For many centuries, Ladakh evolved according to its own values. Then, in the 1970s, the region was thrown open to the global economy. This has brought many changes to Ladakh - including mass tourism, fossil fuels, junk food, plastic consumer goods, and unemployment. Aggravated by exposure to mass media, these changes have fostered the impression that life in the West is infinitely better than in Ladakh.

Tourists often unwittingly reinforce Ladakhis’ insecurity about their lifestyle by expecting Western-style conveniences and products which undermine the local economy and damage the environment.

Greater knowledge about what is happening around the world is essential for Ladakhis to make informed decisions about their own future. Likewise, visitors can learn a great deal from traditional Ladakh and from the changes occurring in the name of development. Closer communication between visitors and Ladakhis can contribute to cultural self-respect.

If you observe the following guidelines, you will be helping to minimize the negative effects of tourism, and to maintain the respect that Ladakhis have for their culture and way of life.

Guidelines for Visitors
Make an effort to present a balanced picture by describing everyday life back home. Mention realities like inflationary prices, stress, loneliness, pollution, homelessness as well as the growing movements to counter them.

Supporting the Local Economy
• Choose, local, organically produced foods as much as possible, both in restaurants and when shopping in the market.
• Try to avoid multinational corporate products such as Nestle, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, etc., which are destroying local economies the world over.
• Buy local-made crafts and support local shops, restaurants, guesthouses and trekking agencies so that the money you spend stays in the region.
• Inform yourself about current rates and prices so that you pay a fair price. By paying too much you contribute to inflation. By paying too little you deny merchants a fair return. Fellow travellers and tourist office personnel are good sources of information on current prices.

Protecting Ladakh’s Environment
• Say ‘NO’ to plastic: Plastic is a huge rubbish problem, and there is no good solution to it: either it is dumped or burned, both of which are polluting and damaging to health. Refill your water bottle with boiled/filtered water, or filter your own with handheld filters or iodine drops. Avoid plastic-packaged foods or other products.
• Save water: Use Ladakhi compost toilets instead of flush toilets (many family-run guesthouses have one – ask for it). Don’t throw anything toxic or non-biodegradable in the toilet. Use natural soaps/detergents and an eco-friendly laundry service.
• Save energy: Use solar hot water showers if available and encourage your guesthouse owner or hotelier to install one if not. Support businesses that use renewable sources of energy.

Cultural Sensitivity
• In general, shorts, bare shoulders and backs, etc. are not appreciated, and public displays of sexual affection are frowned upon.
• It is polite to give and receive with both hands, and to point with your whole hand, not just one finger.
• All religious objects, including books, statues and photos, are kept off the floor. You may cause offence by leaving books or postcards on the floor if they contain images of religious objects or people.
• Don’t point your feet at, or step over, people, religious objects, tables, food, etc.
• It is impolite to be too quick in accepting offers of food or drink.
• Eating utensils are not shared. It is impolite to taste from a utensil used for cooking.
• Always ask before entering Ladakhi houses, gardens, etc. and before taking photos.
• Do not respond to begging or encourage children to beg by giving money or other things to them, as this is how begging takes hold all over the world.
• The sale and purchase of old thankas, statues and other religious objects is prohibited and there are restrictions on the sale of any object more than one hundred years old.
Mindful Travel in Ladakh

Guidelines for Visitors to Ladakh

About Local Futures
This pamphlet was produced by Local Futures, an international non-profit organisation promoting locally-based alternatives to the global consumer culture. Local Futures has been active in Ladakh for more than 3 decades, and its founder, Helena Norberg-Hodge, is the author of Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh.

For more information, please visit our website, www.localfutures.org. We can also be reached by email at info@localfutures.org.

Join Local Futures for screenings of our films, Ancient Futures: Learning From Ladakh and The Economics of Happiness, at the Women’s Alliance in Leh at 2:00pm, every day except Sunday.

Monasteries and Other Religious Sites
The entrance fee at monasteries is used for their upkeep and restoration, as well as for the construction of new shrines, etc. Please remember that monasteries are holy places and observe these guidelines:

• Dress respectfully!
• Take off your shoes before entering shrines.
• Refrain from smoking, drinking alcohol and spitting.
• Never touch the statues, books, thankas or any other religious objects.
• Do not disturb the monks during prayer. Remember that the monastery ‘festivals’ are not folkdances, but important rituals. If you take photographs, be discreet.
• Respect any signs asking you not to use flash photography in monasteries, since it may damage the frescoes.
• When walking through a monastery or when passing chortens and mani walls, always go around them in a clockwise direction, keeping them to your right.
• Never remove stones from mani walls.

Responsible Trekking
• Carefully plan your trek with your agency before setting off, to minimize environmental damage.
• Bring bulk foods in cloth or paper bags.
• Choose trekking agencies that have made environmental and cultural sensitivity a priority.
• Wood is a scarce resource, so please don’t use it!
• Please do not collect any plants, flowers, or stones.
• Respect and protect wildlife. Do not chase, disturb or feed wildlife. Avoid jeep safaris which destroy habitat and stress wildlife.
• Bury biodegradable waste on site.
• Ask your guide or cook to follow these guidelines.