

A homecoming in the mountains

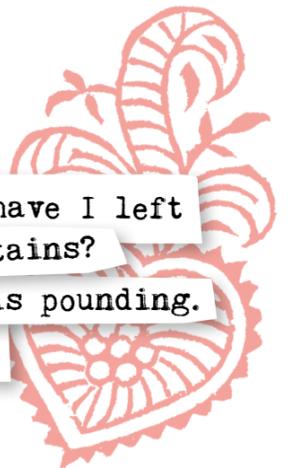
Rugged sceneries, spirits of nature, space, peace: to Myra de Rooy, the mountains feel like home. She travels through the high mountains of Ladakh, in North-Western India, with a monk friend and his brother. "I find riches where other people may only see desolation."



Going through a mountain pass feels like crossing a border, entering a new world



How many footsteps have I left behind in these mountains?
My heart is pounding.
I'm coming home



My path to happiness leads me through the mountains. Walking, moving, one step after another, my feet take me to where my heart is. This passion for the mountains springs from more than a yearning for scenic beauty. The landscape also offers room for self-development. By travelling to this untamed region, I temporarily distance myself from the demons of my daily life: commitments, achievements, expectations to be met. I can recharge and make room for tranquillity. A mountain peak is a place for inner conversation, for feeling in awe of nature and being grateful that I can be here. Although my mind tells me: "The mountains are what they are, nothing more, nothing less," I still feel a kind of kinship.

Slow collision

Sweltering Delhi dissolves below me. The densely populated metropolis is a necessary evil, a stopping place before I can get to my beloved destination. My flight to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, takes an hour and 15 minutes. How many times have I visited Ladakh by now? More than I can count on two hands. I've seen all the seasons there, sometimes even in a single summer day when the heat of the sun was suddenly chased away by a snowstorm or lashing hailstones. When the sun comes up, I float above a sea of mountains born from an ocean. Primordial powers beyond all human imagination ruled here. The clash of the continents that started about 40 million years ago is almost tangible. The Indian continental shelf moved north towards the Eurasian continent at a speed of 16 cm per year. India had travelled 6000 km before it slowly bumped into it. The ocean in between, called Thetys after the Greek sea goddess, was squeezed out. Reminders of this sea can be found on the surface: fossils in marine sediments. Rocks folded themselves and were elevated to become the mighty Himalaya Mountains. Ladakh has two access roads, both involving a journey of several days that is only possible in summer. The rest of the year, the mountain passes are covered in many meters of snow and the only

way in is by air. Glaciers and craggy mountain tops slowly pass below me. The Zaskar Mountains loom ahead. I have left many footprints behind here, and I'll leave some more, together with my friend Karma, who is a local monk.

My plane approaches its destination. I see houses surrounded by bright green barley fields, a river like a shiny ribbon, the sprawling town of Leh. My heart is pounding, not because of the altitude, but because of the vast mountain world. I'm coming home. I had my first mountain experience as a toddler, with my parents. Even before then I had been there. My mother was pregnant with me when she climbed Wildspitze, the second highest mountain in Austria. I was brought up on mountains.

Love at first sight

I studied geology at the university and during a geological field trip to Norway, I learned to decipher the landscape. When I looked closely at what had seemed a dead world, I discovered it was inhabited by flowers, bushes and trees, by creepers, insects and bigger animals. I experienced that silence is not scary and learned that spending time without other people is not the same thing as being lonely. I also became more and more aware that human contact is nurturing and essential for a real life. No human can live without others. The mountains taught me that making contact can only be done if you show your true character and share your thoughts. That's how I began to make friends with the local mountain people. After I had graduated, I was asked to drive a tourist van from the Netherlands to Nepal as a second driver. This temporary job brought me eye to eye with Himalayan giants. It was love at first sight. I went back there to climb, to be a travel guide, and with friends – and with my partner, Hans. After his death in 2000, I have mainly travelled solo. That puts me in touch with the locals and I spend time

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Delek and Karma don't
need a map to know the way.
They carry the map of this
region inside of them

> with people whose language I speak only very poorly. Yet, I feel connectedness and respect during our often wordless times together. And smiling is a language spoken by all. I come back here regularly and that turns strangers into friends.

