

Extreme Bike Tours

HIMALAYA TOUR
(‘HIMALAYA 1’)

A Rough Guide to the Tour and Places of Interest

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Disclaimer and Acknowledgement:

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OVERVIEW

This tour is essentially a one-way trip from Delhi to Leh high up in the Himalayan Ladakh District of Jammu and Kashmir Province of India.

The core of the tour is riding the Manali-Leh road over some of the highest passes of the Himalayas (certainly, over several of the highest motorable roads in India – and the world; and venturing further East over the highest two passes we cross, to the high altitude Pangong Lake and through the Nubra Valley.

After a few days riding around the Kullu and Parvati Valleys south of Manali, we head out for the four day ride from Manali to Leh, travelling north over mountain passes recently cleared of the winter's snow and avalanches (hopefully); through a multiplicity of melted snow flows across the road; along valleys and over plains; and through mountain ranges.

From the 'base camp' of Leh, we traverse the Leh-Srinagar Road to Lamayura and Fotu La; we embark on a 3-day circuit taking in the two highest passes of the tour (and the two highest motorable roads in India); the politically fault-lined, high-altitude, endorheic (leave the dictionary!) Pangong Lake; and the less-visited Nubra Valley. Finally we visit the Hemis Gumpa before returning leisurely to Delhi.

PARVATI VALLEY



From the confluence of the Parvati/Malana River (these two rivers join further up the Parvati Valley) with the River Beas, the Parvati Valley runs eastwards, through a steep-sided valley from the town of Bhuntar, in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh.

The often-precipitous valley road climbs past a side valley leading to the village of Malana and through the backpackers' havens of Jari and Kasol, where Western travellers congregate to sample the local "charas" or hashish which is ubiquitous throughout the valley. From here, the road passes through the Sikh and Hindu pilgrimage town of Manikaran and terminates at Pulga.

The Parvati valley is exceptionally beautiful and just a little sinister. It's a very narrow valley with the mountains rising steeply on both sides, allowing a couple less hours of light than in other areas. It's famous for its high quality charas production and most travellers who come here are stoners (except for those on Royal Enfield tours).

The other striking feature of Parvati is the river which hurls itself down the mountains at an incredible pace. It is said you can sit by this river for hours and lose yourself in the collage of sounds.

There are spectacular passes from Parvati, notably into the Malana valley where the best charas of all is grown. One travel site says "the locals in Malana consider themselves a caste (*sic*) above

everyone else and impose strict rules on where you may walk and what you may touch in your time there.” (I assume the use of the word *caste* was a slip rather than an intended pun!)

KULLU VALLEY

Kullu is a district in Himachal Pradesh. The district stretches from the village of Rampur in the south to the Rohtang Pass in the north. (We cross the Rohtang.)

The largest valley in the district is called the Kullu Valley, which is also known as the Valley of the Gods. There is also a town called Kullu, which sits on the banks of the Beas River in the central part of the valley.



The ancient seat of the kings of Kullu was at Naggar Castle (see photo below), about 12 km north of the present town, and thought to have been built in the early 17th century by Raja Sidh Singh. Raja Jagat Singh (1637-72) moved the capital in the middle of the 17th century to its present position at Kullu, and called it Sultanpur. The Royal compound consists of the Rupri Palace, several temples, and a long narrow bazaar descending the hill.

The British took all of Kangra and Kullu from the Sikhs in 1846. It is still used as home by the royal descendants, but the more ancient Naggar Castle was sold to the British.

NAGGAR

Situated on the left bank of river Beas at an altitude of 1,851 m, the ancient town of Naggar commands extensive views, especially to the north west of the valley. Naggar was the former capital of Kullu. It was founded by Raja Visudhpal and continued as a headquarters of the State until the capital was transferred to Sultanpur (Kullu) by Jagat Singh in 1460 A.D. Today this ancient and beautiful palace is a popular tourist spot.



Naggar was the capital of the Kullu Rajas for about 1,400 years. The gallery housing the paintings of the Russian saint, cum philosopher, cum artist – Nicholas Roerich – is nearby.

MANALI

Manali in the Beas River Valley is an important hill station in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh, near the northern end of the Kullu Valley. It is located about 250 km from the state capital, Shimla.

Manali is administratively part of the Kullu district, with a population of approx. 30,000. The small town was the beginning of an ancient trade route to Ladakh and, from there, over the Karakoram Pass onto Yarkand and Khotan in the Tarim Basin.

