

Trip to Ladakh

Food Ingredients that anyone ever thought possible

Chef PRATEEK SADHU

I've never been a fan of early morning flights, but travelling to Ladakh doesn't leave one with many options. I rush home after the night's service, pack my tools and head to the airport.

I'm exhausted, but full of nervous energy. This is the second time I'm heading to Ladakh in my adult life; memories flood back from the time my father was posted in a small village called Sanjak between Leh and Kargil. We would pluck apricots and apples straight from the tree; wood sorrel grew with wild abandon. The tastes of a dozen different herbs from the region have stayed with me, their names long forgotten.

I meet Ashish Shah at the airport, the photographer who had done one of our earliest shoots at Masque. His work speaks for itself and I remain in admiration of his skill, work ethic and general go-getter attitude. Ashish is my foraging buddy for the next five days, along with Mehdi, the most crucial of this unlikely trio; he's the one who will drive us around the deep interiors of Ladakh in search of sea buckthorn, apricots, and whatever else we can find.

Home, Sweet Home

We land in Leh, still only half awake, I open my eyes to the mighty Himalayas under whose lap I was born. I left Kashmir at a relatively young age, but the connect remains strong; stepping out of the plane feels like a homecoming of sorts. Our dear Mehdi, lucky him, is still sound asleep when we land, but gets us to our hotel where we spend the next day acclimatising to the altitude.

At dawn, we begin the drive to Nubra via Khardung La, the world's highest motorable pass. As Ashish clicks away, we drive past fields of a greyish-purple. Intrigued and with a sneaking suspicion of what we've stumbled across, we stop to explore. We wade into the fields and I stoop over to take a whiff; the familiar, floral scent hits me like a brick. Sure enough, we've stepped into a treasure trove of wild lavender, and I'm left awestruck by how incredible India really is. While we're looking West for infusions and scented bath bombs, this bounty lies untouched within our borders.

After making Mehdi promise to stop on our way back when I have my tools handy, we continue to Nubra. I look on to mesmerising views, the lavender playing on my mind—there are a thousand different tea and cocktail possibilities, or something with fish, perhaps? It's a rough drive to Turtuk, the village we're heading to in Nubra, but worth it: we're

welcomed by a vast jungle of sea buckthorn, the main reason we're here. The beautiful, tiny orange berry is a vitamin C tsunami and grows abundantly here, where locals use its thorny bushes largely for fencing.

We start the next day with steaming cups of *noon* — meaning salted chai — typical to the Ladakh and Kashmir area; the Ladakhi version is unique in that the butter is emulsified beforehand, different from the Kashmiri one I grew up drinking, but still a lifelong favourite.

We gear up to begin foraging. We've had to buy army gloves to protect ourselves from the thorns, and enlisted an extra three sets of local hands to help. We spend the next five hours settling into a steady routine: hold the stem, hit it with a stick, collect the falling berries. Of a target of 100 kilos, we manage 30.

As dusk falls, we call it a day and trek to the top of a nearby hill for some relaxation. However, in this land of endless surprises, we are met instead with views of endless buckwheat farms, their flowers in full bloom. In a month's time, they will be ready for harvest; until then, we sit back and breathe in the serenity, then dive in, wading through waist-deep fields until midnight.

Bring on the Baltis

The next day: more salted tea, more sea buckthorn. Hold the stem, hit the stem, collect the jewels. The locals chime in with traditional Balti songs and direct us towards a typical lunch in Baltistan: pancakes made from fermented buckwheat batter, eaten with dried buckwheat leaves and yoghurt. This is easily my most memorable meal of the trip, and I eat the same dish for two days straight.

The berries have thrown us a bit off schedule, and our hunt for apricots is delayed by half a day. We begin instead the following morning, walking up a hill to be met by a trio of delightful old ladies who run the apricot farms. They explain to us the different varieties they grow: one primarily to be eaten fresh, another to be dried, and a third used most often for chutneys and pickling. I spend the next four hours walking through the farms with them, taking notes on what to do once I get back home. My biggest concern is doing justice to the fruits; the challenge will be working them into dishes without bastardising their sweetness and natural flavour. Actually, scratch that—the primary challenge is to get all the produce back to Mumbai without damaging it.

