



THE
BIG
TRIP

HIMALAYAN HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

Matt Westby rides the iconic... the incredible... the almost impossibly high and challenging Manali to Leh road in the Indian Himalayas and asks: Could this be the world's best bike ride?



Stopping about 500m from the summit, I prop my bike up by its pedal on the edge of the pristine asphalt.

Hot tea and an end to the struggle wait just around the next corner, no more than five minutes of hard pedalling away, but this view, this moment are both too good to rush away from.

Peaks draped in snow line the horizon ahead of me and behind, the vast valley up which I've just cycled sprawls out below to the left, and the smooth-as-Silverstone road surface glistens in the warm sun. Cycling rarely gets as good as this.

For several precious minutes I savour the setting, before hesitantly remounting my bike and continuing on, fatigue returning to my legs almost instantly.

I'm no stranger to cycling up big hills, but this is no ordinary climb. This is Taglang La, the formidable final pass on a simply majestic 490 km mountain highway from Manali to Leh in the Indian Himalayas.

The ascent is 14 km long, which is far from abnormal, but what makes it stand out is a picture-perfect backdrop and the fact that the summit eventually arrives at a

lung-emptying 5,328m, a good half-kilometre higher than the top of Mont Blanc. This is Italy's Stelvio Pass on steroids.

The first 8 km wind up the side of the valley on a gravel road, but then the final 6 km stretch has been newly laid and is so unblemished that the tread of my tyres hums as they roll over the surface.

After reaching the top and waiting for the rest of my group, Taglang La somehow gets even better on the descent down the opposite side. Not only does the scenery improve further still as the heart of the Stok range comes into view, but the road itself is the stuff of dreams: 10 hairpins and a multitude of other sweeping corners spread over 31 blissful kilometres.

By the time the road finally reaches the valley bottom, the temperature is a good 20 degrees warmer and my eyes are watering with exhilaration, I'm in little doubt that this has been the best climb I've ever cycled and the Manali-Leh Highway the best route.

Road of dreams

Amazingly, few cycling aficionados in Europe have never even heard of it, let alone put it on their roads-to-ride bucket list, so only a few hundred people tackle it each year.

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'As the heart of the Stok range comes into view, the road itself is the stuff of dreams'

Road to heaven
The scenery in this picture might almost be Alpine but this road tops out at 5,328m - some 500m higher than Mont Blanc!

The road was built – or rather cut out of the mountainsides – by the Indian Army's Border Roads Organisation (BRO) in 1987 as a means of connecting the provinces of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, predominantly for freight transport.

However, such is the grandeur of the mountains, two-wheeled tourism also caught on as motorbikers and more recently cyclists were lured by a spectacular route dubbed the 'Highest Motorable Road in the World'.

It crests five passes – two of which stand over 5,000m, has an average elevation of over 4,000m and is only open from June to September due to the winter snow.

New asphalt has been and is being laid on many stretches, but well over a third of the route is on broken road, varying in quality from forgiving to worthy of a downhill race. While most people ride hardtail mountain bikes as a result, cyclo-cross bikes also hold their own on the descents and offer far faster and more comfortable climbing, of which there is a biblical 8.5 vertical kilometres.

Couple that with the extreme altitude and progress is consequently slow, so it ends up

IN NUMBERS

2

of the 5 passes on the route are over 5,000m

8.5

vertical kilometres of climbing in 490 km

4

months of the year that the road is open

4000

metres of average elevation on the route

taking nine days to ride from Manali to Leh at an average of 55 km in a six hour day.

Following a two-day bus ride from Delhi to Manali and a short warm-up ride, we start the journey under the thick mist of the late monsoon, pedalling 35 km away from civilisation to a campsite halfway up the first major climb, the 3,979m Rohtang Pass.

This is the baby of the route, but being careful to take your time is as integral to this journey as inflating your tyres and filling your bottles, so we tackle it at a slow pace, allowing our bodies to adjust to the ever-thinning air.

As the road snakes its way up grassy valley sides and around countless hairpins, it feels like I'm riding the Col du Tourmalet or Col du Galibier in Europe, but when we finally reach the top, the scene is distinctly Himayalan.

The Rohtang Pass and its neighbouring peaks are so high that they create a 'rain shadow', trapping the monsoon clouds in the south and leaving everything north far more rocky and arid. The effect is that the skies suddenly clear and we get our first sight of the snow-capped 6,000m peaks we will spend the next week or so slaloming through.

A wide-angle landscape photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, several colorful prayer flags (blue, yellow, green, red, and white) are flying in the wind, partially obscuring the view. The middle ground shows a vast, flat green valley floor. In the background, rugged, brown and tan mountains rise under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. A road is visible on the right side of the valley, with a yellow truck and a few people walking. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a high-altitude environment.