Manali and the surrounding area are of great significance to Indian culture and heritage as it is said to be the home of the Saptarshi, or Seven Sages.

In ancient times, the valley was sparsely populated by nomadic hunters known as 'rakshas'. The next arrivals were the shepherds who arrived from the Kangra Valley and settled to take up agriculture. Some of the earliest inhabitants of the region are the 'naur' or 'nar', which is a caste unique to the Kullu valley. Only a few naur families are known to exist now. A naur family in the village Soyal near Haripur on the west bank of Manali was famous for the vast land they owned and their practice of having 'rakshas' as their labourers.



The British introduced apple trees and trout, which were not native to Manali flora or fauna. It is said that when apple trees were first planted the fruits were so plentiful that often branches, unable to bear the weight, would collapse. To this day, apple—along with plum and pear—remains the best source of income for the majority of its inhabitants.

MANALI-LEH ROAD



The Manali-Leh Road gets a mention on the “Dangerous Roads” site – as do several other roads and passes we take!

The Manali-Leh Highway is open to vehicular traffic for only four and a half months. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO)¹ starts clearing snow and rebuilding bridges from May onwards. This is the general practice, but the opening of the road usually depends on the amount of snowfall the region has received through winter. According to one site, mid-June is a good time to start if you like to see snow on the passes, experience bone

¹ The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) maintains roads that serve the borders areas of India. It is staffed with a combination of Border Roads Engineering Service officers from the General Reserve Engineer Force (GREF) and officers from the Corps of Engineers of the Indian Army.

chilling cold and ride on rough patches. By July-August, snow on the mountain tops is less; BRO would have repaired most of the portions on the highway and the temperature is bearable. By early September, the road is in a near perfect condition (60kph). We're going "mid June"!

Kangla Jal (photo above) is called on one site "the nastiest water crossing on the Manali-Leh Hwy". That or another site says "it's a water crossing where the flow rate changes as the day progresses and recedes as the evening approaches. The best time to cross it is early morning when the snow melt rate is slow. Anytime after 11.00 is asking for trouble."

If that's instilling apprehension, the "good news" is that a bridge has now been built over the river at this spot. Seems it went up between a *Himalaya 1* and *Himalaya 2* tour last year. Never mind. There will be other opportunities!

Kangla Jal comes after we cross Lachulung La and before we get to Pang and the More (**Mor-ay**) Plains.

LAHAUL VALLEY

We enter the Lahaul Valley after crossing Rohtang La soon after leaving Manali. At this point the road splits to travel north-westish through the Lahaul Valley or eastish through the Spiti Valley. We go left.

Lahaul is marked by a central mass of uniformly high mountains and massive glaciers. The two rivers, Chandra and Bhaga, which rise on either side of Baralacha La, flow through the narrow Chandra and Bhaga valleys. Lahaul is a land of fascinating Buddhist art and culture. The monasteries of Lahaul-Spiti are rich repositories of ancient murals, ²thankas, wood carving and golden images of Padmasambhava. The valley lies at a height of 2745 metres above sea level. Summer in this valley is cool and pleasant with green grass and alpine flowers.

² A "Thanka," also known as "Tangka", "Thangka" or "Tanka" is a Tibetan silk painting with embroidery, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala of some sort. (See below.)

Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning "circle." In the Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions their sacred art often takes a mandala form. The basic form of most Hindu and Buddhist mandalas is a square with four gates containing a circle with a centre point. Each gate is in the shape of a T. Mandalas often exhibit radial balance.

These mandalas, concentric diagrams, have spiritual and ritual significance in both Buddhism and Hinduism. The term is of Hindu origin and appears in the Rig Veda as the name of the sections of the work, but is also used in other Indian religions, particularly Buddhism. In the Tibetan branch of Vajrayana Buddhism, mandalas have been developed into sandpainting. They are also a key part of anuttarayoga tantra meditation practices. (Wikipedia)

FIVE PASSES ON MANALI-LEH ROAD

From Manali, we get introduced to the high Himalayan passes. By the time we complete the tour, including the the three day circuit from Leh, we will have crossed nine of India's highest Himalayan passes – certainly, its highest motorable passes.

