

My travels: Kari Herbert in Dharamsala

The author tells of her encounters in the Indian hill town of Dharamsala with Tibetan exiles who risk their lives to be with the Dalai Lama, their spiritual leader

Kari Herbert

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I recognised them as new arrivals by the look in their eyes. Frightened and wide-eyed, they absorbed everything with a kind of hunger. I had seen this look several times during my few months in Dharamsala. In the distance, the snow-capped Dhauladhar mountains rose out of the wide, verdant Kangra valley, the steep valley sides lined with rhododendron, pine and Himalayan oak. For these travellers from Tibet, pressed into an old bus labouring up the Himalayan foothills, this was the last step towards refuge.

The woman next to me had a baby strapped to her back. She was beautiful, her face open and smooth, her cheeks red from exposure. A rosary moved slowly and methodically in and out of her sleeve, each dark turquoise bead acting as an abacus for time and prayer. Suddenly exhausted, she leaned against my shoulder and gripped my knee for support, and eventually fell asleep against the seat in front.

As the bus lurched into McLeod Ganj, the family were overwhelmed with relief. The woman placed her hand on the grubby window as tears coursed down her face. She paid no attention to the Indian beggar children running alongside us with their matted hair and eager grins; her eyes were fixed on the scattered groups of Tibetans beyond. Once a popular summer retreat for British colonists working or living in Delhi, the hill station, otherwise known as Upper Dharamsala or "Little Lhasa", is now home to several thousand Tibetan exiles and their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

It was February and bitterly cold, but even so, the narrow, muddy streets were filled with monks, nuns and lay people, crowding around the many stalls selling incense and reams of prayer flags. In a couple of days it would be Losar, Tibetan New Year, and the mountain behind the Dalai Lama's residence would be quilted with these bright tattooed squares. I paused at the racks of prayer wheels, watching the new arrivals feeling the smooth wooden pegs before spinning the colourful cylinders, clattering their mantras into the heavens.

I went to visit the refugee reception centre, where in the kitchen a smiling Tibetan woman hovered over a couple of enormous steaming pots, her long plaited hair tucked neatly into the back of her apron. She waved me towards the office, where I was greeted by a young woman who spoke perfect English.

"There is someone you should meet," she said decisively, after we had been chatting for a while. I was led into a bare room lined with benches and told to wait. A few minutes later she returned with a 14-year-old girl. Her name was Tenzin. On the insistence of her parents, Tenzin had left her home in rural Tibet with five of her friends and a small number of adults

to try to reach Dharamsala, where she could be assured of a good education, safety and spiritual freedom.

The two-month journey across the Himalayas in the dead of winter had been harrowing. All her childhood friends had died of fatigue and exposure. Of the group of 15, only six made it to safety. Although Tenzin had survived the trip, she had lost all her toes to frostbite. Ignoring my protests, the woman urged her to show me her feet. Just at that moment two small boys ran into the room in their socks and skidded into a tangled heap. Laughing, Tenzin swung one bare, toe-less foot onto her other knee, caught my eye and beamed.

Since this first visit in 1999 I have grown to love this unique place, with its mix of Indian hill people, Tibetan exiles and "spiritual" tourists, and have returned again and again. Each time, I found myself profoundly moved and inspired. Yet for people like Tenzin and the woman with her baby on the bus, this place, this sanctuary, means so much more.

. Exodus (020-8772 3936) runs a 16-day Mountains, Temples and Hillstations tour that includes a stay in McLeod Ganj. The tour, including flights and most meals, costs from £1,549. World Expeditions (020-8545 9030) offers a 14-day Road to Leh: Festivals of Ladakh tour that includes a stay in McLeod Ganj. Trip costs £1,490, joining in Delhi.

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