

# Into the Land of High Passes

‘Such a feeling’s comin’ over me  
There is wonder in most everything I see...’



*Biking through the mountains of Ladakh is a fantastic experience*

Lyrics from the seventies’ Carpenters hit, ‘Top of the world’, could well describe the feeling of awe that seizes a first time traveller to Ladakh, the remote old Himalayan kingdom in India’s Jammu and Kashmir province.

Ladakh draws thousands to the spectacular beauty of its multi-hued peaks, icy glaciers, blue lakes and gurgling rivers; to the world’s highest mountain passes and a cold arid desertscape; to tranquil gompas, rare snow leopards and pashmina shawls and above all, a generous, welcoming people.

Improved air and road connectivity, especially after the opening of the 473-km Manali-Leh road in 1989, has made Ladakh a popular destination among nature lovers and intrepid adventure-seekers.

This has led to a spurt in tourism in the Ladakh Himalayas over the past decade, where the number of visitors has jumped to 150,000 in 2011 from just 20,000

in the year 2001, according to Sudeepta Sanyal, Chief Operating Officer of the Mumbai-based travel company, The Blueberry Trails that she co-founded with CEO Vishal Hanmattekar.

## GREAT GETAWAY FOR GULF EXPATS

Ladakh is also a great getaway for desert-weary Indian expatriates from the UAE and the GCC states, looking to escape the summer heat and explore the charms of their native land on an affordable budget.

For, the ideal period to visit this Land of The High Passes is during the summer months of June to September, when temperatures average 8 degrees Celsius at night and 25 C during day and coincides well with the school vacations and holiday season for Gulf residents.

The Blueberry Trails, which has been offering tours to Ladakh and the Himalayan region annually since its

founding in 2010, is looking to tap into this market, having realised the value and potential of travellers residing in the GCC countries, particularly expatriate Indians.

“Though currently we do not plan to open a branch in Dubai, we are keen to partner with local travel companies to act as our marketing arm and extend our reach to the seasoned traveller community in the UAE and across the GCC,” Sanyal says.

### BIKING FOR THE ADVENTUROUS

Getting to Ladakh – India’s highest inhabited region at altitudes ranging from 2750 metres to 3505 metres above sea level – is a lot easier these days. Several airlines fly to the Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Airport in the capital city, Leh from Delhi (an hour’s flight), Srinagar and Jammu. From Leh one can take in the sights by car or on wheels.

Equally popular, but less comfortable, is the overland summer approach via the 435 km Srinagar-Leh road, which runs through the tortuous 3,505 m high Zojila Pass in the Great Himalayan Wall, and the Manali-Leh road that traverses the upland desert plateau of Rupsho and the Tanglang La pass.

And then there’s biking, for those willing to endure a rugged, challenging holiday in a rarefied atmosphere. “Biking in Ladakh is a life-changing experience. When you ride the Enfield Bullet 500 through the Khardung La Pass, the highest motorable road in the world, your mind and body are transported to another dimension.

“While the terrain is treacherous and certainly not for the mild-hearted, those who conquer their fears are rewarded with one of the most amazing experiences in the world,” assures Sanyal, whose company also



Panoramic view of Leh city nestled in the valley with the mountains as a backdrop

organises bike tours for adventure enthusiasts.

Ladakh has plenty to offer. First of all are the ever-changing dramatic mountain vistas afforded by its location between two of the world’s mightiest mountain ranges, the Karakoram in the north and the Great Himalaya in the south and traversed by two other parallel chains, the Ladakh Range and the Zaskar Range. These throw up opportunities for white water rafting, trekking, jeep safaris, bike rides and mountaineering.

### GROWING TOURIST ARRIVALS

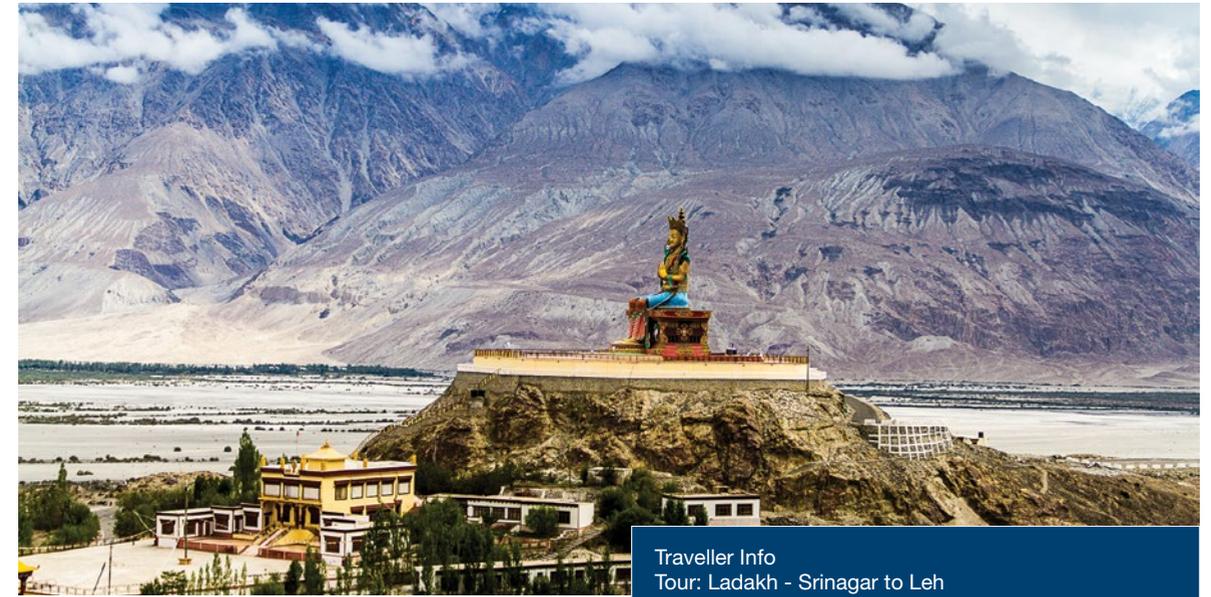
“Ladakh’s harsh, unspoilt terrain, limited accessibility and extreme climatic conditions provide a unique cultural and spiritual diversity that is unforgettable. With peaceful mountain-top monasteries, ancient stupas and architecturally rich palaces dotting the Leh-Ladakh landscape, the region is home to one of the purest forms of a pre-industrial Tibetan Buddhist culture, earning itself the sobriquet, Little Tibet.