Rohtang La

Rohtang La ³(lit: *pile of corpses*, due to people dying in bad weather trying to cross the pass) connects the Kullu Valley with the Lahaul and Spiti Valleys of Himachal Pradesh and is situated about 51km from Manali.



Its elevation is 3,978 m or 13,051 ft. This is the least high of the nine significant passes that we traverse – appropriately so for the first one we experience only 51 km from the starting point of our venture into the serious part of the high Himalayas.

The pass provides a natural divide between the sub-humid/humid Kullu Valley, with a primarily Hindu culture (in the south), and the arid/semi-arid high-altitude Lahaul and Spiti valleys, with a Buddhist culture (in the north).

The pass lies on the watershed between the Chenab and Beas basins. On the southern side of this pass, the Beas River emerges from underground and flows southward; and on its northern side, the Chandra River, a source stream of the river Chenab, flows westward.

Batalacha La

Batalacha La connects Lahaul district in Himachal Pradesh to Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir. The pass also acts as a water-divide between the Bhaga river and the Yunam river.

Wikipedia says its elevation is 4,890 m or 16,040 ft. The sign at the top, according to photos on the net, says it's 16,500ft (5,029 m). Judging from the terrain mode of Google Maps, the road doesn't seem to get to the 5000m contour anywhere. The highest it gets is touching the 4,920 m contour, but the pass seems to be along the 4,890 m contour, as Wikipedia says.



³ *La* is Tibetan for pass. The word *La* gets used throughout the Himalaya to refer to a high mountain pass. It commonly gets included with the word pass even though they both mean the same! So you'll see Rohtang La, Rohtang Pass or Rohtang La Pass. The *La* part comes with or without capitalisation and with or without hyphenation!

Folklore states that there were two lovers, Chandra, being the daughter of the Moon, and Bhaga, the son of the Sun god. To perform their eternal marriage, they decided to climb to the Baralacha-la and from there they ran in opposite directions. Chandra being active and smart easily found her way and reached Tandi after covering the distance of 115 km. Soon Bhaga was found coming with a great struggle through the narrow gorges to Tandi, where consequently both met and the celestial marriage was performed.

Nakee La

There's no entry in Wikipedia for Nakee Pass. There was this bit on one site: "Nakee la Pass is the third of the five passes to be crossed while travelling from Manali to Leh. It is between Sarchu and Pang. The height of the pass is 4,750 m. There is nothing really special about the pass and most people don't even notice while crossing it."

Whether it's 4,739 m, as Wikipedia asserted in passing in another entry and which Google Maps give, or 4,750 m, it's no chicken. It's the 7th highest we cross on the tour.

On the way up to Nakee La, there are the Gata Loops. These consist of 21 loops across the highway that turn into sharp bends, one loop leading to another. They cover a distance of 7 km on road and travelling through them will take you up an elevation of 466 m (1,522 ft). The angularly elevated roads facilitate passage by loaded trucks. There are shortcuts across the loops but only small vehicles can pass through them.



Perhaps the reason why Nakee La doesn't get much attention – and why “most people don't even notice while crossing it” – is that it hardly deviates in elevation terms from a continuous rise to Lachulung La.

In fact, Google Maps locates it at a spot which is about 4,660 m (certainly below 4,700 m) although it (wrongly, it would seem) marks it as 4,739 m. The road continues to climb at this point and goes to about 4,930m before dropping down to a small plateau of about 4780m before rising back to 4,800m and then climbing to Lachulung La. The plateau has a marker calling it Whiskey.

Lachulung La

Lachulung La, at an elevation of 5,059 m (16,600 ft), is located some 54 km from Sarchu and 24 km from Pang on the Leh-Manali highway. After Lachulung La the landscape changes dramatically.

First, coming down from Lachulung La, we cross Kangla Jal (seems on a bridge rather than the hitherto formidable gravel crossing) and continue to Pang. We then climb again to the plateau of the More (**Mor**-ay) Plains. The plains area starts after covering around 4 km uphill road from Pang towards Tanglang La. The road is mostly on the



plains for around 30–35 km, before it again starts to rise to Tanglang La.

The road across the plains has an average elevation of about 4,700 m and is flanked by mountain ranges on both sides. At some places the road runs along the Sumkhel Lungpa River featuring some stunning sand and rock natural formations. Extraordinary shapes, chiselled by the elements, jut out of the sandy mountain sides. These shapes appear mostly in clusters, some looking like anthills while some other clusters look as if they are pieces from a chess set.

