destination was the river that rushed below the cliff. The road dipped to the river and there was a small beach where we would embark. Here we would wait for the rest of the members of our river trip, who were trekking from Dharmeala across a 17,000-foot pass. We expected to see them coming down the trail from the other side of Bardan Gompa in three days time.

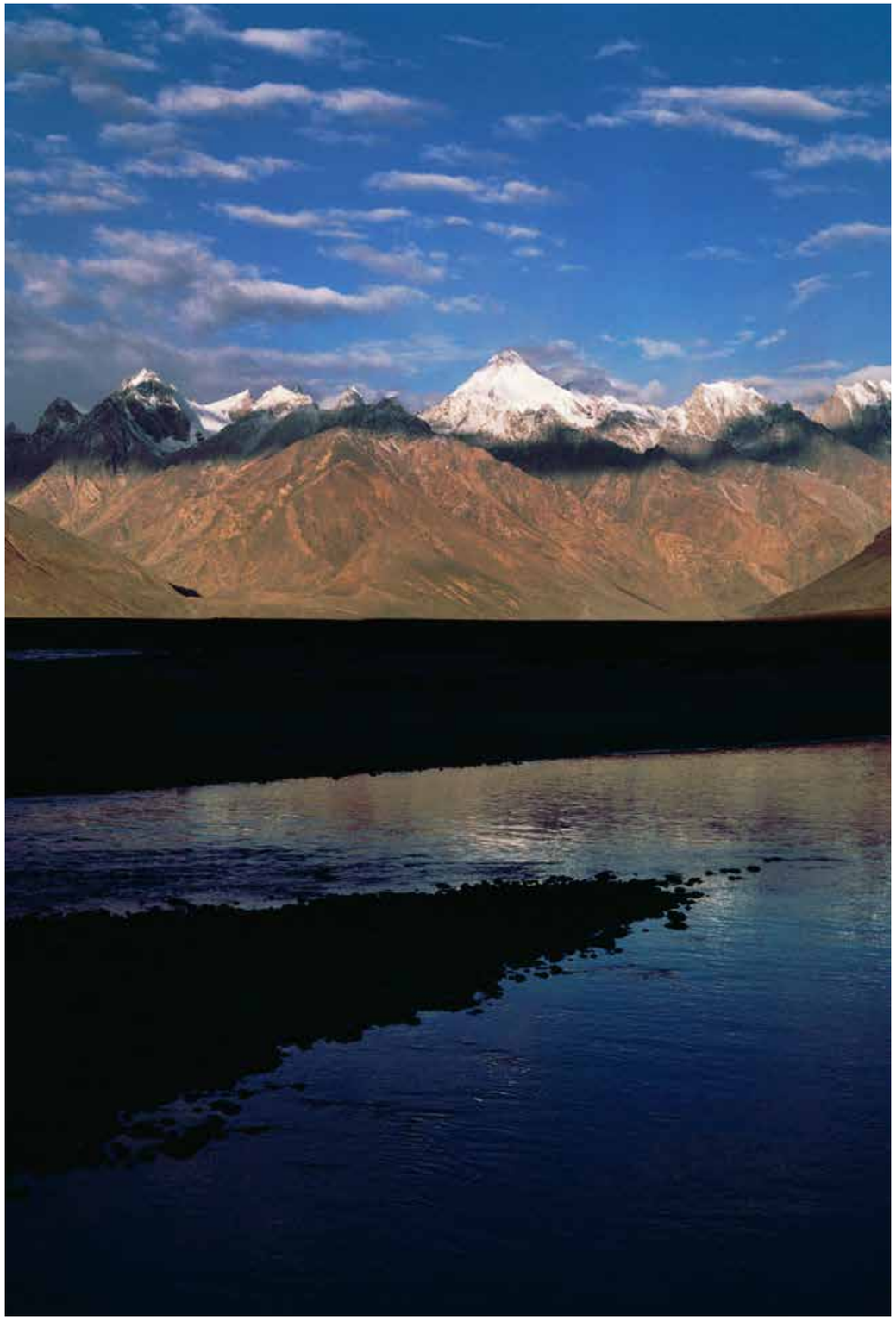
When we all finally reached the beach, it was time to celebrate. John asked everyone to gather around for a group picture. A lama from the gompa joined us. He put on my hat for the picture, and I wore his. John exchanged hats with another lama, and everyone laughed at how he looked with it perched on top of his head. It was lucky we didn't have to travel. The next two days, John and I were too sick to move. On the first day, I woke up, walked over to Bob's tent for some peanut butter and crackers, and then wandered back

The exhausted trekkers arrive and are rewarded with tea.

to our tent where I fell asleep. The routine for lunch and dinner was the same. Bob and Ravi managed to play cards all day.

The second day was a bit better, but not much. On the third day, we managed to walk to the trail and a little way up it toward the gompa, John and I just sat on the ridge and watched the sun across the river and then the walls of the monastery as the clouds kept the shadows at play. The trip had been very difficult for both of us. We are used to comfort and it isn't here. There is just sand and cold and a little food. But life is so simple and everything is precious. The Ladakhi's spend most of their time eating and keeping warm. These are the only two things they need to worry about but they don't seem to worry about them. Yak dung is used for fuel and the little girls go up into the hills to gather it in baskets and carry it home on their backs. It's the only thing that will burn for anytime and with any degree of heat.

Buddhism is the perfect religion here because it teaches you to ignore your exterior surroundings. If you want out of the cold, meditate. If you are hungry, and there is no food, meditate. It also teaches that this too will pass. It is the only thought that will keep you going. That had been my mantra for the last two



We are constantly reminded that these are the Himalayas.

days. If you are sick, you must think, this too, shall pass.

We had to stop before we reached the monastery since we were not sure we would have the energy to return if we walked all the way. Suddenly some men appeared in front of us. It's amazing how people will just suddenly show up in the hills, perhaps because their dress is the color of the hills and we don't see them until they're there. We sat alongside the road and watched the sun set behind the impressive building, and then returned to the beach.

During those three days we spent on the beach, we had visitors who helped us pass the time of day, One time, two boys showed up; they wanted to know where we were from. They asked us if we were from Kargil. We said no; we were from California. They shook their heads in a way that indicated that they had never heard of the place. Then we said that we were from America. Again, they shook their heads. So we said we were from Kargil and their faces brightened.

After three days, now we were healthy again, and eagerly awaited the arrival of the rest of our party. Each time we saw dust clouds on the trail, we thought they had arrived. Finally, we saw two men tromping down the trail at a fast pace, carrying daypacks. They were the advance guard. The first fellow we met was Richard Powers, a tall, blonde, young fellow from Santa Cruz. He was out of breath by the time he reached us and looked as happy to see us as we were to see him. Within 15 minutes, we knew he was a kindred spirit.

As we sat there, we began to see others wandering down the path looking more exhausted than Richard. Richard explained that it had been a rough, trip. Not only was the 17,000-foot pass difficult, but the guide had lost the trail at one point so that everyone was afraid that they would never arrive. And then one night, the men and the ponies that were carrying their gear got separated from the hikers, so they thought there were going to have to spend a chilly night on the trail without food or extra clothing.

The only other people that we talked to that evening at any length were Richard's wife, Judy, and their friends, Berthold and Uta. Judy was a tiny blonde woman, about 26, who had a quick smile, and who made her living as a nurse specializing in labor and delivery. She constantly tempered Richard's complaints about the trip with philosophical comments absolving the organizers of any blame. Berthold and Uta were German scientists working at Yale on research. Berthold was a stocky, blonde man with a beard who was

