

TO ABHA'S

# A Day in Alchi



*Photograph: Handcrafted puppets of gods from Alchi*

# A Day in Alchi

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## Know

About two-hour bus drive between Leh town and Alchi village does not tempt the passengers with the views of the village even once, but nude mountains, lovely villages of Nimoo, Basgo, and Saspol, and Indian Army structures invite the attention. Just one kilometre before the village or less, a bridge spans the Indus River. From here, the introduction of Alchi begins. A line of white *chortens* appears. Only school in the village, fields, houses, and one or two accommodations follow before the bus stops at a small square that doubles as a bus and taxi stand.

Allure of Alchi lies in its religious wall paintings dedicated to Buddhism, raw and tamed form of the viridian Indus in the backyard, tall poplars, flat-roof mud and stone houses, and the wall of barren craggy mountains in hues of brown and other earthy colours. The village has four temples that survived onslaught of time. Is religion more important than education? I do not know what locals think about it. However, the model Village of Alchi known as Chhoksar is an ancient religious conclave.

The paintings, probably a medium of meditation, surround the visitors in non-spacious tall dark interiors with usually short entrances. Another aspect of

the religious expression reflects in the puppets of gods sold in the souvenir shops. I have spotted the puppets of gods for the first time. The puppets reveal the hidden desire of the human being to control the Master at least during play time.

The remoteness dependent solitude and exclusivity of the culture is the main draw of the village. But small modern television dishes, installed on a number of traditional houses, have partly perforated the remoteness.

## Go

Alchi village in Leh District, Jammu and Kashmir is about seventy kilometers to the west of Leh town. No airlines fly to the village. However, you still have four options to travel between the town and the village:

### *Public Transport*

A mini bus plies between Leh and Alchi once daily during autumn. The bus departs around 8:00 am from the new bus stand near Handicraft Training Center, Leh. The same bus returns from Alchi at 3:00 pm. Leh-Alchi buses are punctual.

The bus travels along the roads winding through Leh town and Srinagar-Leh Highway (National Highway (NH) 1) via Skalzangling, Rinchen Chowk, Rinchen Auditorium, Hall of Fame, Air Force Station, Spituk, Umla, Pathar Sahib Gurudwara, Nimoo, University of Kashmir (Leh), Basgo, and Saspol.

The buses may not always have conductors. The conductors or drivers would collect fare in cash. No ticket is issued for the fare (INR 90 per person for one way).

## *Taxi*

Both group and rich travelers can hire a taxi for comfort and convenience. As per official rates of 2014-15, a Leh-

## Alchi taxi ride costs

- INR 2,028 for Innova/Xylo
- INR 1,926 for Grand, Qualis, Safari, Scorpio, Tavera, or Winger
- INR 1,830 for Eeco, Sumo, or Van

These vehicles can at least accommodate four people. If you book a return trip, you would get good discounts. For instance, you can get a discount of more than 30% on a Leh-Alchi-Leh Innova/Xylo taxi ride.

## *Cycling and Self-Driving*



You can easily rent both cycles and two-wheelers (motorbikes and scooters) in Leh town. You can rent a cycle for INR 400 per week. The two-wheeler rentals start from INR 600 per day.

See

## *Shangrong Lakhang*

Simple white washed exterior of Shangrong on a rock amid fields in Upper Alchi Village houses a treasure of ancient religious wall paintings. The theme of the paintings revolves around the Drigung School of Buddhism and eighty-four *mahasiddhas* revered by Buddhist. *Mahasiddhas* are mystical

people who did not care about accepted religious and social customs and resided in India during 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century. The temple, probably built in 1400 AD, shares its neighborhood with a group of *chortens* (stupas).

## *Drukling Gompa*

A short trail, meandering through houses and fields, climbs from Shangroog to the gompa, a part of Hemis Monastery. The gompa can also be accessed from main road.

## *Tsatsapuri Monastery / Latho Lhakang / Drigung Temple*

Upper Alchi also has another religious monument Tsatsapuri Monastery built during 13-15<sup>th</sup> century. The monastery is on the other side of a small seasonal stony rivulet that is bridged at one place. The monastery is dedicated to the Drigung School, a part of the Kagyupa School of the Tibetan Buddhism. The wall paintings of historic value are in reasonably good condition. Some of the murals include figures of Drigung Kyopa Jigten Gonpo Rinchen Pal.

