



TRAVELLERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EXPERIENCES

Turtuk's unique location not only provides breathtaking scenery, but also has a profound historical narrative.



FROM LEFT: BORAZDIBERTAL/ANZO/GETTYIMAGES; ANANI DAI

Lunching in Leh

Turtuk, the last town of India in Ladakh, is having a culinary and hospitality renaissance, discovers **Harsh Surti**

NESTLED BETWEEN THE majestic Karakoram Range and the formidable Himalayas lies Turtuk, a small, picturesque hamlet steeped in history that stands as a testament to resilience, seamlessly blending cultures. Turtuk's unique location not only provides breathtaking scenery, but also has a profound historical narrative. Originally part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region which later became part of Pakistan, Turtuk was captured by the Indian Army during the 1971 war. This once-prosperous kingdom, stretching across 75,000 square kilometers, is now divided—four villages fall on the Indian side with a population of about 3,000. The village's history aside, Turtuk has now transformed itself into a bastion of unparalleled hospitality thanks to the resilient Balti community. Life in Turtuk is a celebration of lush greenery and rich culture, set against a backdrop of stunning natural beauty.

Amidst this setting, *Virsa* ([instagram.com/virsaladakh](https://www.instagram.com/virsaladakh)) a luxury boutique hotel, stands as a beacon of luxury and cultural preservation. Derived from the Urdu-Farsi-Arabic term for heritage, *Virsa* encapsulates the essence of Baltistan's rich cultural legacy. As soon as you enter, you are offered a traditional salaam and *phyaktab* as a warm welcome. The hotel's vernacular architecture, featuring hand-cut stones, mud, intricate woodwork, cultural carvings, and the Looms of Baltistan art series, reflects the Balti style of design, seamlessly blending with modern amenities. The region's ethos is reflected in the minimally curated luxury accommodation, sustainably borrowing from nature and its surroundings. Local





◀ The region's ethos is reflected in the minimally curated luxury accommodation, sustainably borrowing from nature and its surroundings.

experiences such as breakfast in an apricot orchard, picnics by a gushing stream, heritage walks, and local lunches at village homes, offer a deep dive into the local way of life. Evenings are marked by cultural nights with folk music, bonfires, stargazing, and delectable international cuisine.

Turtuk's culinary landscape is buzzing. The Farmers' House Café ([instagram.com/farmershouseturtuk](https://www.instagram.com/farmershouseturtuk)), the only boutique café and ristorante within a 70 km radius, has been designed by architects along with seven local artists. Featuring local elements such as stone, mud, and recycled wood, it imparts a warm, rustic feel, and is set on the banks of the Shayok river. With a global menu (think hand-rolled pasta) that cleverly uses local ingredients such as apricots, pumpkin, and beetroot grown at their own farm, the café offers European, Mexican, and Lebanese cuisines among others, complemented by speciality coffee from Bili hu, and a plethora of teas, all available in an all-day dining format. The restaurant practices responsible sourcing and sustainable farming.

The Farmers' House Café is the brainchild of Rashidullah Khan, a native of Turtuk, whose life is defined by resilience and ambition. In a village where education was a rarity, his primary school was no bigger than a backyard garden. Despite setbacks like failing grade 10 and early business

challenges, Khan was undeterred. His move to Bengaluru opened doors to new opportunities, and his subsequent work experience with Asahi Foods in Japan cultivated a deep appreciation for Japanese culture and cuisine. Impressed by the meticulous craftsmanship and warm hospitality in Japan, Khan dreamt of bringing these qualities back to Turtuk. In 2010, when Turtuk welcomed tourists, he returned home with a vision to diversify the local economy beyond traditional farming. He tackled the logistical challenge of sourcing authentic Japanese ingredients by establishing a supply chain that extends from Delhi to Japan. The nearest grocery store is 1,100 km away in Delhi or 5,450 km away in Kobe, Japan. Despite these challenges, he launched Yakitori ([instagram.com/yakitoriturtuk](https://www.instagram.com/yakitoriturtuk)) in 2021, which serves genuine Japanese cuisine. Yakitori stands as a surprising addition—a Japanese restaurant in one of India's most remote villages—and the presence of sushi at the edge of India astonishes most visitors.

