

Moon Walk

The famed 'Moonland' of Lamayuru is surreal and breathtaking. Tread an ancient lakebed amid fantastical rock formations resulting from water and wind erosion, and climb a hill to Ladakh's oldest monastery.

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We ran as if to meet the moon.” Robert Frost’s words, I thought, were just a manner of speaking. Until the moment when I truly found myself running as if to meet the moon. It was at Lamayuru amidst the mountain-backed badlands in western Ladakh. Being enamoured of the moon is a commonality, but actually encountering the good fortune to witness how the landscape on the moon could look is a rarity. And to take a walk on this moon-like landscape is an experience extraordinaire.

Lamayuru has distinctive slices of the Greater Himalaya like no other region in Ladakh. Yet, like the rest of Ladakh, the route to Lamayuru is stunning, with transforming landscapes – barren terrain, stark mountains, at times yellow or brown, then bronze and again purple. Our four-wheel drive cruised smoothly on the excellent surface of NH1-D (the Srinagar-Leh highway), right after Fotu La. The Indus and Zaskar rivers had cut into the earth, carrying a variegated hue of brownish water along, as could be seen vividly at their confluence at the *sangam*. We stopped to admire the valley with its spectacular display of green, brown, gold and rust, along with the colourful flutter of Buddhist prayer flags. *Chortens* and *stupas* were strewn along the way, with occasional clusters of willows and poplars. But the best was yet to come.

On the final stretch, after a two-hour drive, we took a turn around the bend and there was Lamayuru waiting to unravel its well-kept secret – its moonscape carved out amid the Himalayan ranges. Until then, I had only an inkling of what the surface of the moon looked like, from documentaries on space travel. And now, I verily thought I was walking on the moon. Hypnotising and surreal, Lamayuru’s landscape was absolutely akin to lunar terrain with its unique formations, colour and expanse.

Called ‘The Moonscapes,’ the locals refer to it as ‘The Moonland of Ladakh.’ “Where can we find the moonland?” “It’s right behind this hillock.” That’s a common exchange in these parts.

The Moonscapes are Lamayuru’s claim to fame and there is a story about its origin, rooted in history. Or, in this case, perhaps geography. Geologists talk of Lamayuru as a lakebed in the steep, enclosed valley. The mountain slopes below Lamayuru village once supported a gigantic lake that





NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

- Distance: 127 km west from Leh.
- Regular bus services from Leh and Kargil in the morning and afternoon. Or hire a cab/4WD.

WHERE TO STAY

- Several mid-range hotels are located near the monastery.
- If you are on a shoestring budget, you can stay in the monastery too. Homestays are inexpensive.
- Lamayuru and 'moonland' have become so synonymous that they even have guesthouses named 'Moonland in Lamayuru.'

BEST TIME TO TRAVEL

June to September – as the roads are clear and bereft of snow.

TIT-BITS

- Easily accessible village, where one can experience the Ladakhi way of life.
- Sufficiently off-beat place in Ladakh, without having to get too adventurous – suitable for a family holiday.
- Convenient location if you wish to have a peaceful time in the mountains.



DISCOVER THIS

Fairs and festivals at Lamayuru

- Lamayuru hosts two annual festivals – Yuru Kab-gyat and Hemis Tse Chu – in the second and fifth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar.
- Yuru Kab-gyat is a two-day extravaganza of sacred dances and rituals performed by the monks, wearing masks and representing guardian divinities. Hemis Tse Chu also lasts two days and is the biggest monastery festival in Ladakh.



Monks at the Lamayuru Festival at the monastery. Lamayuru Gumpa (monastery) is built above the ruins of the old one, along the Srinagar-Leh highway



GETTY IMAGES



The route to Lamayuru is stunning and changes magically from barren to bronze and purple

drained out due to neo-tectonic shifts, and its inhabitants, snails, algae, roots and the like, turned into sediment and eventually fossilised.

Today, slopes of fantastically eroded rock formations line both sides of the valley basin, the pock-marked surface resembling the lunar landscape. The craters, orangish yellow in colour, are sprinkled over darkish-brown Himalayan hills rising steeply from the depth of the valley. Through the ages, erosion by wind and water has created curious and intriguing patterns all over the massive expanse; some formations resemble wrinkled faces, some extravagant castles, some even scuffed hummocks or giant blocks of cheese with holes. On a full moon night, Lamayuru is spectacular.

Historians point to traces of pre-Buddhist culture still evident here but the sprawling Lamayuru Gumpa enhances the beauty of the moonscape. Perched atop a sheer cliff, the rock face pock-marked with hermit caves, it overlooks the scenic valley and the moonscape below.

YUNG-DRUNG – Lamayuru Monastery

Probably the oldest monastic site in Ladakh, Lamayuru symbolises an endearing blend of faith, history and myth. It is believed that the Indian Buddhist scholar, Mahasiddhacharya Naropa, a tantric mystic who lived about a thousand years ago, caused the lake, which fed the entire valley, to dry up. Thereafter, a swastika formed and became the foundation stone for the Lamayuru monastery. Naropa is said to have meditated for several years in a cave behind the great hall, though it looks impossibly small.

The great hall has the monastery's collection of artifacts, statues, *thangkas*, carpets, and a charming 11-headed, 1000-eyed image of Chenzing. A young monk peeped shyly out of one of the other halls, where lamps, currency and fruit were getting piled up – becoming the main draw for photographers. I was much taken up with the murals, frescoes and column wall paintings that exemplified the Kashmiri style of Buddhist iconography.

Dating back to the 10th century, the monastery is also called 'The Yung-Drung.' The complex has buildings at various levels. Then, as the sound of drum beating and bell ringing progressively increased, we beheld a rather interesting sight – we saw monks in their maroon robes coming out of their quarters – some running to the school, some walking sedately, some with satchels and books. About 150-200 monks live here, atop Meditation Hill. They churn out medicines from the local herbs, at the medical laboratory on this hill.

MEDITATION HILL

For unmatched views of the moonscape, climb Meditation Hill. One can do so, from within the monastery complex. As we climbed, the sights of the village of Lamayuru unfurled and the labyrinthine road of Fotu La glided into the horizon. We started to see the true enormity of the landforms surrounding Lamayuru. Even more imposing were the

white blocks of houses balanced precariously, yet perfectly, atop these formations. The *stupas* were the most decorated ones we saw in Ladakh. The prayer stones and rocks strewn on the way up are a significant part of Buddhist culture. Carved precisely with the exquisite Tibetan script, these stones are pieces of art. Their colours reflect the colours of the Ladakh mountains.

The interesting anecdote of the 16th-century king, Jamyang Namgyal, who gifted this *gumpa* to a *lama* for curing him of leprosy, came to mind. I had earlier read on an information board that Ladakhis still call this monastery 'Tharpa Ling' or 'Place of Freedom.'

Spending hours here, I admired the juxtaposition of nature and architecture against the backdrop of azure skies and surrounded by the arid, stunning moonscape. The sun was bright and I could feel the pure air all around. I had a feeling of being 'free,' watching the resplendent panorama and cherishing my 'walk on the moon.' ♦