“These attractions bring in a lot of tourists not only from across India but also from the Middle East, Europe and the US. Tourist arrivals into Ladakh are growing at a phenomenal 22 per cent, which is much higher when compared with the 11.4 per cent incoming tourists for the India market. Most of these increased figures are made up by domestic tourists,” points out Sanyal.

Responding to this growing interest, The Blueberry Trails’ ten-day and 12-day tours beginning from June 5 this year are designed to allow “young explorers in their 20s as well as mature holidayers in their 60s” to comprehensively take in the entire Ladakh circuit.

The packages include home stays that offer a taste of local culture, visits to monasteries, camel safaris, white water rafting in the Indus River side trails, village walks, photo walks and of course, shopping.

For instance, the 10-day Srinagar-Leh tour begins with a houseboat stay on Nigeen Lake. The next day



A panoramic view of the Diskit Monastery which is the oldest and largest monastery in Nubra valley. The monastery has a 32 meter statue of Maitreya Buddha

it sets off for Shargol in Mulbek, passing the snow-capped mountains and alpine valleys of Kargil and Drass with a halt at the strategic Tiger Hill, which serves as a gateway to the Siachen Glacier.

Then onwards to Lamayuru Monastery in Sham Valley, the Magnetic Hill, the point of confluence of the Zaskar and Indus rivers. You then head to Leh, where while acclimatising to the high altitude one can shop for the region’s famed cashmere shawls, semi precious stones, silver jewellery and Buddhist artifacts or visit the Shanti Stupa and the Namgyal dynasty’s 17th century Leh Palace.

### MOUNTAINS AND MONASTERIES

The itinerary also includes the far-flung Nubra Valley with its prosperous villages, thick plantations and Bactrian camels through which once passed the caravans of the Trans-Himalayan Silk Route; the recently opened hamlet of Turtok, that with its pretty apple and apricot groves is India’s northernmost village; the endorheic Pangong Tso (lake) on the Indo-China border, and the dizzying passes of Zoji La, Chang La and Khardung La, which at 5578 metres above sea level, literally has you ‘on the top of the world looking down on creation’.

The Blueberry Trails also offers a more extensive 12-day Srinagar-Chandigarh trip. This takes you via Kargil, Drass, the Tiger Hill and Mulbek to Leh, from where you get to visit the historic Alchi, Diskit, Thiksey and

Traveller Info  
Tour: Ladakh - Srinagar to Leh  
Duration: 10 days  
Prices (per head): Twin sharing - INR 38,000 Triple sharing - INR 35,500

Tour: Ladakh - Srinagar to Chandigarh via Leh and Manali  
Duration: 12 days  
Prices (per head): INR 42,800 + 3.09% tax

Contact: 0091 8080122441  
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www.theblueberrytrails.com

Hemis monasteries; watch the sun set against a perfect blue sky from the sand dunes of Hunder, and stay in a Ladakhi home feasting on steaming hot butter tea with momos and thukpas in Nubra.

The onward journey proceeds through the Baralachha and Tang La Passes, the Gatta Loop, Pang and Sarchu enroute to Jipsa in the Lahaul Valley. The Rohtang Pass leads on to Manali where you check out the quaint old town.

After 12 days of travelling rough, battling altitudes on some of the world’s highest mountain passes, marvelling at the beauty of majestic peaks and imbibing the calm and friendliness of the Ladakhi people, you head the next day to Chandigarh where the trip ends.

Alas, all too soon, you are back in the plains. But looking over the horizon you promise yourself amidst the noise and bustle of the modern world, that someday soon, you’ll go back and the mountains will be waiting.

**Armenia Fernandes is a freelance writer based in Dubai.**



Sudepta Sanyal, CEO of Blueberry Trails



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