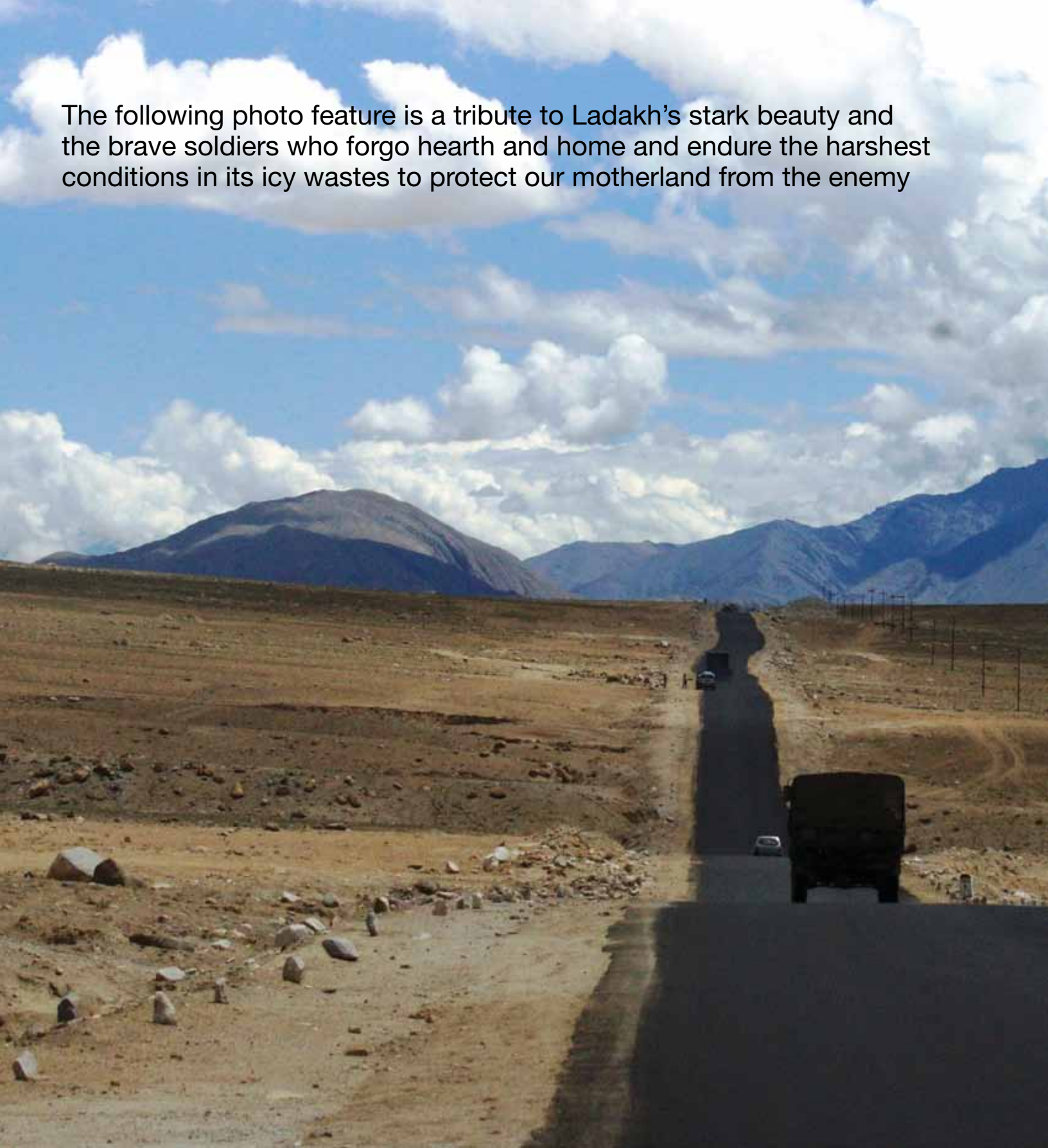


The following photo feature is a tribute to Ladakh's stark beauty and the brave soldiers who forgo hearth and home and endure the harshest conditions in its icy wastes to protect our motherland from the enemy