Tanglang La



Tanglang La is reported as having an elevation of 17,582 ft (5,359 m). This is what the sign at the pass says; and is the number Wikipedia repeats (quoting the sign) – as do several other sources.

The contour lines in Google Maps indicate the road over the pass from both directions runs along the 5,300 m line before rising to 5 320 m for several hundred metres to cross between ridges or peaks on each side. At this stage, the road does not seem to get higher than 5340 m and seems to sit between the 5,320 m and 5,340m lines. However, the ridge on the south side of the road as it crosses the pass seems to plateau at the 5360m contour line. It's likely that this is where the 5359m height has come from.

Google Earth suggests that the highest the road gets as 5 338 m.

All in all, we're talking 20m or so between possible reality and the posted elevation – but not to be treated lightly, given the closeness of the heights of three of the passes we cross. (See more on this later.)

JAMMU and KASHMIR, LADAKH and LEH

Jammu and Kashmir is the northernmost state of India. It is situated mostly in the Himalayan Mountains. Jammu and Kashmir shares a border with the states of Himachal Pradesh and Punjab to the south; internationally, with the People's Republic of China to the north and east; and the Pakistan-administered territories of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, to the west and northwest.

Formerly a part of the erstwhile Princely State of Kashmir and Jammu, which governed the larger historic region of Kashmir, this territory is disputed by China, India and Pakistan. Pakistan, which claims the entire territory, refers to it as Indian-occupied



Kashmir, while some international agencies, such as the United Nations, call it Indian-administered Kashmir.

Jammu and Kashmir consists of three regions: Jammu, the Kashmir valley (Kashmir) and Ladakh. Srinagar is the summer capital, and Jammu is the winter capital. While the Kashmir valley is famous for its beautiful mountainous landscape, Jammu's numerous shrines attract tens of thousands of Hindu pilgrims every year. Ladakh, also known as "Little Tibet", is renowned for its remote mountain beauty and Buddhist culture. Kashmir has had a long association with Islam.

Leh is one of the two districts located in Ladakh, the other being the Kargil District to the west. It is the second largest district in India in terms of area.

The town of Leh was the capital of the Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh and is now the capital of the Leh district within the region of Ladakh in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The town is still dominated by the now ruined Leh Palace, former mansion of the royal family of Ladakh, built in the same style and about the same time as the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace in Lhasa (17th century).



For centuries, Leh was an important stopover on trade routes along the Indus Valley between Tibet to the east and Kashmir to the west; and also between India and China. The main goods carried were salt, grain, pashm or cashmere wool, charas or cannabis resin from the Tarim Basin, indigo, silk yarn and Banaras brocade.

On one level, Leh is a tourist town, with all the travel agencies, souvenir shops and pizza restaurants you would expect to find in a bustling backpacker centre. On the other hand, how many other tourist towns back onto ruined palaces in the lee of the Himalaya? The sky overhead is a vivid dark blue from the altitude – a breathless 3,505 m above sea level – and the modern town melts into a crumbling old city of timber and mud bricks. The Indian Army maintains a large military base near the airport to patrol the borders with China and Pakistan, but their main job is repairing roads and bridges and keeping the mountain passes clear of snow.

INDUS VALLEY

The Indus Valley Civilisation was a Bronze Age civilisation (3300–1300 BCE; mature period 2600–1900 BCE) that was located in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent, consisting of what is now mainly modern-day Pakistan and northwest India. Flourishing around the Indus River basin, the civilisation primarily centred on the Indus and the Punjab regions, extending into the Ghaggar-Hakra River valley and the Ganges-Yamuna Doab (the tract of land between the two rivers). Geographically, the civilization was spread over an area of some 1,260,000 km², making it the largest ancient civilisation in the world.

The Indus Valley is one of the world's earliest urban civilisations, along with its contemporaries, Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. At its peak, the Indus Civilisation may have had a population of well over five million. Inhabitants of the ancient Indus River Valley developed new techniques in metallurgy and handicraft and produced copper, bronze, lead, and tin. The civilisation is noted for its cities built of brick, roadside drainage system, and multi-storeyed houses.

Most of the archaeological interest in the early urbanisation of the Indus Valley is located in today's Pakistan closer to the mouth of the Indus River; but, as indicated above, the Indus Valley civilisation stretched into the areas of the Indus Valley we will visit. We actually pick up the Indus River at Upshi on the way to Leh; and follow it for periods on the road from Leh to Lamayura.



