

# Living & Working in McLeod Ganj



A Guide for Volunteers

Tibet Charity India

## MCLEOD GANJ PROFILE

Tibet Charity is in the town of McLeod Ganj in the state of Himachal Pradesh in North India.

McLeod Ganj is the home of the **Dalai Lama**. The Indian Government offered him refuge here in 1960 and he set up the government of Tibet in exile and established his official residence in the town. It is now also home to several Buddhist monasteries and thousands of Tibetan refugees. It is the real destination for the Buddhist travellers and all the tourists who are going to Dharamsala. It is very well established now on the Indian traveller route.

McLeod was originally developed as a hill station for the British Raj, a place where they could escape from the sweltering summer heat of the lowlands. The town is named after Sir Donald Friell McLeod, a Governor of Punjab, the word Ganj is a common Hindi suffix meaning "neighbourhood". McLeod Ganj is around 1750 feet above sea level.

The town is sometimes referred to as Dharamsala although strictly speaking Dharamsala is a town in its own right below McLeod. McLeod Ganj is also sometimes called Upper Dharamsala. These days it is affectionately known to as "Little Lhasa" and even "Dhasa".



Most people coming to McLeod Ganj fly into New Delhi, being the closest international airport. You can stop over in Delhi to make travel plans or you can continue to Dharamsala straight away (there are flights to Gaggal, the airport near Dharamsala).

## FROM THE AIRPORT TO New Delhi CITY

There are taxis and rickshaws at the airport and there is a government kiosk where you can get a fixed regulated price. However non-government controlled drivers might give you a better price, if you want to take the risk. Or you can use the Metro link direct from the airport at Terminal 3. It runs from 06.00 hrs to 22.00 hrs and costs Rs150. The airport Metro connects with the regular Delhi-wide metro.

There are two main budget hotel areas in Delhi - Pahar Ganj and Majnu Ka Tilla.

We recommend the latter since it is safer, more peaceful and is a Tibetan area with close ties to McLeod. There are also reasonable hotels close to the airport for a quick overnight stay. You can find these on the Internet. Taking a taxi from the arrivals terminal is quick and easy.

### **1 - Pahar Ganj**

Go to either the New Delhi metro or the Ramakrishna Ashram Marg metro station for Paharganj (Pahar Ganj district is on the opposite side of New Delhi Railway station to the Metro stop).

Pahar Ganj is a real tourist ghetto & literally crammed with hotels. You might want to remind the hotel owner of this when you are trying bargain him down on the room price. You will always find a room in Pahar Ganj, which might not be the case in Majnu.

It is a good place to meet other travellers & pick up tips. If you need an ATM we recommend you walk, or take a short bus ride to Connaught Place, a major shopping area close by with half a dozen or so banks.

### **2 - Majnu Ka Tilla**

If you decide on Majnu Ka Tilla then you should take the Metro to Vidhan Sabha. From there get a bicycle rickshaw (30 INR) or an Auto (50 INR) to Majnu Ka Tilla itself (agree the price before you get in).

Majnu Ka Tilla is the name of an area that has both a Tibetan "Colony" & an Indian zone. The 2 areas are separated by a dual carriageway. You'll be dropped off by a foot bridge on the Indian side and you need to cross this bridge to get to the Tibetan part.

There are some inexpensive hotels here and all the facilities you could need including internet and restaurants. There is even a Punjabi Dhaba (restaurant) in the Indian quarter.

It's a good place to make travel arrangements since the local travel agents know all about transport to McLeod. They will make the arrangements for you or they will tell you how to do it yourself.

There is one ATM in the Tibetan area and you will find one close by, on the Indian side, round the corner next to the motorbike repair shop, just ask a local. You will also find one PNB mobile ATM van parked close to the bridge on the Tibetan side.

There are 4 ways to get to McLeod from Delhi

1. BUS direct from Majnu Ka Tilla to McLeod Ganj.

2. FLY from Delhi to Gaggal airport, the nearest airport to McLeod.
3. TRAIN from Delhi to Pathankot or Chakki Bank, and then get a bus or taxi.
4. TAXI all the way from Delhi to McLeod.

