

Journey to Ladakh

in a most unsuitable car

Destination to dream of

A corner of the great Tibetan Plateau is caught inside the Indian frontier, to form the remote federal territory of Ladakh. Its wild mountain terrain beyond the Himalayas had to be a place to visit. Around 2000 we yearned to go, but access was not simple. Flying into Leh held no appeal, and the road in from Srinagar has severe restrictions due to its proximity to the disputed border to Pakistan. A strategic new road had been opened in 1989, linking Manali across four high passes to Leh. However, a crossing by bus that hurtled past all interesting sites was not a good idea, and being driven in a rented 'car with driver' would be frustrating beyond belief. So plans were shelved. But then the rental rules changed, and it suddenly became possible to rent a self-drive car at just a few locations in India.

So in the summer of 2004, we rented a car from Hertz in Delhi. It was the only available location, even though we flew in to Amritsar on Turkmen Air's flight from Birmingham, with Jan and I the only white couple among 200 Sikhs, and took a train to Delhi. On the morning of August 26th, after various phone calls, a car was delivered to our hotel in the centre of Delhi. Just the two of us, so we had ordered the smallest car. A Tata Indicar. Very good, quite small, but a good few years past its sell-by date. Also, it was a diesel. Not our choice, as we had zero experience of diesel maintenance. Could not ask for a petrol version, as we could not say why we wanted the change. No way would Hertz let anyone take one of their cars to Ladakh, not even their oldest knackered Indicar that was all they would trust to a foreigner. "Amritsar and Shimla" was our cautious response to enquiries.

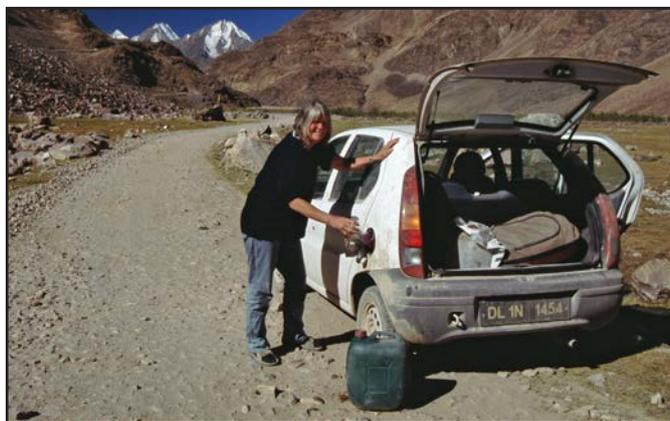


The beautiful Zaskar Valley, one reason to visit Ladakh.

Off in our Indicar

Our friendly delivery man could not explain the Delhi Traffic Permit system, so he drove us out to the tiny, obscure, barely-marked office amid a line of shops beside the main road through the suburbs. There we were told we had to call in to register on re-entering Delhi a few weeks hence. No problem. We set off straight out of town. Seeing more of Delhi, and enjoying the excitement of driving a small car among the buses, trucks and ox-carts of Old Delhi could wait until our return (when we loved it of course).

Half an hour after leaving the traffic office, we were out in the countryside, bowling along the Grand Trunk Road. This road is a piece of history, built as the great highway of British India from Calcutta, then the capital, across to the Khyber Pass, potentially a land route back to England. Very little traffic away from towns; easy driving; we felt at last that we were on our way to what had seemed the unattainable. We drove nearly back to Amritsar, but then turned off to Shimla and the hill country.



Re-fuelling our Indicar from the two spare cans.

A good hotel in the lovely hill-station town of Shimla, and time to visit the hardware shops. Two 20-litre plastic cans that we would need for extra fuel for the long haul over the mountains. And a knife so that we could cut into an old coca cola bottle to make a spout for pouring the fuel into the car. Eventually found the road out of town; few signposts, as the locals know the way, and not many strangers head beyond Shimla.

