



The Naro Photang specially designed for the Naropa, 2018



Naropa Festival



## A Celebration in the clouds

Photos: Holy Relics of Naropa being brought to The Naro Photang (above, left) and, a kid at the Naropa festival (above). All photos by Sany & Vyjay

### Sandy and Vyjay



A sea of maroon surrounded a spotlessly white three-tiered structure

with a spire that rose to the skies. Closer inspection revealed that the sea of maroon was a huge congregation of Buddhist monks gracefully turned out in their maroon robes.

The atmosphere seemed electric and pregnant with anticipation. There was a road that led straight to the white structure and it was lined on both sides by crowds waiting patiently, excitement and anticipation writ large on beaming faces. A group of school kids waved and shouted, "Jhulay",

which in Ladakhi translates as "Hello". Jhulay is the welcome sound that one hears like sweet music from the people of Ladakh during one's stay there. It is an utterance which compresses within it all the elements of welcome, friendship and hospitality. The crowd waited with bated breath. The white structure, Naro Palace awaited in mute splendour, gaily decked up for the occasion. The occasion was the Naropa festival, one of the prominent and famous festivals of Ladakh that was a glowing tribute to the culture and spirituality of Ladakh. Everyone awaited for the start of the festival with the arrival of the sacred relics from the ancient monastery of Hemis which was a few kilometres away. A cheer went up and young monks ran excitedly as a cavalcade slowly made its way down the mountains, the relics held reverently

beneath a huge umbrella. Conches, drums, and other musical instruments struck a heavenly music that echoed across the surrounding mountains. The relics were placed reverently in a chamber at the topmost tier of the Naro Palace where they would be available for the public to have a glimpse during the course of the Naropa festival. The Naropa festival 2018 officially took off with a prayer for peace and happiness of all humanity led by Drukpa Thuksey Rinpoche.

### Naropa Festival Demystified

The cold desert region of Ladakh which was part of the ancient silk route has also been home of Tibetan Buddhism for centuries. The ancient monasteries where monks practise the different esoteric branches of Buddhism bear testimony to this. One of the most ancient of monasteries is the

Hemis monastery that nestles in a valley hidden in the midst of high mountains and situated about 40 kilometres from Leh. The Hemis monastery dates back to the year 1630 and is known for the Naropa festival which is held in its vicinity as well as an annual festival held to coincide with the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava, the 8th century seer who is credited with the spread of Buddhism in the Himalayan regions. The Naropa festival is itself a celebration of the life and times and teachings of Naropa, an Indian saint who lived between 1016 to 1100 CE and was a student and preceptor at the famous and ancient Nalanda University. Naropa is known for his teachings which have influenced the Himalayan region immensely. His main contribution is acknowledged as what are known as the Six Yogas of Naropa which are a



set of Tantric principles that help a person move forward in the quest for enlightenment.

It is widely believed that Naropa with the grace of his Guru Tilopa achieved enlightenment and upon his enlightenment he was given a set of Six Bone Ornaments by the Dakinis who are female spirits according to Vajrayana Buddhism. The Six Bone Ornaments were worn by Naropa and when he directed his disciple Marpa to go to the Himalayan regions and spread the message of Buddhism, he gifted him the Bone Ornaments along with other holy relics. These ornaments and relics have been handed down since then and reside in the ancient Hemis Monastery near Leh. The Ornaments are considered very sacred and also a very important part of the history of the Himalayan region. The ornaments are on public display and worn by the Gyalwang Drukpa, who is the spiritual head of the Drukpa Lineage once in 12 years at the Naropa festival. It may be noted that the Naropa Festival originally was held every 12 years and was dubbed as the Kumbh Mela of the Himalayas. However effective from 2018 the Naropa Festival is being held every year. It is the Six Bone Ornaments that are brought in procession from the Hemis Monastery during the Naropa festival and placed in the Naro Palace to enable the public to see them and be blessed.

### A Riot of Colour & Celebration

The Naropa festival is a grand carnival of spirituality, dance, music. The 5 day long festival was a forum for the meeting of the Buddhist masters from across India, Bhutan, Nepal, and other countries who shared their knowledge and wisdom through religious discourses. The festival also showcased the very best of local dance and music in all its colour and vibrancy. The festival is a fitting celebration of the life and times as well as the teachings of the saint Naropa who makes his



presence felt even after more than a 1,000 years after leaving the physical plane. The Naropa festival is held in the hallowed vicinity of the ancient Hemis monastery about 40 kilometers from Leh. The festival is a congregation of the Drukpa masters from across Ladakh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Devotees assemble in hordes to listen to religious discourses and immerse themselves in the festival of music and dance. The festival also attracts many international and national celebrities who have performed at the Naropa festival. The Naropa festival was not only a sacred and spiritual event which enabled one to cleanse ones' soul in the sanctified presence of the sacred relics and the Drukpa masters but also an occasion to immerse oneself in the realm of dance and music. Local dancers and musicians brought alive the culture of the mountain kingdom like never before and their performances touched the core of our hearts. The voices of celebrity singers added more colour and glamour to the festival. One of the highlights of the

Naropa festival 2018 was the introduction of the inaugural class of the Naropa Fellowship programme. The Naropa Fellowship programme is a one-year residential programme at a special campus near the ancient Hemis monastery.

"Musings From The Heart", a book written by Gyalwang Drukpa, a well known humanitarian, environmentalist and author was also released on the august occasion of the Naropa festival 2018. Another important event was the release of the music album Rhythm Of The Stars, which personifies the voice of the land of Ladakh and features the young and upcoming talent of the region. The proceeds of the sale of these albums would be contributed towards the rebuilding of Kerala after the havoc by the floods of August 2018.

The mountains echoed with the songs of the mountains as the youth of Ladakh energized the crowds with their pristine music and dance. One of the most unusual performances that mesmerized all and sundry was the

**Photos: Thangka - the unveiling of the largest silk embroidery of Buddha Amitabha (above) and, Guinness World Record for Largest Ladakh Dance- (Shondol) performed at Naropa Festival (bottom, left).**

Dharma dance by the Kung - Fu nuns. The Kung-Fu nuns are an order of nuns of the Drukpa lineage and known for their humanitarian work and social activism. The Naropa festival 2018 also saw two hundred and ninety nine ladakhi women catapult into the Guinness record books by dancing the largest Ladakhi dance. Another highlight as important as the display of the sacred relics of Naropa was the unfurling of the largest silk embroidery of Buddha Amitabha. The silk Thangka depicts the life of the Buddha in exquisite colors and details and is unfurled daily during the course of the Naropa festival. All good things come to an end and so did the Naropa festival 2018 but not before captivating a million hearts. The shadows of the mountains lengthened and the temperature plummeted, icy winds blew from the snow clad peaks of the Himalayas and the last monk made his way away from the Naro Palace. It was curtains for the celebration in the clouds, but the end is the beginning as everyone gears up for another extravaganza in the Himalayas at the Naropa festival 2019. As the dust settles on the venue of the Naropa festival and the monks return to their sequestered lives, one cannot help but marvel at what this unique festival has achieved. It has breathed fresh air and vitality in the atmosphere and charged everyone remotely connected with it with optimism and hope. Hope for a world filled with peace, love and music.



The authors are Travel and Lifestyle couple bloggers and writers. They blog at <https://imvoyager.com> and can be reached at [imvoyager18@gmail.com](mailto:imvoyager18@gmail.com)