

When in Rome, do as the Roman do. You do not have to adapt to everything what the Romans do, but knowing a little bit about how to behave in their country while on a visit can avoid annoyance and disrespect to the local customs and hence earning some unexpected friendly treatments. Some experiences and acquaintances might last for lifetime.

Von Tashi Wangail

10 things you should not do in Ladakh

First of all, Ladakh is not a difficult place to travel. Most of the people will tolerate and forgive the awkward situations of a stranger quite naturally. However it is simply a noble sign to make an effort to understand and know some local customs before venturing into a new country.

1. Tables are tables and no benches

The Ladakhi people sit on the floor in crossed leg positions and for this reason, the Ladakhi Table (Choktse) is even lower than the western chairs and therefore quite appealing to sit on it, especially people with Joint and knee problems. But sitting on a table or walking over it is considered quite unpolite. Anyone in such conditions (Joint and knee) can always ask the host for something to sit on or at least a raised platform, if a western type of chair is unavailable



Don't sit on the small tables (= choktse) in Ladakhi houses and monasteries. Photo: Roland Amon

2. Observe sitting hierarchy

It is important to note that a lay person do not sit on the seat rows meant for the monks and also refrain from sitting on the tables where food and tea are served. Lay person sit in accordance with the local custom and never above or on the seat meant for a monk unless a monk offer you to sit, which they do often, especially by a young monk running around and serving tea and food to the assembly of monks and visitors.

3. Stepping over legs

While moving among people sitting in a row, one must not step over a table (Choktse) or over people's leg who are sitting in outstretched positions. Walking behind the people sitting in row to the desired place is always polite.

4. Direct your feet correctly

Most Ladakhi sit cross-legged and solve the issue within itself of where to direct their feet. We "Westerners" often find this sitting position hard and have to stretch our legs. In this case, please be careful not to stretch your legs in the direction of a person, and certainly not in the direction of a Buddha statue.



Please don't direct your feet at a Statue of Buddha. Photo: Roland Amon

5. Never step over books

One should never step over books, especially not when it comes to religious writings!

6. Keep your spoon in your own plate

A Ladakhi does not like, if their food gets touched with the spoon of others. Whereas in the west, it is quite common to ask your friend or colleague: May I try your food? And dig into other's plate. There will be always an extra cutlery for each dish to serve your plate. Ladakhis, while cooking, never taste the food with the cooking spoon. They always take out a little bit with the cooking spoon and put on the palm or on an extra plate and try it, but not directly with the cooking spoon. If you are offered Tsampa (roasted barley flour) please never wet your finger and try it that way! Take the spoon, put it on your palm and then into your mouth. If you are well trained you can also throw it into your mouth directly from the spoon - but this is only for experienced people. Ladakhi will never drink from your bottle, if your mouth touched the opening. They will always drink in such a way that their mouth does not touch the bottle at all.



7. Dress appropriately

Dress appropriately especially when you visit a monastery: Please avoid shorts and shirts that do not cover your shoulders. The most monks will not say a word if you don't dress correctly, but still why one should invite dislikes when it is not such a hard work. For the ladies: Also avoid to show too much of your cleavage and other distracting parts.

8. Bend while entering a room

When you are about to enter a room take care not to hit your head. Sometimes this is difficult as a lot many doors in Ladakh are really low. In many monasteries, especially at the entrance to certain temples, you will often find a note "Mind your head! In this case you show your respect to the sacred space by lowering head while you avoid your head against a good chance of hitting one of the door frames. Although Many Ladakhis do believe if you hit your head it is an obstacle forbade, of course not by intention.

9. Kissing forbidden

Please don't kiss in public. This is something uncomfortable and causes uneasiness. Even holding hands between different sexes is something you will hardly see. Whereas you will see many of the same sexes holding hand in hand or walking hand around shoulders. Do not perceive them as you might do at home. So if you come with your partner to Ladakh, simply keep your signs of love strictly to yourself and when possible away from public places.

10. Don't urinate in/next to water

Ladakhi do believe in *lhu* (serpent spirit) or spirits living in the water. So peeing in water or next to a water body is considered polluting which will cause wounds and sickness onto yourself and the people living nearby. So please - even when you think this is superstitious - don't do it! You generally do not pee in water as people drink from the streams rivers.