Spituk Gompa (Monastery)



The Spituk monastery is built on a lone rocky hill on the right bank of the Indus, eight kilometres away from Leh towards Srinagar. It is one of the most influential monasteries of the 'Yellow Hat' the Gelukpa order. Built in the 15th century on the ruins of a 11th century gompa, the Spituk Gumpa has as its abbot the Kushak Bakula (Kushak is an incarnate head lama of a monastery who has attained the highest form of training of Buddhism).

The Dukhang (main temple) has a high throne at its far end, reserved for the Dalai Lama. The door beside this central throne leads to a dark old chapel. The central images inside the chapel are those of Tsong-kha-pa, his two chief disciples and of the Buddha. It also has a veranda with the usual frescos. On the altar can be seen standing the statues of the fifth Dalai Lama and the 18th Kushak Bakula, along with those of Sakyamuni and another Buddha.

Thiksey Gompa (Monastery)

Thiksey is 20 km from Leh and is the most picturesque monastery of Ladakh. It belongs to Gelukpa order (Yellow Hat). It is built like the Potala Palace of Tibet. The monastery is a famed tourist sight because it is situated on a splendid hill-top perch, overlooking the green valley of the Indus. In the 12-storeyed monastery, which is more than 800 years old, are ten temples. Its chambers are treasure troves of gold and silver statues of Buddha, ancient swords, thankas and the Tantrik wall paintings.



Lamayura Gompa (Monastery)



Lamayuru Gompa (Monastery) is a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the Kargil district of Jammu and Kashmir, India. Situated at a height of 3,510m, this gompa was founded by the Buddhist scholar Mahasiddhacarya Naropa in the 11th century. It is said that he had spent many years meditating in one of the caves at Dukhang. Lamayuru is one of the oldest gompa in Ladakh with a population of around 150 permanent monks.

Ancient legends say that during the time of Sakyamuni, the Lamayuru valley was a clear lake where holy serpents (Nag) lived. The Bodhisattva Madhyantaka foretold that the lake would be emptied and a monastery built there. In the 11th century when the scholar Naropa came here, he caused a split in the surrounding hillside and the lake drained out. The scholar found a dead Lion on the lake bed. At this place, the first temple, the Singhe Ghang (Lion Mound), was built.

A particular landscape on the highway near Lamayuru is called moonland - this is said to look similar to the landscape on the moon. This can be seen in the images behind the main building in lighter colour. This is probably the remains of the lake mentioned in the legend.

Fotu La

Fotu La, at an elevation of 4,108 m (13,478 ft), is the highest point on the Srinagar-Leh highway. It is one of two high mountain passes between Leh and Kargil, the other being Namika La.



PANGONG TSO CIRCUIT

The circuit is a 3 day excursion from and back to Leh. Pangong Tso is about a five-hour ride from Leh, most of it on "a rough and dramatic mountain road." The road crosses the villages of Shey and Gya and traverses Chang La, where army sentries and a small teahouse greet visitors. The road down from Chang La leads through Tangste and other smaller villages, crossing a river called Pagal Naala or "The Crazy Stream" before reaching the lake.

After that, we double back a bit, again crossing Chang La, to the village of Taktok (I think). (There is a 'Taktok' label on Google Maps but I suspect it's incorrectly placed on the wrong side of Chang La.) Taktok Gompa is marked shortly after we turn off at the village. From here we head north over Wari La and down into the Nubra Valley. Next day, we continue through the valley until we meet up with a road heading back to Leh that will take us over the famous (possibly undeservedly so) Khardung La.



Chang La and Khardung La



Since we cross, on this 3 day trip, two passes that vie for accolades as the highest and third highest 'motorable' passes in the world, a few comments on that aspect might encourage enthusiasm or assuage misplaced expectations; or, at least, provide a sobering perspective.

Chang La is the main gateway for the Changthang Plateau, a high altitude plateau stretching from western and northern Tibet into south eastern Ladakh, with vast highlands and giant lakes, one of which is Pangong Tso.

According to the sign at the pass, Chang La has an elevation of 5,360m or 17,586 ft (the sign has replaced the old cairn (now painted over) which claimed an elevation of 17,800 ft). 5,360m is the figure quoted by Wikipedia. Google Maps seems to have the pass running closely aligned with the 5360m contour; and Google Earth seems to take the road as far as 5367m.

