

# IN A TIME WARP AT NUBRA VALLEY

The sun climbs up the eastern sky, bringing warmth to the chilly dawn in Leh. My car trudges uphill along boulder-dotted roads of the dusty Himalayas.

One and a half hours of teeth-chattering ride later, I reach the highest point of the trip — Khardung La at 17,580 feet.

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**K**hardung La greets me with a cold embrace, as soft flakes of snow rain down over me. A multitude of colourful prayer flags blur the crest of glazed white hills. I wrap my palms around a hot cup of coffee at Wanderers Cafe, as sunbeams break through the clouds and the sky turns azure. Phunchok, my driver, powers the engine of the car and speeds to the next destination — Diskit. Like a convoy of ants marching forward, the other vehicles trail behind us.





## A JOURNEY IN TRANSITION

In the cold climes of Ladakh, flora needs human tendering to flourish. When the riverbank shows signs of vegetation, I know habitation is nearby. Standing at 10,310 feet, Diskit is the most important town in Nubra Valley. Tucked away in obscurity and fenced by the Himalayas, Nubra Valley proffers a landscape of extremes. The valley springs to life on the fertile bank of the Shyok River, a tributary of the Indus River. The gilded 32-metre statue of Maitreya Budhha is what draws tourists



to Diskit. The pedestal and seat of Lord Budhha is etched with carvings and decorations deriving inspiration from the Buddhist pantheon. Tourist frenzy ensues at the deity's feet.

We continue our journey onwards to Hunder. The green of Diskit is gradually being replaced with scintillating silver. Parallel to the road, running like a river of white sand, the cold desert gives us

company. Hunder is a neat village with houses huddled together, bordering the desert. Each house has a manicured kitchen garden displaying a rich harvest of fruits, vegetables and flowering plants.

## DREAMLIKE DESERT DUNES

After having a quick lunch, I enter the sand dunes area. The sunrays are still oblique in the western sky. Waves of sand have swollen up throughout the desert



in a perfectly synchronised interlude. The high mountains, bedecked with a crown of white, overlook the barren land, losing themselves bit by bit to contribute more mass to the desert. Thorny shrubs jut their prickly heads in some stretches. The ribbon-thin Shyok River outlining the desert often receives some thirsty visitors — the double-humped Bactrian camels.

Centuries ago, these camels had travelled kilometres on the legendary Silk Route which connected Europe to China. They are native to the Steppe region of Central Asia and are also found in China's Gobi Desert. In Nubra Valley, the camels are domesticated by locals and are utilised to offer joyrides to tourists.

The footsteps of the camel caravan storm up clouds of sand. Led by their herders, they leisurely march eastwards. The evening is progressing fast. The eastern mountains are illuminated but the rest of the desert goes under cathedral shadows of the western hills. Light and shadow cut through silhouettes of the caravan. The unfolding scene makes me wonder if I have been teleported to an era in the distant past.







## A CULTURAL EXTRAVAGANZA

Around one km away from the sand dunes towards the village, drum music explodes from under the shade of a large shamiana. I settle myself in the front row to watch local women, dressed in traditional attire, perform. Arrangements are made for four dances — Shondol, Mentok Stanmo, Zangskari and modern dance.

Performers clad in golden-hemlined red robes with fur trimmings perform Shondol, a song and dance practised on the concluding day of Losar, the New Year festival. Mentok Stanmo, the most popular dance in Nubra Valley, is typically performed to greet the onset of the summer season, during which flowers, accompanied by song and dance, are offered at monasteries. Four women wearing cylindrical winged hats sing in chorus with a bouquet of flowers in their hands, whilst tapping their feet in tune with the slow dance. Zangskari is a tribute to nature — it is performed to thank Mother Earth who provides them with cattle, meadows and pleasant weather. In the last performance, modern dance, the audience is invited to join in for a Bollywood score.

Outside the tent, the wind is howling wildly and the night is inky. My host picks me up and deftly drives the car on the winding village road. Soon, I'm slurping steaming soup from a dragon-motif bowl in his dining hall. A buffet dinner of roti (flatbread), dal (lentil soup) and green salad follows. I brave the cold to watch a thousand glittery stars pricking the sky.

The next morning, I visit the sand dunes again. One last time, I capture the image of Hunder with my mind's eye before breezing away to Leh. 