## 1- Bus between Delhi and McLeod Ganj

This is a semi-sleeper Volvo bus, which means the seats don't lie flat but go back half way. Cost is around Rs 1,200. The bus goes from Majnu Ka Tilla itself, direct to McLeod Ganj. It leaves in the early evening & takes about 12 hours. There is also a non A/C private fan-bus from Majnu for Rs 700. Any travel agent in Majnu can book you a place (*there is almost always a seat for the following day at least on the semi-sleeper*).

You will also find different classes of Govt. Buses from the main Inter State Bus Terminal, around 20 minutes in an auto rickshaw. The ordinary buses, semi deluxe buses and deluxe buses are all available going around the same time early evening from Delhi. Only problem with these buses is that they may be, by rule, required to stop for few minutes, at the bus stops of various towns. The ordinary buses will be really cheap. Please visit their website <http://www.hrtc.gov.in> for more information and to book tickets on line.

## 2 - Flying to McLeod from Delhi

Spice Jet and Air India fly between Delhi and Gaggal airport, nearest to Dharamsala. Gaggal airport has the official I.D. code "DHM" & is sometimes called Dharamsala or Kangra airport. You can visit the websites of the airlines themselves or book tickets via online travel agents such as [www.makemytrip.com](http://www.makemytrip.com) or [www.yatra.com](http://www.yatra.com) whose tickets are no more expensive than those of the airlines. Then there is always the option of booking tickets through travel agents in Delhi if you prefer human connection. These agencies will be at your service from the time you land in Delhi till you depart from Delhi - at little extra cost, of course.

The flight takes about an hour and a half & can cost anything from Rs. 4,000 - 9,000. Flights run daily. You could even arrange to fly on the same day you fly into Delhi and so avoid staying in the city altogether (particularly attractive in the summer months when Delhi is dangerously hot and McLeod is mercifully cool).

There is a local bus connecting the airport to (lower) Dharamsala, a short 15 km ride or you can easily find a taxi. Taxis to McLeod will cost about Rs 1000.

## 3 - Trains from McLeod to Delhi

The train doesn't come all the way to Dharamsala. If train is your preferred mode of transportation, you must get a train and then a bus or taxi. You take a train from Delhi to Chakki Bank or Pathankot, the two nearest stations to Dharamsala. Chakki Bank is the smaller station just a few minutes before Pathankot: they are both in the town of Pathankot. The train stops only briefly, so be ready. People in your carriage or train attendants are usually very helpful in telling you when your stop is close.

It will be around 8 hours journey from Delhi to Pathankot and then another 3 ½ hours (bus) or 2 ½ (Taxi) to McLeod Ganj.

Possible to book online but you usually have to do that weeks in advance to be sure of a place <http://www.erail.in> Rajdhani is the best option but it reaches Chakki Bank bit too early. It becomes quite irritating if you have to wait for few hours at the train station if you feel it's too unsafe to travel in early hours.

## Train booking offices in Delhi

A - International Tourist Bureau at New Delhi Station

7.30 am-5 pm Mon-Sat, 8-2pm Sun). Phone : 91-11-42625156, Fax: 91-11-23343050

The tourist booking office /bureau at New Delhi station makes booking easy. Once at the station go straight to the office & don't get sidetracked by touts in the station - *since everything you need is in the tourist booking office*

On the 1st floor at the railway station is an efficient office for foreigners only. If a train you want is full, ask for the "tourist quota" to get a ticket even for a train leaving on the same day. Or you may be able to get a "Tatkal" ticket which is part of a quota of seats held back for sale until the day before the train runs. Tatkal are sold from 10 a.m. on & may sell out quickly. Take your passport & *also* photocopies of your passport's title page & the Indian visa page.

B - Railway booking office - Arrival hall, Delhi International Airport

"Foreign Tourist Rail Reservation Counter" at the "Delhi Tourism & Transport Development Corporation" at the Indira Gandhi International Airport arrival Lounge. Open daytime between 8am and 8pm.