# LADAKH'S BRAVEHEARTS

A long road strip disappears into the blue yonder,  
dissecting Ladakh's beautiful, treeless terrain



Since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the two countries have indulged in minor and major skirmishes over Kashmir, on the highest battlefield in the world. Situated in the snow covered mountains in the northern plateau in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, Ladakh is the 'land of the passes' and a bone of contention. Located in far northwestern India between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chinese occupied Tibet, Ladakh has sat quietly for centuries behind a buffer of impenetrable mountains. In a literal sense, it is at such a high altitude that it very much unites with the sky, and in terms of beauty it is so sparkling and serene, that its comparisons with the heavens is definitely no fiction! Alluring to intrepid travelers for its high altitude trekking, pristine nature and traditional Buddhist culture, Ladakh is incredibly accommodative to the open-minded traveler.

Even though the slanting sun stabs the skin with its warmth, it is the chilly winds that gnaw at your bones even at high noon in the barren landscapes of Ladakh. Desolate rock faces and jagged mountains piercing the sky are seen all around and the higher you travel into the mountains, the colder it gets — taking your breath away both by its brashness and magnificence. The landscape is like a vast deserted moonscape but the peeling cloud cover very often disperses to reveal the glittering, icy peaks of the Himalayas all around. While the azure skies are appealing, the high mountains are intimidating and the vertigo-causing valleys seem life-threatening. The air is dry, with little oxygen in this treeless, harsh terrain.

Guarding this terrific terrain are the incredible men of the Indian army, who are always on the alert whether it is day or night, hot or cold, windy or snowing. Man and machine work in tandem, engaging not only to keep the enemy at bay but also battling with the harsh and extreme weather conditions. The following photo feature is my tribute to these bravehearts, who forgo their hearth and home to save their motherland. ■

