

Manali-Leh



This is the most famous way to reach Leh and has gained a famed status over the years. The road has been improved over the years and is now almost all paved and easy, except for the first pass, Baralacha La, which BRO (Border Roads Organization) struggles to keep in shape.

Although it is not difficult, it is a spectacular road because it crosses some of the highest passes in Ladakh. For this reason too, it remains blocked by snow throughout the winter, usually between November and May, depending on the year.



No permit



2 days



427 km

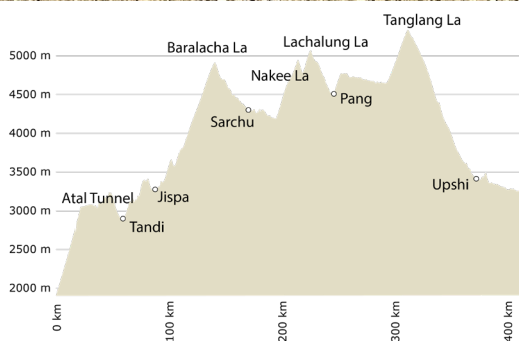


326 km



Easy

Good paved road except for some rough patches on the top of passes.



Duration

You can drive or ride from Manali to Leh in one very long day but it would be pretty tiresome. Indeed, the Keylong-Leh bus takes about 14 hours to ply the route, so on a good car or motorcycle it's very doable. We would recommend instead to do it in 2 days, for example by overnighing in Sarchu, about mid-way. The drawback

though is that Sarchu sits above 4000 m, so people who are not acclimatized usually don't sleep well.

The most popular option nowadays is to start from Jispa in Lahaul, which saves 2 hours of driving from Manali (in the traffic jams) and allows to pass Tanglang La before the night and sleep at a lower altitude.

Coming from Leh, the altitude is usually not a problem. To avoid doing this road a second time, you can instead take itin. **12** and sleep near Tso Khar, which makes it possible to reach Manali on the next day (302 km). The drawback is that you'd need a higher fuel range for this (480 km).

Permits

You don't need any permit to travel on this itinerary, but you'd need one if you were to deviate from the main road, for exam-

ple to visit Tso Khar or Tso Moriri on the way to Leh. Indian nationals could do it, because they can get a permit online, but foreigners can only get their permit in Leh, so that would only be an option when coming back from Leh toward Manali.

Tourists who want to get from Manali to Rohtang pass for the day and return to Manali will need to get a permit, as the number of vehicles allowed per day are limited. But if you're driving through and continue on to Leh, you're allowed to do so without permit. From Lahaul to Manali, there is no restriction to driving to the pass and down to Manali.



① Manali

32° 14.808' N 77° 11.444' E

Over the last few years, Manali has grown so much that it now suffers from the same traffic jams as all the large cities of India. So you better leave very early to beat the crowd. Many people actually start this leg in Lahaul valley (④), which also helps with acclimatization because of its higher altitude.



② Turn-off to Rohtang Pass

N32° 18.626' N 77° 10.369' E 10 km

Since the opening of the Atal tunnel to general use in 2021, only the fuel trucks are still forced to drive over Rohtang Pass. Indeed, you're not allowed to carry fuel in canisters while driving through. The tunnel will save you 43 km and more than one hour of travel. But if you have time, the detour to Rohtang is a great way to enjoy the nature, particularly now that it's free from the huge traffic jams of the past. Note that the Rohtang road is closed every Tuesday for roadwork.

If you take the Rohtang route, you will come across a check post near the intersection with the Kunzum La–Spiti road (see itin. 3).



③ Tandi

32° 33.044' N 76° 59.143' E 63 km

You can turn here for Udhampur and Kullar (itin. 4). The Tandi filling station fa-

mously states: "next filling station 365 km ahead" but it is not exactly true anymore, as there is another one a few km further on in Keylong (32° 34.430' N 77° 01.097' E), and that will be your last chance to fuel up for the next 326 km, until Karhu ⑩.

This kind of range is no problem at all for cars, but also quite achievable with most bikes (RE Himalayan, KTM 390 adv), so you usually won't need extra cannisters, but please check carefully with your specific vehicle and itinerary, taking in account your actual mileage and the occasional detours.

④ Jispa

32° 37.996' N 77° 10.624' E 90 km

You'll find a few guest houses in the Lahaul valley, especially in Keylong, but it seems nowadays most people stop in Jispa, where one can find many tent camps that cater mostly to the bike package tours who seek to lodge all the participants in one place. On the down side, those tents are much more expensive than a simple hotel room in Keylong or Darcha.

