



# Voluntouring FAQ

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## Voluntourism

### **Who can be a Voluntourist?**

17000 ft encourages students, adults, professionals and even families to be Voluntourist(s). The kind of projects allocated to each however, will be decided based on the need at the remote school(s) as well as the skill set and capability of the voluntourist(s).

### **What kind of areas does 17000 ft work in and what areas can I expect to go to?**

17000 ft is committed to working in the remotest and sometimes even inaccessible villages of rural Ladakh. Ladakh has many sparsely populated villages which is extremely remote, a majority of which are reachable by road, but there are also a few which require a multi-day trek to reach. Depending on your project and the needs of the school, you will be assigned a project in any of them. Villages that require a trek to reach will only be for those who are physically fit to trek at those altitudes

### **What kind of projects can I volunteer for?**

You will be volunteering for a project within a local school. Therefore, the projects will relate to the needs within the school. Please see our Volunteer Page for more details. Broadly, the projects will relate to teaching needs, setting up libraries, infrastructure projects, exposure workshops, health camps etc.

### **Will 17000 ft help me reach my destination, even if it needs a trek?**

Yes, it is 17000 ft's responsibility to reach you to your destination, and have you picked up from there at the end of your project. Villages requiring a trek will also be taken care of by our staff. The transportation costs of these villages are higher and will require program specific costs attached to it, however.

### **Will I receive any training from 17000 ft ?**

There will be an Orientation and some training that you will receive from 17000 ft Facilitators before you go to the remote school. You will be given information and training on the local area, the customs, the stay you can expect as well as project level details. If yours is a teaching assignment, you will also be given information on the local curriculum and the background of the students/teachers and the school itself.

### **Does 17000 ft expect a feedback and what kind of feedback do I have to give?**

Yes, 17000 ft will expect a feedback at the end of your project, the format of which will be given to you before you leave. You will be required to keep some basic log of your entire stay. 17000 ft will also take a feedback from the local school headmaster, to help us continuously improve and monitor our projects

### **Can I choose the school that I want to volunteer in?**

If you have a particular school that you would like to volunteer in, 17000 ft will try its best to accommodate you. However, there are other factors that are taken into account when choosing a school for you to volunteer in. For e.g. a) schools with very desperate needs b) the amount of attention a school has already received etc.

### **Can I take pictures and videos when I am voluntouring ?**

Yes you may take pictures and videos. Please be mindful however of the fact that you will be living in a village and will be working at a school. Do respect the sentiments of your host and the school while taking pictures. Do take permission of the school headmaster before taking videos of classes in session.

*17000 ft* will request access to your pictures and videos for uploading on their website, with due credit to you. Please note that you will have a page of our website dedicated to your own volunteering experience.

### **How will I travel to the remote village and what kind of transportation can I expect?**

*17000 ft* Facilitators will accompany you to the remote village where you will be working and depending on the need, even stay a day with you to make you comfortable and acquainted with the local school and people. You will travel by a bus, car or jeep, depending on the needs and the distances.

### **What is the breakup of the things that I am paying for?**

Your costs are broken into the following components:

1. Stay at the cities of Leh/Kargil (mandatory 2 -3 day initial stay for acclimatization. This usually includes breakfast and dinner)
2. Stay at guest house/home stay at remote village (usually includes all means)
3. Transportation costs including airport pick up / drop, drop to remote village and pick-up
4. Weekend travel/tourism options (includes travel and transport)
5. Permit costs
6. Basic costs for *17000 ft* facilitator to travel with you and make periodic visits to the local school (usually once a week)
7. Emergency pullout cost (fully refundable if not utilized)
8. Donation to *17000 ft Foundation*

### **Can I get a certificate of Voluntouring?**

Absolutely! We are a not for profit working to improve lives in the remotest areas of Ladakh and we truly appreciate the part that you play in helping us achieve our goals. If your institute needs a certificate from us, we will be happy to provide one for you. Our only pre-requisites to the certificate is that you complete your stay and purpose of the project and that you have finished your project to the best of your ability.

### **Can I be a Voluntourist in winter?**

Winter can get extremely cold in Ladakh and volunteering in winter is not for everyone. Temperatures can drop to well below -30 degrees Celsius, and staying in basic home stays with no connectivity, no heating and no running water is not for the weak hearted. Also, more importantly, winter closes down many roads and passes in Ladakh, shutting down access to a majority of the villages. What that means is that if you are in a remote village and the passes are closed, you might be snowed in for a good 5 – 6 months. Emergency evacuation in those situations is not always possible, owing to limited connectivity and access. While the children absolutely need the help in after school tuitions and wintertime coaching and

we would be thrilled if you have the stomach for it, Volunteering in winter is absolutely at your own risk. You could, however, choose to volunteer in the cities of Leh and Kargil, which also though extremely cold, are at least accessible by air transport. Flights do operate during parts of the winter. You can still however expect limited connectivity (phone and internet), no central heating, and absolutely no running water.

