

A Guide to Himachal

This 13-day circuit is the crown jewel of Himalayan road trips — a journey that begins in the pine forests of Himachal, climbs through Ladakh's high-altitude desert, and descends into the green meadows of Kashmir. From the switchbacks of Gata Loops to the silence of Pangong, the monasteries of Leh to the Mughal gardens of Srinagar, this route is a masterclass in contrast and scale.

Trip Overview

Duration: 13 Days

Best Season: Mid-June to late-September (*all passes open; Pangong & Zoji La accessible*)

Total Distance: ~1,600–1,800 km

Vehicle Type: SUV / High Clearance; experienced rider for bikes (500+ cc)

Difficulty: Challenging (*altitude, long drives, rough patches, permits*)

Permits: ILP required for Nubra, Pangong, and border routes (*apply in Leh*)

Mobile Network: Jio/BSNL in Leh, Diskit, Kargil, Srinagar; no signal in Pangong/Sarchu stretches

Fuel Planning: Pumps in Manali, Tandi, Karu (Leh), Diskit, Kargil, Srinagar; carry 20–30 L spare for Nubra–Pangong leg

Day-by-Day Itinerary

Day 1: Manali → Atal Tunnel → Jispa

- **Distance/Time:** ~135 km | 5–6 hrs
 - **Highlights:** Atal Tunnel, Sissu waterfall, Keylong market
 - **Adventure:** Evening walk to Sissu lake
 - **Stay:** Jispa (3,200 m)
 - **Tip:** Fuel up at Tandi before heading deeper into Lahaul
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Day 2: Jispa → Baralacha La → Sarchu

- **Distance/Time:** ~90 km | 4–5 hrs
- **Pass:** Baralacha La (4,890 m)
- **Highlights:** Deepak Tal, Zingzing Bar, high-altitude plains
- **Adventure:** Short walk near Deepak Tal (*if acclimatized*)

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- **Stay:** Sarchu camps (4,290 m — *high altitude*)
 - **Caution:** Cold and windy; keep warm layers accessible
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Day 3: Sarchu → Gata Loops → Nakee La → Lachulung La → Pang → Leh

- **Distance/Time:** ~250 km | 8–10 hrs
 - **Passes:** Nakee La, Lachulung La, Tanglang La
 - **Highlights:** Gata Loops (21 switchbacks), More Plains, Tanglang La (5,328 m)
 - **Adventure:** Controlled-speed photography on More Plains
 - **Stay:** Leh (3,500 m)
 - **Tip:** Rest and hydrate — this is your acclimatization base
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Day 4: Leh rest + culture loop

- **Highlights:** Thiksey sunrise, Hemis monastery, Shey palace, Leh market
 - **Adventure:** Sunset cycle to Shanti Stupa
 - **Stay:** Leh
 - **Permits:** Apply for Nubra, Pangong, border routes
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Day 5: Leh → Khardung La → Diskit → Hunder (Nubra Valley)

- **Distance/Time:** ~120 km | 5–6 hrs
 - **Pass:** Khardung La (5,359 m)
 - **Highlights:** Diskit monastery, Hunder dunes
 - **Adventure:** ATV rides, Bactrian camel safari
 - **Stay:** Hunder/Diskit
 - **Tip:** Keep Khardung La stop brief; hydrate well
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Day 6: Nubra → Shyok River road → Pangong (Spangmik)

- **Distance/Time:** ~170–200 km | 6–8 hrs
- **Highlights:** Shyok river gorge, Pangong's shifting blues

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- **Adventure:** Lakeside walks, astrophotography
 - **Stay:** Spangmik/Man/Merak
 - **Caution:** Winds pick up in afternoon; secure tents
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Day 7: Pangong → Chang La → Leh

- **Distance/Time:** ~160 km | 6–7 hrs
 - **Pass:** Chang La (5,360 m)
 - **Highlights:** Chang La snow walls, Tangtse village, Karu fuel stop
 - **Adventure:** Stop at Chang La café for tea at altitude
 - **Stay:** Leh
 - **Tip:** Use this day to refuel, rest, and prep for Kargil leg
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Day 8: Leh → Lamayuru → Mulbekh → Kargil

- **Distance/Time:** ~220 km | 6–7 hrs
 - **Highlights:** Magnetic Hill, Alchi monastery, Lamayuru “Moonland”, Mulbekh Buddha
 - **Adventure:** Cliffside monastery walk at Lamayuru
 - **Stay:** Kargil (2,676 m)
 - **Tip:** Carry snacks; long stretches without eateries
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Day 9: Kargil → Drass → Zoji La → Sonamarg

- **Distance/Time:** ~120 km | 4–5 hrs
 - **Pass:** Zoji La (3,528 m)
 - **Highlights:** Drass War Memorial, Zoji La cliff roads, Sonamarg meadows
 - **Adventure:** Short walk to Thajiwas Glacier (*seasonal*)
 - **Stay:** Sonamarg
 - **Tip:** Zoji La can be foggy — cross before noon
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Day 10: Sonamarg → Srinagar

- **Distance/Time:** ~80 km | 2–3 hrs
 - **Highlights:** Sindh river valley, Mughal gardens, Dal Lake
 - **Adventure:** Shikara ride, Nishat Bagh walk
 - **Stay:** Srinagar
 - **Tip:** Try Kashmiri wazwan at a local restaurant
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Day 11–13: Srinagar exploration + optional buffer

- **Options:**
 - Day trip to Gulmarg (*cable car, meadows*)
 - Visit to Pahalgam (*river walks, Aru Valley*)
 - Shopping in Lal Chowk (*pashmina, saffron*)
 - **Stay:** Srinagar
 - **Tip:** Use buffer days for weather delays or rest
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Essentials to Carry

- **Documents:** DL, RC, insurance, ILP copies (5–6), ID proofs
 - **Clothing:** Layered warm gear, gloves, beanie, rain jacket
 - **Footwear:** Waterproof trekking shoes, sandals
 - **Health:** Diamox (if advised), ORS, portable oxygen, oximeter
 - **Gear:** Tyre inflator, puncture kit, tow strap, jerrycans (20–30 L), headlamps, power banks
 - **Navigation:** Offline maps, paper backup of routes
 - **Misc:** Sunglasses, SPF 50+, lip balm, snacks, thermos
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Permits, Fuel & Checkpoints

- **Permits (ILP):**
 - Nubra (Khardung, Shyok), Pangong (via Durbuk), border routes

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- Apply in Leh; carry 5–6 copies
 - **Fuel:**
 - Reliable pumps: Manali, Tandi, Karu (Leh), Diskit, Kargil, Srinagar
 - Dry stretch: Nubra → Pangong → Leh — carry 20–30 L spare
 - **Checkpoints:**
 - South/North Pullu, Khalsar, Tangtse, Zoji La gate
 - **Timing Tips:**
 - Cross Zoji La before noon
 - Start early on high-pass days
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Insider Tips

- **Acclimatization:** Spend 2 nights in Leh before Nubra/Pangong
 - **Photography:** Best light at Pangong is sunrise and sunset
 - **Local eats:** Try thukpa in Leh, apricot juice in Kargil, wazwan in Srinagar
 - **Road caution:** Gata Loops and Zoji La require full concentration
 - **Eco-ethic:** No littering, no off-roading near lakes or wetlands
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Route Map Overview (Text)

Manali → Atal Tunnel → Jispa → Sarchu → Leh → Khardung La → Diskit/Hunder → Pangong → Chang La → Leh → Lamayuru → Kargil → Drass → Zoji La → Sonamarg → Srinagar