Just after the new bridge over the river you'll be blocked by a checkpoint where you'll have to give your details. There are a few dhabas here as well for a break. Darcha village is a few hundreds meters ahead, off the main road, where you'll find some accommodation.

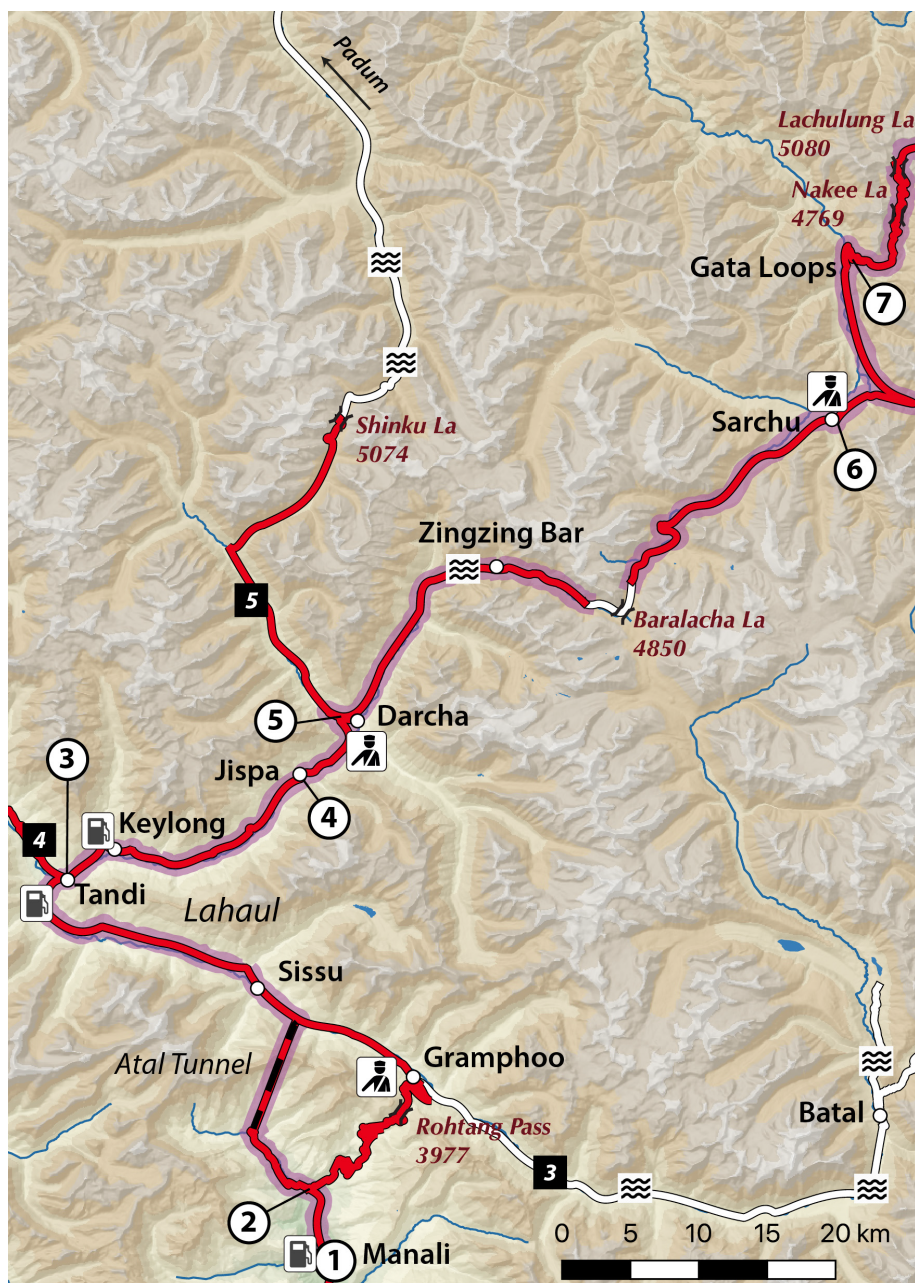


⑤ Darcha

32° 40.839' N 77° 11.300' E 99 km

Just 1 km after the police checkpoint and after the turn-off for Darcha village, you'll see a huge sign showing the way to the new road over Shinku La, spelled here "Shinkhun La".