C - Travel Agents

At Majnu Ka Tilla you will find many Travelling Agents who will be willing to book tickets for you and arrange taxis and tour guides at a price.

The commission is fixed. Therefore there is no pint in running from one office to the next hoping for a better price.

## Types of berths on sleeper trains

1- 2nd Class Sleeper - cheapest sleeper class:

You will be provides plastic covered padded wooden seats to sit/sleep on, no sheets, pillows, blankets. People without tickets are free to walk through these carriages as they like so we advise you to fasten your bags to your bunk with lock & chain. You can buy locks and chains in Delhi station on the actual platforms.

There is no A/C in Sleeper Class and ventilation comes from the windows and roaring overhead fans. Top bunks can get very hot indeed in summer and freezing in winter. It is always very noisy.

2- A/C class - with air conditioning

Though there is not much difference in the seats/beds with the ones in sleeper classes, here you will be provided bed sheets, a pillow & a blanket. These are given out after the train departs. These berths are generally frequented by middle class Indians and foreigners.

It's much more secure since the carriage doors are locked at night so people can't wander through. However it is not as lively as sleeper class and the windows are whited-out so there is no view. There are 3 types of A/C - 1st, 2nd and 3rd A/C. 1st A/C has the fewest number of beds and so is the most expensive.

## Train stations can be confusing

A large Indian railway station can be overwhelming. The most important thing to have clear in your mind is the NUMBER OF YOUR TRAIN and then to find out what platform it is leaving from.

Every train has a unique number and name. You can look up the train names and numbers on ----- [www.erail.in](http://www.erail.in) For example, the train from Delhi to Chakki Bank on Sunday @12.10 am is the " Himsagar Express", number 16317.

The departures board in the train lobby will list the train name in Hindi & often English) and its unique number. It is comforting that the name and number of the train is also written on the actual train itself, and the cars are named too ("S3" for example means "sleeper class compartment number 3").

Your ticket will have the same details - it will have

- the number of your seat
  - the name and number of your compartment
  - our name and age
  - the date and the time of departure/arrival of your train
- 
- the official name and number of the train
  - the code of the train station the train leaves from

Make sure you know which of the 2 big Delhi stations you need - it's either New Delhi (NDLS ) or Old Delhi (DLI). The New Delhi Metro station is at NDLS and you need the Chandni Chowk metro for DLI.

## 4 - Taxi from Majnu Ka Tilla to McLeod Ganj

Not the cheapest way but one of the most convenient. You can arrange a taxi in Majnu Ka Tilla for sure. Most of the travel agencies in Majnu ka Tilla will be able to arrange a taxi for you. If you are lucky, you may be able to find a taxi which has come down to Delhi to drop passengers from Dharamsala. These taxis will be willing to take you to Dharamsala at a price of a bus but you may need to share such taxis with other passengers travelling to Dharamsala.

## PATHANKOT/CHAKKI BANK TRAIN STATIONS TO McLeod GANJ

### 1-Local Bus

When you reach Pathankot/Chakki Bank, you can catch a local bus from the bus station (you'll need to get a short inexpensive auto rickshaw from Chakki Bank Railway Station to the bus station).

The bus normally goes to lower Dharamsala (approximately 100 Rupees and takes around 3.5 hours). A few buses from Pathankot take you all the way up to McLeod Ganj but normally you have to change in Lower Dharamsala.

### 2- Taxi

Some people take a taxi from Pathankot/Chakki bank, mainly because their train from Delhi arrives in the middle of the night and they don't want to wait 4 or 5 hours till the buses start. There are always taxi drivers waiting outside the station during the night. Bargain hard & you can get under Rs 5000 per person for a group of 4 in a small car.

## TRANSPORT BETWEEN LOWER DHARAMSALA & McLEOD

This is a shopping trip you will probably make many times during your stay in McLeod. The options are shared jeep, bus, taxi, and motorcycle-hitching

**SHARED JEEP** There is a *shared jeep* that goes from the bus station in McLeod & from then main road near the bus station in Dharamsala (*at the spot where the side road to the bus station meets the main road through town*). It costs just RS 20 per person so if you have a big bag you can pay double and take a second seat for all your luggage.