The complex comprises a lantern, lama residence, ruins of residential structures, and two temples around the

central courtyard: 2-level Ridzong Dukhang Chenrezig Lakhang and Stupa Hall.

A *mandala* is painted on the wall of Stupa Hall that houses a stupa dedicated to the founder of the monastery.

A Mahakala painting of the thirteenth century adorns the wall of the lama room. The room wall also has other paintings focusing on stories from the life of Buddha.

The *dukhang* wall features a painting of Manjushree.

Sumstek, the 3-tier structure in the east of the complex, is probably a recent

construction than other structures. The wall paintings are similar to that in the Stupa Hall.

## *Buddhist Monastery Complex / Dharma Wheel Monastery of Alchi / Alchi Chos-khor*

The drab and faded exterior may not excite you but the interior is a repository of ancient religious paintings and huge statues of Buddha. The interior recreates and relives the life of Buddha. The complex is aptly called “Chos-Khor” that means “*Dharma Mandala*” or “*Dharma Chakra*.” The monastery design inspired by the Indian *Mandala* System showcases elements

of both Kashmiri and Tibetan craft and art traditions as several eminent Kashmiri and Tibetan artists translated the vision of Rinchen Zangpo into reality. It is believed that Rinchen Zangpo, the famous translator, set up the monastery during 1020-1035 AD. However, an inscription within the *dukhang* states that a student / disciple of the translator built the monastery.

Miniature paintings of Buddha adorn the interior walls of the temples. The paintings include both floral and geometric patterns that are common in the Gandhara and the Kashmiri styles. The themes also cover the Jataka tales

and *mandalas*. The stucco images are another highlight of the temples.

Maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Great Monastery of Likir (Ladakh), the rectangular complex comprises five temples known for ancient murals with or without tantric connotations, and Buddha statues, *chortens*, prayer drums, *mani stones*, monk cells, and a circumambulation path surrounding all the structures. The complex, submitted to the **tentative list of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1998**, is one of the best examples representing traditional architecture of Tibet. The

date of murals and stucco images varies from eleventh to thirteenth century.

Although the monastery started as a place for the Drigung-pa sect of Buddhism, today it is managed by the Gelug-pa sect monks of Likir monastery. About one-thousand-year old Alchi monastery is a protected public religious monument built on a plain ground with an extremely gentle slope. The temples are placed in a linear pattern within the boundary wall made of mud.

## Chortens

The 2-storey high Kagan *chortens* are located near entrance. Exteriors of all



white washed *chortens*, except that of a few, have minimal or no decorations.

## Prayer Drums

Some of the drums are in good condition while others are fully rusted. All drums are not made of traditionally used material. For instance, a shabby prayer drum of Nerolac paint container finds place in one of the exterior alcoves.

## Manjushree Temple

The temple houses four clay statues of Manjushree facing four cardinal directions. Each statue of Manjushree is painted in different color: red, white,

blue, and gold. The statues are on a high lotus like platform, a Kashmiri art element. The walls feature one thousand paintings of Buddha. The wooden pillars support the porch.

## Vairochana Temple

The eleventh century dukhang witnessed monk gatherings and ritual performances on several occasions during the heydays. The square shrine features statues of Vairochana and Avilokiteshwara. Buddha-theme murals cover the walls. A colorful sand *kalachakra* (a wheel of time) is also on display. The oldest and most elaborate structure within the complex has a flat

mud roof and the parapet features a red band. Highlight of the murals is seven *mandalas* of Prajnaparamita, Manjushree, and Vairocana.

## Sumtsek Temple

Sumtsek means “three tiered.” The three storey temple houses about one-storey high stucco statues of Avilokiteshwar, Maitreya, and Manjushree in the three alcoves. In the centre, a large *chorten* is built. The mural covered walls feature images of the Goddess of the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita). The cornices and capitals of the wooden pillars of the portico are richly carved. The carving

motifs consist of floral patterns and animal and human figures. The façade has three triangular gables featuring wooden figures of Manjushree, Maitreya, and Avilokitesvara. The colorful paintings of various forms of Buddha on exterior walls have almost faded. Air and light entering from the clerestory at the top floor freshens and lights the interior.