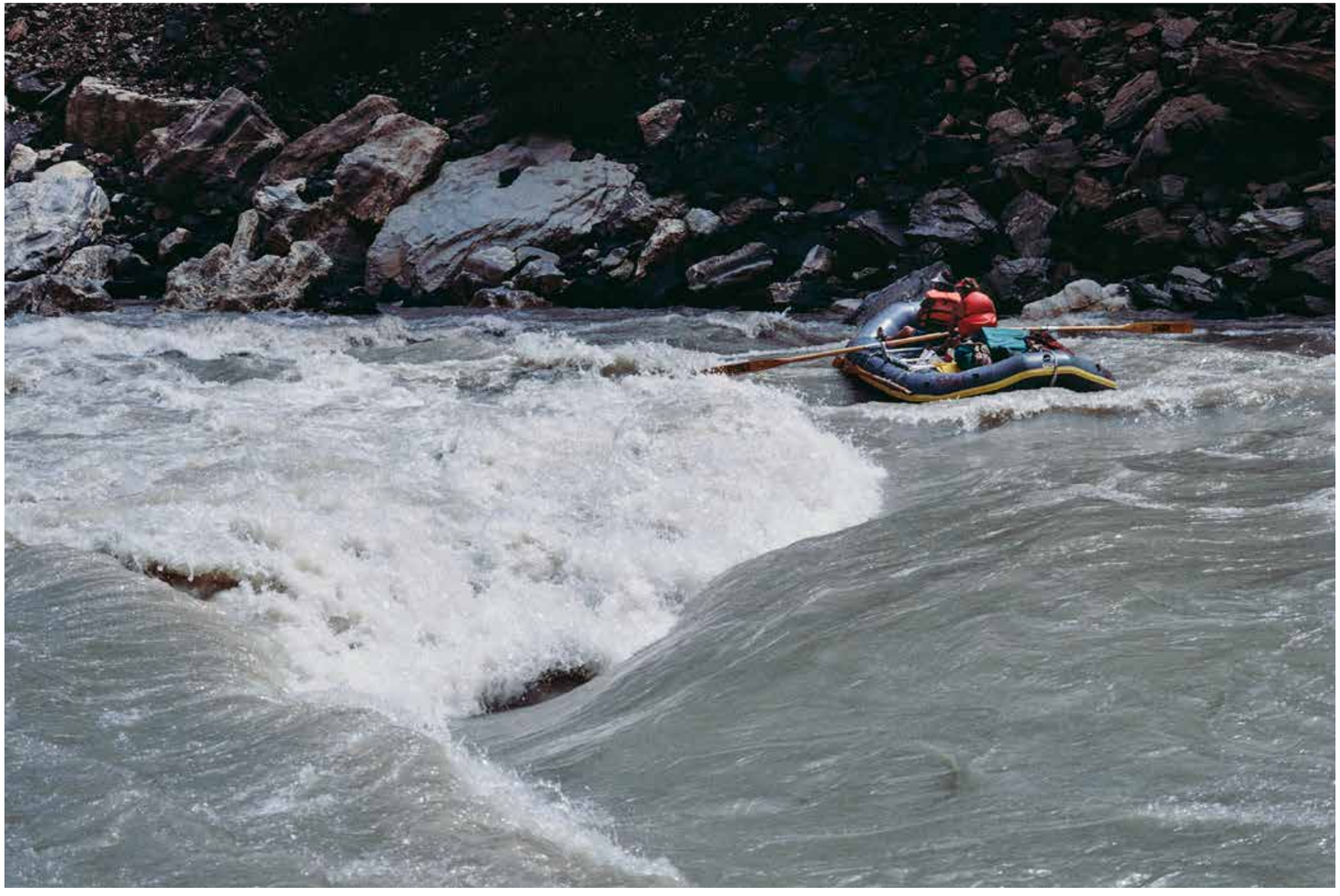
always quite serious. He smiled rarely and didn't talk much. His wife, Uta, in contrast, was a thin, vivacious brunette.

The next morning we were able to meet and talk to a few more of our fellow travelers, some interesting and others less so. There were five women on the trip. In addition to Uta, Judy and me, there was a lab technician from the Salk Institute called Darlene, and the wife of one of the boatmen, named Melanie. Of the men, the two most memorable were an attorney from Los Angeles named Alan, who was better informed on the region than the boatmen, and his friend Paul, who was a quiet, friendly man who had quit his job as a vice-president of Litton Industries to run a photography shop in Vail, Colorado. The entire party was made up of twenty people, of which six were crew.

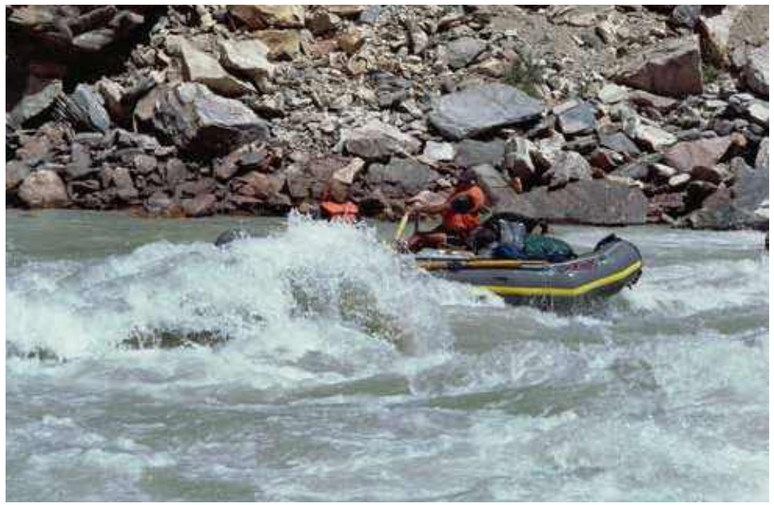
The first day on the river started at 7:30 in the morning. After breakfast, everyone scattered to pack black bags, which would keep their clothes dry. Then the boatmen explained the procedures for safety in case someone fell in the water. The basic technique: go feet first, hold on to the life jacket, and hold your breath. The only difference between rafting back home was that the water was 44°F and one's life expectancy was said to be about five minutes. The lesson learned was not to fall overboard.

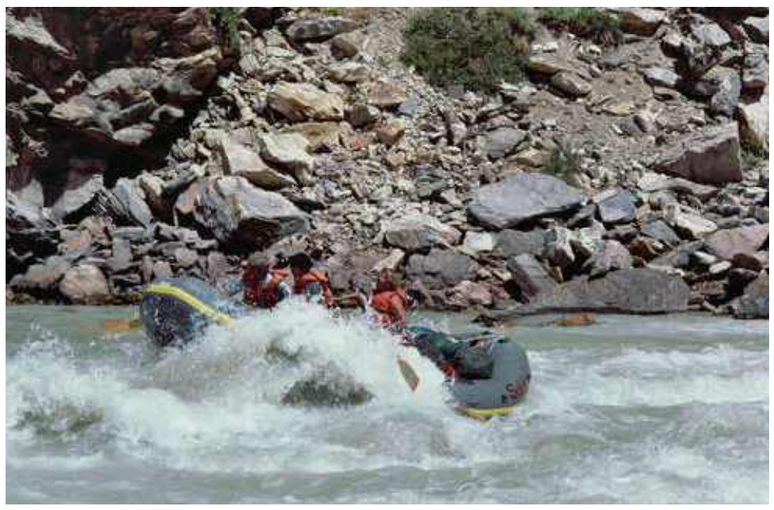
Then the boatmen walked down river to scout the first rapid. The discussion, which took place on the rocks overlooking the rapid, was long and intense and lasted from nine o'clock to eleven thirty. No passengers were allowed to participate. The gist of the conversation was that the rapid was a cinch if you made it, and it seemed likely that we would, but, given the force of the rapid, there was a chance a boat could flip over, and if you did, the prospects were very bad. As John put it succinctly, if you made it, the rapid was four on a scale from one to ten, but if you didn't, then it was a 14, this despite the fact that the vacation had been billed as a "float," i.e. non-white water trip. The boatmen decided that they would take only two passengers each through the rapids because of the hazards. The boatmen made it look easy. Nevertheless, all the passengers got wet and didn't warm up for the rest of the day.

When the last boat was pulled in to shore below the rapid, the crew made lunch—peanut butter and jelly, one box of crackers, cheese, nuts and a couple of cans of tuna for the twenty of us. It turned out to be the best lunch we had during the whole trip. After lunch, we climbed back into the boats for the rest of the day. John,



Finally, we were on the Zanskar River. We had been told there would be no white water. Not so, the boatmen deliberated on the bank for two hours before the rafts finally took the plunge.





The water was as cold as it looks, and it was impossible to avoid the freezing spray. Still, this is what we came for.

back in the driver's seat on our raft, pulled us out into the current. Richard stood in the back of our raft and shouted to John which way to go and where the rocks were.

John tried hard, but the rocks kept popping up just when the boat was on top of them, and he would have to pull hard and fast to the right or left to avoid getting caught perched on top. We proceeded in this fashion past the town of Shila, which we had hiked past on our way to the beach. At a bend in the river below the town, the boat got stuck on a rock and Judy jumped to the high side to level out the raft and disengage us.

By this time Darlene, our fifth passenger, was cold, after having gotten wet earlier. All she was wearing was a pair of wet shorts, wet tennis shoes and a woolen jacket. The sun was slipping behind the clouds more frequently as the day wore on, and each time it did, the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. I looked down at my hands, the only exposed part of my body, and they were blue from the constant splashing.

Around the next bend, we saw a man standing on the side of the river, waiting for us. It was not the King of Crime as we had expected, but his assistant, who had been told by his superior officer to march up the river to scout for us. Bob pulled over, and the man hopped into his boat. Bob threw him a life jacket, which he donned so that when we pulled into Padum, a little later, the assistant was the man of the hour. The whole town lined the shore to greet us. We stiffly climbed out of the boats and past the engrossed Ladakhis to climb up the hill to the teahouse for some refreshments and warmth. There, at the top of the stairs twenty of us crammed ourselves into the tiny room to drink tea and eat hot, spicy momos.

Once we were warm again, we headed back to the boats to continue the journey while Bob and Ravi stayed behind to negotiate with some locals for the goat meat we would eat for dinner that night. At the boats, the King of Crime and his assistant were guarding our worldly possessions from the crowds of children.

As we waited for Bob and Ravi, a few small girls wandered up to Judy and me to talk. We could not understand what they were saying, but I spotted the young pony boy from our trip from Tungri, who acted as an interpreter. We made up a little game to play. I pointed out their eyes, nose, ears and earrings, and they would tell me the Ladakhi words. I would name the same things in English. They also taught us how to ask someone his name, and then laughed at our accents.

When we finally boarded the boats to leave for our evening camp, they ran down to the river to wave until we were out of sight. We could hear them shouting "*Jute,*" as they got smaller and smaller. Everyone else in town, too, was on the slopes yelling goodbye. We had been told that there were 1,000 people in Padum, and it looked like they were all there that evening as we headed to camp.