**BUS** The bus from McLeod to Dharamsala takes about half an hour, some buses go from the bus station in McLeod & buses originating in Bagsu can be flagged down as they pass through town. Buses for the return journey go from the bus station in Dharamsala, but can be flagged down in town. They have signs in the front window. Bus ticket Rs 20.

**TAXI** A taxi all to yourself will cost at least Rs 200 to the main chowk in McLeod (*square in Hindi is "chowk"*). Taxis are white with a blue stripe down the side & will hunt you down!). They have yellow number plates with black numbers.

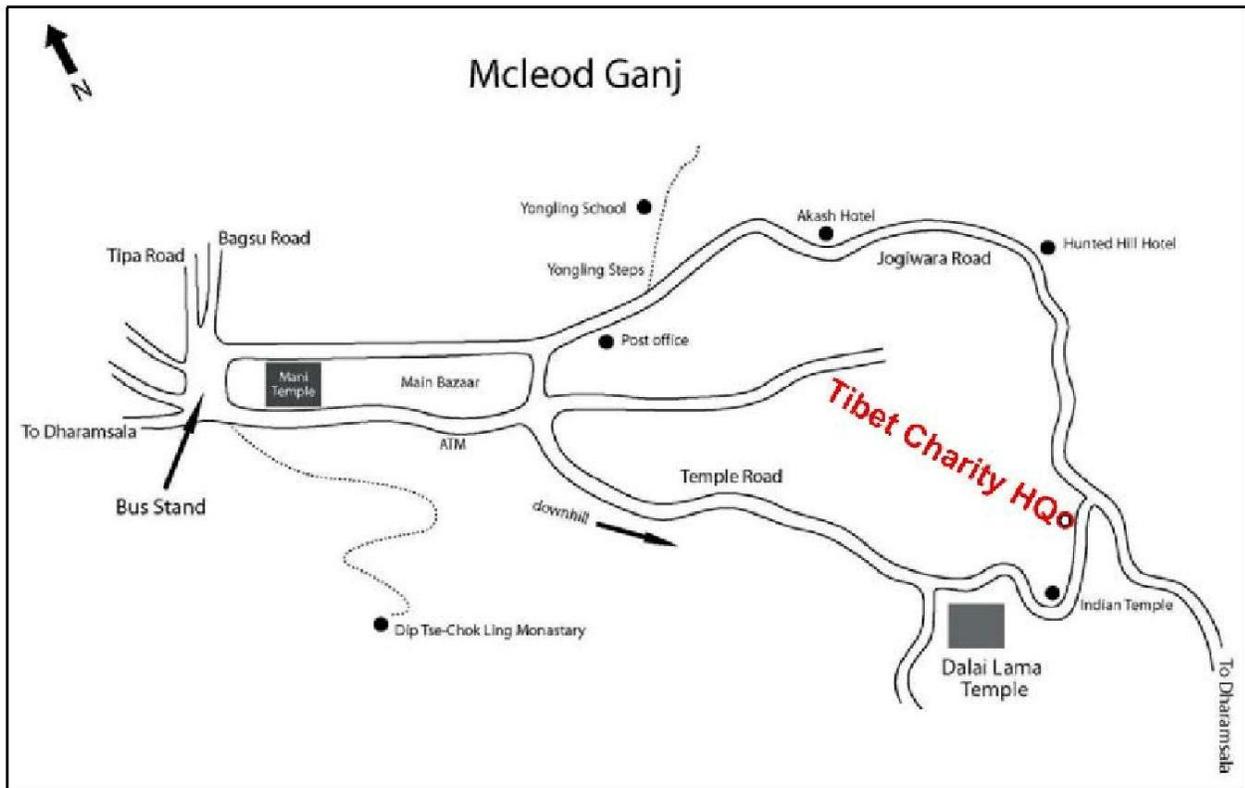
**THE ROUTE** Buses & shared jeeps use the long winding road up the hill to Mc Leod whereas taxis take a steeper & more direct route. Some buses up this winding road are for TCV and not McLeod so ask the other passengers which.