‘A flat corridor through the mountains known as the More Plains awaits, with 40 km of straight, freshly laid road blessed with a delightful tailwind..’

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Throne room

But if this is the 'smallest room in the house', how big is the house?



Pedal power

Cycling the world's highest motorable road* without a motor...

Before then comes the pleasure of a descent as spectacular as Taglang La. The southern flank of the Rohtang is a joy to climb but the northern side is a step up again, its 24 hairpins and mountainous views across the valley of the Chenab River making for a cycling experience so rich, so idyllic that I can't help but laugh at my fortune to be riding here as I cascade my way down in the sun.

Brutal cycling beauty

Over the next day and a half we follow the Chenab and then Bhaga River, before leaving their raging torrents behind to climb steadily to the marvellously named village of Zingzingbar, which sits at the foot of the second high pass, Baralacha La.

'Village', however, is a generous description. The winter here is too brutal and the land too unyielding for permanent settlements, so Zingzingbar and the other staging posts between Manali and Leh are instead collections of five or six guesthouses-cum-restaurants-cum-grocery shops made from rocks and sheets of tarpaulin. They are not much to look at, but the people inhabiting them are welcoming and the hot tea they serve is refreshing.

Baralacha La stands 4,850m high – a significant increase on the Rohtang – and we inch up its gentle slopes under heavy but dry cloud cover, passing by the turquoise Suraj

It's a cycling experience so rich, so idyllic, I can't help laughing at my fortune

Tal lake before reaching a barren summit covered with Buddhist prayer flags.

Since the Rohtang, the landscape has been dominated by snowy peaks standing over us, but after Baralacha La, the road dips down into a valley cut by the Tsarap River that looks more like Mars than the Himalayas, the towering scree-lined peaks on each side warping gradually from black to terracotta and finally egg-yolk yellow over the course of 10 otherworldly kilometres.

Eventually we reach a plateau housing a tent colony known as Sarchu and stay the night, before continuing along the sculpted banks of the Tsarap the next

WHEN IN INDIA...

Go trekking in Ladakh There are plenty of routes ranging from just a couple of days to as much as a fortnight. Most are also easily accessible from Leh and the cost is fairly cheap.

Climb a mountain Stok Kangri is the standout option. At 6,153m, it's a great chance to get a 6,000m peak under your belt, and given that you'll already be well acclimatised, you can start the trip to climb it right away. It's also a trekking peak, so no technical skills are needed.

Hit India's tourist trail. The most obvious choice is, once you have flown back to Delhi, to travel the 200 km to Agra to see the Taj Mahal.

Go rafting The Indus River flows just a few kilometres past Leh. Rapids get up to grade three and numerous companies in Leh offer trips, so it would be easy to organise.

Explore the Himalayas Broaden your Himalayan horizons by heading over to Uttarakhand, where you can trek in the Nanda Devi National Park. Routes can last from a couple of days to as long as three weeks.

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Water course
Next to the rivers at least the road is fairly flat...

morning to the foot of one of the most stunning sections of road not just on this route, but potentially in the world.

The Gata Loops are a series of 21 hairpin bends winding 10 km straight up the valley side. A comparable climb would be the iconic Alpe d'Huez in France, which also has 21 hairpins, but here they are more tightly packed and the backdrop far more expansive.

Until this point I have been taking pictures incessantly, every single view worthy of capture, but the cycling on this stretch is too idyllic to keep stopping, so I climb it one go and in such a heady state of enjoyment that I forget what altitude I'm at, push too hard and am totally spent by the top.

A stop for lunch fails to bring me back around and so I limp painfully over the third of the high passes, the Nakeela Pass, which follows immediately after the Gata Loops and tops out at 4,738m.

After a descent on a broken road down the opposite flank and a night beside another wonderfully named 'village', Whiskey Nullah, at 4,800m, I'm feeling fresh again the next morning. It's just as well, because today's 75 km stage is the longest of the trip and we have to climb above 5,000m for the first time to reach the summit of the fourth pass, the 5,059m Lachalang La.

It's freezing at the top, so we pile on layers and then hurtle down a gravelled descent

'Scree-lined peaks tower on each side of the Tsarap river valley'

into yet another new landscape, this time a narrow gorge hemmed in on each side by pillars of yellow rock that look like they have been poured like concrete from above.

The highway then rears up once more on to a wide and flat corridor through the mountains known as the More Plains, where 40 km of straight, freshly laid road blessed with a delightful tailwinds awaits.

