



Tibet/Ladakh

# Central Asian Museum Inaugurated in Leh

After 8 seasons of hard work, we are happy to say our biggest project is finally completed, the **Central Asian Museum** in Leh.

For centuries, Ladakh was at the crossroads of Central Asian caravan trade; however, in the mid-20th century when the cross-border trade stopped, Ladakh fell into relative geographic and cultural isolation. Ladakh's culture has been shaped by the transmission of goods and ideas from Tibet, Turkestan, Kashmir and India. The Leh's Central Asian Museum commemorates this important aspect of Ladakh's history.

The museum is built in the Tsas Soma garden, formerly the site of Leh's caravansarai, which is also said to be the site of the town's first mosque established by Muslim traders in the 17th century.

After **Tibet Heritage Fund** (THF) restored the Masjid Sharif in 2007 together with the **Anjuman Moin-ul Islam** society, THF and **Leh Old Town Initiative** (LOTI) were asked to design and build the museum in the Tsas Soma Garden. Together with local artisans, international volunteers

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and students André Alexander designed the concept for the main building, putting a contemporary twist on a traditional Himalayan fortress tower.

The square ground plan and diamond-design ceilings acknowledge ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim places of worship. Each floor has its own different interior architectural style, is open in the center - which brings natural light through the four floors - and is encircled by a passage leading to a stairway to the next floor.

The ground floor ceiling and timber elements are crafted in the ancient royal Ladakhi style, inspired by the Tsemo palace tower in Leh. The second level is shaped in the early style of Kashmir, with Bactrian-influenced fluted columns, based on those found in one of the older Masjids in Srinagar. Level 3 is designed in classical Tibetan style, with timber elements and carvings copied from homes of the Lhasa aristocracy. The top floor interior is decorated in the style of Baltistan, with long elegant pillar capitals and flower-pattern carvings. On the far side of the garden will be the Ladakhi Kitchen museum, providing the 'Changsa' atmosphere and experience of a traditional Ladakhi kitchen.

The construction materials are traditional Ladakhi materials of stone, timber and mud. The walls of the museum



► Bottom: the Ladakhi scholar Konchok Panday talking of the importance of

the Central Asian Museum for Ladakh and for the Ladakh communities.

are built in solid stone masonry with mud mortar. The style of the masonry, individually faced stones embedded in layers of splinter stones, is the same style used in Lhasa, and also in the remains of monuments of the Gandhara civilization. The stones are local granite, quarried at Shey village, the old capital of Ladakh. The mortar is local mud mortar, a mix of soil, water and markalak-clay. In Tibetan architecture, the embedding, or 'braiding', of large stones with small ones gives walls a certain flexibility to resist tremors.

All the details are carved on-site. The tall and narrow windows are placed asymmetrically on the facades, designed to help give a contemporary, modern outlook. The main door is inspired by the gates of mansions in the old town of Leh. The floors are paved with a slate stone traditionally used for monastic courtyards. The ceilings are decked traditional Ladakhi style with willow twigs. On the typical Himalayan flat roof, slate was laid on top of the traditional mud layers for waterproofing.

Historic elements donated by local community members have been integrated throughout the buildings. These include three lintels, carved with Buddhist and Islamic floral patterns, as well as two dozen historic windows, most of them in the Kashmiri tracery style.

Visitors exit the museum main building by an iron bridge into the Tsas Soma gardens, an oasis in the centre of Leh, with ancient willow trees and a water channel. The buildings composing the museum complex all adjoin this garden.

There are three gates to access the museum. Over the entrance gate of the museum it is the Trans-Himalayan Research Library, and next to it is the Sharif Masjid and the Kashmir bakery building, (now the museum extension building).

This building was re-designed to be used as office and activities space for the museum complex, including a Ladakhi Kitchen museum created to experience the traditional kitchen atmosphere and tastes of tea and food.

Tibet Heritage Fund hopes the museum will be an important contribution to the cultural life of the region, and to the experience of local and international visitors, by promoting understanding, tolerance and diversity.

We also organized exhibitions and workshops to raise awareness on the preservation of Leh old town with residents and the government, including one workshop "how to run a museum". Besides the Central Asian Museum, Leh THF/LOTI continues to repair residential houses in Leh old town together with residents, owners and artisans, recently completed two projects in the countryside (wall paintings conservation) and started the restoration of the traditional doctor house in Nubra. These are our activities this year in Ladakh. Thank-you.

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▷ Top : The architectural details of the pillars, brackets, floor and ceiling is all in traditional Ladakhi style.  
Middle : Our beloved Rigzin (LOTI and THF team cook) in

the Ladakhi kitchen museum making fresh Ladakhi tea and snacks to offer to the visitors.  
Bottom : Skylights brings light in throughout the building.

