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Travel Teaches Lessons for Home

The Experience of Responsible Travel is Transferable

By Lori Hinton

There are a few great ways to work to improve the lives of people in foreign cultures as a catalyst to doing the same thing in your own. Case in point, a trek through the Ladakh Range of Northern India to a tiny village called Lingshed with a community-based travel company like Crooked Trails.

This far-off mountain community near Tibet at 13,000 feet (and over 17,000 miles from North America) can truly teach a Westerner valuable lessons for life at home as well as abroad.

The trip starts and ends with a couple of big city days in Delhi and Agra. Heat. Humidity. Countless cars. Sacred cows. Curry. And of course, the Taj.

But the bulk of the journey, including an average of ten participants and six guides (four local Ladakhis and Tammy Leland and Dan Travers of Seattle's Crooked Trails Travel), is a challenging 2-week trek up the remote Ladakh Mountain Range to Lingshed Village and back.

Cradled between the Himalayas in the South and Karakoram in the North (approximately 50 miles from K2), amidst the extreme conditions of sweltering daytime summer heat and night temperatures falling far below freezing, lies the peaceful mountain village.

Landlocked with snow and ice for nine months of the year, Lingshed is a mountain oasis where travelers learn to breathe deeply (both from strenuous trekking and high altitude exposure) and experience living simply in a small subsistence farming community, leaving all the conveniences of the Western world far behind: no showers for 14 days, dirt pit toilets, and every single drop of water to be consumed.



This page: The author and a Ladakhi trekker atop the 15,000-foot high Sir Sir La Pass, Ladakh, India. Opposite page: Lori helps her host mother, Lobsong, make breakfast dumplings for the family.

When trekkers arrive in Lingshed, they attend Tibetan Buddhist seminars, take Ladakhi language lessons, and experience the biggest education of all: living and working with Ladakhi families. It's not uncommon to milk goats, water wheat fields, harvest horse dung for fuel, and knead dough for breakfast dumplings. And though life is hard work, the people are happy.

Strangely enough travelers find they are more similar than they are different. In a matter of days the physical and psychological borders between the two worlds vanish. Instead of craving conveniences of home, travelers find themselves wanting to be more like the people of Lingshed.

Having learned to romanticize about a world without cell phones, email, TVs and cars, travelers want to bring this simple life home with them.

Wantings of the Western World

"I personally think we all have something to learn about the simplicity of life in the places we visit," reflects Leland, guide and co-owner of Crooked Trails.

"Travelers can become introspective in a very productive way. Experiencing foreign cultures can also lead you to learn more patience," says

trekking guide Dan Travers. "Just witnessing the way other people react to stressful situations is a great learning experience."

For example, *tuk tuk* drivers (Indian mini-taxi drivers) get cut off in traffic time after time, yet the drivers never seemed phased. We all experience road rage, but why is it that other cultures don't have it?

"In Ladakh the Buddhist perspective of compassion is pretty powerful. You simply don't see or hear anger or yelling. It just doesn't happen," says Travers.

But how can the world embrace the peaceful ways of Lingshed at home?

Taking the Foreign Teachings Home

"Witnessing an ethnic community like Lingshed, to live the way they live and learn what it's like to be part of their supportive community, we realize we also want to be part of something like that," says Leland's business partner Chris MacKay.

"When we return we feel the need to do something—to turn our energy toward what we've learned from where we've been and focus on some important needs in our own communities like the homeless or the hungry," suggests Leland.

And this can happen in any community on the planet. Whether people are artists, educators, or politicians, anyone

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can find avenues in which to give back to their community.

Socially: In Lingshed, there is no homelessness, nobody is abandoned. No matter who you are, you belong. Not a bad goal.

Economically: Responsible travelers try to support the locals in the particular country they visit. Why not try the same at home? Spend money in locally-owned coffee shops, thrift stores, restaurants, and farmers markets.

Environmentally: Often in third world countries travelers witness the lifestyle of subsistence living, where everything's used and little is wasted. Why not try to reduce consumption or give away things we don't need to those who do?

Culturally: At home, travelers can seek out foreign cultures in their own communities, hear their music, visit their restaurants, study their religions (the Buddhist practice of compassion is a powerful lesson for all).

"Before you leave on a trip like this, maybe you would see a guy with a turban in line at the grocery store and you wouldn't talk to him because he was different," explains Leland. "But once you've visited a Sikh temple in Delhi and have a connection to his lifestyle, now you are compelled to ask his name and where's he's from. Now you want to talk to him."

This kind of practice can open up lines of communication where barriers stood before.

"We traditionally don't try to overcome communication barriers," says Travers. "But when we travel, in order to get by

we are forced to overcome them. And after we travel, we are more comfortable breaking those barriers. I use butchered Spanish at a Peruvian restaurant in Seattle and they love the fact I'm trying."

"One of the things you learn when you travel abroad is cultural respect," says MacKay. "Then when you come back you can help open the hearts and the minds of others around you. Rather than judging someone you see walking down the street, you have a broader perspective on life. You feel more open and judge less. It's a subtle thing, yet it's one of the most important things we can ever do."

The point is, if these influential travelers can open their eyes to those already in their communities, they can gain more respect for those around them and benefit their own communities as a whole.

For More Info.

For more information on Lingshed Village, visit: www.Lingshed.org. The

next Crooked Trails trip to Lingshed is July 8-August 2, 2005. The approximate cost is \$2,000 plus airfare.

For information on the trek to Lingshed and other responsible travel trips, see www.CrookedTrails.com, or call 206-372-4405.

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