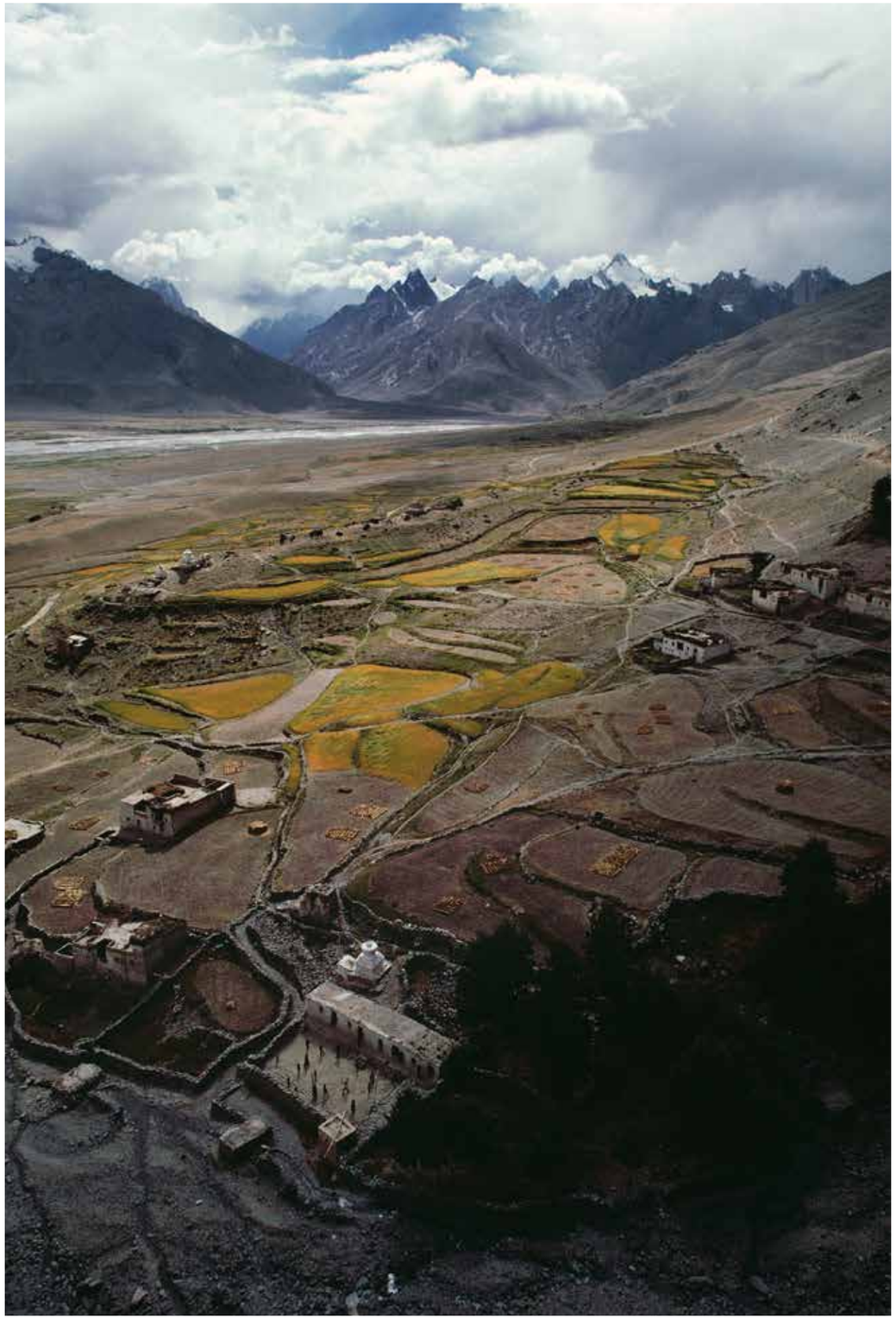
With evening approaching, there was little sun to warm us as we ran the swirling river. Twenty-thousand-foot, snow-swept peaks stood behind us, and a frosty air blew down from them. After some time, we could see a gompa high on the mountain to our left. It looked like a Mediterranean village, the houses square, whitewashed and remote. The monastery itself was built above the village, which provided the monks with their food. The houses of the village, although below the monastery, were still high up on the mountainside. Below them were green and gold fields delineated by the same kind of stone fences we had seen on the truck ride from Srinagar to Tungri.

We pulled to shore, the wind now howling and wintry. No one spoke as we pulled the tents off the boats. All we wanted to do was to get out of our wet clothes, eat some hot food and settle in for the night in warm sleeping bags. The crew set up a cooking and eating tent, which looked like it was British army surplus left over from the Second World War. There was a small fire in a corner, where dinner was cooked. It made the tent smoky but warm, and emitted a hazy glow. But although our eyes stung, it was more comfortable inside than out. After dinner, we returned to our tents, flapping in the cold wind.

John arose at dawn the next day. The surrounding mountains had been newly coated with snow during the night, but the clouds had dispersed and the sun was shining. In the dawn light, our tents looked bright and cheery. As the others started to move, Bob went around from tent to tent with hot tea. It was a wonderful way to start the day. This was how I imagined a trip would be.

Author Jan (left) *and photographer John* (right) *practice their respective crafts along the Zanskar River in 1979. With the publication of this book, their work comes to fruition.*

Following pages: *The village of Shila near Padum*



Karsha Gompa

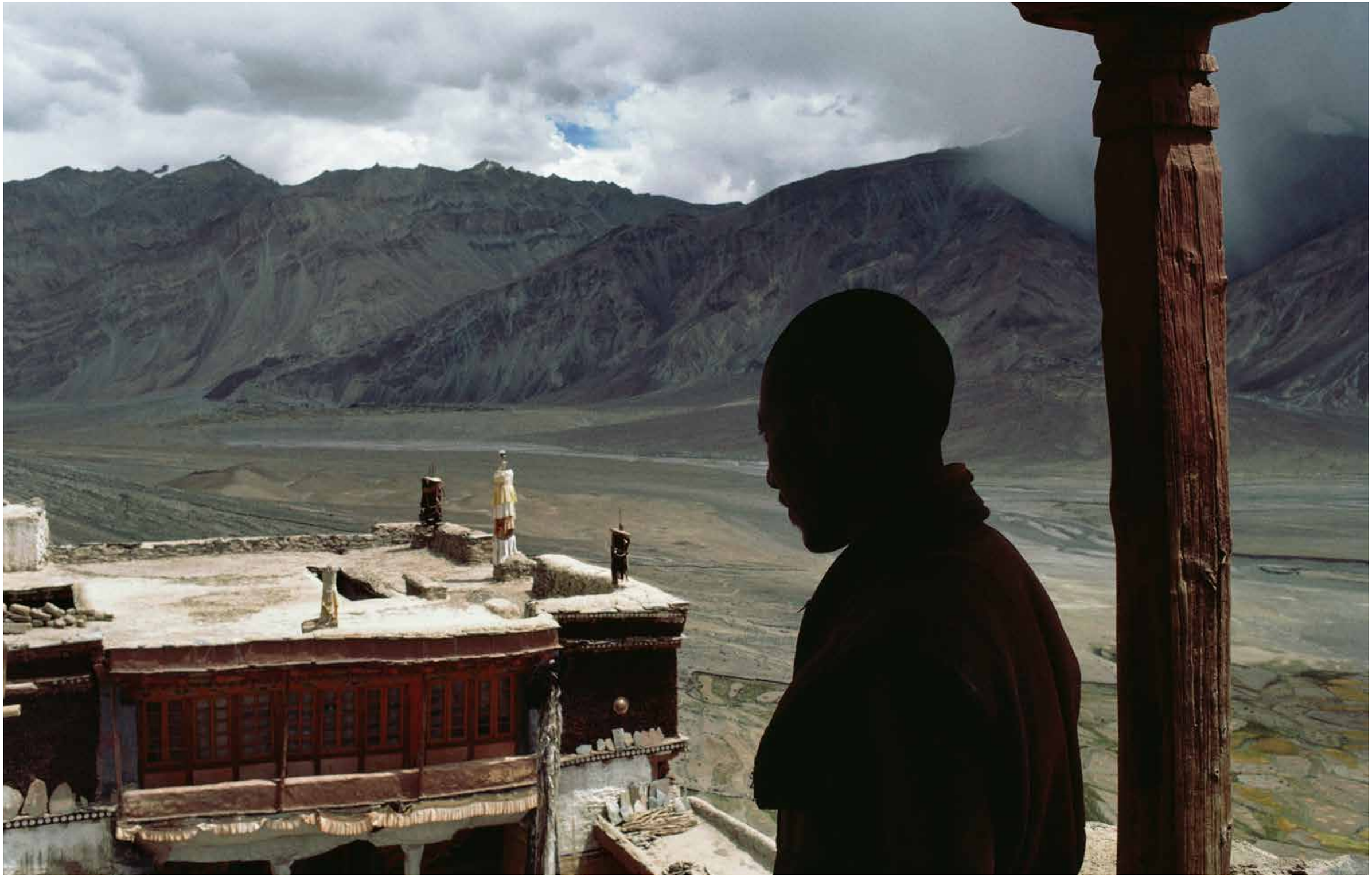
33°53'N, 76°90' E

At breakfast, we learned that this would be a layover day, and that those of us who wished to could hike up to the gompa, the largest in the Zanskar region. Of course everyone wanted to go, but we left in small groups since the route was self-evident. The first part was up a ravine and then along a trail across a rocky plain. The trail led into the fields below the town. Some of the local townspeople were in the fields gathering up the barley and laying it out to dry. They called to us, and offered refreshment—a couple of bottles of chung.

