

LADAKH – LAMAYURU TO ALCHI TREK

- Grade:** Demanding 
- Land-only duration:** 16 days Delhi - Delhi
- Trekking days:** 8
- Maximum altitude:** 5180m
- Minimum numbers:** Requires just 4 participants to guarantee these departures at the advertised price.
- Dates and prices:** Our latest dates and prices list is available at www.catreks.com or from the CAT office.



Leh (Doug Scott)

This trek traverses the heart of Ladakh, focusing on the rugged and remote valleys and ranges south of the Indus Valley. This is a region of intense contrasts, of colourful mountains scored by deep gorges, where villages sit among islands of green that are the neatly cultivated plots of subsistence agriculture in a harsh and unforgiving land. The village gompas, steeped in Buddhist tradition, house priceless antiquities and are an important spiritual focus for the local people. Our trek through this intriguing region also takes us over three high passes, from where in clear weather, the views stretch forever.

Prior to the trek, we spend several days in and around the ancient capital, Leh, in order to acclimatise and to visit some of the many beautiful monasteries, including Shey, Thiksey and Hemis.

Fitness & Experience: though daily walking times are moderate and average 5-6 hours, the altitude and three high passes make this trek strenuous. Some trekking experience is helpful.

• Land-only prices:

The cost of flights, in particular those to India, are less predictable than they used to be. Airlines now request full payment upfront. As a result, we will quote you a land-only cost, and quote separately for the cheapest flights we can find at the time of your booking. We will, however, require full payment for the flights prior to booking them. If you prefer to search for alternative flights yourself, we can sell you the trek at the land-only price.

• Important note – minimum numbers:

Before booking flights, please note that this trip requires a minimum of 4 trekkers before we can guarantee the departure at the advertised price. Please note that should you decide to book your own flights, it is essential that you check with the Community Action Treks office to ensure that the departure is guaranteed before committing financially to any flights or travel arrangements.

OUTLINE ITINERARY

Walking and journey times are approximate

Day 1 Arrive Delhi

We are met at Delhi airport and transfer to the hotel. After checking in and a short rest, we have a sightseeing tour of Old Delhi, which includes a visit to the Red Fort, built in 1648 during the reign of Shah Jehan in red sandstone, which gave the fort its name. Sightseeing in New Delhi includes a visit to India Gate, built in memory of Indian soldiers killed during the First World War. Rashtrapati Bhawan, built in the early 20th century as the Imperial residence of the Viceroy is today the official residence of the President of India and Parliament House, a unique circular building with huge colonnades, houses the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. Humayun's Tomb is the first Mughal garden tomb. Visitors are immediately struck by the tomb's resemblance to its more famous cousin - the Taj Mahal - with its four grand gateways, octagonal base-plan, soaring niche-shaped

arches, lofty double domes and the symmetrical garden with its central canal.

Day 2 Fly Delhi to Leh 3500m

In the afternoon we visit Leh, a fascinating labyrinth of winding streets and quaint bazaars. The main street is open and airy, with rows of shops on either side. In the market, a long line of Ladakhi women in traditional dress and colourful jewellery of coral and turquoise, are seated behind enormous baskets, selling vegetables. The spectacular eight-storey Leh Palace looming above and overlooking the town, was built in the 16th century, about the same time as the Potala in Lhasa, which it resembles. The stroll through the town is followed by a visit to Sankar gompa, about 2 km from the market. It has a number of pure gold icons and richly painted walls, its pictures depicting different stories, including some from the *Panchtantra*.. Our stay in Leh is essential

for acclimatisation, and taking it easy while we are here is strongly recommended.