TEXT & PHOTOS: **N. SHIVA KUMAR**

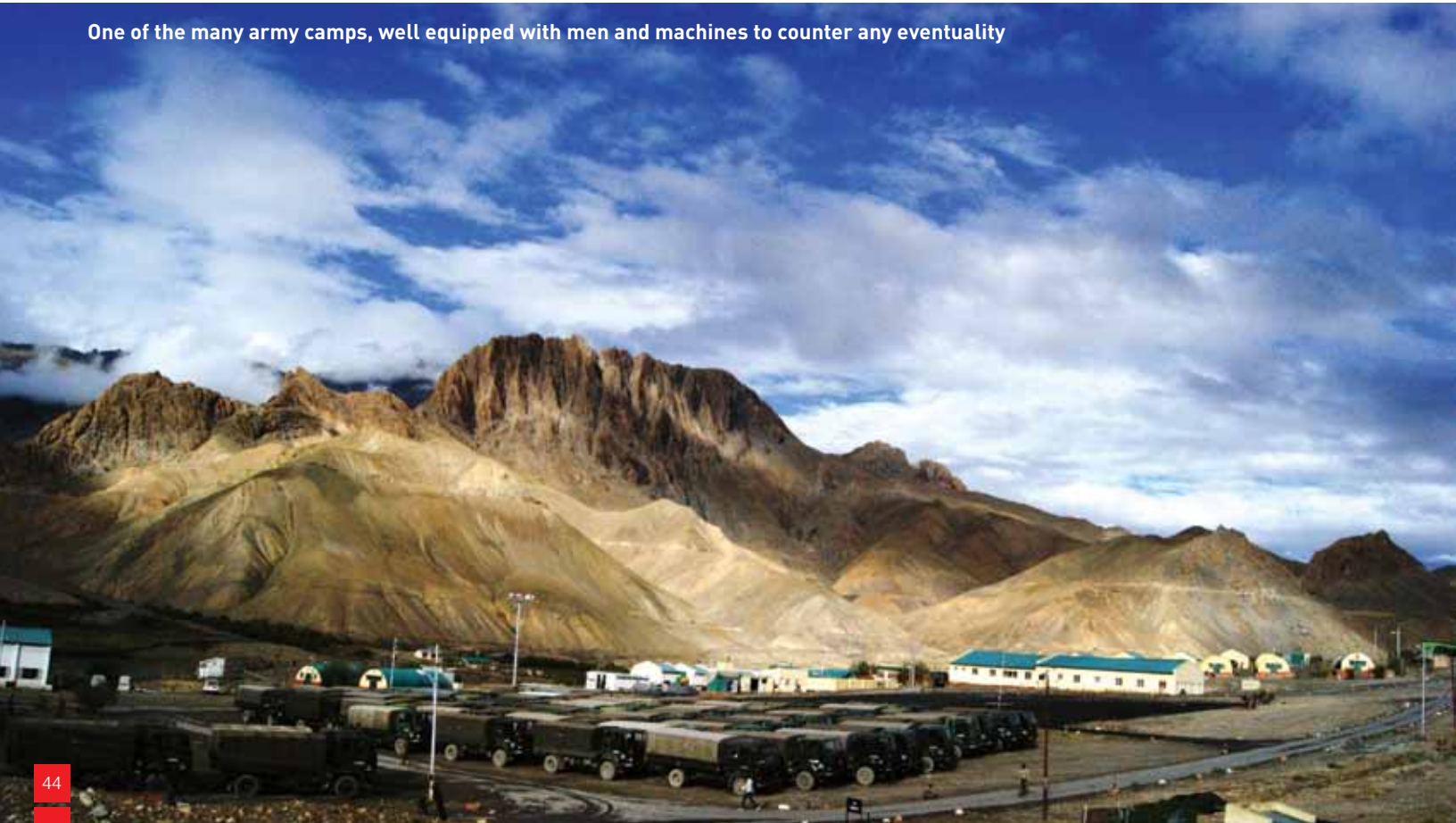


Though barren and bleak, the dramatic landscape is continuously changing from dawn to dusk