When we reached town, the path became a road marked by stones along the side. Cows, dogs and dzoes wandered freely. The children ran up to us asking for "*kaka,*" which we assumed meant "candy" in Ladakhi. We did not have any candy, but Judy pulled from her daypack a dozen different balloons and gave us each a few to blow up for the children. They grabbed them happily and ran down the side streets with the balloons clutched in their hands. Wherever they ran other children they met came running to get their own balloon. They called them "*pampali.*" Judy tried to make her supply last a little longer by explaining to the children that they must share, but they would hear none of it; each insisted on having his or her own balloon.

Around the bend, we saw a group of lamas making bricks, and we stopped to watch. They used wooden forms into which they poured wet sand. The form was then pulled away, leaving the soggy brick to dry in the sun. Little children carried the wet sand in baskets from the spot where the lamas were mixing the dry sand with water to the spot where the bricks were poured. When the children carrying the sand saw the children following us with their balloons, of course they too wanted some. So Judy pulled out some more from her pack and gave them to the children nearest to us. But she could not hand out the balloons fast enough, and some of the children started to run home crying. Judy asked an adult to call them back, and they returned, sniffling, as they took their balloons.

As we climbed higher into the monastery, some monks passed us, one saying "*om mani padme hum*" as he went by. The hill was becoming



Previous page: *A monk's perspective. This is the view from the Karsha Gompa, looking down on the valley of the Zanskar River.*

Top left and right: *Thankas in the monastery. A thanka is a painting on silk with embroidery, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala.*
Center and bottom: *A monk beams as he reviews his work, and then continues to paint the Buddha.*

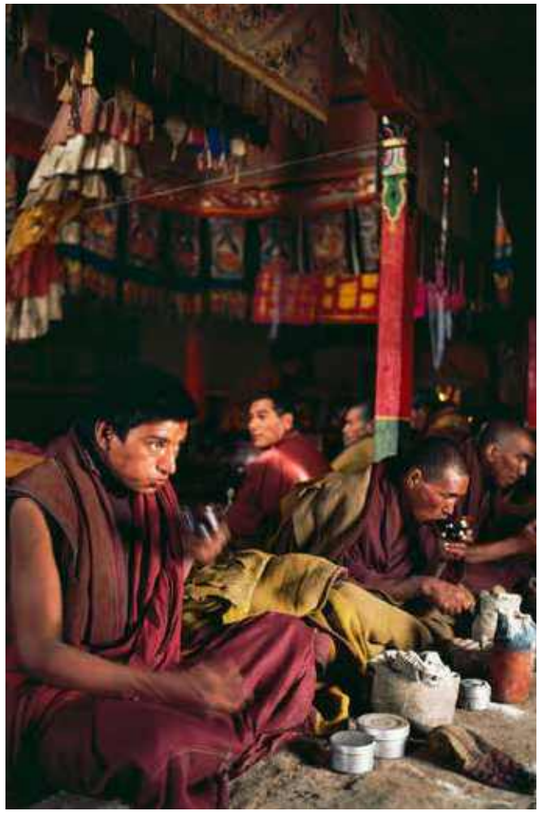
Children gather round us hoping to be given balloons (pampali) *from Judy Powers, a fellow traveler with foresight.*

steeper, and every so often some stairs had been inserted to make the climbing easier. Richard asked another monk who too was climbing the stairs where the Buddhas were, and the monk pointed up towards the sky.

The road then split in two. We chose the path through a red and yellow tunnel that led into a courtyard surrounded by buildings that were two stories high. On one side of the courtyard was a porch with pillars, the inside wall painted with tantric murals in vivid primary colors. The figures in them were dancing or grimacing or staring fiercely at us. Under the porch stood a row of shoes, evidence of our fellow campers who had reached the temple before us. We pushed aside the entrance to the temple and peeked inside.

The interior was dim, but lit by light filtering through small, dusty windows. Three monks inside were occupied repainting the Buddhas, bodhisattvas (enlightened beings), manjusris (the bodhisattvas of transcendental wisdom) and avalokitesvaras (the bodhisattvas of compassion) on-the walls. The monks had much to do. Every inch of the walls was covered with a painting, even the little bays in which the windows were located.

In the front of the room was an altar covered with small metal



instruments such as Tibetan bells and horns, used in the religious ceremonies. Prayer flags and thangkas hung from the ceiling. The wooden posts that supported the roof were painted in gold, red and blue. The floor was dirt. Two of the monks were busy painting an ochre band, about three feet high around the wall just off the floor.

A third old monk, with his hat tilted back on his head, was intently painting, inside penciled lines, a goddess holding flowers in her hand. The position of her fingers is particularly important because they indicate a special meditation. In a little room behind the altar lit by a skylight, holy books, wrapped in silk and placed in carved wooden boxes, lined the walls. The sun filtered down on three life size golden Buddhas who sat staring into the temple, kindly, beatific expressions on their faces.

As our group wandered in and out of the two rooms, the old monk came up to us to point out a special five-foot long metallic baton that had been brought from Tibet. He told us that the head lama held it in meditation sessions as a badge of office to show his superior position.

One of the monks surprised us by asking, in English, whether we would send him his photograph if he gave us his address. We said of course, and got into conversation with him. How many monks in the monastery? One hundred and sixty. How old was he? Twenty-nine. Where was he from? From a monastery in the south; he was visiting Karsha monastery for only two weeks. How old was the monastery? He was not sure, but he told us that the head lama was the Nau Rimpoche.

After questioning him, a few of us walked outside into the courtyard and listened to the chanting in the distance. Suddenly John ran out of the temple, grabbed something and came back a few minutes later, laughing. As he was taking a picture of the old lama painting the white goddess, his flash exploded. He said that the old monk jumped because he thought John was trying to kill him.

The monk came out a few minutes later, laughing as he told his fellow monks the story. The story travelled quickly—within minutes, young monks came running up to see John's camera. We wondered if the monks would take the incident as a sign that the

Far left: *Statues of the Buddha are often draped in saffron robes, traditionally cast off material dyed with vegetable matter including tumeric and saffron.*
Left and above: *Between the many hours spent reciting the sutras, the monks drink tea made from rancid yak butter and sound their horns.*

pictures were not to be photographed. I knew that some thangkas are kept covered because they are considered too powerful to be exposed continually.

Richard called to us from the balcony above the courtyard to come up and watch the monks chanting in the temple. We climbed the stairs and looked into a second dimly-lit temple. Inside there were four rows of chanting monks fanning one another. Two rows sat facing each other in the center of the group, and two rows sat facing the outside walls of the temple. In front of each monk was a bag of tsampa and a cup of tea. As they chanted, the monks rolled their tsampa into dough by mixing it with the tea, and then paused to eat. Temple boys ran in and out of the temple with big buckets of tea, which they served to the chanting monks. At one point in the ceremony, all of the monks shaped their tsampa into dolmas, long sticks of dough, which they flattened in a number of spots. They then took pieces of the dolmas and threw them on the floor to suppress any evil spirits. The young boys who were serving the tea picked up the pieces and fed them to the dogs in the courtyard.

The chanting accelerated and the lamas in the center aisle started to read sutras that were printed on long pieces of paper they

Left: *Hospitable monks showed us around their monastery. One of them took the photo of John and Jan and a monk who a few moments earlier thought he was being shot when John's flash bulb exploded.*

