

Wheeling good

The country's most geographically isolated district is now accessible to the wheelchair bound, thanks to an inclusive circuit called Himalaya on Wheels

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI

DEMANDING DESTINATION: Indus river at the base of a monastery in Ladakh; (right) gilded Buddha of Matho monastery

His face seemed to have been sculpted and chiselled by adversity and unforgiving winds. In its rock-solid contours, his visage resembled the mountains of his beloved Ladakh. Yet Mohammed Iqbal brimmed with the passion of a man who lives in the here and now. President of PAGIR (People's Action Group for Inclusion and Rights), he has fought for the rights of the disabled to lead a normal life, including travel in Ladakh.

So much so, we initially did not notice that Iqbal was physically challenged at multiple levels. He is endowed with the spirit of a warrior and the courage and fortitude typical of the Ladakhi, who battles almost daily with a hostile though beautiful environment.

The country's most geographically isolated district, barricaded by parallel mountain ranges the Himalayas and the Karakoram, Ladakh is a tough destination for even the hardest of us. And thanks to Iqbal, we saw this almost surreal mountainous Arctic-type desert from a different perspective—from a wheelchair.



EMPOWERMENT

Jagged peaks at ease with their immensity crowd the horizon, and seem to loom on the visitor who often feels breathless, thanks to the rarefied air in this high altitude desert. Even the fittest may experience waves of nausea and other symptoms of high altitude sickness. But PAGIR, essentially a small band of people with disabilities led by the intrepid Iqbal, has, in conjunction with Travel Another India, a company that organises off-the-beaten-path responsible travel, launched a wheelchair-friendly circuit in Ladakh. (The circuit is ideal for the disabled as well as their friends and family.)

This is a remarkable first in India, where the children of a lesser god are often forgotten and abandoned, or at best, live their lives on the fringes of society. Iqbal's contribution has been recognised with awards such as the CNN-IBN Real Heroes Award and the Shell Helen Keller Award. Gouthami, founder of Travel Another India, is the Asian laureate of the fourth edition of the Cartier's Women Initiative Awards.

To develop an inclusive travel circuit in Ladakh, Shivani Gupta, the physically challenged director of AccessAbility, India's premier Access Consultancy firm, was re-



MAN WITH A MISSION: Mohammed Iqbal, president of PAGIR, which, in association with Travel Another India, has launched a wheelchair friendly circuit in Ladakh; (right) wheelchair friendly resort with ramp at Uley Topko; (left) door handle at the Choglamsar monastery

quested to conduct an audit. She then submitted a report detailing what needed to be done to make Himalaya on Wheels a rewarding experience. Her findings detailed accessibility issues and suggested the installation of ramps in hotels and tourist sites, as well as wider entrances and alarm systems in the rooms and bathrooms.

Shivani observed that while most gompas (monasteries) in Ladakh are accessed via numerous steep steps, the Shey and Likhir Gompa (close to the district hub of Leh) have fewer steps. In the case of Likhir, the gilded, seemingly cloud-scraping (all of 70ft) statue of the

Future Buddha can be viewed from the pathway below. Idyllic Alchi village is home to the region's oldest monastery which is located not on some seemingly inaccessible hilltop as is the norm but in the heart of the hamlet; in the midst of charming village homes that snooze amid apricot trees. Thus, many sights are supremely accessible.

Yet though it is alluring, Ladakh, undeniably, is a demanding destination; and not only for the physically challenged. It was by no means an easy task as PAGIR set out to provide the basic amenities for wheelchair users. The team



convinced a few hotels/guest houses like Zik Zik Guest House and Hotel Grand Dragon in Leh and the Ule Ethnic Resort in Uley Topko village, a charming resort on the banks of the Indus river, ensconced in the midst of fruit orchards, to modify a few of their rooms. These were made wheelchair friendly by providing facilities like ramp access, larger bathrooms and room service. A guidebook outlining accessibility issues and local history has been put together and is given to the client in order to make his sojourn more comfortable and meaningful.

The team even convinced a monastery on the outskirts of Leh to build ramps for wheelchairs, while at the 11th century Alchi monastery, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has constructed ramps. Meanwhile, a few young people have been trained to handle the physically challenged—managing their wheelchairs with built-in commodes, and to cater to their special needs. Portable ramps are also provided by the organisation.

