



## Lachen: Paradise Reclaimed

Most people visiting Lachen in Sikkim fall prey to what is termed as the sheep dog phenomenon; squashed into a jeep like domestic animals, guided by their driver who instructs them what to do when to do, thus acting like sheep dog. For a majority of them Lachen is only a night halt on their way to the bejeweled Gurudongmar lake, belittling the beauty of this stupendous valley. But this resplendent land has so much more to offer, the hospitality of the locals with their unique governance system, the rich flower ridden valleys with flowing streams, the forested mountains with snow capped tops — all adding to the splendour and majesty of this land.

The Lachenpas are Bhutia by race, following the Nyngma sect of Buddhism — a sort of Tantric Buddhism preached by Guru Padmasambhava. The unique feature about this village is its local governance system — “Dzumsa” which literally means a “gathering place”. Unlike most

villages in India, Lachen does not adhere to the Panchayat system, choosing instead to follow on with their centuries old governance system. The Dzumsa is a committee of 12 members elected on an annual basis by the people of Lachen to govern and administer the village affairs. The two members who receive the highest votes act as the pipon or the village head while the remaining members play the role of advisers, accountants and messengers.

Single-storied houses made of mud and timber with brightly painted facades alongside fluttering prayer flags greet visitors; the morning sun accentuating the bright colours add to the charm of the village.

The Neadu Choling gumpa, built in the traditional two-storied structure, is impressive. The main hall bears vivid paintings of Guru Padmasambhava in his various *avatars*, depicting stories of his triumph over the demons. A large statue of the Guru rests in the centre of the main altar, with Acharay

Shantarakshita to his left and King Trisong Deutsen to his right. Further down the road is Ma Mo Laghang, literally meaning — old ladies prayer house, a small old gumpa constructed in the early 20th century for the elderly women of Lachen. There is a fascinating old throne of Jogchen Rimpochi — the first lama, along with his rosary, prayer wheel and clothes.

Nature seems to have bestowed all her beauty on this valley which never ceases to amaze with her wonders. A whistling thrush chirping merrily on the majestic hemlock, beaming silver firs shooting for the sky, multi coloured rhododendrons and primulas, all culminating to overwhelm the senses. Every step in this land is a new experience, which reminds a visitor of John Muir’s words: “In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks”.

Towering above the village is the guardian mountain of Lama Angden, protecting the people from misfortunes and the evil eye.

### Ministry of Tourism wins world travel award 2008

India’s Ministry of Tourism won the prestigious World Travel Award 2008 at the World Travel Mart in London for its role in developing and promotion of “Responsible Tourism”. Sujit Banerjee, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, received the award.

### Kalka-Shimla railway gets heritage status

The Kalka-Shimla mountain railway formally received the World Heritage status from UNESCO at the Shimla extension railway station on November 9. Minister of State for Railways R. Velu received the certificate and laid the foundation of a new rail museum there, showcasing the heritage of the historic, 96 km (59 miles) rail link with the world’s steepest incline.

### US insurer offers option for surgery in India

The American health insurer, Wellpoint, is testing a new programme that gives covered patients the option of going to India for elective surgery, with no out-of-pocket medical costs and free travel for both the patient and a companion according to *The New York Times*.

### Qutub Minar metro station to have museum

Delhi Metro, Delhi’s ultra modern transit subway system, now being extended to many areas, has a unique first. The Qutub Minar Metro station that will come up on the Central Secretariat-Gurgaon corridor will look like a heritage structure, with clay, chiselled stones and other earthy colours.

### Rajasthan desert fest to feature camels and music

The city of Bikaner will come alive with music and dance on January 10-11, 2009, during the Camel Fair. Visitors will get to see some unusual folk performances, camel races and dances that are a great attraction.

### Hyderabad to host tea & coffee Asia cup meet

The brewing and flavours business of the world’s top two beverages, tea and coffee, will be the subjects of discussion at a global meet in Hyderabad from November 20-22. The Tea & Coffee World Cup/Asia 2008, expected to bring in all the stakeholders in the industry, will congregate for an exhibition and symposium.

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