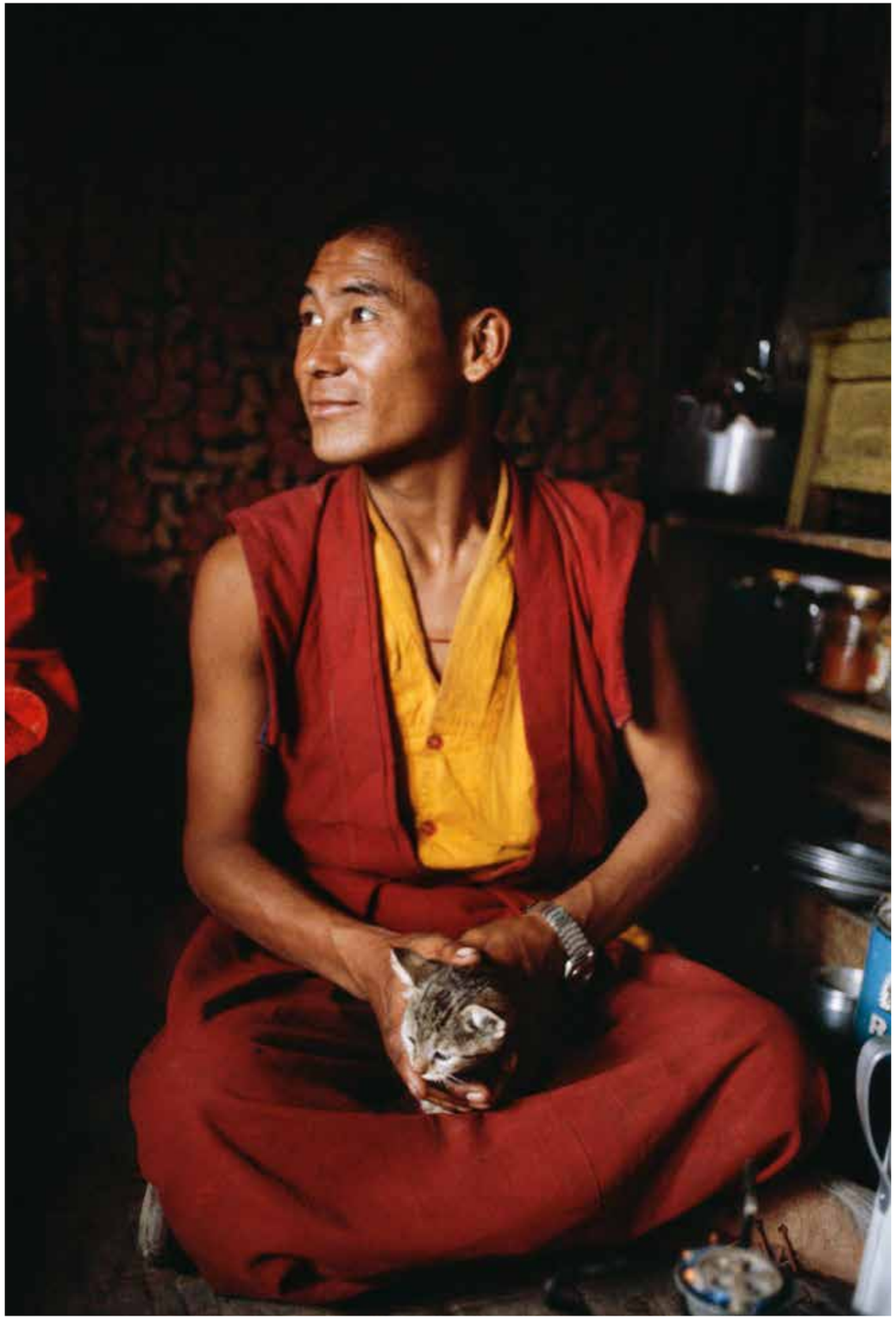
Above: *White-washed village below the Karsha Gompa*

held in front of them. At intervals, the head lama rang bells he kept beside him. Then the monks hit drums at their sides in a steady beat. At the crescendo, two monks sitting in front of the temple in the center aisle blew long, solemn notes on silver conch trumpets every inch covered with coral and turquoise.

We moved to a corner of the temple, and sat down next to two silver horns that were as large as men. One of the lamas leaned over and handed us a ball of tsampa. I tried it, smiled at him and handed the tsampa to John who said it tasted like raw bread. We also tasted some of the tea, which was flavored with rancid butter and salt, rather than with milk and sugar as in India.

John photographed the entire ceremony; the monks did not object in spite of the incident of the exploding flash bulb. The monk who had given us the tsampa asked if he could look at John's camera. We gave it to him and he put it to his eye. John showed him which button to press and he took a picture of us.

As the chanting continued and it became apparent that the ceremony was not about to change dramatically or end soon, we left. Outside on the balcony we met a young monk who invited us to come up to his room for more tea. We followed him up two flights of



On the top floor of the gompa, at the end of a narrow dark hall was a small room shared by three monks and a kitten.

stairs and across another courtyard into a building where we climbed a wooden ladder up to the second floor, then along a narrow, dark hall. His room, which he shared with two other monks and a kitten, was small but surprisingly cozy. Four of us squeezed in, and the monk lit a Bunsen burner in the corner of the room, heated water, and poured a cup of black tea for each of us. There was even some large-grained sugar in a glass, serving bowl with which to sweeten the tea. On one wall were pictures of famous lamas and a prayer written in English and Tibetan on the bed.

As we sipped, we asked the young monk questions while he stroked the kitten, purring in his lap. I could not help admiring the hospitality and graciousness of the monks we met. They did not seem surprised or nonplussed to have twenty foreigners walk into their midst without warning; instead they were warm and friendly. We were sorry to leave and the young monk was sorry to see us go, but the wind was becoming stronger and reminding us that it was time to return to the boats. Swirling clouds and dust storms were sweeping the valley; it looked like rain. We were told that the monks meditate day and night for six weeks during the raining season even though parts of Ladahk get only four inches of rain per year.

The walk down was quicker than the walk up, but along the way, we stopped at one turn in the path to talk to three monks who were sitting on the steps of a building. They asked us if we wanted to see the big Buddha, and of course we said yes. They took us inside where we climbed up a steep set of stairs leading to the second floor. We went out onto a balcony where a goat's head stuffed with straw was hanging on the wall. The monks pointed to a smoky window on the other side of which was a huge golden Buddha's head surrounded by a golden halo. The head alone was one story high, and we could not see the body to which it was attached. One of the monks motioned for us to follow him down a precarious handmade wooden ladder into a room downstairs that was completely filled with the Buddha's body. While the rest of us were studying the Buddha, to the monk's surprise, John was more interested in photographing the ladder than the Buddha. The walls of the building where the Buddha was kept were covered with the same kind of paintings we had seen in the first temple, but these paintings were quite faded and seemed older. The lines of the underlying drawings were finer, however, than those made by the artist we had just met.

With the wind growing colder, we bundled our jackets around

us and made our way through the barley fields and across the rocky plateau to the boats and our cozy tents. Back at the camp, John and I invited Judy and Richard into our tent for cognac since it would have been impossible for them to sit up in their little pup tent. When Richard later stuck his head outside the tent to see who else had returned from the monastery, he saw that the young monk who had invited us for tea was outside with a companion.

They had come down from the monastery to see our boats. To be polite, we bundled up again and stepped outside to visit with them. The other members of our group were in the kitchen tent having tea and we invited the monks to join us, but they declined saying they had to get back. We talked for a few minutes, and learned that the young monk was interested in our boats because he himself owned one, an old German boat, which he used to ferry people across the Zanskar for five rupees a crossing. The monks at Karsha Gompa must provide themselves with food and clothing. In addition, each monk must supply the monastery with five kilograms of butter per year. The monastery provides the monks only with the tea drunk during the ceremonies. Our new friend met his yearly quota by taking passengers across the river.

After they left, we moved into the kitchen tent, where the rest of our group were talking to a German lady and her Tibetan husband whom Alan and Paul had met in a hotel in town. Both the lady and her husband were eminent Tibetologists, who were in the area doing research. Their work had to be done surreptitiously because all research required the approval of the Indian government, and none had been given since the region had been opened in 1974, five years earlier.

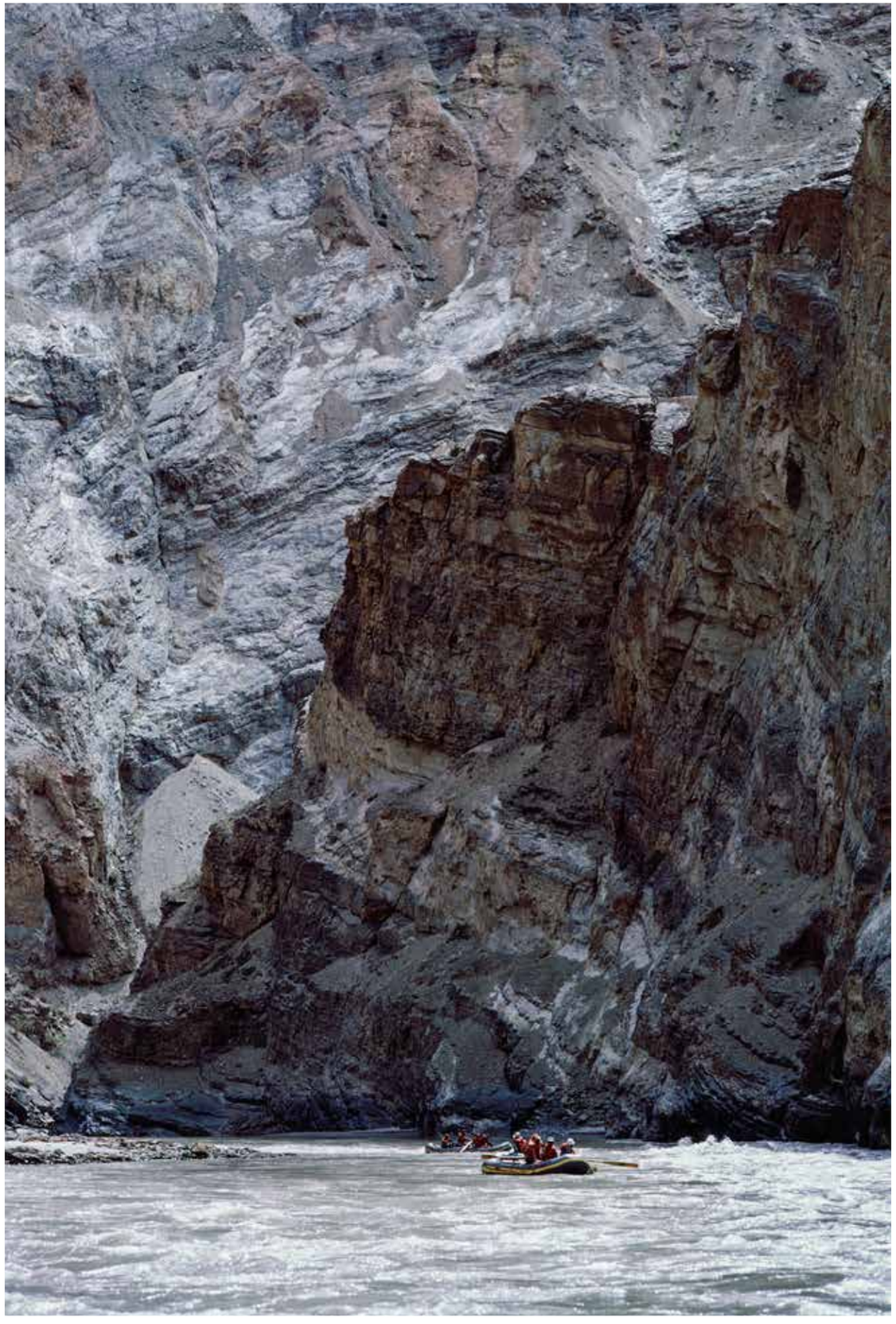
Left: *A mysterious ladder and a rugged stonewall both intrigued the photographer more than a huge Buddha nearby.*