Inner map

A man dressed in red stands outside the arrival hall. When Karma sees me, his face creases into a wide smile. He puts a kata, a white ceremonial scarf, around my neck and then I feel his arms around me. I have arrived, I am home. In order to acclimatise and get used to the altitude, I spend some time around Leh. Snowflakes flutter down from the sky on the morning we set out for Karma's home ground. Colour is slowly giving way to white. With a gaping abyss on one side, our car shakes and rattles along the dented road as if we are sailing on a wild sea. It's not for nothing that pictures of lamas travel with us. Once in a while, the muddy snow makes the car tires spin senselessly. No grip means no motion, and I help push the car free. The driver drops us off just below the snowy Senge La, the Lion's Pass. The altitude here is more than 5000 meters. We'll have to walk from here on. Karma's brother Delek is waiting for us with donkeys and horses to carry the luggage for the trek that will last several days. Going through a mountain pass feels like crossing a border, entering a new world. The brothers know this region inside out. I use a topographical map to give me an idea of the terrain. This helps me find my way, especially when I walk alone. These guys don't need a map; they have one inside of them. It's anchored in the stories told by their ancestors, in tales from lamas in sacred places, but most of all, it's ingrained in their bodies by all the walking they have done here. Karma and Delek don't come here for the impressive vistas. This is their stomping ground, this is their crib.

Good terms

I, too, feel a kinship with mountains, despite the fact that I have actually lost friends to climbing. I have felt

in my bones that death is just around the corner when the weather turns, when a rock falls, or when there's an avalanche, but the feeling of kinship is there all the same. Although one false step can have irreversible consequences, I feel safe here. Not everyone will feel that way. Things that I admire can seem hostile to other people. I find riches where passers-by may only see desolation. In addition to the imposing mountain tops, I also see miracles on a smaller scale. I no longer work in the field of geology, but I am still fascinated by rocks, minerals and fossils. An immovable rock can move me by its striking hues or rugged shape. Rocks don't think or feel, but lifeless as they are, they can move and inspire. According to Buddhists, they can even be inhabited by lu, local spirits. I see a rock covered in calcite crystals that seem to wink at me in the sunlight. A lump of limestone with fossil shells sits next to a rock touched by human hands that chiselled the mantra om mani padme hum. There's also art from a distant past: cut-out hunting scenes. Ibexes with curved horns are captured in stone for all eternity. When I point to a huge tower of rock and ask Karma if it has a local name, he says it's Namkha, pillar of air, sky-bearer. People give names to the mountain giants, and the mountains in turn shape the people's lives. The mountains have shaped me too, and they became my friends. But you mustn't make them angry; a mistake can still be fatal.

Wealth

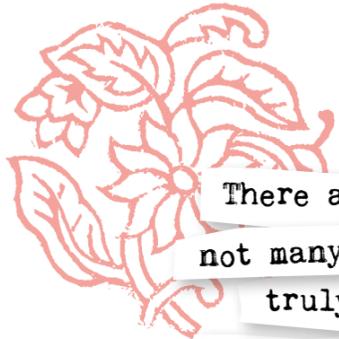
After our first night at the camp, the sun wakes the weather-beaten mountain giants. Karma was up before me: when the summits around us were still veiled in blue hues of shade, he made his prostrations on the cold ground. Now he's making clapping noises, as if he applauds Buddha's teachings or the scenic beauty. His hands make chapattis for breakfast before he and Delek go to fetch the horses and donkeys that are looking for the scarce bits of green >