An easy day's drive, over the hills then down to Kullu and up a long valley to Manali. This used to be the end of the road, a resort town spread among tall pine trees, and best known as a centre for winter sports. Also a popular summer resort, it was a joy to visit. One of its attractions was a mini-resort part way up the Rohtang Pass that climbed straight out of the back of town. Hordes of Indian tourists took jeep trips up the road, to relax in the cool mountain air and play in the remnant snow drifts.



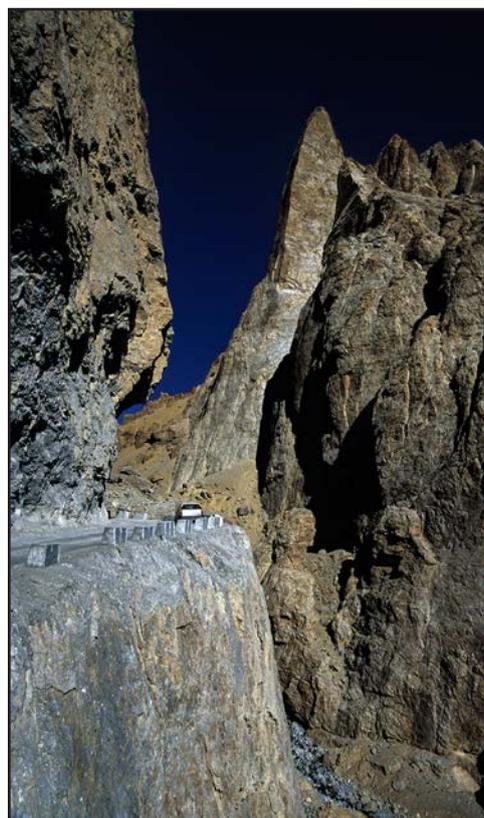
On the Rohtang road, high above the Chenab Valley.

Manali to Leh Highway

Once beyond that mini-resort, we had the road almost to ourselves. Spectacular zig-zags, wonderful views of snow-capped mountains, wild terrain; just a first taste of the multiple Himalayan ranges. The Rohtang Pass was the first of the four big passes, which are only open from June till October, when they are not closed by snow. It rises to 3980 metres, almost exactly 2000 metres above Manali, and then drops 1400 metres into the Chenab Valley. Since late 2020, it can be avoided by the new Atal Tunnel that is nine kilometres long at a level 900 metres below the pass, and is kept open all year round. The valley-floor village of Tandi had the last fuel station, so we topped up, and also filled our two large cans.

Then upwards again to Keylong. Our Indicar was just not pulling well; like all diesels it relies on the correct mix of fuel and air (much more critical than with petrol), and it did not like the thin air at altitude, as its mix was set for normal air at Delhi. As a result, our power was depleted, and our exhaust was a great plume of black smoke that was partially burned diesel. Keylong actually had a garage; no fuel, but a workshop and a mechanic, to whom we told of our concern that much could be wrong with the car. He made a few adjustments, disconnected the interior heater, and told us nothing to worry about. Faith renewed, we continued. And soon found the lone, small, basic, hotel in Keylong, for a good night.

Next morning, out into the wilderness. Soon past the last tiny village, and then just empty mountain landscapes on a grand

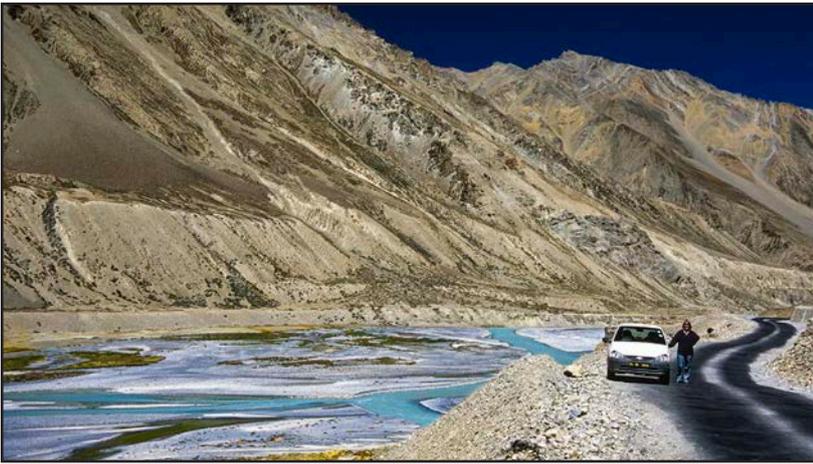


Mountain highway.



