



In McLeod Ganj, where the Dalai Lama gives regular teachings, it isn't uncommon for traffic to come to a dead stop for an hour or more. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In Home of Dalai Lama, Traffic Makes for Bad Car-ma

Jams Stress Out Tibetan Monks;
Good Luck Getting to the Monastery

By **JESSE PESTA** | *The Wall Street Journal*

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DHARMSALA, India—This town in the Himalayan foothills, the residence of the Dalai Lama and his retinue of Tibetan Buddhist monks, has attracted spiritually minded visitors for decades. But just down the road there is now a more worldly tourist attraction: a cricket stadium.

Ringed by snow-capped peaks, the stadium boasts phenomenal views, and India's cricket fans are

motoring up the mountain to see it. This is introducing something new—namely, traffic jams—to a place better known for its meditation retreats and photogenic clusters of strolling monks.

“This is madness,” said Sonal Mehta, a 29-year-old tourist from Mumbai who had come hoping to enjoy a laid-back, Buddhist vibe in the hamlet of McLeod Ganj, uphill from the stadium. Instead she found herself in a shouting match with a man on a scooter who was honking at her to get out of the way.

“I’m moving, stop honking!” Ms. Mehta yelled.

The problem was, neither one of them could budge. They were frozen in a Himalayan traffic glacier of SUVs, crimson-robed monks, vans, cows, motorcycles, Tibetans in vivid finery and throngs of other strolling tourists. Finally, the scooter wriggled between Ms. Mehta and a man selling watermelons and threaded its way through the jam.



Traffic Officer

The watermelon vendor, Iqbal Hussain, sees it all day long. “If you’re lost in thought,” he said, “people have to honk.”

Of course, getting lost in thought has long been McLeod Ganj’s main selling point. The Dalai Lama moved here, just up the hill from Dharmasala proper, after fleeing Tibet more than a half-century ago and regularly gives teachings that draw people from around the world. Yoga studios and Buddhist bookshops line narrow lanes alongside places serving

cappuccino, Tibetan dumplings and spinach quiche.

The tourism is nothing new. McLeod Ganj takes its name from a British colonial figure from the 1800s, when Brits would summer here.

What's new is how the tourists arrive. For decades, foreigners have come mostly by plane or bus—not car—which meant traffic on the mountain wasn't a total disaster. In recent years, though, televised cricket matches from the stadium have showcased the area's beauty and unusual history to more people close enough to drive.

The new arrivals come for the full experience—the mountainscape, the Tibetan temples, the rooftop sports bars. And they come by car. Today in McLeod Ganj, a village so small that you can walk from one end of it to the other in about 15 minutes, it isn't uncommon for traffic to come to a dead stop for an hour or more.

One recent morning, a taxi driver named Hari sprang out of his car to try to clear a jam. His fare was an impatient Tibetan monk.

“The monk, really stressed out,” Hari said.

The monk explained his rush. He needed to reach his monastery because he was late for a soccer game. The game couldn't start because he had the ball.

“Can you move this car back?” Hari asked the driver of a van stopped on a hill.

“It doesn't have enough power,” the driver replied. He threw the van into reverse and hit the gas. A thunderhead of diesel fumes blanketed the area. The van didn't move.

Traffic has gone “from bad to worse” very quickly, said Lalit Kumar, executive director of the municipal council overseeing McLeod Ganj and Dharmasala. “I've been stuck in traffic jams extending up to four hours,” he said. There is a plan to build parking lots, he said, but that will take time. Parking lots on mountainsides are a tricky thing.



The Singh family sightsees at the cricket stadium in Dharamsala, India, just down the mountain from the village where the Dalai Lama lives. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Provided there is no jam, it takes only 30 minutes or so to drive down the mountain from McLeod Ganj to the cricket stadium. One recent Sunday, with snowy peaks towering over the cricket pitch, radiant in the Himalayan light, a dozen tourists admired the panorama.

“Beautiful,” said Sadanand Gokhale, a bank manager from Mumbai.

“Amazing,” said his nephew Akshay Kumar, a chartered accountant.

Their next stop, they said, would be up the mountain to visit the Dalai Lama’s monastery.

Good luck with that. Joginder Singh, standing nearby, had tried the same thing the day before, and failed. “There was too much traffic. Too much,” said Mr. Singh, who was visiting with his family.

His daughter, nursing student Amritpal Kaur, is a

big fan of Kings XI Punjab, the cricket team that plays here. Her favorite cricketer is Glenn Maxwell, whose nickname is the “Big Show.”

But she also hoped to see the temples, she said, and a nearby waterfall. Her family planned to give it one more try on their last day.

“Two, three years ago, it wasn’t that much of a problem,” said Narender Singh, a constable, referring to the traffic. He spoke standing in the heart of the jam, an asphalt purgatory in McLeod Ganj where seven roads converge.

Traffic was completely gridlocked. A driver trying to make his way to a scenic waterfall walked over to plead for mercy. He wanted to take his big van down a skinny village lane where big vans are forbidden. “My wife has a fracture and can’t walk,” the man said.

“OK,” said Mr. Singh, the constable, granting an exception.

Overhearing this, another officer asked Mr. Singh, “If she has a fracture, how can she hike to the waterfall?”

The two officers shared a laugh. “There’s always an excuse,” Mr. Singh said.

Day turned to dusk; the jam endured. Yet on this Sunday, at least one of the seven roads out of town remained unclogged. The road led, improbably enough, to the 2014 Miss Tibet pageant. This year’s pageant featured just one contestant, though, which might help explain the lack of traffic.

Fireworks lighted up the sky. Miss Tibet performed a solo on the hammered dulcimer. And out on the road to the pageant grounds, Kelsang Choezin, a hermit, had just walked into town after several months in the mountains.

“There’s a lot of traffic, there is a lot of noise,” Mr. Choezin said. “This is very different.”

Yet the bustle, he said, is merely a test. Mr. Choezin has been practicing meditation for nearly a decade in

hopes of “alleviating the suffering of all sentient beings,” he said. “If I can’t even survive this, there is something wrong.”

—Aditi Malhotra contributed to this article.