HITCHING People driving down to Dharamsala on the Jogiwara Road are happy to give you a lift on their motorbike if they are alone. The best place to catch a lift is at the Open Sky Cafe downhill from Tibet Charity. Most of them turn the engine off going downhill to save petrol. You will find that it is not so easy to get a lift coming back up the hill.

## FINDING THE SCHOOL WHEN YOU ARRIVE

The school opens at 9 am Monday to Friday. It is not open at the weekend.

If you arrive late at night without a booking then you should find a hotel near the main square, which is just a few minutes' walk from the bus station. There are hotels within a hundred meters, down Bhagsu Rd & Jogiwara Rd. It is advisable to take a room in one of these hotels and to come down to the school the following morning to see us.



## Disclaimer

We will do all that we can to help you find a room, in a hotel or in a studio flat or apartment. But please note that Tibet Charity does not provide you with rooms nor do we pay for volunteers' accommodation. Unfortunately, we do not have any rooms of our own where you can stay nor do we hold any rooms on long term leases to sublet to you.

If you arrive in town without having pre-booked a hotel or arranged a long term rental then you will still be OK. You can take a hotel room and with our help you should be able to find a monthly rental studio-flat within a week or so.

## Room rates

Some of the hotels offer low rates if you take the room on a monthly basis and they even have cooking facilities. On the whole the rooms in low rise apartment blocks are more comfortable. Right now we have teachers in studio flats and hotel rooms near the school paying between Rs 4,000 and Rs 9,000.

Rental is determined by the proximity to the centre of town, the modernity of the building, the size of the room, the utilities included (gas and electric) and the view (some buildings have an unobstructed view of the mountains while others are tucked away behind houses).

Cooking for yourself is the cheapest option. Shops in the town sell Indian dried foods, spices and fresh vegetables as well as imported western stuff so you will have a varied diet.

Foreigners will pay more than the local Indian and Tibetan residents, partly because foreigners demand more space and tend to live alone. If you are willing to live further away from the school (say for example in the area around the Tibetan Library which is 2kms downhill) then you will get a cheaper rent. You can find a room at the same price as locals pay if you are persistent (maybe as low as Rs 2000 per month but it may be very grim).

The cheapest hotels are usually booked up so expect to pay at least 400 INR a night for a room with bathroom.

## Help finding a room

There is help on hand if you are looking for a room from various sources

The people living in town and in the local villages always know when there are rooms available so our Tibetan staff will be able to show you some rooms for rent.

Our volunteer teachers and long-term foreign residents usually know about empty properties too.

If a teacher is leaving at the same time as you are arriving you may be able to take over their lease. If this is what you want then you should contact the English Language Volunteer Coordinator and ask us to pay an advance to the landlord which you would pay us back on arrival. Your choice of rooms will of course be limited but we have photographs to give you some idea.

Join the Dharamsala expats forum before you come out here.

<http://groups.google.com/group/dharamsala-expats>

The people in the forum are mainly long-term residents but it's open to people who will be here more than a few months. It is a Google group so if you subscribe you can get a regular bulletin that sometimes includes offers of accommodation. You can also post a request of your own.

Rooms can be booked on the internet - we give details of many hotels below.

## Secluded accommodation

Long term visitors/residents don't generally stay in the centre of town because it is noisy & crowded at weekends, especially in the summer months. There are many options for real peace and quiet in an idyllic rural setting, such as Gamru village below the Library and Dharamkot, on the hills above Bhagsu.

There are also apartments and hotels in McLeod itself that are relatively quiet, being high up on the hillside and so shielded from the commercial activity of the main streets. These are conveniently situated above Temple Road and Jogiwara Road.

## ATMs and Cards:

There are a number of ATMs in McLeod Ganj. The State Bank of India, Punjab National Bank, HDFC & ICICI all have a presence in the town. When there is a choice of ATM's, you should use the one that just scans your card and doesn't take it into the machine. If the machine holds on to your card for any reason it can be very difficult to get it back. The State Bank of India is safe in this regard.