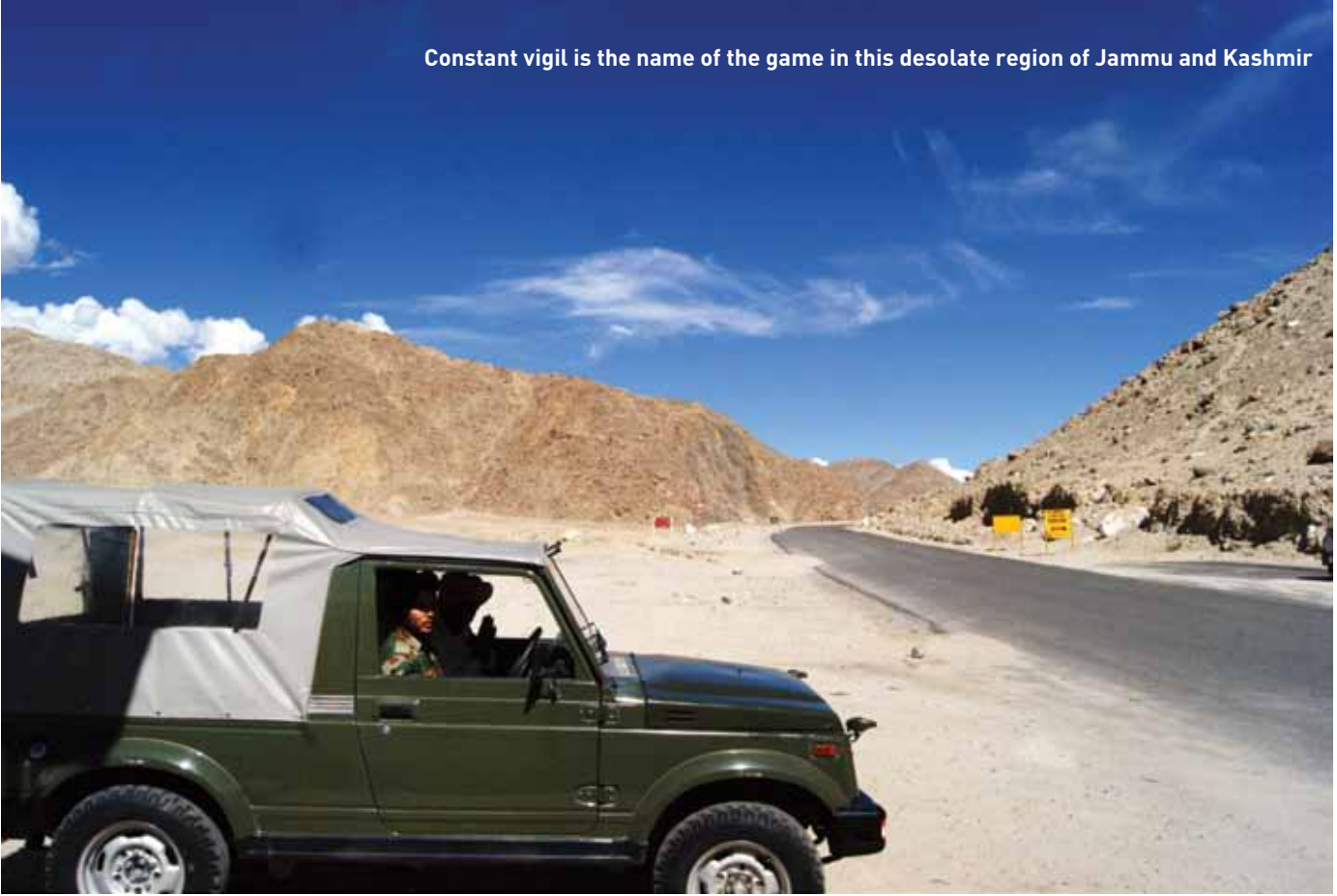


One of the main attractions in Ladakh region is Magnetic Hill

One of the many army camps, well equipped with men and machines to counter any eventuality



Constant vigil is the name of the game in this desolate region of Jammu and Kashmir



A strong-minded officer on duty checks out his territorial terrain by foot

A proud soldier shows grit and glory on his stern face, adorned by a healthy moustache



A rare view of a lush valley that provides an oasis for the local residents to build a settlement





