



Journey to Little Lhasa



Charukesi Ramadurai goes to Dharamsala and McLeodganj and finds as much to look at around as within

It is really early in the morning and still dark when we set out for a walk. There is a whiff in the air, not the smell of fresh momos, this one lingers longer; the nostalgia of hundreds of Tibetans for the motherland that they have left behind. Of course I am imagining it. I have just finished reading the Dalai Lama's autobiography and am thinking about the history of the place and the people.

It was about 50 years ago, on March 31, 1959 that the Dalai Lama entered India after a gruelling and dangerous journey across the Himalayas. He was offered refuge in India and land up on a hill in Himachal Pradesh, in McLeodganj also known as Upper Dharamsala.

Today, it is a bustling community, populated largely by Tibetans, who have slowly recreated their lives here. So in the market, there are the thukpa vendors, the women selling assorted jewellery and sweaters, the locals from the plains below, the foreigners in search of their personal *nirvana*, and finally the monks in their bright maroon and yellow robes.

There is really nothing much to see or do in McLeodganj, a friend has warned us. And that is indeed the best way to spend time here — in a blissful routine of nothing-doing. Our days were filled with late lazy breakfasts, mid-morning momo snacks, long walks up and down the winding hill roads browsing through the second-hand bookshops, lunch at Nick's Kitchen — a rooftop restaurant with stunning mountain views, followed by afternoon siestas and evenings in

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the monastery watching the glorious sunset in the distance.

Actually it is not true that there is nothing to do here; every tiny tea shop and building offers trekking and assorted mountain adventures, including an alluring trek all the way up to Triund, at 3350 meters the closest point to the Dhauladars. However, that sounds too much like work, and like with most people who visit McLeodganj, we decide — conveniently — that this is a time to look inwards.

The only exception is a morning at the Church of St John in the Wilderness, hidden in the mist, followed by a drive to Naddi village. Our lone car is parked in the middle of a mountain road, the tall deodars whispering their secrets, little children scurrying about like busy ants in the school yard way down in the valley and the Dhauladars within touching distance. Almost. And we stand there watching their snow-capped peaks of early winter now visible through the trees, now hidden by the cotton-candy clouds.

It is truly a time and place to look inwards.

