

Lobang Tso – The emerald lake

Lobang Tso is a crystal-clear, oval-shaped lake, nestling in the hollow formed at the junction of 2 mountains. ■ by Murli Menon



During my college days, I had read in a book by T. L. Rampha, about the existence of an emerald lake on the borders of ancient Tibet. This lake was so hidden from the world that it had no name. However, the lama had given some clues about its location. First, he had indicated that the lake lay in the midst of 2 elephant-shaped hills, on the Silk Route. The other clue was that the Yerkendis (Chinese Turks) extolled the miraculous medicinal properties of the clear-green waters of this magical lake.

Now a little about the miracles attributed to the waters of this lake. It was said that, if you meditated on the banks of this lake at daybreak, chanted mantras, followed a life of discipline and had a spiritual bent of mind, the reflections of the clouds and the sky would form patterns,

which would reveal events long before they actually happened. In other words, one would be able to predict the future.

The Tibetan lamas used to regularly meditate on the banks of this lake and could foresee the Chinese invasion of Tibet, before it actually occurred. This warning enabled the Dalai Lama and his followers to escape the Chinese and flee to India along with priceless ancient scriptures, books, Tibetan medical encyclopedias, religious texts and sacred relics. These are now safely enclosed in the Buddhist monasteries in Sikkim, Ladakh and Dharamshala.

In September'2004, after countless hours of research over the internet, I identified this lake as lying in the Nubra valley, on the way to Siachen. I decided to visit this lake after completing some official engagements in Leh.

We rose early and started in a jeep from Leh, at 6:00 am. The journey was as pleasurable as the destination. The 130-km-drive took us through the villages of Khalsar, Khardung and Tikrit. We crossed the world's highest motorable road at Khardung La (18,380 feet) and halted there for an hour, to allow the convoys of the Indian armed forces to pass.

Serene zone

The view from Khardung-La is picturesque. Innumerable snow-clad peaks stretch from one end of the horizon to the other. The weather is biting cold even at noon and there is snow at the top even in September. One has to make an effort to breathe as the atmospheric level of oxygen is low at this altitude. The energy aura of Khardung-la is incredible. The

fresh mountain air, the ice-cold winds and the total seclusion imparts vibrancy to every cell in your body.

Driving up to Khardung La, immediately after flying into Leh, could prove risky. It is recommended that you acclimatise at Leh for a week, before venturing to Nubra valley. It is advisable to limit the time of your stay at Khardung La, to avoid high-altitude sickness.

We crossed several high peaks before reaching Hunder (14,350 feet). Every photograph we clicked en route resembled a picture-postcard. We played soothing ZeNLP (a combination of Zen meditation and Neuro Linguistic Programming) music for relaxation throughout this 7-hour drive over rugged terrain.

The drive from Leh to Hunder took us over a very picturesque, high-altitude desert. Driving along this wide stretch of sand dunes was virtual simulation of driving alongside an isolated sandy beach at Lakshadweep! The vegetation was sparse and consisted of cacti and shrubs. Two rivers, namely Shyok

and Nubra, flow through the dunes, creating a patch of green. The snow-capped peaks at the distance add to the breathtaking beauty of this oasis.

After checking into Hiker's Hut at Hunder (run by J&K Tourism), I rested for a day before setting out for the magical lake. I found out from Yangtan, the manager at Hiker's Hut, that the Lobang-Tso (lost lake) lake was a 5-hour trek from Hunder. The next day morning, we set off.

The initial 2-hour uphill walk took us through miles of uninhabited sand dunes. We crossed a couple of double-humped camels before reaching a green patch. Here, we found several

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mountain goats grazing on the banks of the Shyok River. Soon, we could see an outline of 2 elephant-shaped mountains in the horizon. The trek to these hills over sand, cacti, rocks, mud and stone was tough.

Trekking a stretch

It took us over an hour to reach the mountains and another hour to climb uphill. After an arduous trek, we managed to descend into the hollow of the mountain and had our first glimpse of Lobang Tso. It was a very divine, spiritual experience. A speck of light-green amidst sand dunes, rocks and stone. It resembled an emerald nestling in the palm of Nature's hand.