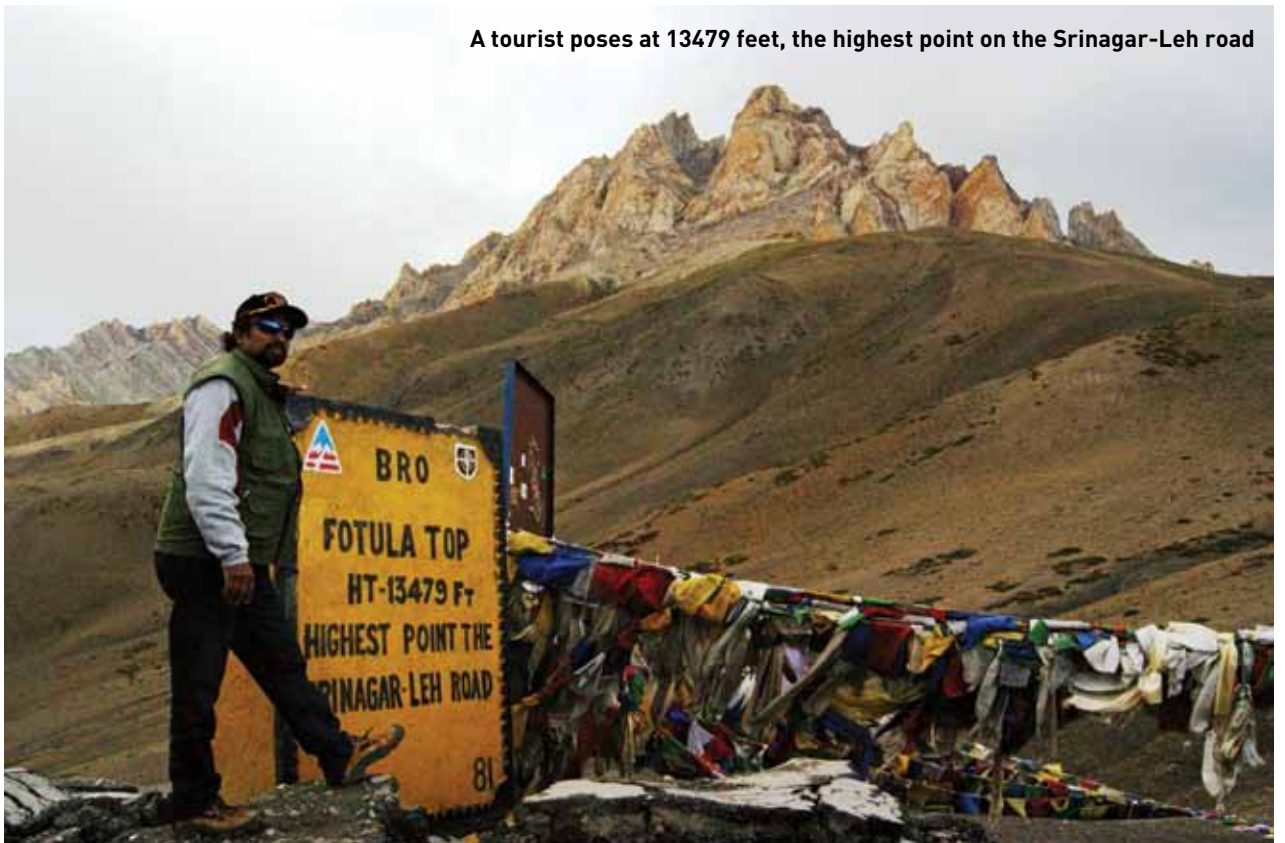
Young Lamas in a highland monastery are a determined lot, providing hope for the future generations

Long-haired goats ward off cold conditions as they go about grazing



Road construction is an ongoing procedure to stay connected with uplands

A tourist poses at 13479 feet, the highest point on the Srinagar-Leh road



Long-tailed sheep find green grassy pastures along streams on the high hill slopes



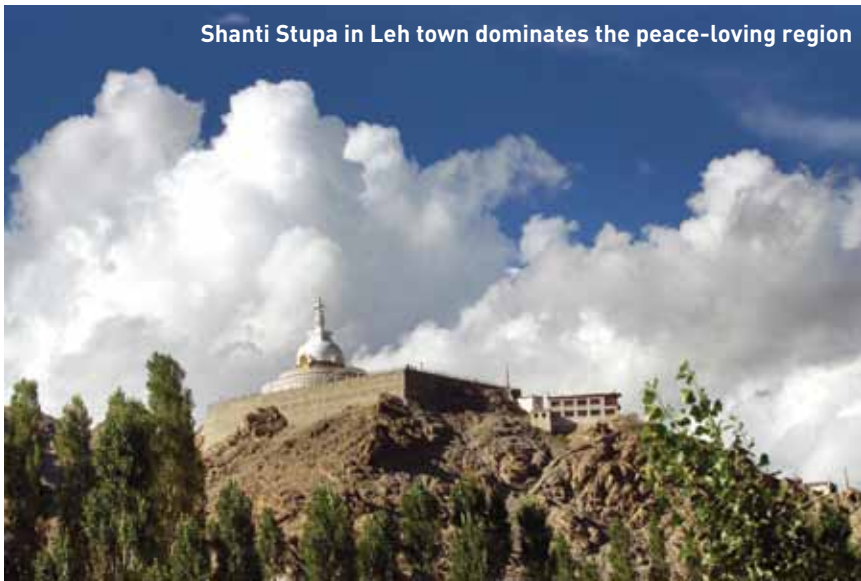
Handy medical aid is a must in these high altitudes for providing solace to the needy



