



Lotus Expeditions

Specialists in Custom Adventure Travel

Ladakh: The Markha Valley Trek

Ladakh, the jewel of Northern India, lies sandwiched between the Great Himalayan Range to the south and the Karakoram to the north. It is referred to as “the land of high passes,” as it forms a barrier between the great Tibetan plateau and the western Himalaya. It is also known as “Little Tibet” for its language, culture, religion, and topography. Despite the prevalence of Buddhist culture and religion, Ladakh, and the capital city Leh, is a melting pot of religions and cultures coexisting peacefully. The sight of monks in saffron robes, and the daily muezzin’s call to prayer from the central mosque, only enhance the sense of unity and peace in this region.

Ladakh is also a paradise for exploration, adventure, and challenge. The Markha Valley Trek, in Hemis National Park, visits one of the most spectacular regions in Ladakh and offers challenging hiking at high altitude, over high mountain passes, through diverse desert ecology, and down deep river canyons and gorges with fascinating geology.

Our adventure begins in Leh (11,600 feet/3,515 meters), where we will spend a few days visiting monasteries, exploring ruins, and acclimatizing to the altitude with light hiking to stunning vistas. The trek travels through traditional Ladakhi villages where subsistence agriculture and cooperative living reign. In the higher plateaus, you will see Ladakhi families at their summer pastures tending to their community’s goats and yaks; the women spinning wool, knitting, and churning yogurt and butter to sustain them through the long winter months.

This trek is an exploration of the culture and religion of the Ladakhi people, and a journey of Himalayan proportions.

Trip Summary

- Ladakhi culture, Buddhist monasteries, high mountain passes, and desert canyons
- Ten days of challenging hiking with daypacks at elevations up to 17,400 feet/5,273 meters
- Nine nights camping, six nights hotels, one dayroom on final day

Itinerary

Key: B, L, D—breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner included; O/N—overnight in hotel or camping

Day One, Depart Home

Day Two, Arrive Delhi, India

Most international flights arrive in Delhi late in the evening. A Lotus Expeditions representative will meet you at the airport, outside the customs and baggage area, and transfer you to your hotel. *O/N, Hotel in Delhi*

Day Three, Fly from Delhi to Leh, Ladakh

Flights to Leh depart early in the morning to avoid afternoon weather. Transfer to the Delhi domestic airport and fly to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, at 11,567 feet/3,505 meters. We will have a trip orientation followed by a free afternoon to rest and acclimatize to the high altitude or explore the city. Optional evening lecture on Mahayana Buddhism. *B, L, D; O/N, Hotel in Leh*

Day Four, Monastery Tours Near Leh

After breakfast, we will spend the day exploring a former residence of Ladakh's royal family and two important Buddhist monasteries close to Leh. According to tradition, Shey Palace was the seat of power of pre-Tibetan kings. A 25-foot/7.5-meter copper statue of Buddha, plated with gold, is installed here. The Thiksey Gompa, situated on a stunning hill overlooking the Indus River Valley, is one of the largest and most architecturally impressive monasteries in Ladakh. The Stakna Gompa, one of the more colorful and beautiful monasteries in the region, holds a commanding position atop a 200-foot/60-meter rock promontory above the Indus River. *B, L, D; O/N, Hotel in Leh*

Day Five, Sightseeing Around Leh

Today is another opportunity to adjust to the high altitude and explore the sights around Leh. To the east of our hotel, the newly constructed Shanti Stupa, or Peace Pagoda, holds a prominent position above the city; 554 steps lead to its base, where commanding views of Leh, the surrounding valleys and the snow-capped Ladakh Mountains unfold before you. The Leh Palace, built in the seventeenth century by King Namgyal on a ridge above the city, was designed after the Potala Palace in Lhasa and is well worth a visit. Farther along the ridge sits the colorful Gonkhang Temple from the sixteenth century. The Mani Sarmo, or Yellow Stupa, is the oldest stupa in Leh from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries and should not be missed. It is believed to hold magical healing properties. B, L, D; O/N, Hotel in Leh

Day Six, Begin Trek to Rumbak

After an early breakfast, we depart by private vehicles for the one-hour journey to Spituk. A bumpy ride along a four-wheel-drive road leads us along the Indus River for approximately one more hour before we reach a tributary stream, the Jingchan Nala, flowing out of the Jingchan Gorge. Our trek begins here. We will meet our local staff and pack animals and begin our journey along the river up this pretty, willow-lined gorge. After an easy river crossing, we reach the small village of Jingchan, and continue upstream through a narrow, rocky gorge, entering Hemis National Park and crossing the river a few more times. The gorge opens and the snow-topped peaks of the Stok Mountains appear as we arrive in our camp below the village of Rumbak (12,470 feet/3,800 meters). *Hiking time, 5–6 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Seven, Trek to Latsa

Today's journey leads us through a wide, open valley dotted with colorful bands of rock. The imposing Stok Kangri peak (20,279 feet/6,145 meters) lies at the head of the valley. The valley splits and our trail leads to the right past a lovely, traditional Ladakhi home, and up toward the Ganda La Pass. We will camp in Latsa, just before the pass, at 14,700 feet/4,455 meters, where there are spectacular views of the surrounding ridges and mountains. *Hiking time, 5–6 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Eight, Cross Ganda La Pass, Trek to Shingo