Switch to itin. 5 if you like off-roading. Otherwise, if you prefer paved roads, continue on the NH5 highway toward Zingzing Bar (32° 47.525' N 77° 19.124' E), a dhaba tent camp which sits at the base of Baralacha La. The road here is in poor shape and there is even a water crossing just before Zingzing Bar. It is usually easy to cross,



Map 1a : Manali-Sarchu

although it may turn out to be much more difficult after the rains.

The road then deteriorates quickly, despite the heavy construction work, until the top of the pass. The surface improves somewhat in the descent.

Note that if you come here at the very beginning of the season, at the end of April and in May, there may be a lot of snow remaining, unlike the following passes which, although higher in altitude, see much less snow as Ladakh is much drier overall than Himachal Pradesh.



⑥ Sarchu checkpoint

32° 54.495' N 77° 34.766' E

176 km

Arriving in the wide valley of Sarchu, you'll start to see the large tent camps offering beds for the night to the travellers.

There is a Himachal Pradesh police checkpoint where you have to give your details. And a few meters beyond you'll need to redo the same at the first checkpoint of the Ladakh police.

Many people break up the journey from Manali or Leh here. If you started the day from Jispa, then this would be a half-day trip, but if you're tired or if the road conditions make the 86 km a whole-day ordeal, then this is an OK place to spend the night. Beware the altitude though, it sits at 4300m, so if you're not acclimatized you will feel short of breath and probably get headaches.

The road continues along the valley on an excellent tarmac until the base of the next pass.

