

The Virgin Vale

About 20-km south of Rangdum stands the Pazila watershed across which lies Zanskar, the most isolated of all the trans Himalayan Valleys. The Panzela Top (4,401 m) is the picturesque tableland adorned with two small alpine lakes and surrounded by snow-covered peaks.

As the Zanskar road winds down the steep slopes of the watershed to the head of the Stod Valley, one of Zanskar's main tributary valleys, the majestic "Drang-Drung" glacier looms into full view. A long and winding river of ice and snow, the Drang-Drung" is perhaps the largest glacier in Ladakh, outside the Siachen formation. It is from the cliff-like snout of this extensive glacier that the Stod or Doda River, the main tributary of river Zanskar, rises.

The Mountainous Panorama

Zanskar comprises a tri-armed valley system lying between the Great Himalayan Range and the Zanskar mountain; The three arms radiate star-like towards the west, north and south from a wide central expanse where the region's two principal drainage's meet to form the main Zanskar River.

It is mainly along the course of this valley system that the region's 10,000 strong, mainly Buddhists population lives. Spread over an estimated geographical area of 5,000-sq-kms, high-rise mountains and deep gorges surround Zanskar. The area remains inaccessible for nearly 8 months a year due to heavy snowfall resulting in closure of all the access passes, including the Penzela.

Today, Zanskar has the distinction of being the least interfered with microcosms of Ladakh , and one of the last few surviving cultural satellites of Tibet. Within the mountain ramparts of this lost Shangrila stand a number of ancient yet active monastic establishments. Some of these religious foundations have evolved around remote meditation caves believed to have been used by a succession of famous Buddhist saints for prolonged meditation in pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment.

HISTORY

The Khampa, the nomadic shepherds who originally roamed the grazing pastures of the Tibetan plateau, would have been familiar with the high passes into Zanskar many centuries before the villages of the Zanskar or Indus valley were established.

In the 11th century, the eminent scholar Ringchen Brangpo wandered the Zanskar valley selecting sites from the 108 monasteries that were to be found throughout the west Himalayas. At the same time, legend has it that the sage Naropa meditated at the site of Sani monastery.

The Advent of Foreign Travellers

The famous Hungarian explorer Coso de Koros was one of the first European travelers to visit the region. He spent nearly a year, in 1826-27, at the monastery of Phugthal translating

Buddhist texts from Ladakhi into English. An inscription of his name can be still found in the monastery.

Dogra Invasion

A few years later, the Dogra general Zorawar Singh led his army over the Umasi La during the conquest of Ladakh and the Zanskar. In 1834 he reduced the powers of the royal families in both Padum and Zangla to a nominal status and established the fort at the village of Pipiting just north of Padum. He is also said to have paid a small fortune to hire a local guide to lead his army directly across the passes of the Zanskar Range to the Indus Valley in Order to mount a surprise attack on the king of Ladakh.

The Dogra conquest was recorded by Thomas Thomson, a member of the East India Company's Boundary Commission crossing the Umasi La in June 1848 en route through the Zanskar and Indus Valleys to the Korakoram Pass.

PRIME ATTRACTIONS

Panikhar

On the route to Zanskar, Panikhar, which is commonly considered to be on the border of the Suru Valley, is an important place. There is a high pass between Panikhar and Sankoo, a moderately sized valley about 42-km from Kargil, Ladakh . Zorawar Singh and his forces entered Ladakh from the Suru Pass in 1832 en route to conquer Tibet. He built a fort whose ruins stand to this day.

Penzella Pass

The Panzella Pass is situated at an elevation of more than 4,200 m over the Zanskar range (Penzella mountains). It separates Zanskar from the Suru valley and other parts of Ladakh. On either side of the pass there are camping grounds used by migratory grazer communities and travelers. At the top, an enchanting view of the surrounding ranges and countryside greets the visitor.

At the top of the pass, there are two springs of greenish water credited by legend to be the birthplace of the progenitors of the famous Zanskar breed of ponies. Different forms of vegetation come up around the pass soon after the snow melts in summer. These include many species, which have medicinal value. Marmots live in burrows, moving to lower elevations in winter. The brown bear is also found on the slopes of the Penzela Pass.

The Penzela glacier, where the Suru River arises, is situated on one of the flanks of this pass. On the Zanskar side, an extensive stretch of flat land is present at the foot of the pass. It is dissected by a number of streams and supports riverine vegetation, which becomes thick in summer. This is an ideal camping ground for graziers and trekkers.

The Penzela Pass remains open only from May to September, being closed for the rest of the year due to heavy snowfall.

Karsha

Karsha is another large settlement across the river from Padam, at a distance of about 8-km from the latter. It has a small market, school, dispensary and post and telegraph facilities. There is also a monastery at Karsha, which is revered by the population living in the surrounding region