Some international ATM cards can be rejected by the ATMs. It is advisable to check online before you come to see which banks accept your card (the State Bank of India accepts most).

If you are still unsure then bring your credit card & some traveller's checks. There are many stores in that give a cash advance on your credit card charge for a 3-5% commission. Travellers' cheques are no problem to exchange either.

*It is usually difficult to open a bank account here as a foreigner but some people have had success at HDFC bank.*

## SHOPPING

The Tibetan Government- sponsored shops in the centre at certain attractions offer high-quality merchandise like clothing, books, silver and rugs at reasonable prices, and the money goes to support community projects. The Stitches of Tibet shop will custom make a *chuba* (traditional Tibet dress) for you from your own fabric.

Kashmiri carpet shops offer rugs and textiles and other Kashmiri crafts. Be wary, however, of the high prices (always bargain) and the quality of "silk rugs." Don't fall for the "it's an investment" trap to make you pay more.

The best shopping is found along the roads of McLeod Ganj, which are filled with local vendors selling everything from silver jewellery (*most of it made in Nepal or Bali- make sure you buy "925" silver or above*) priced by weight to prayer beads and wheels, warm woollen shawls, antique coins and handmade paper and journals. Prices are more reasonable than in other parts of the country and many of the goods are of very high quality.

There are also many English-language bookstores in town, so you can get novels, travel guides, Tibetan history, and Buddhist /Hindu philosophy, Indian spirituality and language books. Sometimes you can part-exchange old books.

## EATING OUT

Volunteers can have a nutritious meal with the staff free of charge at the school on weekdays.

There is something to suit every taste and budget in Dharamsala & McLeod Ganj. There are restaurants and cafes serving Indian, Tibetan, Western/Continental, & even Japanese, Korean & Thai food. You can get mutton & chicken in many places too though there are many strictly vegetarian places.

There is everything, from roadside stalls selling samosas and momos for Rs. 20 to upscale restaurants where you can splash out on a quality three course meal that costs more than a road worker's monthly wage.

There are many restaurants catering to western tastes (like pizza, pastas, pancakes, tortillas, chowmein and that defining dish of Western cuisine, or at least the Indian fantasy of Western cuisine, apple pie!).

Some of the street food is well worth trying, but there is always a chance of stomach upset so pick your kiosk wisely - there are steamed momos, samosas, roasted sweet corn, chowmein and even fried chicken in the main square.

There are Indian and Tibetan bakeries selling all sorts of freshly made breads, cakes and pocket pizzas.

You may be perplexed when you see "vegetarian chicken" on the menu but it doesn't mean that the chicken never ate meat, it's just means "chicken and vegetables".

## GROCERIES

There are fruits and vegetables on sale all year round, types available according to season. Discriminating chefs may go to Dharamsala for the best selection of dried beans, pulses and grains but these days more and more is becoming

available in McLeod Ganj itself and the prices are just as competitive.

There is at least one shop selling health food, and now several supermarkets selling imported western foods such as Dutch cheese, dried herbs, Swiss biscuits, pasta, tuna, Italian pasta, Belgian chocolate, peanut butter & the modest British baked bean.

## DRINKING WATER

You shouldn't drink the tap water, this is particularly true during the monsoon months at which time there is a risk of amoebic dysentery (easily treatable though). Local India villagers boil but do not filter the tap water before they drink (they have more immunity than foreigners).

Mineral water costs Rs15 a litre, or even less if you get refills from the hotels that have purifiers and sell it on the street front. Bottled water can be bought everywhere so you don't have to carry it around with you.

You can buy a good inexpensive water purifier of the Baby Burco type in lower Dharamsala

## HOW MUCH YOU WILL SPEND - BUDGET ESTIMATES

The cost of living is much lower here than in the West. Since you will be living here without work, or at least not working for money, which makes you rich in this context.