Laughter is a language
spoken by all. It turns
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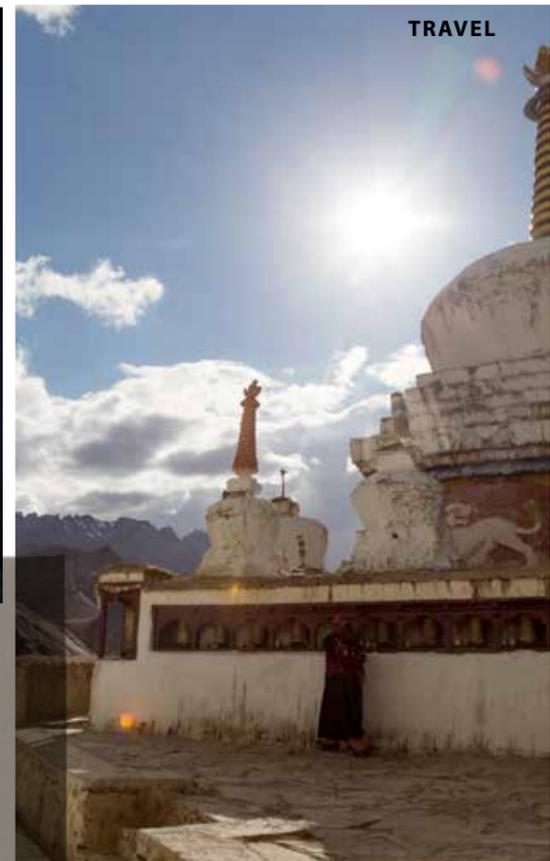
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this landscape

> higher up on the slope. Meanwhile the sunlight reaches down into the valley until it warms our camp. The locals don't sleep in tents; only the nomads in eastern Ladakh do. Here in Karma's world, people live in clusters of whitewashed houses with flat roofs. The prayers on the prayer flags are disseminated by the wind as a blessing to all living creatures. I am welcomed in other ways too: cups of salty tea with a lump of butter, served in kitchens where the dung fires are burning. In the village of Skimpata, a woman shows me her riches. She holds up her festive clothing and her perak, the traditional headgear embroidered with countless turquoises. Then her daughter Stanzin is allowed to don the jewellery and try on the heavy perak. The next time it will be for her wedding, when her mother traditionally hands down the precious heirloom to her eldest daughter. Stanzin's brother will inherit the land and the farm, while she will try her luck elsewhere, at the side of her future husband. It's no longer certain that her parents will pick one for her, as in the old days. But she does know she won't be following her mother's example. This is no farmer's wife but a young woman going to school in Leh. She dreams of being a sports teacher, but for now she helps out her family and tends the herd in summer. I walk a kora around the village monastery. Buddhists make a clockwise circuit of sacred buildings or objects such as monasteries and chörten, the Tibetan Buddhist variation of the stupa. Not only man-made sanctuaries are worshipped, but also natural phenomena. A striking mountain, an ancient tree, a fathomless lake or a remarkably shaped rock may be home to creatures who protect the earth and its people. These are places where you ask for prosperity and happiness in this life

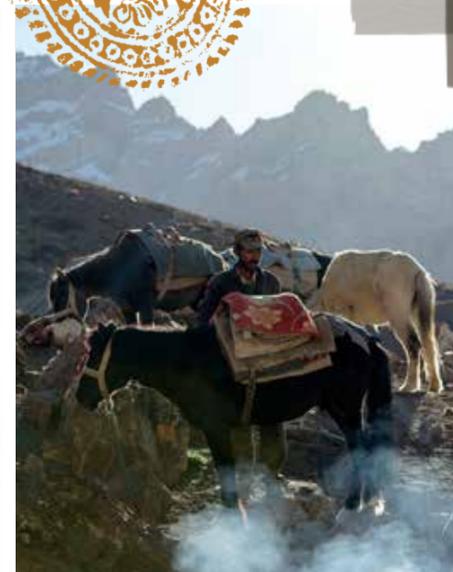
or the next. Stanzin points out the village well to me. Clear water wells up from the rocky ground, drinking water that needs no purifying. She tells me that a lu lives there.