By the prayer flags atop the Baralacha La.

scale. And almost no traffic. One bus, some days. Laden fuel-tankers, crawling up the gradients on a journey that would take them four days to reach Leh (though half that, empty on the return); always in groups of three, for mutual help with any problems along the huge distances of totally empty land. The very occasional Toyota Land Cruiser with affluent Indians making the journey in organised comfort. A rare military truck in splendid isolation. We could go for hours with seeing no-one at all. And that was it. Trucks carrying supplies and freight in and out of Leh all



Glorious road beside the Zaskar River.

of excitement alongside huge drops. Firm gravel surface, with some stretches already improved with a narrow strip of blacktop. The few ponderous tanker trios that we had to pass were no problem on the mountain roads. They each carried a painted sign on their back “Horn to Pass”; a single toot on our horn, and within a hundred metres they would shift to the edge of the road and leave just enough room for us to squeeze past, as long as we were sharp about it, because slowing down was not an option. But never a problem.

We drove steadily northwards, relishing the magnificent mountain scenery, beneath deep blue skies. Already in the rain shadow of the front ranges, the terrain is properly described as a montane desert, and it is absolutely beautiful. We crossed over the Baralacha La (*la* means *pass*) at an altitude of 5030 metres. The air was cold and thin, but our only signs of altitude sickness were not sleeping well on our first night. The pass was through the main Himalaya Range, though somewhat diminished from its grander scale further east. Ahead lay the Zaskar Range, and ever more mountain wilderness.

Punctures

Just short of the pass we had a flat tyre. But we had the means, and it was soon changed. Though the prospect of a second puncture on this lonely road loomed over us. Down from the pass into the valley of the Zaskar River, we came to Sarchu, a tent town that existed each summer between being abandoned to the winter snows. It had a small military post, a few truck-stop cafes, and little else. But beside the road on the way in, we spotted a compressor cylinder with its distinctive small pump on top. Surely a puncture repair shop. Nobody in sight. But a single tiny tent. I opened the flap and called hello, and a body stirred beneath a blanket. Sign language sufficed, and this Indian gentleman emerged to work at our proffered wheel. He took off the “tubeless” tyre that had no decent seal to the battered rim, and extracted an inner tube that was adorned with an incredible number of old patches. It should have been scrapped long ago, but our new friend simply started on its repair. Actually four repairs to four leaking patches. One of which was so bad that he replaced it with a large new piece of rubber, which he sewed on using a needle and thread (why didn’t I take a photo?). This could only work, because he then re-sealed the rubber by clamping the tyre in a heated press. Wonderful that he had set up his shop for the summer at this remote spot; but everything just works in India.

After more than an hour, we were on our way, with a serviceable spare tyre. However, all our car’s tyres were in dreadful condition. In the next two weeks, we had six more punctures. And each time found some obscure repair man before we had the next. We did have to buy a new inner tube and then a new outer tyre when each was beyond repair. But our friend’s sewn patch held good all the way back to Delhi.



Fuel tankers on the zigzags of the Lachalung La.

Cold night at Pang

The road left the Zaskar Valley with a climb over the Lachalung La at 5080 metres, and then down to another beautiful desert valley, and Pang. This was a summer camp with eight dhaba tent cafes. Run entirely by women (there with their kids) from Leh, who set up each summer to service passing travellers and truckers, while their husbands work as mountain guides. A great system, and behind each yurt cafe, a tent equipped with mattresses and quilts. As we drove alongside, the lovely, welcoming women descended on us, competing for our custom; there were just a few folk from a Land Cruiser and a Chinese jeep already there. We had a good dinner of dal baht, followed by a comfortable and cosy-warm night in a tent to ourselves.

