PENCH
FAMILY TIME IN THE FOREST

BHUTAN
THE ROAD TO OGYEN CHOLING

STREET EATS
INDIA'S POPULAR FOOD STREETS

Quiet Places
Spaces of serenity

SURFING IN KARNATAKA | 48 HOURS IN CAPE TOWN | DO YOU TAKE HOTEL AMENITIES HOME?
The cover photo was shot at one of the coral pinnacles near Pacific Harbour, Fiji by Andrey Narchuk, a well-known Russian photographer and passionate diver. He has won many underwater and wildlife photo awards, including the title of the best wildlife photographer in Russia.

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First trip to the Himalayas: I arrive in Lhasa on my twenty-third birthday, hair newly buzz-cut on a dare. I alternate between violent bouts of nausea and head-exploding exhilaration at the gorgeousness of this place. People on the street call to me: “Ani! Ani!” (Nun! Nun!). Of course, they’re just responding to my coiffure. They have no way of knowing that within two years of this trip, I’ll live in Buddhist monasteries in France and the UK, and will be ordained a novice.

On the streets of Lhasa, barrels of pure pigment in hardware stores become riotously-coloured interiors in thick-walled houses. Golden lotus-buds and makara-monsters fly from the ends of roof beams. Whirling grey dust tears at my eyes and clogs my nose. Red-tasseled khampas in big black boots scowl at soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army. A tiny, fierce old lady grabs my hand at the entrance to the Jokhang temple and pulls me along for her daily pilgrimage circuit through the dark-painted chapels.

I’ve been wandering through Buddhist Asia ever since I graduated from Yale in 1994, where I got a BA in studio art, though I’m originally a French-speaking Swiss. My teaching position at the Chinese University of Hong Kong gives me the chance to explore Tibet, Nepal, Thailand, Mongolia and Ladakh. Travelling in the Himalayas is always impossible: it means rickety buses on totally insane mountain roads, altitude sickness, fear of heights, and being flayed of the comforts of home. And yet, I have never encountered elsewhere such concentrated beauty and a laughing embrace of suffering. The images on the walls in Himalayan Buddhist temples have drawn me back to the mountains’ maelstrom again and again. Skull-cups brimming with goggling eyes, nose, brains, tongue, and ears render self-importance as an unappetising cocktail. Tender Bodhisattvas teach compassion with their slender hands. The Wheel of Life spins the course we all travel till we wake up. I have been brought inexorably back to the Himalayas as a painter, to learn something of the methods and materials of “thangka”—a school of Himalayan Buddhist painting that gives visual form to teachings concerning the arising and cessation of suffering.

“You, Lama Ishe Jamyang, study, go!”

The Venerable Phuncho Namgyal Kundup Pa is adamant: instead of lurking here outside Lamayuru Gompa in Ladakh, sketching with my uninformed pencil, I should find the master who painted the monastery’s courtyard mural, and learn the craft properly. No “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts”. It’s 2009 and I’m back in Ladakh to study animal imagery in the monasteries at Thikse, Achei, and Lamayuru.

I spend the following days in a frenzy of Buddha-drawing. The Blessed One’s eyes, with their delicate whorls. His eyes, simultaneously half-closed and deeply focused. Lama Ishe Jamyang uses a notched reed to draw proportions, and I use a yellow plastic Poke-
Besides being a highly skilled art form, thangka paintings are a rich representation of Buddhist iconography and spiritual practices.
GET GOING

Learning Holiday

At least ten years of supervised training are required to gain complete mastery over thangka painting.

THE GUIDE

ORIENTATION
Dharamshala and McLeod Ganj are in the Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh, around 480 km north of New Delhi. Thangde Gatsal is in Dharamshala, about 20 minutes by private car/taxi from McLeod Ganj.

GETTING THERE
AIR Direct flights operate between Delhi and Gaggal airport, Dharamshala. From Dharamshala airport Thangde Gatsal is around 25 km/1 hr by taxi (from ₹500).
RAIL The closest railhead is Pathankot, around 80 km/3 hrs from Dharamshala by taxi (from ₹1,000). Visitors can also take the toy train from Pathankot to Kangra (17 km from Dharamshala) for a longer but more scenic ride.
ROAD Dharamshala is a 480 km/12 hr drive from Delhi. Overnight buses depart from Delhi every day, usually at around 6 p.m., and arrive in Dharamshala at around 5 a.m. the next morning (AC semi-sleeper bus costs ₹1,200).

SEASONS
Dharamshala is cool for most of the year, but maximum temperatures in May-Jun can approach 38°C. Moderate rainfall between Jun-Sep brings average temperatures back to around 25°C. Winters (Nov-Jan) are cold, with a minimum around 5°C. Dharamshala is most pleasant between Feb-Apr, with temperatures between 18-25°C.

LEARN THANGKA
Thangde Gatsal Art Studio and School, Village Kandi, Dharamshala, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh 176219. (01892 246932; 9418655401; www.tibetanpaintings.com/courses; thangdegatsal@hotmail.com.)

COSTS & DURATION
Teaching is offered on a dana (donation) basis; fees for lodging, room, and board are to be arranged with the director Sarika Singh. An established artist, Pütgen spent two months training at Thangde Gatsal and found it adequate for a first visit. There are single-day and weekend workshops and courses from one month to six months.