Khardung La, according to the sign at the pass, is claimed to be 18,380 ft which is 5,602 m. The sign also proudly proclaims it to be the highest motorable road in the world.

It's the Khardung claim that has aroused most contention. According to Wikipedia, Khardung La is 5,359m or 17,582 ft. Wikipedia says that the 5,359 m elevation is from a modern GPS survey by a team of researchers; it accurately matches SRTM data and Russian topographic mapping; and it is broadly consistent with several other independent travellers' GPS reports. Several of these sources contain assertions by local people that the 5,602 m (18,380 ft) height claimed by the summit signs has been inflated for the purpose of record breaking. The even higher elevation of 5,682 m (18,640 ft) that has been claimed by Guinness World Records and the National Geographic Society is not supported by any evidence and may be rooted in a copying error from 5,602 m.



The 5,359 m figure seems to coincide with the contour lines in Google Maps, although Google Earth takes the road as high as 5,363 m.

At these elevations, Chang La could claim the mantle of the highest of the passes we cross. So, note that when we get to the top – twice! But read on before you get too excited.

Pangong Tso (Pangong Lake)

Pangong Tso (or Banggong Co Lake) is an endorheic lake situated at a height of about 4,350 m (14,270 ft). (Endorheic lakes are closed bodies of water that do not have any outflows to rivers, seas or oceans. Water coming into the lake by precipitation or surface flow can leave only by evaporation or seepage. The evaporative process results in a high concentration of minerals and other inflow erosion products. Over time this input of erosion products can cause the endorheic lake to become relatively saline (a "salt lake"). Since the main outflow pathways of these lakes are chiefly through evaporation and seepage, endorheic lakes are usually more sensitive to environmental pollutants than water bodies that have access to oceans.)

The lake is 134 km long and extends from India to Tibet. 60% of the length of the lake lies in China. The lake is 5 km (3.1 mi) wide at its broadest point. During winter the lake freezes completely, despite being saline water.



The lake is in the process of being identified under the Ramsar Convention as a wetland of international importance. This will be the first trans-boundary wetland in South Asia under the convention.

Pangong Tso is in disputed territory. The *Line of Actual Control* passes through the lake. A section of the lake approximately 20 km east from the *Line of Actual Control* is controlled by China but claimed by India. The eastern end of the lake is in Tibet and is not claimed by India. The western end of the lake is not in dispute. After the mid-19th century, Pangong Tso was at the southern end of the so-called Johnson Line, an early attempt at demarcation between India and China in the Aksai Chin region.

Pangong Tso is still a delicate border point along the *Line of Actual Control*.

The brackish water of the lake has very low micro-vegetation. Guides report that there are no fish or other aquatic life in the lake, except for some small crustaceans. On the other hand, visitors see numerous ducks and gulls over and on the lake surface. There are some species of scrub and perennial herbs that grow in the marshes around the lake.

The lake acts as an important breeding ground for a variety of birds including a number of migratory birds. During summer, the Bar-headed goose and Brahmini ducks are commonly seen here. The region around the lake supports a number of species of wildlife including the kiang (wild ass) and the marmot (ground squirrel).

Formerly, Pangong Tso had an outlet to the Shyok River, a tributary of the Indus River, but it was closed off due to natural damming. Two streams feed the lake from the Indian side, forming marshes and wetlands at the edges. Strand lines above current lake level reveal a 5 m thick layer of mud and laminated sand, suggesting the lake has shrunk recently in geological scale.

Wari La

This seems a bit of less-trodden territory. There's no separate entry for it in Wikipedia; and what seems to be the crucial section of road that would traverse Wari La is totally obliterated by snow in satellite mode of Google Maps and Google Earth. The terrain mode of Google Maps seems to suggest the pass is at 5,280 m but the road then climbs over a protrusion, touching the 5,320,m contour, before dropping down to below 4,000,m into the Nubra Valley.



The elevation is serious. There's only one pass on the Manali-Leh road that is higher; and Wari La is snapping at the heels of both Chang La and Khardung La. It will be the 4th highest pass we traverse.

Nubra Valley

Crossing Wari La takes us into the Nubra Valley.