Then after a freezing night, the car would not start. The pre-heater worked but had little effect on the cold steel. Our landlady came out with kettles of boiling water to pour over the fuel pump and injectors. But to no avail. It needed a wood fire beneath the fuel tank, same as the truck drivers do, to improve the viscosity of the diesel that thickens up when it is very cold. And the battery was getting hammered by the starter motor. But the driver of the Land Cruiser came

to our rescue. With a strong tow-rope and his mate sat in our car, we watched as Land Cruiser dragged Indicar along the road until its engine was slowly forced into action. And after that no problem. Stopped and re-started with ease, filled up with diesel from our spare cans, and we set off north again.

Across the Morey Plains, on huge gravel terraces between dramatic lines of mountains. Then over the Taglang La, crossing the Zaskar Range at an altitude of 5328 metres. For a short time it had been the highest road in the world, but was already surpassed (and is now well down the list). A small Buddhist shrine on the col had a Tibetan guardian, very lonely but a bit simple. Our trusty car had made it in the thin air, a little low on power and belching lots of black smoke, but it had got there. Then downhill all the way to the Indus valley. On the way, a tarring gang was adding a blacktop to the road, melting the tar in drums amid clouds of black smoke, then applying it by hand and rake, their only machine being a single road roller. We stopped for a chat in our respective languages, with only the *namaste* greeting being understood, and took some photos amid much posing and laughter; we were probably the greater curiosity.

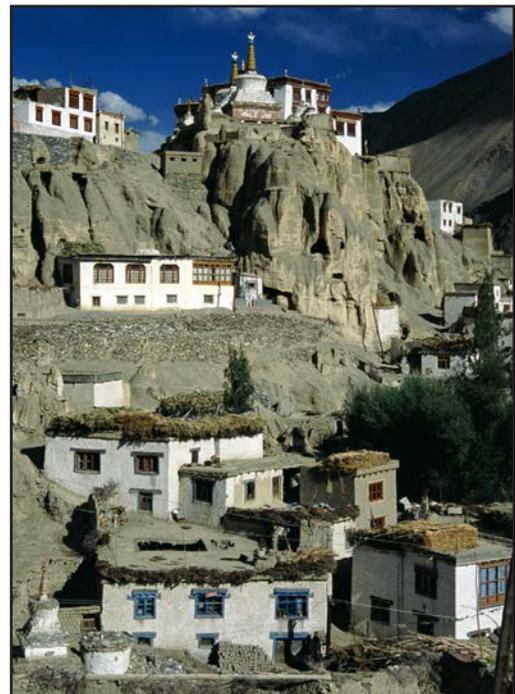
We arrived in Leh before the evening, and found a lovely small hotel in the middle of town. Parked the car, and had a whole day without getting into it. A fine town, with a great potola on a crag above, plenty to see, and even many Indicars buzzing about, though they had all come in on the Srinagar route. We took a couple of days along the Indus valley, with the spectacular monastery of Lamayuru as our turnaround. A couple of punctures along the way, but soon fixed; and tank and cans newly filled with diesel. Then we set off on the return journey, back over the high passes.



Three of the six yurt cafes at Pang, each with its dormitory tent.



The isolated Buddhist shrine at the crest of the Taglang La.



Lamayuru and its beautiful monastery.

Taglang La again

A gentle trundle along the Indus valley, then onto the long climb up to the Taglang La. We passed our friends in the tarring gang, with much cheering and waving; our small white car was not easily forgotten when it is likely that nothing else like it had ever been seen on that mountain road. But as we went ever higher, the car seemed to be steadily losing power. We both noticed it, but said nothing, just thinking and hoping that it was an effect of the altitude and would resolve itself once over the pass.



