



**MOVIE REVIEW**

# Journey from Zanskar: A long, hard way to get to school ★★★☆

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## Journey from Zanskar

- *Written and directed by Frederick Marx*
- *Narrated by Richard Gere*
- *Classification: NA*

In the summer of 2004, veteran documentary-maker Frederick Marx arrived in Zanskar, a remote and impoverished pocket of Tibetan culture in the Himalayas of northwest India, without a clue what to shoot. The original plan was to document the long-awaited visit of Tenzin Choegyal (the Dalai Lama’s younger brother) to ancient Tibetan Buddhist monasteries there. But TC, as he’s commonly known, unexpectedly cancelled.

That turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Marx, writer-editor-producer of the acclaimed 1994 documentary *Hoop Dreams*, went to the Stongdey Monastery looking for a story. He met Gershe Yonten, a monk with a not-so-simple plan to escort a group of poor Zanskari children, ages four to 12, to Tibetan schools in Manali, a popular Himalayan tourist stop in the Himachal Pradesh province and home of several Buddhist monasteries. Marx joined the trek and the result is *Journey from Zanskar*, more heart-breaking and action-packed than one imagines from a monastery travelogue film.

An enormous sense of urgency propels Gershe, the trekkers and the film itself. The monk, a Zanskar native, has dedicated himself to preserving the culture of this sparsely populated region of about 14,000 mostly Tibetan people. Local public schools only teach Urdu, Hindi and English – forget about Tibetan language or culture – and are, in any case, prohibitively costly. The monks themselves are building a school, but it won’t be finished before a new road opens up the region (which had no phone service or running water at the time of filming) to both the good and culture-eroding effects of the outside world.

Gershe secures funds to cover travel and tuition costs for a small group of hand-picked kids, but it’s not like he can just load them into a yellow school bus. The two windy roads out of the region offer armed skirmishes on the Dalai Lama’s side of the valley and dangerous snow drifts

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skirmishes on the Pakistan side of the valley, and dangerous snow drifts on the other. Gershe elects to take the traditional overland route to Manali, which includes crossing the 17,400-foot Shinku Pass. The group swells to include the kids, some of the parents, five young women on pilgrimages, horses, their surly handlers and yaks. But they set out too late in the season. After many days of trudging, battling altitude sickness, rock slides and cold temperatures – with the kids, the youngest often strapped onto the horses, proving the most hardy trekkers – even the yaks agree they must turn back. Gershe has to come up with Plan B.

Marx does a great job of making us care about the outcome of the journey. The stakes, both culturally and practically, are high – the conflicted emotions of the hopeful parents, who may not see their children for years, are keenly felt. Through this small story, *Journey from Zanskar* illuminates the challenge of preserving what’s left of Tibetan culture.

*Journey from Zanskar* opens Friday night at Toronto’s Revue Cinema.

*Special to The Globe and Mail*

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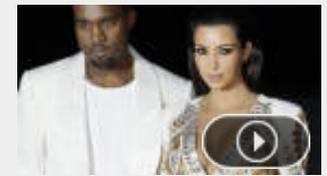
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