The Nubra Valley is about 150 km north of Leh. Local scholars say that its original name was *Ldumra* (the valley of flowers). The Shyok (pron Shayok) River meets the Nubra or Siachan River to form a large valley that separates the Ladakh and the Karakoram Ranges. The average altitude of the valley is about 3,050 m (10,000 ft).



Like the rest of Ladakh, Nubra is a high altitude desert with rare precipitation and scant vegetation except along river beds, where irrigated, and on high slopes. The villages are irrigated and fertile, producing wheat, barley, peas, mustard for oil, and a variety of fruits and nuts, including apple, walnut, apricot and even a few almond trees. Most of the Nubra Valley is inhabited by Ladakhis who speak Ladakhi; the majority of them are Buddhist, with a minority of Shia and Sunni Muslims. In the western or lowest

altitude end of Nubra Valley, along the Shyok River, the inhabitants are Balti, speak Balti, and are Shia and Sufia Nurbakhshia Muslims.

Siachen Glacier lies to the north of the valley. The Sasser Pass and the famous Karakoram Pass lie to the northwest of the valley and connect Nubra with Xinjiang. Previously there was much trade passing through the area with East Turkestan and Central Asia.

The beautiful village of Baigdandu is also located in this area. There is a marked presence of people with startling blue eyes, auburn hair and rosy cheeks as against the typical mongol features of the Ladakhis. Local lore has it that they were a Greek tribe who came in search of Jesus Christ's tomb and eventually settled here. Baigdandu is also known for the goats that give you the famous Pashmina shawls. We won't visit it. It may be too far away, but, in any event, it's beyond areas allowed to foreigners and close to Pakistan.

Wikipedia says (somewhat dated now): “currently the only road access to the Nubra Valley is over Khardung La, whose status as the highest motorable road in the world is no longer accepted by most authorities. The Indian Government has completed another road pass over Wari La from Sakti, to the east of Khardung La, and the road connecting it to central Nubra along the Shyok River is said to be almost completed as of 2008.”

As we will discover, this road is now operable and will provide us with the new entry into the Nubra Valley, which we will later exit via Khardung La.

HIGHEST MOTORABLE PASSES

Where do we stand in terms of the hierarchy of motorable pass elevations?



To some extent, the answer depends on definitions, especially ‘motorable’. Not too far from our planned itinerary – to the north east of the northern tip of Pangong Tso – is Marsimek La (see photo at left) at a reputed height of 5,582 m or 18,314 ft.

Marsimek La may well legitimately claim to be the highest pass traversed by a motorised vehicle, but there are serious doubts whether it could be classed as ‘motorable.’ It has seen the odd intrepid motor bike and specialised 4WD vehicle; but only by inflicting cruel and unusual punishment on both vehicle and personnel.

That leaves two passes in Tibet that come into contention: Suge La, west of Lhasa, 5,430 m (17,815 ft), and Semo La in Central Tibet, 5,565 m (18,258 ft). Someone has written on some site or other that there are bus routes over these passes, so they are genuinely ‘motorable’.

Putting aside Marsimek La for now (I’m confident it won’t be long before India gets a motorable road over it, if only to regain the glory of the record), India’s passes start at 3rd in terms of the world’s highest motorable passes (after the two Tibetan ones).

On the basis of the published measurements, Chang La (at 5,360 m) would seem to have a metre on Khardung La (at 5,359 m), making the former the highest motorable pass in India and the third highest in the world. (It is often stated that Chang La is the third highest, although not necessarily for the right reasons. One site claimed it is 3rd after Khardung La and Tanglang La.)

If these computations are correct, Khardung La gets relegated to second highest in India and fourth highest in the world. All this until Marsimek La gets something more credibly classifiable as a motorable road. That shouldn’t take much!

Tanglang is not far behind – if at all. At the published elevation of 5,359 m, it’s equal – to the metre – with the latest wisdom relating to Khardung La. So Tanglang La becomes equal second highest in India and equal fourth highest in the world. However, as explained earlier, the figure of 5,359 m might be cheating a bit by using the ridge above the road rather than the height of the road, as

others seem to use. It seems the road might be no higher than about 5,340 m, putting Tanglang La as India's 3rd highest pass.

And don't overlook Wari La, which I suspect, not too many tourers get to cross. It's harder to get a fix on Wari La as there is not much information about it. As far as I can tell from the contour lines, the road reaches 5,320 m, which suggests Wari La is right on the heels of the top three canvassed above.