Not a garage in sight from where our car ceased to progress on the Taglang La.

But it got worse. And worse. Then just two kilometres short of the summit, and on the same gentle uphill, Indicar would go no further. Switch off, cool down, re-start, but still no power; nothing beyond tickover. Certainly not enough to go any further even on the extremely gentle gradient. We got out and looked around, in total solitude; magnificent vistas but a severe shortage of diesel mechanics.

I knew nothing, but thought it might be the fuel pump. The only remedy was to get it replaced or fixed, back in Leh. Which was 110 kilometres away. But it was downhill to Upshi, the village on the Indus, where we could hope to rustle up some sort of assistance. So we could just free-wheel down to there. So we turned the car round, by dint of pushing and a bit of tickover power. And did just that. We set off rolling in silence. Delightful; just 58 kilometres to go, with the assistance of more than 2000 metres of descent.

It says much for the engineering of the road that such a long free-wheel was possible. Helped by much of that side of the Taglang La already having a narrow strip of tarmac. There were gentle dips to bridges across tributary streams, so we kept up as much speed as possible, to roll uphill from the bridges; at a few places, we gained a tiny boost of engine power running at marginally above tickover, so we only had to get out and push twice, each time for less than a hundred metres. About half way down there was an isolated tent cafe, so we stopped by (on a suitable slope, ready for take-off). A military truck was there too; we spoke with the driver. He could offer no real help, but did think the problem was with the fuel pump (or was he just agreeing in order to be polite?). So we carried on rolling down the road.

The one bit of excitement was at the tarring site. By chance the gang was working at a spot with a significant level stretch just beyond. So we did not want to stop, and furthermore needed a deal of speed when passing them, speed gained on a handy bit of downhill. So we decided to make a run at it. No engine, therefore no horn. So suddenly these guys in the tar gang see this small white car hurtling towards them, silently except for two half-mad foreigners leaning out of the windows and shrieking to get out of the way (though in a language incomprehensible to them). And thereby, we streaked over their wet tar and disappeared into the distance, waving cheerily. These people in the Indicar were becoming ever more out of the ordinary. Totally bizarre in fact.



The tarring gang, who got to see us again and again.

Eventually we rolled to a halt in front of the ramp up onto the Indus bridge, and even parked the car neatly at the side of the road. We then walked across into the village of Upshi, to find absolutely nothing. No garage, no mechanic, no bus to Leh. About to resort to thumbing a lift, a delightful local family offered us space in their already crowded car for a ride all the way to Leh. He knew the fuel-pump shop in Leh, down in the industrial sector of town, so drove us there. It was closed for the afternoon, so our host kindly drove into the town centre and found a taxi-truck that we could hire to go back out to Upshi and tow our car in. Our new driver even told us that he had a tow-rope.

Back into Leh

Within an hour, we were back at Upshi, drawn up in front of our dead Indicar. The tow rope was then produced; and proved to be little more than an old clothes line. We set off in tow, myself in the car and Jan in the taxi-truck, watching from the rear window. But the road was rough, our taxi-driver had no experience of smooth and gentle towing, and I had no experience of being towed. Soon the slightest irregularity, a bit of slack on the rope, then instead of me being jerked abruptly forward, the rope broke. Jan told him to stop, and he backed up. We knotted the rope, and set off again.



Polo at Leh: traditional sport in a magnificent setting.

Soon a simple repeat, and a new knot. Subsequently, fourteen more breaks, and fourteen more knots. With each knot, the rope became shorter. So our nervous driver went ever more slowly. Sunset, and we were still trundling onwards. Eventually, I was being towed on a rope less than two metres long in total darkness. Stressful. Jan directed him round to the fuel-pump shop, and we parked the Indicar right outside. Our driver dropped us back in town and we found a hotel for the night.

Next morning, we walked across town, back to our car. Approaching from across the road we saw there was no window in the driver's door. Instant panic that all our kit had been stolen during the night, but we then peered in to see everything untouched on the back seats. Tired out last night, I had locked the car doors but failed to wind the window up first. Nothing lost. Another reason to love India.

