

Standing amid the bustle and banter at the middle of Leh's old town, deep in the heart of the Indian Himalaya, you could be forgiven for thinking that the latest mule caravan from China or Tibet had just arrived.

Leh, capital of Ladakh – the tranquil, Tibetan Buddhist half of the restive state of Jammu and Kashmir – is a town of modest bazaars and winding streets. Whitewashed, panda-eyed houses with poplar-lined gardens fringe its outskirts, followed by sprawling army camps that are themselves hemmed by rugged hills.

Yet Old Leh still reeks of the old days and their earthy ways. Threaded by slender lanes and stepped paths, its mud-brick, cheek-by-jowl houses huddle picturesquely beneath a palace largely empty since Ladakh's royal family was forced out during the 1840s.

Sadly, Old Leh's ensemble of Tibetan-style urban architecture is ageing quickly, and literally crumbling at its joists. However, if the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) and its offshoot, the Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI), have their way, it might just age a little more gracefully.

GRAND PLAN

THF, a German-based NGO, was formed by André Alexander and Pimpim de Azevedo during the mid-1990s. Living in Lhasa, the administrative capital of Tibet, and with a growing passion for the traditional vernacular, Alexander – who describes himself back then as a 'pushy enthusiast' – managed to persuade local authorities to let him and his partner pursue restoration work in the city. Their first modest job involved composting toilets, but it won them many friends, if not favours. They moved on to old downtown houses, and by 2001, THF had restored about 20, with a sympathetic mayor declaring preservation orders on nearly 100 more. Then the political wind turned and THF was forced to wind down.

Alexander first came to Leh in 2003, and was struck by the virtually untouched fabric of its old quarter. Coupled with the more relaxed ambience and local officials, LOTI was born with the aim of carrying out sympathetic yet practical restoration that involves local people. Part of its grand plan involves encouraging visitors to

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take guided 'heritage walks' through Old Leh, and I begin mine sipping possibly Leh's best espresso at Lala's Gallery, a tiny café and exhibition space tucked away in a lane just off the town's main thoroughfare.

The house belongs to a nearby monastery and was probably once used by monks as offices in which to organise trading caravans – wealthy monasteries often participated in business ventures. Yet the family tending it had been unable to prevent its slow decay, and despite the presence of an ancient ground-floor chapel, there was talk of demolishing it to erect a concrete shop. In return for carrying out vital repairs, LOTI (and Lala's) can now use it for a few years.

The house's decay mirrored what was happening across the old quarter. By 2004, ten per cent of buildings were unoccupied, and more than half

PREVIOUS SPREAD: an elderly Leh resident treads carefully on a path above Old Leh as dusk falls over the Indus Valley; **OPPOSITE:** a woman strolls past Sofi House (shown here before restoration) next to the Stagopilog stupa gate and the historic entrance to the old town. The house's name is probably derived from Sufi, the presumed faith of its original builder; **ABOVE:** prayer flags flutter at the so-called Peak of Victory near the 14th-century Namgyal Tsemo Monastery high above Old Leh