My time in Kargil, Ladakh, May–July 2026

From the moment I first came into contact with Ladakh Hilfe e.V., it quickly became clear to me that I wanted to get involved here. Ladakh, India's northernmost territory, where I had already explored the breathtaking mountain passes and beautiful valleys on foot and by motorbike back in 2024.

I flew from bustling Delhi to Leh. I managed to snag a window seat and, full of anticipation, pressed my face against the small aeroplane window, gazing at the snow-capped mountain peaks. The town of Leh has changed over the last two years. My anticipation for Kargil is growing, and the next day I set off on a seven-hour impressive bus journey on a 'local bus', passing various monasteries and 'Moonland'.

I am warmly welcomed by Johanna Klein and the Kingi family; there's delicious food, and I'm shown my home for the next few weeks: a large private area with a bedroom, a spacious bathroom, cooking facilities and a weather-protected entrance area with seating, where I'll be spending a lot of time over the coming weeks.

We spend another lovely weekend together, take a trip as far as Sankoo, and I already get to know one of my new colleagues, who lovingly cooks for us. To this day, her food remains in my personal top three.

And suddenly it's Monday, my first day at the Munshi Habibullah Mission School. Full of anticipation and excitement, accompanied by Johanna Klein and Gulzar Munshi, I arrive at the school to find a welcoming committee of some of the schoolgirls in traditional dress and the REWA Society team already waiting for us. I'm welcomed with local delicacies and the obligatory khata and welcomed into the circle – though I don't realise it at the time, by the end of my time in Kargil I'll have amassed a huge pile of khatas. These traditional shawls are used as a ritual of welcome and farewell and symbolise respect, happiness and good wishes. Next comes the welcome for all the children of the REWA Society. I'm already shaking lots of hands, even those of the youngest children, and I get to know the rest of my future colleagues, with whom I'll also form personal bonds over the coming weeks. Overall, I'm given an exceptionally warm welcome by everyone and immediately welcomed into the group. There's a great deal of excitement on all sides, but I quickly realise that I'm going to feel very much at home here.

And this is confirmed over the following weeks. The children grow very dear to my heart, as do my colleagues at the REWA Society. To this day, I remain impressed by the ways in which the staff, sometimes with very limited resources, create a space for the children where they can learn, explore and grow.

Together with the physiotherapists, I work with the children on everyday challenges and optimal positioning, in order to make the children's lives easier and minimise secondary damage; together, we consider how therapy can be integrated as effectively as possible into their daily lives. In this, I have the support from Germany of Heike Holz and Rosemarie Geenen; we speak regularly on the phone, and I remain grateful to this day for our exchanges and for what I was able to learn from both of you.

A large part of my duties in Kargil involved, amongst other things, accompanying surveys. Due to various circumstances, no field trips had been carried out to the small surrounding villages for many years and the records were no longer up to date.

We spent many days in teams of three in the REWA jeep, some of our trips even lasted overnight. I did most of the driving myself, which was great fun, even though driving on the left in India certainly takes some getting used to.

The hospitality and warmth of the people there still stay with me to this day. Local people who hear about our project invite us in for tea and show us the schools and children in the village who might need help. Over many days, we travel round the smallest and most remote villages in the surrounding valleys, some of these villages consist of just a few houses or are so close to the border with Pakistan that tourists aren't actually allowed there at all. We meet many children who clearly demonstrate just how much access to therapy, education and support could transform their opportunities for participation. And in every village and school, we were showered with tea, biscuits, nuts or dried apricots from the region. Seeing how the people support us in this project is heart-warming, as is the hope and gratitude in the eyes of the relatives of those affected.

We meet quite a few – the list is long. And I am impressed by the skills, compensatory strategies and ingenuity with which the children overcome their physical and motor limitations. During the field trips, it became particularly clear to me just how important this work is: many families live far away from the existing services. Through these on-site visits, the team can reach children and families who would otherwise have little access to therapy and further support.

A definite highlight of my time in Kargil was our class outing: a picnic. Unfortunately, not all the children were able or willing to take part, but we were still a group of 14 children in total, along with the team comprising helpers, social workers, us physiotherapists, the driver and the coordinator. I have rarely experienced so much energy and such exuberant dancing over such a long period. We sang loudly, played games together and ate together. Inclusion in action – even from neighbours who weren't involved at our picnic spot – our group growing closer together, and seeing the children helping and looking out for one another.

My daily life during my time in Kargil was varied and shaped by new experiences and new tasks, alongside my work at the school. I discovered new skills within myself, slipped into the role of a teacher, had the chance to get to know people whom I would never have come into contact with even as a 'normal' tourist, was able to spend time in the local community and gain a genuine insight into a completely different way of life. By the end of my time there, I'd developed my own routines: buying my vegetables from my favourite stall and also the homemade yoghurt from the elderly lady, with whom I could impress her with my few words of Hindi and Balti. The rest was, as always, communicated with gestures and body language. It was precisely these encounters that made my stay so special.

Through Ladakh Hilfe, I was given the opportunity to get closer to people's everyday lives. I was able to experience a genuine part of local life, characterised by encounters, collaboration, challenges and all the more beautiful moments. My time there was so much more to me than just a trip. I'm sure I'll carry my colleagues and the children in my heart for a long time to come.

I am very grateful to the people I had the privilege of meeting, to those in Germany who supported me, and for the experiences I now carry with me.
Milena Bender