Day 3 Shey, Thiksey and Hemis

After breakfast we set out to explore some of Ladakh's ancient gompas in the surrounds of Leh. A picnic lunch is provided. Shey Palace was built in 1645 by Deldan Namgyal as a summer residence for the Kings of Ladakh. It is the oldest palace in Ladakh and above the palace is an even older ruined fortress. In 1655, in memory of his father, the King built the two-storey Shey gumpa adjacent to the palace. Hundreds of *chortens* of all shapes and sizes stand below the palace and gumpa. These chortens demonstrate the interest taken in Shey by the Ladakhi Kings and Queens who succeeded Shey's original builder. Located on the second storey of the gumpa is a large Buddha statue made in 1655 by a Nepalese sculptor who was assisted by three Ladakhi craftsmen. The seated Buddha is 12 meters high and worked of copper sheets gilded with gold. This Buddha is the biggest metal statue in the region and was the largest Buddha statue of any type in Ladakh until Thiksey gumpa installed a 15-meter tall Buddha made of clay in 1970. The castings of the statue were made in Leh while the statue's copper was collected in Zanskar and hammered into plates on big rocks. More than five kilos of gold were then used to plate the copper. The statue was built in parts in the *Zanstil* Palace (*Zans* means copper and *til* means to hammer) in Leh and then transported to Shey where it was assembled and installed. Sacrificial offerings such as grain or jewels, holy signs and mantras are contained inside the figure. In front of the Buddha is a large bowl of wax with a central flame that burns for one year before being replaced. This flame represents divinity and purity and is present in front of all Buddha statues.

Thiksey Gumpa is the most picturesquely situated monastery in Ladakh, perched high on a hill above the Indus. Its buildings are arranged at various levels, leading up to the private apartments of the incarnate lamas on the summit. From here one commands a magnificent view of the valley.

The gumpa possesses a rich and beautiful collection of hundreds of hand-written or painted prayer books. A new temple contains a 15-metre tall Buddha statue, constructed in 1970 to commemorate a visit to Thiksey by the Dalai Lama.

The statue, made of clay and covered with gold paint, is the largest Buddha figure in Ladakh and took four years to construct. Inside, the statue is filled with the *Kandshur* and the *Tandshur* - volumes of Buddhist canonical texts. The statue was made entirely by local craftsmen and represents *Maitreya*, ("compassion" in Sanskrit) the Buddha of the Future. The prophecy made of the Future Buddha is that the world will be undergoing

such chaos that He will teach compassion to the people.

Hemis Gumpa is one of the most important in Ladakh, the largest and also the wealthiest. It was built in 1620 by the king-architect Singe Namgyal, a great patron of Buddhism. He filled Hemis with golden statues, stupas set with precious stones and *thangkhas* brought from many places, including Tibet. The lamas of Hemis were associated with the Ladakhi royal family and became quite prosperous, owning much land and supervising many smaller, scattered monasteries. Although only about a dozen lamas actually live there, Hemis has several hundred lamas attached to its subsidiary monasteries. The *Rimpoche* or spiritual head of Hemis is a reincarnation of the monastery's founder Stagtshang Raspa. The last *Rimpoche* was a reincarnation who, as a five-year old child, was being taught in Tibet when the Chinese invaded. There has been no communication with the *Rimpoche* since the 1960s. During the 1975 festival, Drugpa *Rimpoche*, a 12-year old youth, became the new *Rimpoche* as a new incarnation. Hemis is the location for numerous religious festivals throughout the year, although the most important one is in July, when a huge *thangkha*, one of the largest in the world, is hung in the courtyard. It takes about 50 monks to carry the *thangkha* to its place and unfold it. The *thangkha* is made of fine heavy silk and embroidered with pictures of various gods as well as of the founder of Hemis. The dances in front of this *thangkha* represent the forces of good, symbolised by legendary heroes and saints, overcoming demons. Eventually, the violence of the demons is overcome by the superiority of virtue resting on wisdom and the demons are driven from the courtyard. Spectators watch these dances from the upper storey verandahs around the courtyard. Hemis also has a *thangkha*, reputed to be the largest in the world, that is displayed once every eleven years. The hands of the artist who painted this *thangkha* are preserved at Hemis as holy relics, though they are not shown to the public. Overnight hotel.

Day 4 Free in Leh

A free day to wander at leisure and soak up the sights and sounds of this intriguing city. All the time we are here it will help us to acclimatise.

