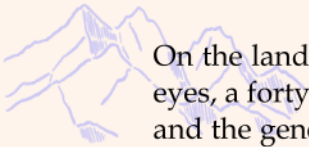




## Beyond the horizon

The intercom crackles to life:

*"Good morning ladies and gentlemen, this is Capt Namgyal from the flight deck. We are cruising at 35,000 feet above mean sea level, temperature outside is 55 deg. centigrade below 0. Our flight route is between longitude 77 - 78 degrees, we are presently flying over the Greater Himalayas..."*



On the land below, a mega spectacle is unfolding – A soulful sight to behold for human eyes, a forty-five million years old splendour entrenched on land. It is the abode of **Gods** and the genesis of Hindu mythology; the grandest phenomena on Planet Earth. Studded with thousands of snow-clad spires, craggy peaks, lofty summits, mighty massifs, and mammoth glaciers, it is a world enshrouding phantom mysteries, bottomless crevasses, tearing winds, endless snow slopes and thundering avalanches, where only humans of grit and daring could set their foot.

Anointed in eternal glory the majestic grandeur of the **Greater Himalayas**, slowly passes by underneath.



Marvelling at what she just saw through her seat window, a young lady in the front row is completely awestruck: *"Unbelievable! Ohh my God, this is incredible"*.

The other passengers sit dazzled in complete silence and wonder, trying to recover from the dramatic impact of the visual event they just witnessed.



Meanwhile, on ground, a the mid-aged lama (Buddhist monk) in maroon robe steps out. Ignoring the wind slapping on his monastery's old wooden door, he looks up in the sky towards the approaching airplane.

*"Who amongst them will visit his monastery to pay reverence to the figurine of Padmashambava; the guru of Tantric Buddhism", he wonders.*

The intercom crackles to life: *"All cabin crew return to their stations to prepare for landing"*.

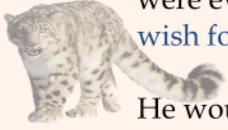
The airplane begins it's descend. The Indus river gets closer in view, landscape begins to changes to stark lunar like shades. Tiny green patches of poplars and willow trees start appearing. A few minutes later, Capt Namgyal pulls back gently on his control-column and touches down on the runway of Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Leh airport. Reversing his throttle to break the linear momentum of landing, he presses his feet skilfully on his rudder pedals to keep the airplane rolling on in straight line, till it finally taxis to halt.



You have just landed at an altitude of 10,684 feet (3256 meters) on the western end of the Tibetan Plateau. "Julay" (pronounced joo-lay, meaning hello in Bhoti language), you are in Ladakh (or Khapa-Chan). You may now redefine your isolation or fulfil your fantasy of Shangri-La or indulge in your private rendezvous with Buddha.

Once an independent **Buddhist Kingdom**, located on the crossroads of the trade route between China and Middle East, it is often called 'Little Tibet'. Its 59,145 square kms of geographical domain (nearly 1½ times the size of Bhutan), covers parts of 'Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges and the upper Indus river valley'.

A territory of extraordinary encounters, it is comparable to no other destination. If you were ever to sit on Aladdin's magic-carpet (legendry flying-carpet of fiction) and were to wish for the discovery of Ladakh, this is what the good Djinn would do for you:



He would joyfully sail you over the sensational 'trans-Himalayan terrain', over Chanting valleys, Enchanting landscapes, Splendid rivers, Emerald lakes, Delightful hamlets and Dramatic gorges, over the elusive Snow leopards, Urials, Chiru (Tibetan antelope), Wild Yaks, over Stunning peaks and icy glaciers. And over towering Monasteries embedded in mountain slopes and across grand Buddhas carved into mountainous rocks and over white Gompas clinging to hillsides and over Bactrian camels wandering in wildernesses.



The Djinn would sail you over unimaginable wonders, where women wear Turquoise-stoned hats, churn Yak milk for butter-tea, and eat Tsampa from barley crops, and men enact Tantric mask dances in holy courtyards. He would sail you over winding Trekking routes and grazing Dzos, high Mountain passes and old wooden Bridges across singing Rivers, fluttering Flags carrying mantras into the winds and across artistic Mandalas and Tankha paintings, Carpet weaving and over blossoming apricot orchards and more.....!



And maybe he would also offer you a glimpses of our frontiers, touching China and Pakistan, where our valiant soldiers (Faujis) stand alert 24x7, guarding our Mother Land and its matchless cultural diversities.

Waving out to the ground engineers, Capt Namgyal switches off his turbo engines as his passengers begin to move towards the exit and into the unfathomable magic of Ladakh.

Outside, near the arrival terminal door, an old Ladakhi lady with wrinkles of wisdom, grace and beauty on her innocent face, awaits her Pilot son. Capt Namgyal is there only for a short time, before he takes the airplane back with his next set of passengers. The old lady holds a rosary of beads in one hand and tibetian prayer wheel in the other.

She sees her Pilot son and begins to chant: "Om mane padme om". The author, who is also amongst the arriving passengers finds himself a seat in the arrival area and starts to wait for his baggage to arrive. Sitting there he feels inspired to capture the essence of Ladakh.

*"Far away beyond the endless horizon, there lies a piece of the gentle moon,  
holy whispers speak to silence here, valleys echo with om mane padme om"*

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One week later, the young lady passenger sends pictures on Whatsapp from her phone to her friends back in Italy, with a caption that reads: "This is Ladakh - truly astounding".

A young boy with rosy cheeks and a sunburnt nose, peeps out from behind a tall white Gompa, smiles at her, "Joolay" he says shyly and rushes back to hide behind the Gompa.