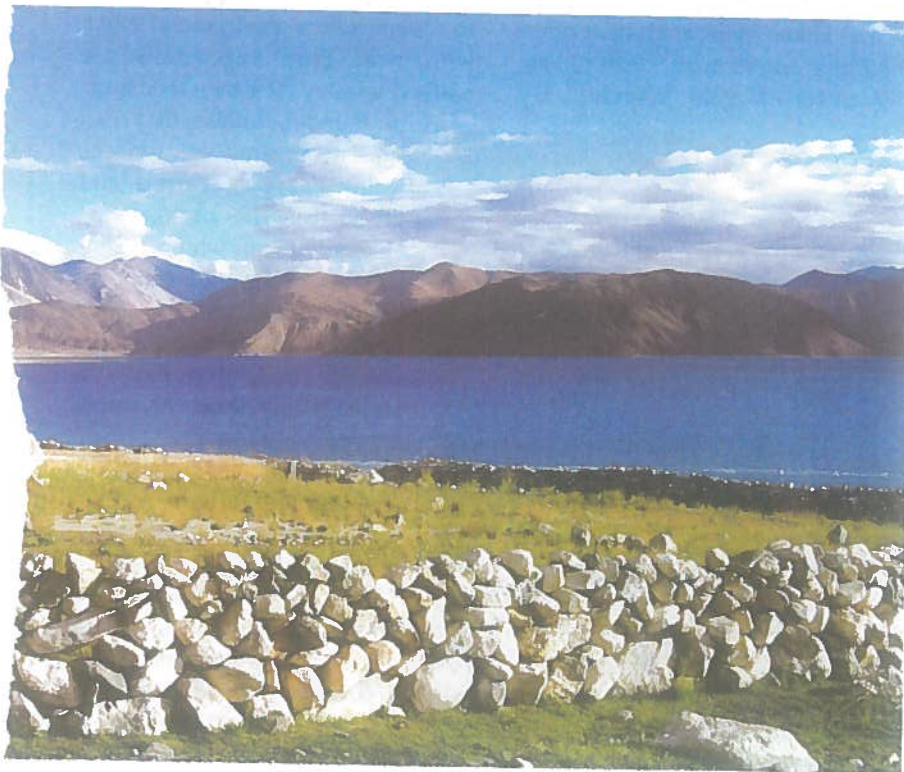
The closer we got to the lake, the more beautiful it looked. The tranquillity experienced while meditating on its swampy banks, cannot be described in words.

Lobang Tso is a crystal-clear, oval-shaped lake, nestling in the hollow formed at the junction of 2 mountains. The calmness and serenity of the place touched my soul. I meditated on the banks of this ocean of tranquillity and am planning to take a group of corporate CEOs on this trek, to make them experience the healing force of Nature.

Dikshit, which is a short drive away from Hunder is a small town, where one can shop for curios. One can also find Tibetan crafted items, singing bowls, singing bells, incense for meditation, Buddhist masks and ginseng.

Every minute of the time invested in the long journey was worth it. The physical, mental and spiritual benefits of visiting Lobang Tso are unparalleled, unless compared to the trek to Kailash Mansarovar through Kumaon, which I completed last May. The drive back to Leh took 5 hours. However, all vehicles had to halt at

**Pangang Lake:
Another beauty in Ladakh.**



Khardung for 3 hours to allow the Army convoys to pass, as maintenance of the roads was being carried out by the Border Roads Organisation.

How to get there:

Indian Airlines operates daily flights to Leh from New Delhi, Srinagar and Jammu.

The to and fro drive from Leh to Hunder costs approximately Rs 2000 by jeep.

Shared taxis are available on the return trip to Leh (Rs. 400 per seat).

Permits:

Inner-line permits are needed for Indian as well as foreign nationals to enter Nubra Valley and can be obtained from the District Collector's office in advance. Inner-line permits are issued in 2 to 3 working days. Obtain them as soon as you land at Leh.

An inner-line permit for 4 weeks enabled me to visit Panamik, Hunder, Dikshit and Siachen base-camp comfortably. Identification documents come handy at the Indian Army check-posts at Khardung. My driving licence, issued by the



Khardung La towards the emerald lake gives a different journey experience.

Government of Gujarat, was checked at all border check-posts during my 8-week stay at Leh.

Where to stay:

JKTDC Moonland Guest House at Leh, adjacent to the airport, is a comfortable place to stay.

The Hiker's Hut at Hunder offers minimum comforts but clean rooms.

Contact Urgan Loondup, Dy.

Director Tourism, Leh, or Ashok Raina at JKTDC, New Delhi, for bookings.

Where to eat:

There are very few pure vegetarian joints in Leh or Hunder. At Leh, The Punjabi Dhaba opposite New Bus Stand offers good Jammu rajma with rice. Pure vegetarians are advised to carry their own foodstuffs to Hunder, unless they can subsist on almonds, apricots, walnuts, apples, carrots and green tea. The caretaker of Hikers Hut can whip up simple meals if the ingredients can be purchased and given to them. Fresh cabbage, cauliflower, potatoes and onions are available from the farms around Nubra valley.

Other precautions:

Carry extra sets of AAA batteries for digital cameras. There is no electricity at Hunder. Extra candles, matchboxes and torches come handy. There are few shops after crossing Dikshit. Vaseline is needed throughout the year. ■



Perfect setting to attain mental peace.