Day 5 Drive from Leh to Lamayuru 3364 m

Travelling on the Leh to Srinagar Highway and visiting Chulichan gumpa, the oldest gumpa of Chomos (Women Monks), a 5 to 6 hours drive. Lamayuru is a splash of green against the stark desert, with its charming village and a centuries old gumpa. The afternoon is spent exploring the village and gumpa. Lamayuru Gumpa lies 15km east of the Fatu La, and its medieval village appears to grow out of the rocky hillside below it. In the past, Lamayuru has housed up to 400 lamas, but at present there are only 30-50 resident here. Other

lamas stay and teach at Lamayuru's smaller gompas located in outlying villages. Twice a year, all the lamas gather at the gompa for general prayers, accompanied by 3 days of masked dancing. These gatherings occur in the 2nd and 5th months of the Tibetan calendar (usually March and July). Lamayuru belongs to the red-hat sect of Buddhism. Ancient legends say that at the time of *Sakyamuni* (the Historical Buddha), Lamayuru's valley was a clear lake where *nagas* (holy serpents) lived. The Bodhisattva *Madhyantaka* foretold that the lake would be emptied and a monastery built there.

The legends continue by saying that Naropa, an 11th century Indian Buddhist scholar, came to Lamayuru and spent many years meditating in a cave, which can still be seen in the main *Dukhang* or assembly hall. Naropa then caused a split in the surrounding hillside and the lake emptied through this opening. After the lake emptied, Naropa found a dead lion previously covered by the waters of the lake. On this spot, Naropa built the first temple at Lamayuru, the *Singhe Ghang* (Lion Mound).

Other historical accounts relate that in the 10th century the King of Ladakh ordered the building of Lamayuru gompa and placed it under the supervision of Rinchen Zangbo.

The original gompa was composed of five buildings although only the central one still stands. In the 16th century, Ladakh's King Jamyang Namgyal was cured of leprosy by a lama from Tibet. In gratitude, the King gave Lamayuru gompa to this lama and also bestowed other privileges - no taxes were collected and the area surround the gompa was declared a sanctuary where none could be arrested. For this reason, Ladakhis still refer to Lamayuru as *Tharpa Ling*, the "Place of Freedom". Camp is set on a forested river bank below the village.

**Day 6 Lamayuru to Wanla 3090m
3 / 4 hours walking**

The trek starts after breakfast, passing through deeply eroded gorges. The path gradually ascends southwards, to the Prinkiti la 3726m, a pass reached in about an hour. We then descend along a dry, narrow gorge to the valley of Shillakong, through apricot orchards and beautiful willow groves, via the village of Shilla, ending the day at Wanla village, dominated by its red-hued gompa.

**Day 7 Wanla to Hinju 3787m
5 / 6 hours walking**

The trail follows the Yapola before turning off into the Ripchar Valley which is dotted with tiny green villages at short intervals. We then arrive at Hinju, a large village with a typical cluster of mud houses built onto the hillside and bright green fields stretching out into its barren surrounds. Our camp is set up by the stream, just below the village.

**Day 8 Hinju to Marjek 3400m
6 hours walking**

After following the Ripchar Nallah for about an hour and a half, the trail ascends steeply up to the Konke La 4996m where the fierce winds on top of the pass are more than compensated by the spectacular views all round. We descend into the pastures where the local people bring their horses, cows, dzos and yaks to graze. This is blue sheep and ibex country and if lucky, we might even spot the occasional red Himalayan fox. Tonight we camp in a meadow by the stream.

**Day 9 Marjek to Largos 4130m
6 hours walking**

Continuing along the Sumdah Tokpo, the trail reaches Sumdah Chenmo, a beautiful village with some very interesting 11th century wood carvings, embedded in the ground and exposed to the elements. According to local belief, great disaster will strike the community if the carvings are moved in any way. The monolithic structures are carved in a rustic folk style. Back on the trail, we wade across the stream, and climb to Lanka, a grassland dotted with shepherds' shelters built of piled up stones.

**Day 10 Largos to Sumdah Choon 3835m
6 hours walking**

After descending to the Sumdah Tokpo, the route turns east along the stream to Hasgo, along a very fertile valley. We then head north to Sumdah Choon, where camp is set for the night.

Day 11 Acclimatisation Day at Sumdah Choon

Today an acclimatisation day which allows time to explore the very old and interesting monastery, which houses some unusual bronze figures, crafted in a style different from that prevalent in most Ladakhi and Tibetan monasteries. The figures have predominantly Indian features, rather than the Mongoloid ones seen elsewhere in Ladakh. The monastery is small and has maintained the old monastic traditions undisturbed. Acclimatisation days are a very important aspect of our trek and will undoubtedly assist with the success, as well as with our enjoyment of it.