WHAT TO EXPECT
• Student housing at Thangde Gatsal is comfortable and private, with good beds and access to hot water.
• Meals are delicious and healthy; mostly vegetarian Indian fare, with the occasional foray into Tibetan cuisine provided by Master Locho, who is an excellent cook.
• The school has internet, but for Skype-speed, you'll probably do better in McLeod Ganj.
• Thangde Gatsal has a library and there are numerous local bookstores, so you don't need to worry about bringing many books with you.
• Leave behind your ideas about who you are as an artist, good or bad, and your need to be constantly plugged-in.

WHAT TO BRING
Good walking boots, cooking ingredients from home if you'd like to contribute to evening meal delights, any art supplies you'll need for other than thangka work, and rain gear if you're planning a monsoon visit.

mon ruler—a schoolchild’s substitute. Each day, I rush over from our guesthouse to the master’s room with a new set of exercises. He patiently prepares tea, looks over my efforts, suggests my Buddha looks a little startled, and shows me more of the tools of his painter’s trade: pigments ground from precious minerals, musselshell paint cups, and tiny brushes.

“This very bad.”

A year later, I am in Dharamshala with my new teacher, Master Locho, and he is not going easy on me. He doesn’t care that I’ve already drawn several dozen pairs of the Buddha’s eyes, or that I am a university art professor. I need to draw more eyes, smiling mouths, soft hands touching the earth, feet stacked on top of one another in meditation.

“This maybe little bit more okay.”

I have moved on to the Buddha’s robes. Not because the eyes are perfect yet, but because in the universe of thangka painting my two-month stay at the Thangde Gatsal Studio and School is a hasty blip, and allowances must be made. I clothe the now-familiar body, struggling to give precise folds an artful flow, stilling my hand as I trace over pencilled lines with a sable brush, and praying to keep ink-blobs at bay. Outside the studio’s many windows, the rain courses down pastured hills, sometimes so quickly that whitecaps form. Mostly the monsoon keeps us indoors, working, but once in a great while, the clouds clear, and the towering Dhauladhar’s serve as a reminder: we are in the Himalayas.

I make regular visits to McLeod Ganj to break the spell of the studio. Just the trip from Kandy (the village nearest to the school, which has the same name as the Sri Lankan city with the temple housing the Buddha’s tooth) is an epic poem: the flower-
seller strolling under a five-foot pyramid of artificial blossoms; the painted elephant walking beside the bus; the jeep-full of Tibetan students who stop for me, insisting there's room.

As the 16th passenger, I am sitting on at least four people. We are on our way to hear HH the Dalai Lama speak on the Diamond Sutra, a text made even more esoteric through radio-translation and Korean language loudspeaker-broadcast. No matter: we 5,000 listeners are all here together, and there are buckets of tea and bread for everyone. We sit on scraps of cardboard or piles of other people's shoes, glad beyond measure as devout old ladies make prostrations toward the great teacher's throne.

About a month into my stay, Lochen deems me ready to begin painting a Green Tara. I love the vibrant colour of her skin, and her attitude: open-eyed, listening, ready to intercede, a compassionate witness to the struggles of all beings. I dedicate plenty of hours to this project, and yet every part of my Tara is dependent on the gifts of others. Rani (the radiant cook) and Nancy and Jenny (my fellow-students) help keep my spirits high and my body strong. Lobsang and Chophel, Thangde Gatsal's two studio apprentices, help Bme prepare the painting surface and show me how to apply the stippling strokes of the sky's azure gradient. Sarika, the master's wife and director of the school, kindly agrees to extend my stay in exchange for help with the institution's study-abroad programme.

To ensure that Tara's gaze is clear (even if her hairdo is a little wobbly), Lochen himself paints the goddess's features in his master's steady hand. A local tailor sews the silk brocade frame around all our efforts. Finally, we wrap the glowering Tara and roll her up in a length of PVC pipe, and she's ready for the long trip home.

One lesson I've learned from my time at Thangde Gatsal is how much we need each other, in order to accomplish anything of real beauty. Another is a loyal, confirmed wanderlust: I will be obstinate in my efforts to travel to the Himalayas, repeatedly, for the rest of my life, as long as I have teeth left to rattle in my head on the long road there.

Thank you are said to be painted out of a contemplative experience, and the Thangde Gatsal school provides the ideal location for it.

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POSCHE DESIGN

Engineered Luxury

Meets Powered Performance

The BlackBerry® Porsche Design P'9981 Smartphone is a perfect example of high quality engineering meeting luxurious design and functionality. The smartphone comes in a forged stainless steel frame, with a hand-wrapped leather back cover, a QWERTY keyboard and a crystal clear touch display. In keeping with the smartphone's Porsche theme, BlackBerry has updated its Wikuide World Browser, with a Porsche-inspired color scheme and a directory of nearby Porsche dealerships. The Porsche Design P'9981 is built on a performance-driven platform that features a 1.2 GHz processor and Liquid Graphics technology for a highly responsive touch experience. It also features 24-bit high resolution graphics, advanced sensors enabling new augmented reality applications, and built-in support for NFC (Near Field Communications). The smartphone has 8GB of built-in memory, expandable to 40 GB with a microSD card. It also has a 5 megapixel camera with flash and high-definition video recording capabilities—perfect features for the business traveller.

in.blackberry.com/P9981