Rural development is part and parcel of the progressive environment of the province



Shanti Stupa in Leh town dominates the peace-loving region



Mountains seem like molehills as the Indian flag flies in the crisp air of Ladakh



A high altitude of 12198 feet is just a figure that needs to be protected



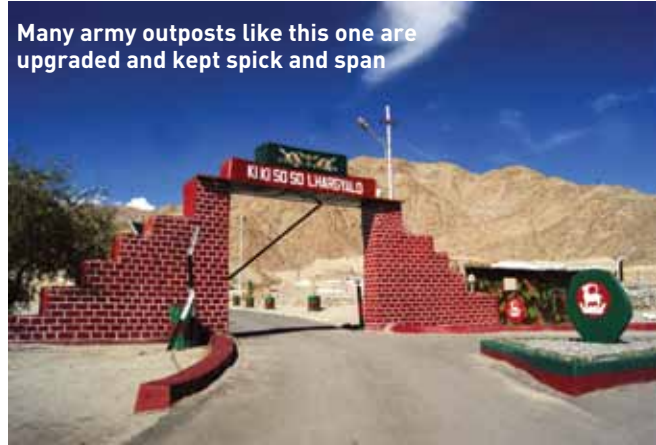
Looping roads and high hills are no deterrent to the protectors of Leh-Ladakh region



Many brave hearts have lain down their lives in protecting their motherland



Many army outposts like this one are upgraded and kept spick and span



Patrolling men go on a routine check to keep the roads clear of landslides



The Hall of Fame houses a military museum that contains many artifacts



Even in the harsh weather conditions, the Ladakhi women are pretty and proud of their motherland



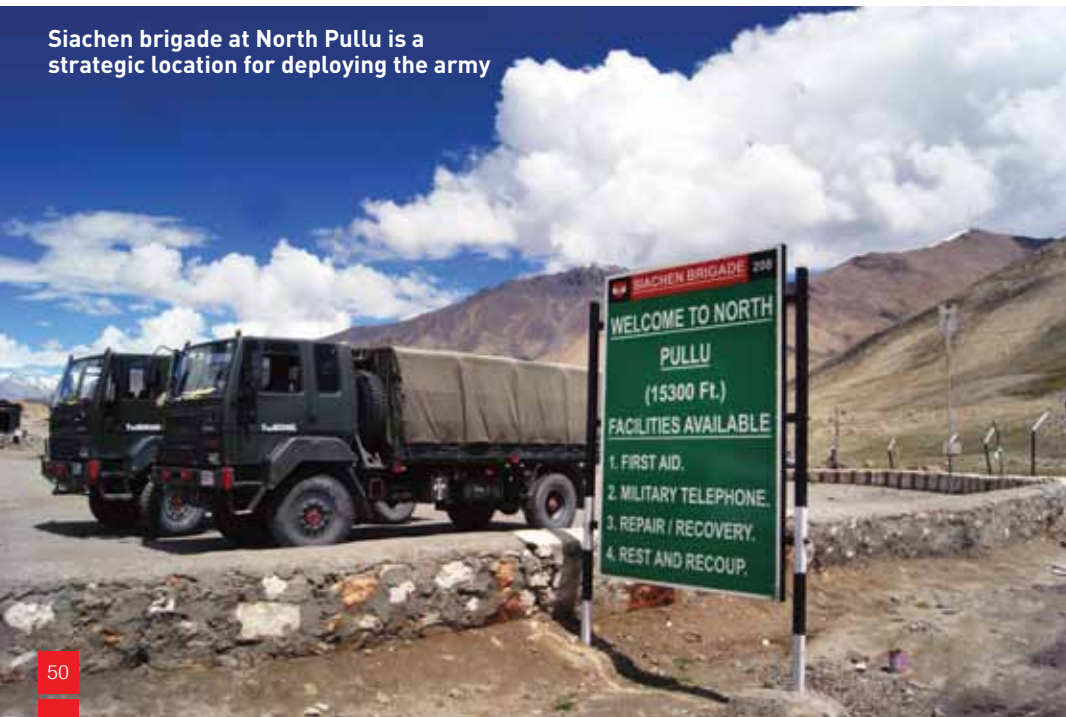
All-terrain vehicles of the Indian army constantly patrol the stunning landscape