The fuel pump shop opened on time, and the keeper came out to peer under our bonnet when we started the engine, just to tickover of course. "Not the pump" he said, we think, as our comprehension of Hindi is



The Zaskar River winding between the mountain ranges.

almost nil. He called up a friend from just down the road. They both looked under the bonnet, and both said "not the pump", we think. A passing college student looked in on the action, and spoke to us in English. He instantly became our interpreter. The mechanics then unbolted the exhaust manifold. And the engine worked perfectly; full power, but very noisy. "The exhaust is choked" said our interpreter; "take the car to the mechanic's workshop down the road". Downhill, so we rolled down in silence.

Once there, straight up on jacks, and four lads go beneath to remove the entire exhaust. Then steel rods to hammer out a load of carbon that was almost blocking the pipe. A pile on the road, maybe a kilogramme of it. All the fault of the bad mix of fuel and thin air at altitude, and this was just what did not emerge as the cloud of black smoke. With a cleared exhaust re-fitted, our Indicar was again perfection, which should get us back to Delhi. "How much to pay", I asked out interpreter, still with us because he had never seen anything like this before. The answer was 150 rupees, about £2. We gave him 200, and thanked him profusely. Everything helping, in Indian parlance, smiles all round, and we drove out of Leh once more.



A trio of tankers heading down from the Lachalung La on the road towards Leh, and a donkey train heading out to supply a summer camp in the wilderness.

Taglang La yet again

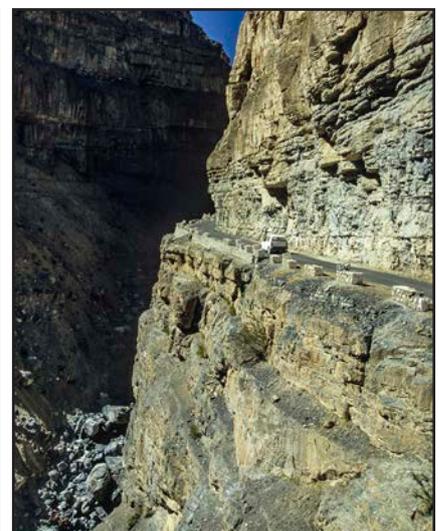
Our trusty Indicar definitely felt better as we retraced our route. No problems as we cruised up hill. Just a touch of embarrassment when we passed the tarring gang. Lots of waving, smiles all round, pointed fingers and gales of laughter. They knew us by now, but we just kept going; we thought that a bit of mystery was better than explanations with no common language. Trouble-free over the high pass, and back across the beautiful deserts looking delightfully different when seen in the opposite direction.

As dusk was falling, we stopped in front of the yurt cafes at Pang. And our landlady of the previous week rushed out to welcome us like old friends. Seems that foreigners in little Indicars have a recognisable rarity value in those parts. We parked the car at the head of a slope where it would catch the morning sun, and then our hostess came out with old blankets to place under the bonnet perhaps to retain a little warmth. Then family dinner, and another warm night in the yurt.

Still very cold in the morning. Took the blankets out, poured two pans of boiling water over the injectors and pump, gave three bouts on the pre-heater, then switched on, and the engine started. Cheers all round, lots of waving as we set off, and we were on our way again.

Tried a different route back, over the very rough Kunzum La into Spiti, but the road onward to Shimla was blocked by a landslide. So next day, back over the unsurfaced Kunzum, then over the smoother Rohtang, and down to Manali. All plain sailing. Easy back to Delhi, then some fun in the city traffic, until we park up outside a small hotel in our favourite Paharganj district. One phone call, and a driver comes to pick up the car. No problems, not a scratch on it. And Hertz had no idea where their knackered old Indicar had been on its holidays.

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Spectacular vistas along the rather rough road over the Kunzum La and into the remote and beautiful Spiti Valley.