But Rashidullah's culinary journey in his



▲ From top: Yakitori, a Japanese restaurant in one of India's most remote villages, astonishes most visitors; the Balti Farm Experience comprises a farm-to-table, seven-course meal crafted by the women of Baltistan, highlighting the area's rich agricultural heritage.

hometown actually started with the launch of the Balti Farm Experience ([instagram.com/thebaltifarm](https://www.instagram.com/thebaltifarm))—a unique journey into the culinary heritage of Baltistan. Established in 2017, The Balti Farm (at Turtuk Holiday Resort) was conceived to revive the region's traditional culinary practices, which had become confined to local homes over time. The initiative's core mission is to uplift the Balti community by preserving their cultural identity, with a special focus on their cuisine. The Experience comprises a farm-to-table, seven-course meal crafted by the women of Baltistan, highlighting the area's rich agricultural heritage. This experience is a tribute to the locally grown produce, which remains a vital part of the community's livelihood. In Baltistan, 'summer is a celebration'—a time when the community comes together to celebrate the bounty of their farmlands, using age-old farming techniques. The cuisine reflects this festive spirit, featuring nutritionally balanced dishes made with grains like buckwheat, herbs, and walnuts.

GETTING THERE

IndiGo ([goindigo.in](https://www.goindigo.in)) has direct flights from Delhi or Mumbai to Leh. From Leh, it's a six-hour drive to Turtuk. You can either rent a car for the journey or opt for a bike if you are a rider.

STAY

Hotel Duktuk is a boutique property centrally located in Turtuk. *Doubles from ₹1,999 per night; [hotelduktuk.com](https://www.hotelduktuk.com);* **Tyakshi Eco Village** in Nubra Valley is a few kilometres away from Turtuk. *Doubles from ₹2,800 per night; [tyakshiecovillage.com](https://www.tyakshiecovillage.com)*

The customer experience at these establishments is nothing short of magical. Guests often express awe and gratitude for the unique and unexpected experiences and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many travellers sharing memorable stories of their stay. One particularly touching account came from a group of gentlemen who had been planning their trip to Ladakh for 40 years. Upon finally making it to Turtuk, they were moved by the hospitality and the beautiful setting that made their long-awaited dream trip unforgettable. Travellers are delighted by the element of surprise, such as finding sushi or a katsu burger, which adds to the charm of their journey.

The Balti experience in Turtuk goes beyond just food and lodging. It's an immersion into the local way of life and traditions. Turtuk, as the last habitable village in India, offers a plethora of activities and sights that cater to different interests. History enthusiasts can explore the Balti Heritage House and Museum ([instagram.com/balti.heritage.museum](https://www.instagram.com/balti.heritage.museum)), and Yagbo Palace, both offering deep insights into the village's journey. A short drive to Thang, a border village, provides a glimpse of the Indo-Pak border. Here, Goba Ali Museum and Garden, hosted by a legendary local, offers a cup of tea and captivating stories in a dreamy garden setting.

Nature lovers can explore the Farol part of Turtuk, home to astonishing natural cold storage and scenic trails leading to a monastery-waterfall. There's even a mountain beach, a polo ground, and numerous nooks waiting to be discovered. In Turtuk, history, culture, and hospitality converge to offer an extraordinary experience. The efforts of individuals like Rashidullah have transformed this remote village into a destination where travellers can enjoy world-class amenities and cuisines, while immersing themselves in the rich heritage of Baltistan in the heart of the Himalayas. 🌿

▼ From left: The Farmers' House Café is the only boutique café and ristorante within a 70 km radius in Turtuk; speciality coffee from Bili hu is served here in an all-day dining format.



TOP: HARSH SURTI; BOTTOM: AVANI RAI

TOP: AVANI RAI; BOTTOM FROM LEFT: HARSH SURTI; AVANI RAI