Deciphering the landscape

The mountain world is inhabited by supernatural creatures, by spirits, gods and demons. The Western world studies Humanities, but here, it's the spirit world that counts. Everything is interconnected. The lha live in open spaces such as passes and summits. These mountain gods control the weather cycles, they bring the winter snow and the summer sun that melts the snow away. They give life and fertility to the fields, but can also cause floods, avalanches and earthquakes if the people misbehave. The lu, on the other hand, are water spirits: snake-like creatures associated with the underworld. These protectors live in water wells, quiet lakes or juniper trees. The keepers of well-being, water and happiness respond angrily when their habitat is harmed, when sacred trees are chopped, when buildings are erected without asking the earth for permission first, and when mining pollutes the environment. The lu will then bring disease or drought. On the outer wall of one house, I spot a demon deterrent: a goat's skull with colourful threads wound all around it. The vulnerability of humans in the mountains is understandable. That's why offerings are made, as if a summit or a sacred place has a personality. There are probably not many Westerners who truly understand this landscape. It's only when you "entrench" yourself in the land, when you spend a longer period of time there, that a sense of home can grow. My stay is also too short to experience it fully; I would have to live here. I regularly spend time with mountain tribes and I sympathise with their way of life. Where I live, the connection with nature is usually disturbed. But for nature people that relationship isn't idyllic either. It is often too cold or too dry, too hot or too wet. Life is brutal here, balancing on the edge of existence. And yet these mountain people show a greater intimacy with the earth. Their spiritual landscape is nourished



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Hours later, a yellow dot comes down: our rescuer. It's part of the mountain world, people help each other out

> by a natural scenery with sacred places, places where myths as well as actual history are stored.

Mirror Lake

After a few days in Karma's "divine mountains", we return to Leh. There's not so much snow now on the Senge La pass; bulldozers are sweeping it clean. Our land cruiser awaits us, as arranged. The driver is in a hurry. There's a meltwater river down in the valley and the water will rise later in the day. One unfortunate driver is already stranded at the ford. We can't manage to pull the car clear of the stream. Our driver tries to pass it and gets stuck too. Soaring water rises. We pin our hopes on the bulldozers and one man goes off to get help. Hours later a yellow dot comes down: our rescuer. It's part of the mountain world, people help each other out. Nothing is permanent, the world changes, roads are built, solar energy is turned into light in distant lands, money takes over the exchange economy. And yet the core quality of Buddhism rules: compassion. When there's trouble, you help each other. And today, that keeps the greedy water demons from gobbling up our car. Much more peaceful water, the colour of the turquoise in Stanzin's mother's perak, is what I see at Pangong Tso: a huge, surrealist lake on the Tibetan border. During a storm, it can look like a sea, but now the water mirrors the sky. The crowds of people there make me reel. They're mainly Indian motorcycle tourists, crowding around the tent restaurants. One of the places is called "3 Idiots", which explains the throng. A Bollywood blockbuster by that name was shot in this location, so it seems all the bikers have to take a selfie here, at the very least. The road takes me past the tourist camps and beyond. When the asphalt stops, the crowds are gone. Two villages along, everything is tranquil. This is as far as my permit allows me to go. I spend the night at the house of an anchi, a traditional doctor, and watch him treat a patient with homemade herbal ointments. Karma spends the evening talking to the doctor about ancient wisdom and miraculous events. A spirit lives in the gnarled juniper tree further down,

another one in the well that drives a water prayer wheel. There's even a lu in the rock that I spot next to the monastery the following day. It's a weathered piece of granite with a round hole in it. Karma shows me how to crawl through. The lu rock is prosaically set in cement, to keep the natural wonder from wobbling. Fortunately that hasn't happened to the rock men by the edge of the water. Years ago, I piled up rocks here, a balancing tower for my departed husband, Hans. A forest of rock men has appeared here since, the surreal blue of Pangong Tso in the background. The lake is a mirror for the soul. It's a place where the sun is reflected in the surface and where I can reflect on my life. I pause here while the breeze creates wavelets and streams, and I can let my own stream of thoughts flow without anyone interrupting it. The turquoise lake is surrounded by bare mountains in pastel colours. I sit there and am reminded of a quote by the author and conservationist John Muir: "The mountains are calling and I must go." 🌿

TEXT MYRA DE ROOY

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANTAL ARIËNS