We eventually peel off this glorious stretch of road to camp on the shores of the brilliant-blue Tso Kar salt lake, which sits in a vast basin surrounded by snowy peaks at just over 4,500m. The next morning, under another crystal blue sky, we set off on what will turn out to be one of my best ever days on a bike.

First up we climb the magnificent Taglang La and then descend 1,800m all the way down to the quiet village of Lato, passing Tibetan-style settlements along the way as we leave the Zaskar range behind and enter the deeply Buddhist region of Ladakh.





Summit success
I had a little lie
down after tooping
out at 5,359m.

Our final day into Leh is also a gem, joining the mighty Indus River in the early stages of its journey from the high Himalayas to Arabian Sea, before stopping off at the Thiksey Monastery, an unsung rival to Lhasa's Potala Palace for size and splendour.

King of the mountains

Leh itself is a fusion of old world and new, with the Namgyal Tsemo Monastery, which dates back to 1430, towering above a bustling city packed with restaurants and shops selling SIM cards, rafting trips on the Indus and treks into the Stok range.

It's a welcome return to the real world after the isolation of the Manali-Leh Highway and an ideal place to rest up for a day ahead of the ultimate challenge of the trip.

The colossal climb of Khardung La, which separates Leh in the south from the Nubra valley to the north, isn't part of the main route but most people tag it on at the end due to its growing fame and notoriety.

The BRO claims it is the single 'highest motorable road in the world' (it isn't) and that the top stands at 5,600m (it doesn't), but the actual numbers are nevertheless eye-watering and the climb is unquestionably one of the toughest on the planet.

The real altitude at the summit is 5,359m and the road ascends more than 1,800m over its daunting 39 km distance from the

start point in the centre of Leh. The fastest time it has been ridden on Strava is just over three hours, but four and a half to seven is a far more realistic guide for those blissfully ignorant enough to attempt it.

The first 25 km are on decent asphalt and are a pleasure to ride as they wind their way up the flanks of the mountain that the pass straddles, but then all hell breaks loose after an army camp 14 km from the top. The road from here on in is simply savage – so broken, rocky and dusty that it takes immense concentration just to maintain forward momentum along its surface.

Inside the last 10 km I have to stop every kilometre to get my breath back, each turn of the pedals a miniature battle within the war, but then the road finally flattens out and I turn a corner to find prayer flags fluttering and the summit sign standing tall.

I'm completely spent as I dismount, but views of snow-capped neighbouring peaks in the immediate distance and the entirety of the Stok range stretched out on the horizon are a more-than-handsome reward for having risen to this truly epic challenge.

It takes two and a half hours to descend all the way back down into Leh and when I pack my bike away that night, ready for a flight back to Delhi the next morning, it's with a deep sense of sadness that the best ride of my life has come to an end.



End of the road
Thiksey Monastery, Leh



Footnotes



NEED TO KNOW

Country India

Capital Delhi

Population 1.3 billion

Climate The Indian Himalayas are mostly dry and sunny, although the summer is still monsoon season so the odd day will have rain.

Time zone GMT +4.5

When to go Summer only, from

June to September. The rest of the year the route is covered in snow and closed off.

Money Indian rupee
Comms There is virtually no mobile signal between Manali and Leh, so don't expect to be able to call or text family and friends during the trek.

TRAVEL INFO

Health & safety

Strong sun screen is imperative (minimum SPF30 recommended). Take plasters, bandages, tape and antiseptic cream in case you have to patch yourself up after a crash.

What to pack

Everything. Waterproof jacket, fingerless gloves, thick gloves, windstopper, short-sleeve jerseys, long-sleeve jerseys, waterproof bottoms, bib shorts, leg warmers, arm warmers, a Buff, base layers, T-shirts, casual shorts, casual trousers, fleece, down jacket.

Our trip

Matt travelled with Red Spokes on their 17-day India: Himalayas trip. The price is £1,395 (land only), which includes airport transfers, hotels in Delhi, Manali and Leh, plus camping and all food when on the ride. The itinerary is: day 1 – arrive Delhi; days 2-3 – travel to Manali; day 4 – acclimatisation

ride around Manali; days 5-13 – ride Manali to Leh; day 14 – rest day in Leh; day 15 – ride Khardung La; day 16 – fly to Delhi; day 17 – fly home.
redspokes.co.uk

Getting there

Red Spokes' trip starts and finishes in Delhi.

Red tape

You need a tourist visa to enter India. Standard visas for British nationals last for three months, valid from date of issue, so don't apply too early.
indianvisaonline.gov.in

Food and drink

The camp food provided is excellent. Except for a couple of nights, it is mainly vegetarian, but the variety of dishes leaves you spoilt for choice.

TOP TIP
Take at least two water bottles. They get dirty quickly

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