You will be paying between Rs. 4000 and 9000 a month for your room, if you are in a studio flat. Electric included & gas sometimes. (*ROCK BOTTOM BUDGET - you will get a small room without view for Rs 4000/5000 but not the centre*)

If you cook for yourself you will spend from RS 4,500 a month on food. (*ROCK BOTTOM BUDGET - you can get by on a diet of rice, daal, vegetables and locally produced food, without eating out for Rs2500 month*)

If you do eat out for all your meals, expect to spend at least Rs7,500 month on food. (*ROCK BOTTOM BUDGET - you can get by eating out on vegetarian food without booze for Rs5250 month but that means keeping out of restaurants and eating in Indian dhabas & street stalls*)

### Other expenses to consider

- ✦ TRANSPORT a taxi all to yourself is the most expensive way, shared-jeeps & government buses are cheaper.
- ✦ DENTAL a lot cheaper than in the west, even for the best
- ✦ MEDICAL local Delek hospital provides basic Western style healthcare free - but private hospitals are better
- ✦ CLOTHING New clothes are cheap, even tailor-made & there is a second hand clothes market in Dharamsala.

### Risks

#### Keeping the Delhi belly at bay

There is always a danger of getting food poisoning if you eat street food, which is a pity since street food is cheap & often tasty. It is safest to eat at stalls where the food is cooked fresh, right in front of you. Some travelers try to stay safe by avoiding meat, but rice & vegetables can also cause food poisoning. If a restaurant is giving people food poisoning then word gets out. Most people have just a few places where they eat, places which they know are safe and the food is good. There are many perfectly safe eating places in the town.

Raw vegetables and fruits are a potential health risk. If they are peeled then they are OK. Some people soak them in iodine or potassium permanganate solution then rinse them in clean water before cooking them/eating them raw.

#### No malaria

Cases of Malaria in Mc Leod are almost unheard of. We do not think it is necessary to take anti-malarial drugs if you intend to remain in McLeod for your whole stay in India (*though there are parts of India where you must take anti-malarials*). However please note: the decision to take anti-malarial drugs or not is YOUR responsibility, consult health professionals or travel experts in your own country before you travel.

### Minor risk of rabies

Rabies exists all over India and used to be a problem in this town as well. But thanks to Tibet Charity's annual rabies vaccination drive in the town and surrounding villages, the disease has almost been eradicated here. But if you are bitten by a stray dog, then you must still get vaccinated as soon as possible. If that happens you will need a series of 5 injections, inexpensive by western standards, which you can get at the Delek Hospital.

### Stray dogs

There are many stray dogs here, local Government does nothing for their welfare, & nothing to protect the human population from them (*only Tibet Charity Animal Care Section & a few other independent organizations are trying to treat them & curb the numbers through sterilization*). They are more independent, wilder & more aggressive than the domesticated animals you are used to. The dogs can be friendly if you treat them well but be careful when approaching them all the same.

## Medical treatment

There are many options for medical treatment with both low cost public health care and more expensive private. There are physicians specializing in Western, Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine, more than we list here.

For minor wounds and medical advice you can use Tibet Charity's own Health Clinic at the school.

The Tibetan Delek Hospital near the Library uses western medicine. Doctors are well trained & the service is free, though there is a charge for medicine. Tel: 01892 22053/223381

There is an inexpensive Tibetan-traditional clinic called Mentse Khang, offering consultations and medicines.

## HASSLE, HARASSMENT AND PERSONAL SAFETY

You won't get hassled by touts and shopkeepers as you do in other touristic areas of India. Tibetan shopkeepers don't call you into their shops as you pass, nor pressurize you once you get inside. They usually give you the same prices as they give the locals but bargain all the same, because that's what locals do.

There IS some burglary in the town, it hits the. Make sure you have a stout lock and close all your windows when you go out especially if you are living on the hill in the centre of town. It's never a good idea anywhere to slump around town with your expensive heavy camera hanging round your neck like a dead swan.

## VISAS

Our teachers come to India on tourist visas, if they come directly from their home countries then you will be able to get 6 month visas. Teachers who want to stay longer have to leave the country to renew their visa. Many choose to go to Nepal but then they can only get a 3 month extension. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get a 6 month extension unless your return to your home country.

One way round the problem is to get a Student Visa, which lasts for a up to a year. You can enroll in certain courses at the Tibetan library that will entitle you to apply for a Student Visa, but you need to attend.