I've carried an icebox with me, but one look at our

yield and I set off to buy more buckets. The berries are especially delicate, and unfortunately so are the buckets we find in tiny Turtuk; we'll have to repack them in a sturdier contraption once we get to Ladakh.

Another morning of *noon* chai and we set off, this time with tools handy. We make pit stops where the lavender grows thick, hopping out every now and then to cut it fresh. Once we arrive, the day is spent gorging on thukpa and momos and discussing how to incorporate all this brilliance into our new menu at Masque. Foraging and farming with your own hands creates an entirely new sense of responsibility towards your ingredients; my focus lies in creating unique plates that do justice to the produce.

Back on the Ground

Still, all the beauty in the world could not make me relinquish my hatred for an early morning flight. It's compounded this time by the 70 extra kilos I'm carrying back with me and the fact that I cannot use my credit card to pay for it thanks to technical issues. At 5 am, we scramble to find an ATM, rush back to the counter, and hop on the flight. I'm

eager to get back to the kitchen—with produce this delicate, every moment counts, and some amount of loss is inevitable. I head straight from the airport to Masque, where the team is ready and waiting to unpack the buckets for storage.

We spend the next four days running through trials and taste tests; not until day four do we succeed in getting our sea buckthorn ice just right. A delicate ring of it is set atop a light mousse of black pepper from the south, garnished with pine salt and fennel flowers. We begin running it on the menu that same night. The apricots will feature on our next, paired with duck, if all goes as planned.

Additional advice

1. Visit Balti Farm, an a-la-carte restaurant, in Turtuk that dishes up Balti dishes sourced almost entirely from its own orchards. (Source: Lonely Planet)

2. Take a short hike to Yarab Tso Lake on the way from Teggur to Panamik hot springs. (Source: TripAdvisor)

3. Stay at Desert Himalaya Resort, a comfortable campsite that has good dining options and snug tents with private bathrooms. (Source: Condé Nast Traveller)

Pests in Aeroplanes

The case of bed bugs being found on Air India business class isn't the only time that pests have been flying high. Here's a roundup of other creepy crawlies who disrupted smooth flights.

1. Cockroaches

You know that good feeling officially sinking into your seat and just relaxing? Well, a New Zealand man didn't because he was left disgusted when he saw cockroaches running around on an Air New Zealand flight. He managed to kill a few and did a show and tell for the airline staff who were reportedly just not interested in the dead bug. But they did spray the plane on landing.

2. Wasps

Wasps are a major problem for aircraft taking off from Brisbane. Plastic covers are placed over gauges to prevent wasps from building hives in the probes, which they can do in under 20 minutes. While the wasps didn't get in this time, —a Malaysia Airlines flight had to return to Brisbane because of a pre-flight inspection failure that left the plastic covers on, causing an in-flight emergency.

3. Spiders

A Mississippi man had a Little Miss Muffet moment when he sat down on an American Airline flight in 2016. Marcus Fleming was bitten by a reclusive brown spider, and

the bite led to an infection which meant that Fleming had to have surgery or lose his thumb. The staff at American Airlines brushed off the spider bite as a mosquito bite and Fleming is seeking \$500,000 in damages.

4. Fleas

A father of two was looking forward to a holiday in America but thanks to British Airways, he may be once bitten, twice shy. Paul Standerwick was attacked by fleas after he and his son moved seats to get a better view while the plane landing. Only after he landed was he informed that the seats were vacated due to the pests. To compensate for the passenger's multiple bites, British Airways left the dad with a £50 voucher.

5. Snakes

A snake nearly made it on a plane. This is not the brief of a horror movie but something that happened at Miami International Airport in July this year. The Transportation Security Administration discovered a large python coiled inside an external hard drive tucked away discreetly inside a piece of luggage.

The live snake and its sneaky owner were both not allowed on their Barbados-bound flight. TSA put up a post and cheekily added, "Con conversationally, this python had not gone full monty. It was wearing a nylon stocking".

—Glynda Alves