## Lo-Tsawa / Lotsa Temple

The wide frame of the short door is embellished with floral patterns interspersed by religious figures. The centre space features Buddha statue in *bhumi-sparsh-mudra* besides a statue of

Avalokiteswara. A portrait of the translator is also placed inside the temple. *Mandalas* are painted on the walls.

## New Temple / Lakhang Soma

This small temple on a square plan was added later on. The windowless one-chamber temple has a *chorten* in the centre. The two circular columns of wood support the ceiling of wood.

## Kangyur Library

The library is a collection of Buddhist scriptures (Kanjur) and religious documents.

## Photography

Photography is not allowed inside the temples.

## Entry Fee

Indians: INR 20 per head

Foreigners: INR 50 per head

## *Nimoo Bazgo Hydroelectric Project*

The forty-five-megawatt Nimoo Bazgo Hydroelectric Project on Nimoo Plateau in the backyard of Alchi lights up the villages in Ladakh Region. The project has also reduced power-less-hours in Leh town. A commendable engineering feat of National Hydroelectric Power

Corporation Ltd (N.H.P.C.), the project harnesses energies of the Indus and converts it into electricity. The river gushes out of various tunnels in the dam, rises like white cotton balls and falls with a force on the bed. This adds some moisture to the dry air and creates cooling effect in adjacent areas. This is a sight that enhances the landscape mainly consisting of tall poplars and the mountains baring the skin.

A short walk along the road behind the Chos-Khor takes you to the bridge connecting Bazgo and Umlung hamlets. From here you can have a full view of the dammed Indus. The road runs along the Indus on which a 57.5-meter-high

concrete gravity dam is built. The project would complete in 2014.

## Do

- Stroll along the Indus River.
- Photograph lovely landscape or just enjoy it.
- Shop local handicrafts.

## Stay

Alchi village does not have many sleep options. But still, it has at least seven accommodations given the size of the village.

1. Alchi Resort
2. Choskar Guesthouse and



## Camping Site

3. Dil Dil Homestay
4. Hotel Lower Ladakh
5. Hotel Samdupling
6. Potala Hotel and Restaurant
7. Zimskhang Holiday Home

## *Types of Rooms*

The village mainly offers standard-single and standard-double rooms with attached baths. Zimskhang also has deluxe-single and deluxe-double rooms. An extra bed can be accommodated in the rooms for additional fee.

Alchi does not have high-end hotels.

## *Room Tariff*

The mid-end hotel room price starts from INR 1,350 per night, per person for the European plan (EP). Rates for all three meal plans are available.

Extra charges may include VAT and / or luxury tax of 10%. For example, Zimskhang levies VAT of INR 30 per head.

Alchi Resort increased tariff by about 10% for all meal plans for the 2014 season compared to the last year.

Potala increased the room rates by more than 68% in 2014 over the previous year (INR 800 per night, per person to INR 1,350 per night, per person).

Guesthouse and home stay are definitely economical than hotels and give an opportunity to mingle with local community.

### *Reason to Smile*

Limited choices for stay have an upside too: no visual pollution, no overcrowding, and no unhealthy competition for local resources.

Experience:

Alchi in Pictures



1. A lady from Alchi village

3. The Indus River in the backyard of Alchi village



## 2. Chortens and houses in the village



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## 5. Road above Alchi Village



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4. An old chorten whose base is adorned with auspicious Buddhist symbols

6. Figures and motifs on the door frame of Manjushree Temple



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## Tip

### *Where to Sit in Leh-Alchi-Leh Bound Bus*

- While going, sit in the row near the bus door to get view of the Indus River and the valley.
- While returning, sit in the row behind the driver to get view of the Indus River and the valley.

You can  
advertise here.

Thanks!

Happy  
Himalayan  
Holidays!

Contact Us:

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*Photograph: Shangrong Lakhang*

## More...

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[Upper Alchi](#)