The wheelchair-friendly circuit is

aply called Himalaya on Wheels and covers the monasteries and palaces in and around Leh as well as the gompas of Alchi and Likir, a two-hour drive from Leh. Wheelchair-users can even head out on a day trip to savour the surreal beauty of Pangong Lake near the Tibetan border. This is a six-hour drive and is said to be one of the most scenic in the world, where the mountains en route resemble the flexed muscles of a divine titan ready to reach out and pummel minuscule cars that teeter along their edge. The journey includes traversing the third highest pass in the world—Chang La Pass at 17,800 ft—a thrill for sightseers of every shape and hue.

After a day of rest in Leh, when we acclimatised ourselves to the rarefied air, we sped to Likir and Alchi. Iqbal travelled with us, ensconced comfortably in the back of the car, with a helper. Outside the car windows, the landscape unfolded like a Tibetan tangkha painting—muted, multi-layered but at times ablaze with colour. Often rugged and at other times



crumbly and slashed with frozen rivers of snow, the mountains clawed at an incredibly blue sky; had they been created in a fit of divine fury, we wondered.

The palette was in all shades of brown, beige, dark brown, deep green, fissured and seemingly raked by giant fingernails. Oft times the mountain's surface was as smooth as silk or striated and streaked with snow at the top. Large boulders hung precariously over ravines, seeming to hold on to mountain flanks with sheer will power. We recalled what Shivani had said: "Being a wheelchair user, I tend to enjoy natural beauty, as it is usually more accessible than man-made monuments, which are comparatively inaccessible. Leh's natural beauty is so magnificent and overpowering, that it completely humbles you and spreads a sense of peace and calm."

We saw the circuit through Iqbal's bright eyes, the almost, unyielding beauty of a region, buffeted by nature and bludgeoned by invad-



NATURAL HUES: (Clockwise from top) A Ladakhi woman at a homestay; tented camp resort at Pangong Lake; monks buying spices at a sidewalk stall; a monastery

ers from the neighbourhood—the hardy Dogras of Jammu, the Baltis and Kashmiris. Yet Ladakh does not show the scars of its bloody history; instead it is swathed in a palpable serenity, trapped within an amphitheatre of bare mountains, lush valleys and some of the highest mountain passes in the world. Here multi-tiered hilltop monasteries, wreathed in incense and Tibetan chanting, were strung with colourful prayer flags and seemed to tumble off the slopes. Green oases, edged by poplars and willows, flowered along the banks of the Indus and the Zaskar rivers. Near the banks of the river, the harsh landscape softened



and Ladakh would throw another surprise—a burst of lush wheat fields and mustard yellow expanses bounded by poplar and willow trees.

We revelled in the melting pot appeal of Leh, traversed over the centuries by caravans from faraway lands and touched in spirit by the wizened monks and nuns, who



FACT FILE

The flight into and out of Leh is dramatic as the plane cruises above snow-custed mountains. There are a number of early morning flights from Delhi to Leh.

One can travel by road to Leh from either Srinagar, or Manali in Himachal Pradesh, but be warned this journey is physically taxing.

As Leh is located at 11,500 ft, the air is rarefied. Do not exert for the first 24 hours. Breathlessness for the first day or two is common but if unusual symptoms occur such as nausea, dizziness or a constant headache, get medical help. Drink plenty of water, avoid alcohol and move around slowly. Carry any medicine that you may be taking normally.

PAGIR's four-day package includes airport transfers, breakfast and dinner as well as the services of a trained driver, helper and the use of portable ramps where necessary. A guidebook covers accessibility issues pointing out the availability of ramps, wheelchair friendly guesthouses and hotels apart from a brief background on the region and its sights. (There is an option for budget as well as luxury accommodation.) The profits are ploughed back into PAGIR to help the disabled.

spun prayer wheels as they strolled and prayed; hardy Ladakhi women bore toddlers on their backs or tilled the fields and vegetable gardens outside their pretty white-washed homes... always ready with a smile or a jullay (a catch-all greeting) for visitors.

With Iqbal, we shopped in the charming Leh bazaar, tasted the crisp yet fluffy butter-slathered Ladakhi bread (a kind of crisp round roti), bit into delectable momos (local dumplings), slurped thukpa, a rich noodle soup and sipped butter tea in small intimate cafes and hole-in-the wall eateries... revelling in his look of wonder that every experience engendered.

But it was at Pangong Tso (lake) where Ladakh's fragile beauty seemed to crystallise in a canvas of intense hues—a cobalt-blue water body, rimmed by bald snow-tipped mountains that changed colour almost every minute. As we retreated into the relative warmth of our frail tents, located virtually on the edge of the lake, it warmed our hearts to know that this half-way-to-heaven destination is now accessible even to those who are physically challenged. ●