Our trail climbs steeply to the Ganda La Pass at 15,910 feet/4,380 meters. We will be feeling the effects of the high altitude; thus, our climbing will be slow and steady. At Ganda La, we are rewarded with stunning views of the valley we have just left behind us and the impressive high peaks of the Zaskar Range before us. If the skies are clear, an additional climb up the ridge above the pass affords views of the Karakoram Himalaya to the north and K2, the second highest

mountain in the world at 28,250 feet/8,611 meters, on the distant border with China and Pakistan. A steep descent brings us to our camp in the village of Shingo (13,620 feet/4,150 meters). *Hiking time, 5–6 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Nine, Trek to Kaya

From Shingo, we follow the river downstream and enter a spectacular gorge with unique geology, flora, and fauna. Watch the rocky cliffs above, as bharal, or blue sheep, are common here. The trail grows fainter as it crosses the river several times and continues downward to the village of Skiu. A lovely gumpa sits on a cliff above the village and clinging to a rock wall are the ruins of a 1,000-year-old royal residence. From Skiu, we continue downstream a short distance to the lovely riverside village of Kaya (11,000 feet/3,333 meters). In camp, you can rest, dip your toes in the water, or take an optional side trip (3 hours round trip) to a high point overlooking the glacial grey-blue waters of the Zanskar River as it pores out of the impressive Zanskar Gorge. *Hiking time, 4–5 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Ten, Trek to Markha

Today is one of our longest days on the trail. From Kaya, we follow the Markha River upstream as it passes through narrow canyons to open valleys. Keep a keen eye on the mountains and cliffs around you, as dozens of ancient monasteries and royal residences cling to the rock walls or perch on the cliff tops. The scenery is dramatic and changes around every corner. We reach the village of Chaluk and may glimpse Ladakhi families working in the fields. Our trail passes by elaborate mani walls carved with ancient Buddhist prayers. We cross the river several times and continue toward the village of Markha (12,140 feet/3,700 meters). From this vantage point, we gain our first views of the stunning Kangyatse massif (21,000 feet/6,400 meters) in the distance. *Hiking time, 8–9 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Eleven, Rest Day in Markha

Today is a well-deserved rest day. Our camp is set in an idyllic location next to a lovely traditional Ladakhi home, just above the river. You may choose to rest or explore the village of Markha, the largest settlement on our trek. There is a small school and an old gumpa next to the ruins of an even older building. If we are lucky, we may be privy to Ladakhi hospitality and a singing and dancing performance by local women in their traditional dresses and elaborate top hats. *B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Twelve, Trek to Tahungste

The trek to Tahungste continues up the Markha River Valley, crossing the river several more times and passing through small villages. The Umalung Gumpa sits atop a high rocky cliff above the trail. For those with adequate energy, the climb to the monastery will reward you with views of the valley below. We eventually reach the village of Hankar and the spectacular ruins of the former Hankar Gumpa. A few more hours of travel lead to our camp at Tahungste (13,620 feet/4,150 meters). *Hiking time, 6–7 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Thirteen, Trek to Nimaling

After a leisurely breakfast, we begin the steady climb to our next camp in Nimaling (15,490 feet/4,720 meters). We reach a small, alpine lake where the stunning and glaciated Kangyatse peak (21,000 feet/6,400 meters) fills the southern skyline. Ahead lays a high, wide, open valley, reminiscent of the Tibetan Plateau, where our next camp awaits. The Nimaling Valley is home to a semipermanent population of herders from the Markha Valley who come here to graze livestock in the summer pastures. The women spin wool, milk the animals, and churn rich yogurt and butter that will sustain their families through the long winter months. *Hiking time, 3–4 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Fourteen, Cross Gongmaru La, Trek to Shang Sumdo

Today is our last big day in the mountains. We cross the Gongmaru La Pass at 17,400 feet/5,273 meters, our highest point on trek, where we are greeted with stunning 360-degree views and fantastic photo opportunities. We descend steeply and enter another rocky gorge with fascinating geology. Our trail follows the river valley down until we reach the small village of Chukirmo. After a few more hours of spectacular trekking, we reach our end point in Shang Sumdo (12,010 feet/3,660 meters). Tonight we will celebrate our final evening in the mountains. *Hiking time, 7–8 hours; B, L, D; O/N, camping*

Day Fifteen, End Trek at Trailhead, Visit Hemis Monastery, Return to Leh

After breakfast, we pack up one last time and begin the short trek to the trailhead. We bid farewell to our staff and board our private vehicles for the return trip to Leh. En route, we will stop and visit the Hemis Monastery, the biggest, wealthiest, and best-known monastery in Ladakh. We return to Leh in the afternoon, where hot showers, a delicious meal, and proper beds await! *Hiking time, 2–3 hours; B, L, D; O/N, Hotel in Leh*

Day Sixteen, Early Flight to Delhi, Free Afternoon in Delhi

Flights to Delhi depart very early. We will be transported by private vehicle to the airport where we will board our flight to Delhi. In the afternoon, there will be an

opportunity for organized sightseeing, or you may explore the city on your own. We will enjoy a celebration dinner and some fine Indian cuisine. *B, D; O/N, Hotel in Delhi*

Day Seventeen, Sightseeing in Delhi, Late Departure for Home Country

There will be more optional sightseeing this morning. The afternoon is free to prepare for your late-night departure, explore, rest, or take advantage of more excellent shopping opportunities in the local markets. Many international flights depart Delhi immediately before or just after midnight. *B; dayroom, Hotel in Delhi*

Day Eighteen, Arrive Home