Above: *Stupas, which usually contain relics or the ashes of Buddhist monks, are scattered throughout the landscape.*

Following pages: *Rafting through the steep sepia-colored gorges near Zangla, we felt alone in the universe.*

The German lady told us that Karsha Gompa dated from the eleventh century and that it was the largest monastery in the Zanskar region of Ladakh. She thought that the artwork being done today was not very good and hoped that the monastery would not have sufficient funds to complete the "restoration" because they were doing more harm than good, while the paintings we had seen in the temple with the two-story Buddha were of great historical interest. She told us the two best things to see in the region were the old fort at Zangla and the Alchai monastery near Leh, which had the oldest and best paintings. She said that the Zanskaris had told her that Buddhism had been brought to the region in the second century A.D., but that scholars thought they were merely boasting.

She also knew a little about the sociology of the region. Land is passed through the sons of the family, but to keep the estates from becoming too splintered, the Zanskaris had practiced polyandry, passing property through the matrilineal line. However, she had found only one polyandrous family remaining in the town below Karsha Gompa. Another practical reason for polyandry was that the husband was responsible for trading, and to carry out this responsibility, he had to travel to faraway places such as Srinagar and Kargil. Because he was away for long periods of time, the wife was left without a protector. To solve this problem, the wife was allowed to take another member of her husband's family as a second husband while her first husband was away. Also, because one-half of women died in childbirth, it seemed practical to share the women around. She warned us that rape of Zanskari women—but not foreigners—was not a crime, or even morally reprehensible.



Zangla

33°67' N, 76°98' E

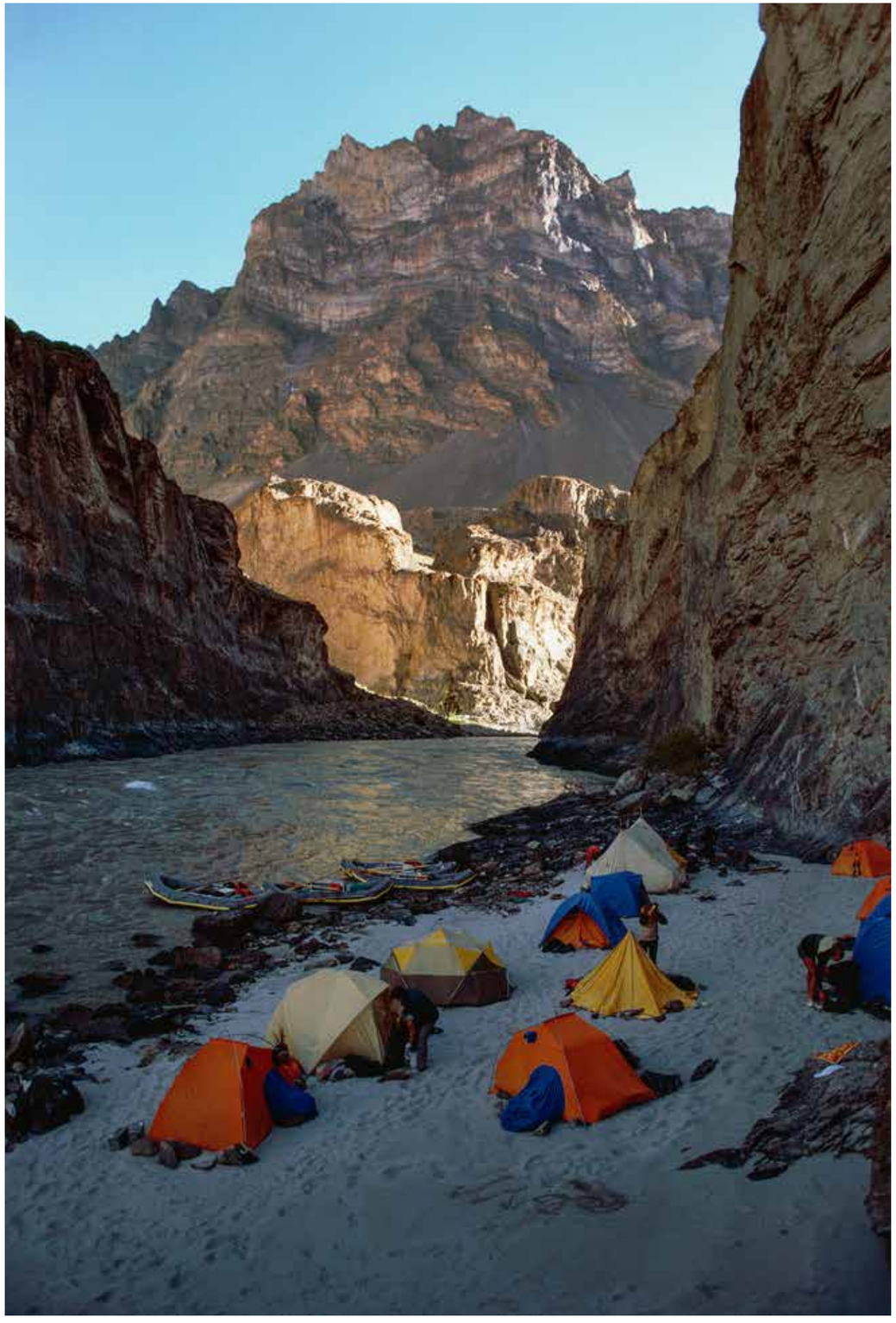
The next day we traveled to a point just below Zangla, with a short stop to see the old Zangla fort that the German Tibetologist had recommended. The fort had been built in the second century A.D. by the people indigenous to the region, and not by the descendants of people from Tibet who now inhabited Zanskar. While the others climbed up to the fort, John, Judy and I stayed by the boats to rest. The group never made it to the fort. Instead, they spent the time at a chung party given by the King of Zanskar and his Crown Prince at the Zangla Hotel. The king and prince live in Kargil, but visit the provinces once a year to keep in touch with their subjects. They used to live in the old fort, but it was impractical to keep up since the fort sits on top of a large butte outside town and is accessible only by a single foot path which winds up the back, along which all water, food and supplies had to be carried.

The next day's travel we rafted through an enormous gorge, which reminded me of the Grand Canyon, except for white-striped black rocks at water level. Above, the walls were so pale, it seemed as if we passing through a sepia print. It was clear that there had been much geologic activity in the area since the layers of rock swept up almost vertically. The Himalayas were formed, we learned, as the Indian tectonic plate moving incessantly northward rammed into the Eurasian continent.

We stopped at a side stream to walk and wash. Some hardy souls, including John, actually swam in a pool. The water was warmer than the Zanskar, but not enough to be even vaguely comfortable.

The river trip was beginning to take on a rhythm of its own. The days on the water were short, because the crew wanted to stretch out the voyage and did not want to travel the 110 miles too quickly, so it seemed like we were forever putting up and taking down tents. We often would not leave camp until 10:30 in the morning and the tents would be set up again at the next camp by 3:30. As we went further downstream, the beaches got smaller and smaller until we were camping on top of each other. A fellow traveller called it camping "Bombay-style."

The next morning was relaxed, until, after everyone packed



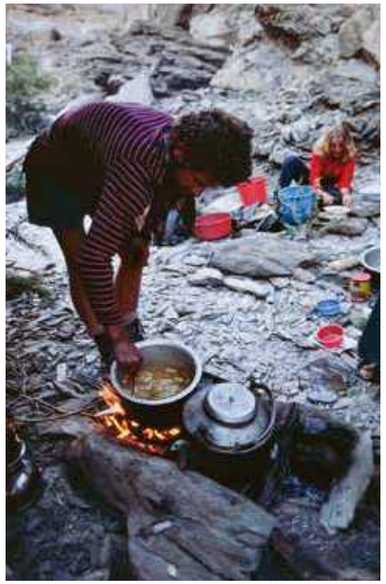
On the narrow beaches along the river, we camped, "Bombay-style," almost on top of each other.