⑦ Gata Loops

33° 02.299' N 77° 35.419' E

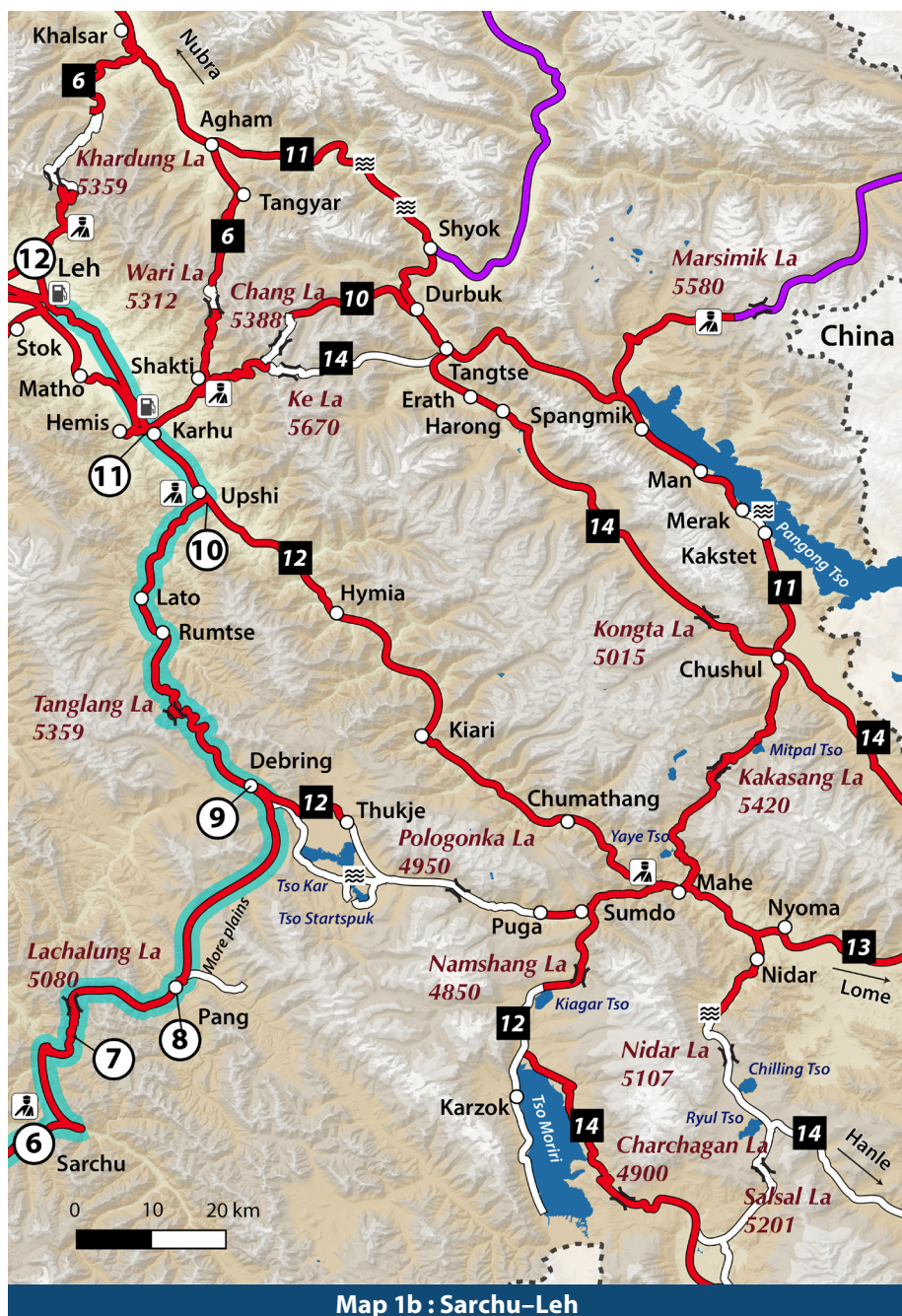
200 km

The climb to Nakee La starts with a series of 21 switchbacks known as the "Gata Loops". They're not difficult but they can be boring if you happen to follow a convoy of trucks. The view gets more and more impressive as you raise above the valley floor.

For the hard-core off-road fans there are short cuts that shoot straight up between switchbacks, but they require a powerful vehicle and, if on motorbike, a very skilled rider.

You then reach Nakee La (4769m), and after a short dip on a much degraded road, Lachulung La (5080m), your first 5000m, before getting to Pang down a beautiful valley.

Above: Gata Loops.



⑧ Pang

33° 07.748' N 77° 46.939' E

252 km

This small locality feels more like a truck stop than a genuine village, but it allows to recharge your batteries (figuratively;

don't do this trip on an electric vehicle and try to recharge here !).

Pang sits at the base of a spectacular canyon, which is best viewed from above. After a series of switchbacks, you reach a very flat plateau that is known as the More

plains (also spelled Morey). It's easy to get off the road and find good camping spots on this very flat and desert-like area. You can also just follow the off-road track that follows the rim of the canyon and enjoy the view from there.

↗ **⑨ Debring, intersection to Tso Khar**
33° 22.764' N 77° 54.610' E 292 km

After about 30 km of driving on a good, straight road across the More plains, you have the option of turning off toward Tso Kar, just before Debring. That's a beautiful area, where it is easy to camp, trek, spot wildlife or sleep in a home stay and meet locals. Note that you need a permit to get to Tso Kar and beyond. There are a few options for sleeping in Thukje, which is only 16 km away on a good paved road. Coming from Leh, it is popular to take a detour to Tso Kar, to avoid doing the same road twice (see itin. 12).

It's also easy to find a nice camping spot in this vast flat area. The road continues up to Tanglang La (5359 m), the highest

point in this itinerary as well as one of the highest passes in Ladakh.

As you descend on the other side, you will cross several villages where you can find accommodation for the night (Rumtse, Lato), if you're too late to reach Leh safely.

↗ **⑩ Upshi checkpoint**
33° 49.812' N 77° 48.835' E 380 km

You'll be stopped at a checkpoint at the entrance of the town where you'll have to register. You'll also have to pay a small entry fee to the Leh region.

If you have the required permit, you can turn south-east toward Mahe Bridge, Tso Moriri (12) or Hanle (13).

↗ **⑪ Karhu**
33° 55.483' N 77° 44.109' E 393 km

Less than 15km later, you reach the large army cantonment and village of Karhu. That's also the start of the roads to Chang La (10) and Wari La (6), giving access to Pangong Tso, but you'll need to a permit to get there.



Above: Tanglang La road.
To the right: Thiksey Monastery



If you need to fuel up, there's a filling station 2 km after the intersection.

The road along the Indus is very busy, as the valley is much more populated than the deserted area of high plateaux and passes that you've seen since Sarchu. Right next to the road you can't miss Thiksey monastery (34° 03.194' N 77° 39.917' E), one of the largest in Ladakh.



34° 05.299' N 77° 36.802' E

427 km

Leh nowadays is a very busy and crowded city, at least during the high season between June and September. It's worth visiting for its palace and stupas, but it's also an obligatory stop for foreigners to get the necessary permits for reaching the Nubra, Pangong or Changtang areas.

You'll find a wide range of accommodation, from luxury hotels to cheap guest houses and dozens of eateries for all tastes.