**Day 12 Sumdah Choon to Pulu 4320m
6 hours walking**

The trail ascends steeply to the Stakspi La 5180m where again there are wonderful views of the valleys on either side. After a steep descent we arrive at our campsite at Pulu.

**Day 13 Pulu to Alchi & end of trek
2 hours walking**

A short descent to the end of the trail brings us to Alchi Gompa, located near the small village of Saspol. It is one of the earliest monasteries built in Ladakh, dating from the 11th century. Because it was constructed before the invading wars began in the 15th century, Alchi was built on lowlands, rather than on a hilltop

as others were, in order to protect them from marauding armies.

Walking towards the gompa from the small group of houses nearby, the first temple of importance is the *Sum-stek* temple, the oldest of the Alchi gompa. The temple is surrounded by wooden pillars and carved woodwork of mythological animals. The woodwork is original and reflects Kashmiri influence. The *Dukhang* is the place where the lamas gather for religious ceremonies. The walls along both sides of the *Dukhang* are covered by mural paintings which are probably original to the time of the monastery's founding. Of particular interest are the miniature scenes of royal life. The best preserved is the royal drinking scene which is one of the most remarkable to have survived anywhere in the Tibetan-speaking world. The costumes in this scene clearly depict central Asian dress and the King and Queen each have a halo, a convention that appears elsewhere in Alchi and possibly shows Nestorian Christian influence from Persia. This is the only painting in Ladakh that shows central Asian influence so clearly.

We then drive from Alchi to Likir, Basgo and on to Leh, around two and a half hours. Likir Gompa was established around the 15th century and early in its history became responsible for overseeing Alchi gompa, to which it has posted lamas up to the present day. Likir belongs to the yellow-hat sect of Buddhism and currently houses about 120 lamas. It is set on an isolated ridge a few kilometres north of Saspol.

The road approaching the gompa makes a wide semi-circle around its base, affording beautiful views of the gompa from different

vantage points. The gompa school has about 30 pupils who learn three languages besides Ladakhi: Hindi and English, as these are the national languages of India, and Tibetan for religious purposes. The pupils, some of whom will be selected as lamas, live part of the time in the monastery and part of the time with their parents. Likir's head lama, a younger brother of the Dalai Lama, has married (against the rule of the sect) and is permanently absent from the gompa.

Basgo Gompa, now a World Heritage Site, is situated about 40km west of Leh. The complex of buildings includes a ruined fortress dating from before the 15th century, two large temples and a small shrine. The best preserved temple, situated at the highest point, is the Chamba Lha-khang or Maitreya temple (Chamba is the Ladakhi word for Maitreya, the Future Buddha). This temple was built in the mid-16th century by Tshe-wang Namgyal, a member of the Namgyal dynasty which ruled Ladakh. Presently, one lama from Hemis gompa is the caretaker at the temple. With the exception of Alchi, this temple has the oldest original wall murals, dating from the 16th century, of any Ladakh gompas. We stay overnight in Alchi.

Day 14 Drive to Leh
Overnight in hotel

Day 15 Fly Leh to Delhi
Transfer to the airport for the flight to Delhi.
Transfer and overnight at the hotel.

Day 16 Depart Delhi
Transfer to the airport.

Important Note: Whilst we expect that the trek will run as per the itinerary, participants should accept that there is a possibility of changes being necessary subject to local conditions.

The Price Includes:

- Domestic flights Delhi-Leh-Delhi. These can vary in India so according to availability at the time of booking. You will be quoted for these when you book, but they will be part of the total price you pay to us.
- 2 nights hotel accommodation in Delhi on a bed & breakfast basis
- 4 nights accommodation in Leh on a full board basis
- Inclusive trek arrangements on full board basis, with camping equipment provided
- English speaking Indian Trek Guide and trekking crew
- Local transportation and guided sightseeing in Ladakh as described
- Entrance fees and local taxes

Not Included:

- International flights
- Airport taxes (please refer to our document "Preparing for your trek, India" for the latest prices, payable in rupees at Delhi Airport)
- Visa (please refer to our document "Preparing for your trek, India" for the latest prices)
- Meals other than breakfast whilst in Delhi
- Sleeping bags
- Travel Insurance
- Tips
- Items of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry, telephone calls and souvenirs

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