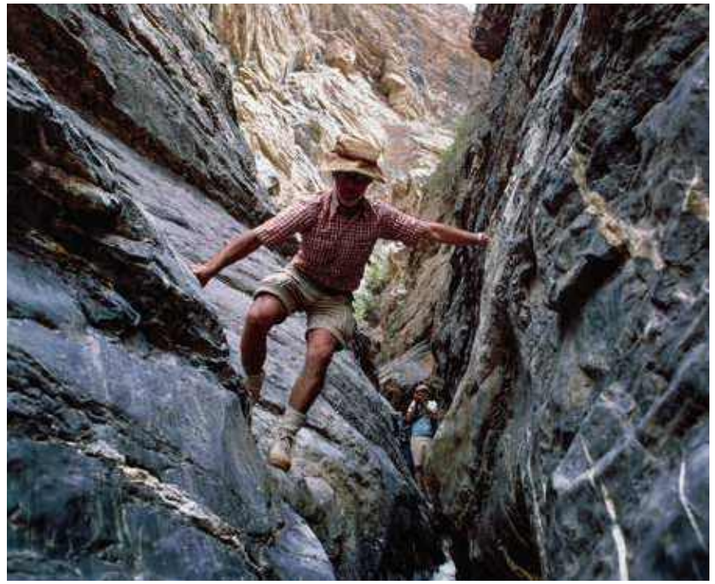
his or her gear after breakfast, we were told that we would not be leaving the beach until noon. Jim Slade who represented the organizers, tried to explain why the trip was paced so slowly. He said it was to give the passengers the opportunity to hike the side canyons and to allow the crew leeway in case of emergency, but the passengers weren't happy.

Once we left camp, our first stop that day was a side canyon with a stream of crystal clear water. We decided to take some time to hike up the creek. About a mile from the river, we discovered a flour-mill powered by the stream. It was a small rock building built into the ground through which the stream ran. Inside an old woman was grinding barley. She offered us some fresh flour to taste. Again, I was struck by the equanimity of the Ladakhis. Here was this old lady, by herself in the middle of nowhere, being visited by twenty strangers, and she was not upset or even surprised.

After visiting the mill, we wandered back downstream to where members of our group were having a bathing party. Some people were even jumping into the ice-cold water naked for a full-fledged bath. Those who had already bathed were stretched on warm rocks to dry. When everyone was clean, we boarded the boats to run the two severe rapids Bob and Jim warned us about. The river had changed since the year before and because of the increased flow this year, we passed over the first rapid they had spoken of without even being aware of it. But we were soon at the second, and we stopped to scout. Up to this point, the river had meandered through lime-stone and sandstone, which are relatively soft rocks, but the rock at this rapid was igneous and much harder. Because it was so much harder, more force was needed to wear it away, and the channel through which the river had to flow was much narrower; it was a mere twenty feet wide. The boatmen sat on a large rock overhanging the rapid and discussed the best way to run it, but there was only one way to go, enter right center, then pull hard and away from the wall where the water poured. We scraped the side, and our egos, before heading downstream to the next big beach to camp for the night.

The big event of the next day was the stop at "Phaedra Falls," named by Jim, Bob and Dave Henshaw on their first trip down the Zanskar. The falls shot out of a mountainside next to the river in a frothy white veil. Moss grew alongside the falls and made the air smell sweet. The water tasted as good as Perrier. Some people hiked up the hill to see the source of the water, but most of us





From top left: *Lunches were often local stews; Many hours were spent exploring the cliffs and waterfalls around the river; Phaedra Falls, named by a previous expedition probably because they shone so brightly in the reflected sunlight.*

just sat near the stream, drank the freshwater and relaxed.

We headed downstream for lunch, which we ate beside a tributary. This one was wide and sky blue when seen from a distance, but crystal clear, when we walked along the bank, for it flowed over millions of small glistening, jewel-like rocks.

Back on the boats, we could see that we were entering a different part of the canyon. The cliffs at the river's edge were iron red and close together. As we floated down, through the silent, towering walls, everyone became quiet. It was almost unnerving: the walls were so high that the sunlight hit the river only at infrequent intervals, and the few sounds we made echoed back and forth from wall to wall. We looked back to where we had been and saw a solitary, triangular red mountain with the blue stream flowing in the foreground.

The gorge ended abruptly, the wind picked up and the sun disappeared. We were soon all wet from a fine spray, which the wind blew into our faces. People dragged out of their packs every piece of available clothing they had, and we headed for Chilling, the last village on the map before Nimu, our last stop.

As we rounded a bend, we saw trees neatly lining the ridge on the left shore, a sure sign of civilization. Next was a constructed waterway, which led to the local barley mill. There was a wonderful beach just below the mill, but we did not stop, nor did we stop as we passed the village situated on a butte high above the river. The villagers waved at us and yelled "*Jule*" as we sailed past. We landed

on the opposite side of the river at a small beach. The crew decided, to the disappointment of all the passengers who preferred to stay on the water, that we would hike to Chilling the next day.

So we organized a cocktail party. John and I provided cognac, Richard and Judy the sesame candy hors d'oeuvres, and Jeff and Alan the company. We were all bruised and insect bitten, and our bodies were covered with a fine Himalayan mica-filled sand that glittered in the sunlight. Lips and hands were chapped and split from the sun and wind. We were ready to go home.

The next day was our last on the river, and none too soon. Most of the passengers spent the morning climbing to Chilling. John and I washed our hair in the river and waited expectantly to head downstream. At Chilling, our group met a silversmith, who is renowned in the area for his work. Richard traded him his recorder for a silver spoon and a bracelet.

When all of the passengers had returned from Chilling, we made our way downriver for lunch. We had three hours to travel to Nimu, where we planned to deflate the rafts and load them, the rest of our gear and ourselves on a bus, which would take us to Leh, the capital of Ladakh. The afternoon was lazy and uneventful; we were

all thinking of the civilized pleasures of Leh. We still had two rapids to run, and the first was a cinch. The second was easy too, but it was sheer excitement for our extra passenger, a Ladakhi man who was traveling to Leh. When we had stopped at the second rapid to scout it, the Ladakhi had eyed our boats with interest. We found that he was on his way to Leh to sell the three barrels he was carrying on his back; he had made them himself and wanted to sell them for 45 rupees in all, or about US$8.00. When Dave asked him if he wanted a ride, he accepted with alacrity. He put an orange life-preserver over his red robes, found a seat in the back where he sat in the lotus position for security and so his feet would not get wet and chanted his mantras in low tones as the boat headed through the rapid.

We reached the confluence of the Zanskar and the Indus without incident. The famous Indus was a disappointment, surprisingly much narrower and shallower than the Zanskar. We floated down to a village composed of spacious white houses, along the riverbanks and surrounded by poplar trees and green fields. We camped at a beach nearby, but since it was late, we just unpacked and ate dinner. There was no time for a walk, besides John had developed diarrhea.

Left: *We offered a lift to the man with the Tibetan hat who was traveling to Leh to sell two barrels he had made.*
Right: *The last gorge, the last rapid*

Leh

34°17' N, 77°58' E

The bus arrived in the morning and we packed all our gear and headed for Leh. Chultim was there with his little sister and her friends who were to be our escorts. They had brought us all white shawls, which is a Ladakhi gesture of welcome. And they sang Ladakhi songs to entertain us on the ride to Leh. The bus pulled up at the Kangri Hotel, where we planned to stay for two days. The hotel offered only subsistence fare, and any hope of civilization was dashed when we saw our rooms. There were no showers, just cement floors with holes in them to drain the water that came from buckets hanging on the walls. To get hot water, you had to ask at the desk, and the manager would heat the water on the kitchen stove in between cooking meals.

The time in Leh turned into a weeklong constant shopping spree. Leh is a trading post, crowded with shops selling rugs, clothes, jewelry and other artifacts made in Ladakh. Some sellers settled for a third of the first quoted price. Others would not bargain at all. Most of the stuff looks like junk but there was beautiful, traditional Ladhaki silver work to be found. Other times my fellow passengers traded with the shopkeepers—exchanging their sleeping bags and cameras for Tibetan rugs and coral jewelry. We were anxious to leave Leh, but that was proving difficult. We were scheduled to fly out on Saturday, but the engineers at Indian Oil were on strike, so Air India had no plane fuel, so no plane arrived. There were only two flights a week to Srinagar. We headed for the airport again two days later, checked in, received our boarding passes, checked through Indian security only to be told an hour later, that the plane was not coming. We returned to town.

Wandering around Leh that day, we ran into the man who had been a passenger on Bob's boat. He was thrilled to see us and insisted on giving us a fresh tomato to eat. He had also become famous about town as an expert river runner. Apparently, he had become quite the ladies' man. He pulled us over to a British student, who spoke Ladakhi because she was writing her thesis on the language, and asked her to ask us to send him a picture of himself riding in the boat. He gave us the address of one of the shops in town. He also

Previous page: *Selling turnips in Leh market*

Above: *Tibetan style baby carrying sling, made from goat skin. Vegetable sellers on a Leh street. This style of hat is unique to Ladakh. It is worn by men and women, though the women's have more embroidery and are worn with more flair.*

wanted the student to take a picture of us standing with him in the main street of town.