## THE LOCAL POPULATION

McLeod Ganj has a population of about 10,000 people, including Indians, Nepalese & foreign expats. Surrounding villages are predominantly inhabited by a hill tribe called the Gaddi who have their own distinct language.

The Tibetan population is made up of refugees who fled Tibet to escape persecution or in search of a better life, & Tibetans whose parents fled Tibet but who themselves were born and brought up in India. Most of the Tibetans born in India speak Hindi as well as their parental tongue. There are Tibetan settlements all over India, some in the far south of the country, Dharamsala is the most well known. Tibetans born in India do not get Indian citizenship.

There are Tibetan monasteries in the town housing a permanent population of monastics but there is also a regular

influx of monks and nuns in the spring from monasteries elsewhere who come here to study and leave again at the end of the year. The lay and monastic populations mix freely, often living side by side.

The expat community is very diverse. There is a semi-permanent population, some of who are western followers of Tibetan Buddhism. They may study and the Tibetan Library and practice under the guidance of their Tibetan Gurus. At the other end of the spectrum are travelers with no interest in Tibetan traditions who are attracted to the rural setting, low cost of living, permissive culture and alternative lifestyle that has taken root here.

Strenuous efforts are made by the Tibetan government to keep alive the traditions, customs & religious practices of old Tibet but the younger generation are leaving the ways of their parents behind as they increasingly embrace the ubiquitous culture of modern India. Older retired people tend to be very devout and spend much of their spare time chanting and visiting the temples for prayers, something the younger generation have little time for.

Visitors find Tibetan people to be modest, considerate, straightforward and honest. They are gregarious & cheerful for the most part but emotionally reserved and reticent about personal matters.

## CLIMATE AND TERRAIN

Dharamsala is at an altitude of 1700m, so be prepared for all types of weather

**OCTOBER & NOVEMBER** This is the best time of year with clear skies and low humidity. Colder than in the monsoon season (*the sun is strong but there is sometimes a cool wind*). It is the best time for hiking with great views over the mountains and valleys.

**DECEMBER to FEBRUARY** The temperature can drop below freezing and it snows. Heavy warm clothes are needed but don't over pack since woollen gloves, socks, sweaters , jackets etc are all available here at reasonable prices.

**MARCH to JULY** The summer season in Dharamsala. It doesn't reach 30 centigrade though, so it's very pleasant in the day though the nights become a little cold.

**DURING THE MONSOON FROM JULY TO SEPTEMBER** Dharamsala receives the second highest rainfall in India. It is very wet and humid but you can buy an umbrella here at every second shop so no need to bring one. It is not cold but you should bring a light jacket to wear over your T shirt. Laundry services use electric dryers.

Bring a good pair of walking boots if you intend to explore since the hills around are steep and rugged. The town is surrounded by fragrant pine forests that are beautiful at all times of year. The local hills give way to snow capped mountains that are easily reachable within a day. In half an hour the vexing man-made world will be far behind you.

## TRANSPORT IN TOWN

Most people get around town on foot. Some of the roads are steep, but most of the facilities are within easy reach. You certainly get fit here.

Many local people and foreign residents have 150cc motorbikes and mopeds. You can buy them second hand or new outside Dharamsala. (You can hire a motorbike on a daily rate starting at Rs450, long term rates are lower. Buying a motorbike will cost you at least Rs 30,000, petrol/gas is currently Rs. 80 a litre. There are sometimes notices in the town advertising bikes being sold by travelers who are leaving India. In the past some of our teachers have bought motorbikes from a local shop with an agreement to sell it back to them when they leave.

There are cheap regular buses and taxi-jeps to Lower Dharamsala.

If you don't want to walk you can get rickshaws from the main square to just about anywhere - many people take them to go to outlying villages and settlements such as Dharamkot, Bhagsu, TCV, TIPA and Naddi.

It is easy to hitch a lift on a passing motorbike and they don't charge you ----- it's a courtesy of mountain people!

Volunteers do not get generally get any help with accommodation or food, simply because the organizations here operate on such a tight budget.