### **Are there any restrictions for foreign Voluntourists ?**

Foreigners are restricted in certain areas of Ladakh, and a lot many other areas require special permits. If you are of foreign origin and your project school is in an area, which require permits; we will obtain one for you. In areas where there are absolute restrictions for foreigners, you will not be assigned to a project there if you are a foreign national.

### **How does one interact with the children in remote areas and what language are they taught in?**

The medium of instruction in most schools is English, though you will find teachers teaching and explaining in the local language of Bhoti. *17000 ft* encourages volunteers to interact and teach in English, as the curriculum demands it, and it will also do wonders for the child's confidence and performance. Children in remote areas, are however, extremely shy, and we encourage you to build a rapport with them and help them speak out. Older children will understand English and you can use their help to reach out to the younger children.

### **What else should I bring?**

The city of Leh is like any other tourist city in India, and you can get anything that you want here, from cosmetics to electronics, clothing, even toilet paper! But here is a list of what will definitely be useful in Ladakh

Flashlights, sandals, sunscreen, moisturizer, lip-balm, camera, batteries, light sweater (regardless of which season you come in), good walking shoes, (trekking boots, if you plan to trek), thick jackets if it is winter. There are plenty of things available in the local stores if you forget to bring your own.

You could think of bringing gifts for the children you will be teaching or interacting with, if you wish, like simple reading books, puzzles and games or toys.

## **Travel**

### **Will I be required to trek to reach my project school?**

The answer is no, not usually. Most schools/villages are accessible by road, and only those who are fit to trek will be assigned projects that remote

### **How does one get to Ladakh?**

Regardless of where you are coming from, you have to come into the National Capital Region of India, New Delhi, from where you can choose your mode of transport to reach Leh

Ladakh is only approachable by air and by road. There are only two roads into Ladakh, one from Srinagar, and the other from Manali. While you can use your own transport or hire taxis, there are also buses that go into Leh from Delhi-NCR. These options can only be exercised from May/June to Oct/Nov as these roads cross very high passes which are likely to be snowed in during winters.

Three airlines operate the Delhi-Leh route, with daily flights throughout the year, with some airlines operating more frequently than the others. The three airlines are Indian Airlines, Jet Airways and Go Air

that go into Leh (IXL)

Please check weather conditions as well as latest information and advice from other travel forums like Lonely Planet Thorntree Forum

### **What visa should foreign Voluntourists should apply for?**

You do not need any special visa to come to Ladakh. All you need is a tourist visa to come into India. Any further permits to enter restricted areas in Ladakh, if needed, will be obtained by us once you reach here.

## **Stay**

### **What kind of accommodation can I expect?**

Most of the villages that you will be going to are quite remote and very very basic. While you will find hotels mainly in the cities of Leh and Kargil (the only two cities of the Ladakh region), some villages, which expect tourist traffic, do have guesthouses and standardized home-stays. However, a lot many of the villages are unused to receiving tourists and do not have pre-setup home-stays. Depending on the project that you are assigned to, a home-stay/guest house will be setup for you depending on availability at the remote area. Homestays are very basic, and are usually a few rooms of the house set aside for guests. None of these rooms are expected to have attached toilets, and the toilet will usually be a dry-compost pit Ladakhi toilet outside the house. Unless you are staying at a guesthouse, in an area used to tourists, it may even be difficult to get running water for your bath. The room however, will have a clean bed, plenty of thick warm blankets, enough place for you to keep your belongings. Each homestay is different, some are nicer than the others, some are larger than others, and some are even more "modern" than the others. However, what is common to all of these is the almost never ending supply of hot black tea or salted butter tea, biscuits and the warmest Ladakhi hospitality. Keep in mind that these Ladakhis are extremely grateful for your time you are spending there in teaching their children and bettering their schools and will go out of their way to make your stay comfortable. The homestays are however, nothing like what you would expect in a bed-and-breakfast or even a hotel, so we suggest that you keep your mind open, and do try to live like the Ladakhi does. They have survived here for generations and are an extremely open, gentle and simple people. What is really important is the fact that your visiting these remote villages to volunteer brings attention and some income to these villages through your stay in their home stays.

### **Will there be electricity and connectivity in the school I will be voluntouring ?**

Electricity and connectivity is at a premium in the remote villages of Ladakh, while the larger cities of Leh and Kargil enjoy much better comforts afforded by electricity, hot water, telephone connectivity and even broadband connection.

In the remote villages where you will be volunteering, be prepared for lights powered only by solar panels, which work for just a few hours in the night. Cell phone connectivity is also limited and though there are multiple providers (BSNL, Airtel and Aircel, with only BSNL working in the remoter areas), once you go into remote areas, you can expect cell phone silence. Most of these villages however, have a Satellite Phone, which you can pay to use for emergencies. You can almost not expect any broadband in these areas. (3G does not work as well).