Then we walked over to the main street to watch a parade in which the President of India was riding. He was visiting Leh to dedicate a new hospital. All of the shops along the street had bright banners streaming from their windows in his honor, and a few policemen were gently asking the crowd to move back. At the head of the parade was a jeep in which men dressed in army uniforms with white spats and turbans were riding. The turbans were decorated with red crowns that made the soldiers look like oversized roosters. Next came five motorcycles riding slowly in a line, so slowly that they wobbled precariously. Finally, three more jeeps, the last one carrying the President, Rajendra Prasad standing in the back in a white Nehru jacket and hat. Chultim, our erstwhile guide, was proudly in attendance. Once the president passed, the police let the crowds out into the street and business returned to normal.

When we returned to the hotel, we found that four of the passengers had hired a jeep to take them back to Srinagar. They were tired of waiting and did not trust the reports that the Air India plane would arrive the following day. The crew was trying to convince them otherwise, but they were determined to leave.

We slept fitfully that night. At 4:00 a.m., the mullahs began their usual exhortation to prayer and the many dogs that lived at and around the hotel accompanied them with their howls. It was soon impossible to get back to sleep. As soon as the kitchen opened, John and I packed our bags and moved into the kitchen to drink tea and wait for the others to come down. The cabs were called

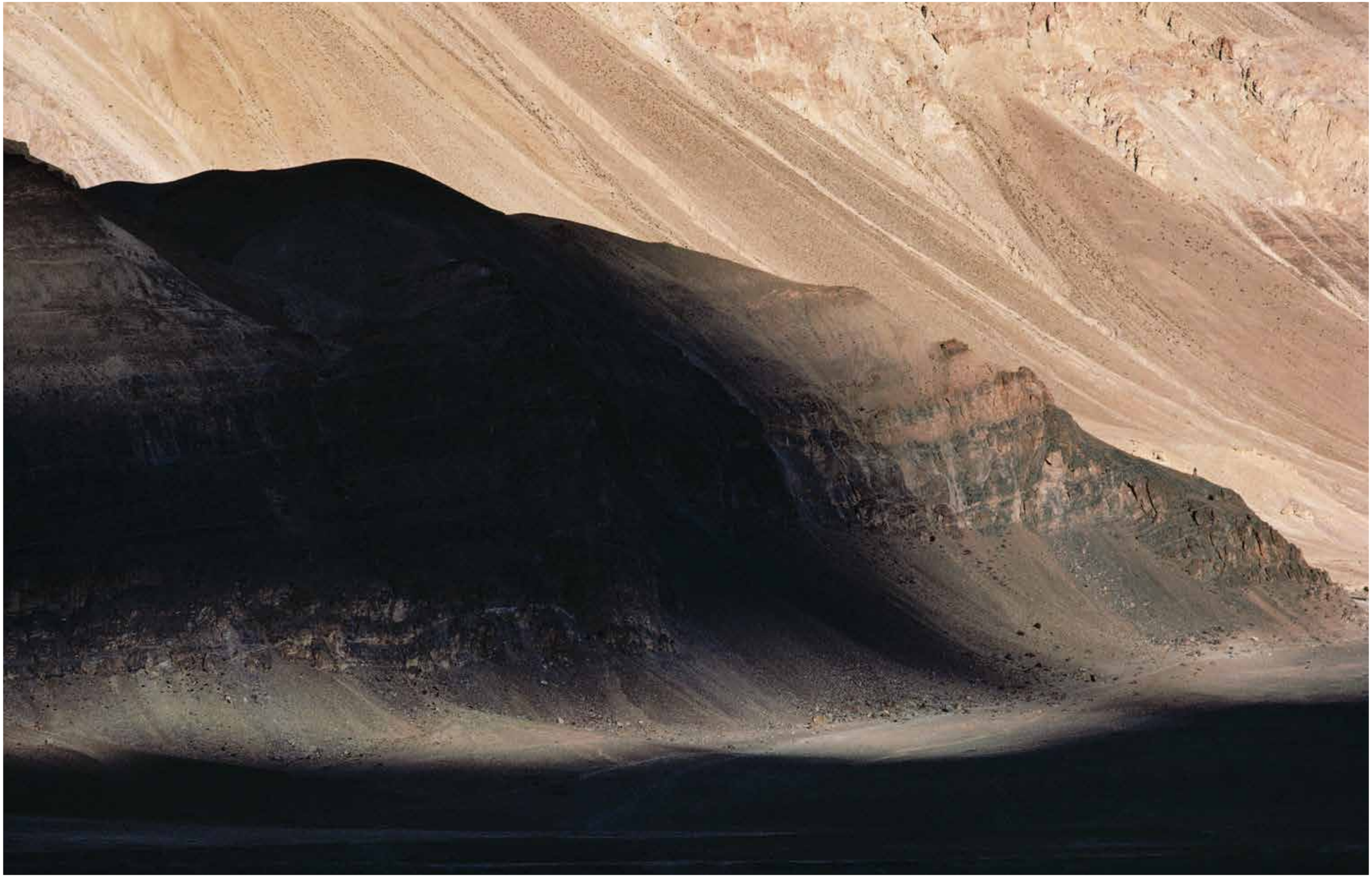
The map shows our journey. First by truck from Shrinagar to Tungri, then by pony to the river, by rafts down the Zanskar River to the Indus and by bus to the town of Leh, the capital of Ladakh.

and our caravan once again set off to the Leh airport.

This time luck was with us, or someone's prayers were answered. Within an hour, we saw an Air India jet arrive. A few passengers got off, and then it was our turn. Our hearts were soaring before we even boarded the plane. Then the clouds began to gather and we wondered anxiously if we would be cleared for takeoff. When we were strapped into our seats, Ravi casually mentioned that the airport was the second highest in the world at 11,500 feet, the only one higher was Bogota, Columbia. The altitude made the slow, gradual takeoff exciting, as did the flight path, which took us directly into the mountain at the end of the runway. As the plane lifted, creeping upward, it looked like we could not possibly clear the mountain. At the last minute it seemed, the plane veered to the right and we flew between two peaks.

Below us, the Himalayas stretched like waves on the ocean as far as we could see. The pilot pointed out Annapurna 1, the world's tenth highest peak, on our left. Only then did I finally realized that we were truly on our way to Srinagar, My memories of the river trip, especially the hard parts, began to fade—and only the good ones remained—a wonderful, arduous and frightening adventure.

We still had Srinagar to look forward to, so we were not yet heading into the tumult of American culture. That was a blessing. We needed a reentry period just as deep-sea divers need time to restore equilibrium returning from the ocean floor. We were returning from "Moonland," which we learned is the CIA's nickname for Ladakh and if life anywhere can be anymore different as that of the United States from Ladakh the moon must have some wonderful surprises in store.



A Place to Preserve

The Buddha teaches that life is full of love, but that it is also in constant flux. How do we balance the preservation of what is beautiful with the inevitability of change?

Over a period of many years, I have come to recognize how important culture is. It is in every country that you go to and every person that you meet; every rock on the Earth embodies culture. The people in this region of Kashmir have a very special culture. The inhabitants comprise a unique and inspiring amalgam of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Buddhists. They demonstrate that where there are no large, outside forces driven by greed or ideology, a community can live in harmony. Yet, it is in the nature of humanity to create and to destroy.

This book tells of a journey, of an exciting time in my life with new adventures and discoveries around every bend. It was a beginning, and beginnings are full of hope and optimism. It is about a photographer and a writer on a honeymoon in one of the most mysterious and magical places on Earth. We were at the apex of our lives and we expected it to last forever.

A marriage is a culture in miniature, a microcosm. And the preservation of a marriage is like the preservation of a culture. As with the broader culture a marriage takes time to mature and like a culture it takes energy to establish roles and create rituals, and it takes commitment to preserve. But maintaining the important goals in our lives is hard, whether they be personal desires or a society's tenants. So again, how do we reconcile desire for preservation with the inevitability of evolution and the consequent adaptation?

When I learned about the Global Heritage Fund (GHF), a preservation organization with connections all over the world, it had recently become interested in helping preserve aspects of Chinese culture. I went with a group of women to Suzhou to see the Gardens, to Fujian to see Tulous, circular buildings many of earthen construction, and to Pingyao in Shanxi Province with its famous city walls and Foguang Temple dating back to the Tang Dynasty. Everywhere I went I saw manifestations of a living culture. And the GHF and their Chinese hosts were sharing in its preservation, respecting the tradition, the honor, the face.

Is Ladakh also worth preserving?

Is it a place worthy of World Heritage status? Does it exemplify a culture that is highly endangered? Does Ladakh provide the basic environment for effective project management? Is the site part of a developing country? Can the project be funded and properly managed? Does it offer opportunities for long term planning, the practice of conservation science, and support from the local community?

The GHF's final condition for helping to support a project is the likelihood of its sustainability. This book portrays Ladakh as it was over a generation ago. It has changed little in the meantime while the surrounding pressures of modernity are growing. Nothing lasts forever, but we must cherish what is good and sincere: hold on to and preserve the best.





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