Always cold, the snow thaws only in summer and it is time for kids to enjoy the warm sun



Siachen brigade at North Pullu is a strategic location for deploying the army



An elderly lama in his typical attire in one of the monasteries



Vehicular traffic is limited yet the tarmac is negotiated day and night



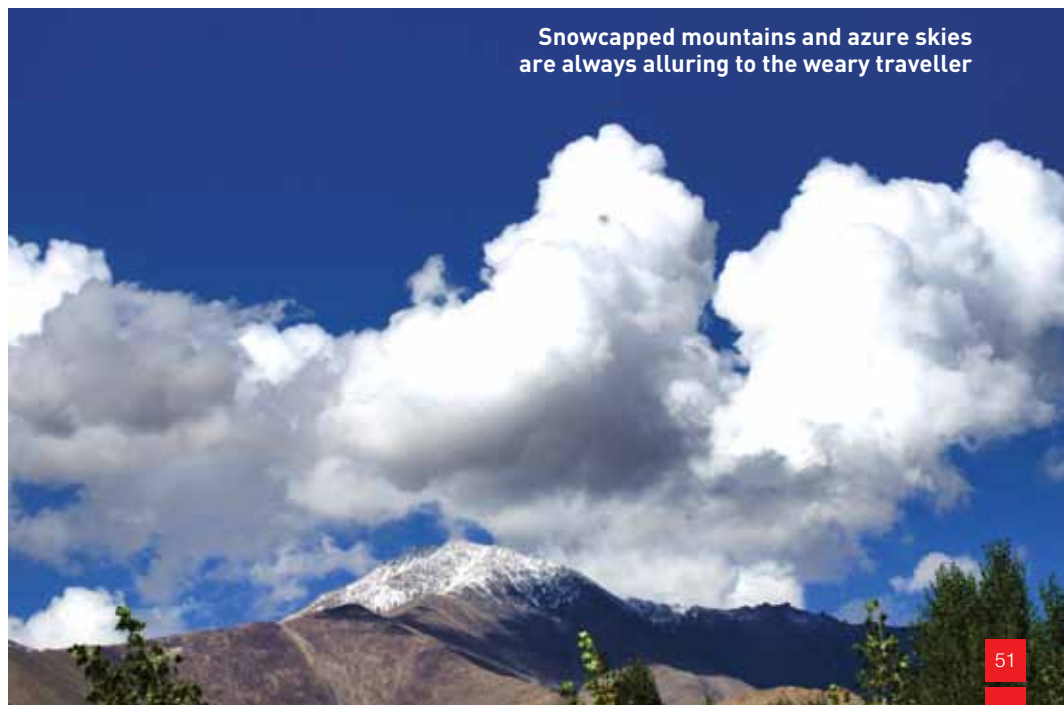
The lovely lakes of the land are pristine and picturesque when the snow melts away

Always on the alert are the men and machines of the Indian army



The army officers take a break to enjoy the breathtaking views in the valley

Snowcapped mountains and azure skies are always alluring to the weary traveller



Come hell or high water, the Indian flags fly and flutter with pride at one of the military memorials