We encourage you to inform your family ahead of time if you expect a radio silence from the area you will be going to. *17000 ft*, however, will be in touch with the local village through its facilitators and its ground network and messages may be passed on to us in case of emergencies. Though it may take some getting

used to, volunteering in areas where there is no connectivity and/or electricity, we ask that you take the time to enjoy the surroundings, the people and the absolute serenity of nature around you. These people have stayed here for generations and have survived and learned from their surroundings.

### **Can I drink or smoke during my stay at the remote village?**

*17000 ft* strictly prohibits underage smoking or drinking. If you are an adult and must smoke, we ask that you step out of the school premises to do so. Under no circumstances can we endorse any smoking in the school premises, or in front of the children. Drinking during volunteering hours is also not allowed. It is possible that you may be offered the local drink "chhang" in appreciation of your efforts or just to welcome you into the community. We ask that you practice restraint and take care to ensure that you do not behave in a manner that compromises your position, or the credibility of *17000 ft Foundation*. Any untoward incidents caused by unruly behaviour can cause our contract to be declared null and void and a forfeiture of the emergency amount deposited with us.

While we want you to enjoy your experience at the remote village, we ask that you treat the role that you are playing with responsibility and sincerity and contribute to a positive experience at the school.

## **About Ladakh**

### **What is Ladakh like, as a region and what should I be prepared for?**

Ladakh is a mountainous region and exists in areas above 9000 ft. above sea level. When you arrive at Leh by air, you will be landing at an altitude of over 11,000 ft, which can cause discomfort and needs acclimatization of a minimum of 2 days. *17000 ft* makes it mandatory for you to stay 3 days at Leh before we send you to a remote location.

### **What precautions should I take to avoid High Altitude sickness?**

Before you decide to make that trip to Ladakh, please talk to your doctor about going to an altitude of over 11,000 ft / 3500 m, specifically if you have any blood, heart, or lung disorders, or diabetes.

We recommend that you start taking Diamox tablets (Acetazolamide) a day before you are scheduled to arrive in Leh. The recommended dosage is Diamox 250 once a day for 5 days, starting a day before you arrive. Diamox does not have certain side effects that you should read up on before you arrive here. People with sulpha drug allergies can develop allergies to Diamox, so, as always, please consult your doctor before starting any medication.

You are advised to take it easy the first day of your stay, and to sleep or rest as much as you can. You may roam the city the next day, as long as you are not exercising, climbing or trekking, as your body needs at least 3 days to acclimatize to high altitudes. *17000 ft* strictly enforces this mandatory acclimatization and asks that volunteers comply with the requirements.

### **What is Ladakhi cuisine and what kind of food can I expect during my stay?**

Ladakhi cuisine is mainly vegetarian, as meat is not that easily available in the remote areas. While you can expect all sorts of cuisines in the cities of Leh and Kargil, in the remote areas, you can expect basic Ladakhi cuisine which is mildly flavoured, nourishing and can consist of rice, roti, "khambir – the local roti", simple vegetable dishes, daal, and on some days thukpas, momos etc.

You will be provided safe drinking water, however, if you are particular about carrying your own water, we encourage you to make those purchases during the first few days of your stay in the city of Leh. Some of

the better home stays also carry bottled water for purchase.

### **What is the local language and how do I communicate with the locals?**

The locals speak Tibetan and the local language, Bhoti. However, a majority of the Ladakhis do speak Hindi, the Indian Language and also English. Owing to tourist penetration in even remote areas, and the movement of locals into the towns of Leh and Kargil, English and Hindi are very well understood and can be used to converse in.

### **Can you explain a little bit about the geography of Ladakh?**

Ladakh, meaning "Land of High Passes" is a region of the northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and lies between the Kunlun mountain range in the north and the main Greater Himalayas to the south, inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan and Tibetan descent.

One of the most sparsely populated areas of Jammu and Kashmir, it covers a mountainous terrain of over 60,000 sq. km., home to over 230+ villages with a population of just under 300,000! An incredibly beautiful region, with tall mountain peaks and crystal blue lakes, this is a popular trekking and tourist destination for people from across the world.

### **What is the weather like and what kind of clothing should I bring?**

During the summer months of Jun – July, you can expect it to be extremely warm in the day times. A light sweater might be needed for the evenings. Since the weather is unpredictable at all times, we always recommend carrying a light sweater for emergencies. The winters can get very cold, and you should pack accordingly from thermals, gloves, woolen socks to thick fleece jackets. As in the rest of India, we request that you wear clothing that respects the sentiments of the local people and avoid wearing revealing clothing. While the city of Leh is used to tourist and their differences in clothing, the remote villages are not as exposed and we request that you wear long pants or jeans or long shorts

### **How safe is it for a woman to be a Voluntourist in a remote school?**

Ladakh is one of the safest places for women and men alike. Many women trek alone in these areas and have never felt threatened. The locals respect women and will treat you well. The local Ladakhi women are also very friendly and we encourage you to build a rapport with them and involve yourself with them. As anywhere, dress so as not to draw extra attention, and do carry yourself confidently