Does all this really matter and who cares anyway? If the difference between elevations is around a metre, we're talking about 0.02% difference – well within GPS margins of error. There is one clear point to take from it: we get to cross several of the highest motorable passes in India, including, at least, the highest, second highest, third highest, fourth highest ...possibly down to the ninth highest!

I'm confident that none of this debate will lessen in any way the sense of achievement, boasting rights or photo opportunities beside the sign on Khardung La proclaiming that we have traversed the highest motorable road in the world. Perhaps, later, when bragging to family and friends, we might *sotto voce* mention the disputed issues. Perhaps, as importantly, we know we will have crossed the highest of the motorable passes in India irrespective of controversy.

HEMIS GOMPA

Hemis Monastery holds the distinction of being the biggest as well as the wealthiest monastery of Ladakh. It dates back to the year 1630 and was founded by the first incarnation of Stagsang Raspa Nawang Gyatso.



Hemis Monastery is positioned inside a gorge, at a distance of approximately 47 km from Leh. Belonging to the Dugpa Order, it stands on the western bank of the Indus River. The monastery also boasts a very rich collection of ancient relics.

The array of items kept inside the monastery consists of a copper-gilt statue of the Lord Buddha, various gold and silver stupas, sacred thankas and several other exquisite objects.

Situated slightly higher than the Hemis Gompa is a sacred hermitage, founded by Gyalwa Kotsang. The meditation cave of Gyalwa, along with his footprints and handprints on the rock and sacred shrines, still bring back his memories to life.

The Hemis Monastery also serves as the venue of an annual festival, known as the Hemis Festival. This festival is celebrated as a commemoration of the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava. On the day of the Hemis Festival, the thangka of the monastery is displayed, with a gap of twelve years between successive displays. The Thangka is the sacred appliqué-work tapestry wrought with pearls, which depicts Guru Padmasambhava.

THE HIGH HIMALAYA PASSES WE CROSS

Pass (in the order in which we cross them)	Elevation	Comparative Elevation Ranking	Location
Rohtang La	3,978m 13,051,ft	9	Between Manali and Leh
Baralacha La	4,890 m 16,040 ft	6	
Nakee La	4,739 m 15,548 ft	7	
Lachulung La	5,059 m 16,600 ft	5	
Tanglang La	5,359 m 17,582 ft (with some doubts: more likely about 5,340 m)	2 (more likely really 3)	
Fotu La	4,108 m 13,431 ft	8	Just beyond Lamayura
Chang La	5,360 m 17,586 ft	1	Between Leh to Pangong Tso
Wari La	5,280 m 17,323 ft	4	Between Pangong Tso and Nubra Valley
Khardung La	5,359 m 17,582 ft (despite the sign at the pass saying 18,380 ft)	2	Between Nubra Valley and Leh

Notes:

- *La* is the Tibetan word for a pass (in the sense of a high mountain pass). Hence, Khardung La, for example, is Khardung Pass, although, there are several variations, such as, Khardung La Pass or Kardungla Pass, as well as simply Khardung La or Khardungla.
- The quoted elevations do not always accord with signs at the passes. The pass that has caused most contention is Khardung La. It has traditionally been claimed as the world's highest motorable pass at 18,380ft or 5,602 m. The sign at the pass confirms its elevation as 18,380 ft. However, more accurate assessments say it's 17,582 ft or 5,359 m, pushing it down the pecking order. There are photos of a marker at Chang La indicating an elevation of 17,800 ft (5,423 m) but this seems to have been subsequently painted over and a new sign erected saying 17,586 ft or 5,360 m. There are also variations of elevations of passes amongst sources on the Internet!
- It does seem an odd coincidence that Tanglang La and Khardung La have exactly the same elevations. And, Chang La is only a metre higher than the equal second highest! I can't vouch for the accuracy of the quoted elevations. On my reckoning, Tanglang La is more likely no higher than 5,340 m, putting it lower than Khardung La.
- As points of reference, the highest pass we crossed on the tour of Nepal and Bhutan was Thrumsing La in Bhutan at 3,800 m. Mt Kosciuszko is 2,228 m. Passo dello Stelvio, which was a stage in the 2012 Giro d'Italia is 2,757 m.....And the lowest of the nine passes we cross is 3,978 m!

