



Ladakh Diaries

About



Nidhay



Pavan

Myself Nidhay and my friend Pavan, both students of architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi, share an intense passion for the great outdoors. Our hearts are happiest when we're surrounded by mountains and nature, and we've always made it a point to get out and explore whenever possible. Despite our busy academic schedules, we've become experts at planning spontaneous, short trips that make the most of our limited free time.

We are incredibly grateful to have been awarded the Extreme G2 travel grant, which has transformed our ambitious travel plans into a tangible reality. This generous grant has made it possible for us to embark on what is undoubtedly a "Bucket List" journey for many: a trek to the breathtaking region of Ladakh. For us, this trip isn't just an adventure; it's a profound dream come true, representing the culmination of our love for exploration and our desire to witness one of the world's most stunning landscapes firsthand.

Travel Itinerary

Day 1: The journey begins in Delhi, moving through Chandigarh and Manali to Keylong.

Day 2: Keylong to Leh via Baralacha La, Gata Loops, and Tanglang La.

Day 3: Dedicated to exploring Leh, including Leh Palace, monasteries, Shanti Stupa, Mall Road, and the streets of Leh.

Day 4: Journey to Nubra Valley, including Khardung La Pass, Diskit Monastery and reaching Hunder.

Day 5: Exploring Hunder, Agham and then heading back to Leh via Khardung La Pass.

Day 6: Journey to the Dark Sky Reserve- Hanle, via Chumathang

Day 7: Off to the Highest Motorable road in the world- Umling La. via Koyul.

Day 8: Exploring Hanle, which includes Hanle Monastery, The Deep Space Observatory and then to Rhongo.

Day 9: Back to Leh, and our journey back to Delhi commences.

Day 10: Srinagar via Kargil, Drass, Zoji La Pass and off to Jammu.

Day 11: Jammu to Delhi via Pathankot.

Chapter 1: Journey to the Cold Desert



The anticipation was a physical hum as Pavan and I settled into our seats on the bus from Delhi, knowing the vast expanse of the Himalayas awaited us. The early hours were a steady rhythm of highway miles, gradually shedding the urban sprawl for the open road. As we began our ascent, the air around us noticeably cooled, and the first whispers of pine forests drifted through the vents. The roads quickly became a thrilling dance of twists and turns, each curve revealing more dramatic scenery—deeper valleys, higher ridges, and the promise of what lay beyond.



The true epic began as we pushed onward towards Leh. This wasn't just a commute; it was an odyssey across some of the most challenging and spectacularly beautiful terrain on Earth. I distinctly remember reaching Baralacha La Pass, gazing out at the stark, breathtaking landscape when, with a sudden pop, the bag of chips I'd been saving for a snack dramatically burst open, a stark reminder of the extreme altitude and pressure changes. It was a funny, yet oddly poignant moment in the midst of such raw grandeur. The journey stretched to a gruelling 32 hours, the constant motion and the thinning air taking their toll. Yet, every moment of fatigue was eclipsed by the unfolding vistas—the dramatic shift from lush greens to stark, lunar landscapes, the distant glint of glaciers, and the vibrant prayer flags that marked ancient passes. We'd peer out, mesmerised, as rivers carved their paths far below and ancient monasteries clung to mountainsides. By the time we finally rolled into Leh, utterly exhausted but with spirits soaring, it felt like we hadn't just travelled across land, but through a living, breathing masterpiece, every second of the arduous journey undeniably worth it.



Pang



Ghata Loops



Chapter 2: Exploring the city of Leh



Thiksey Monastery

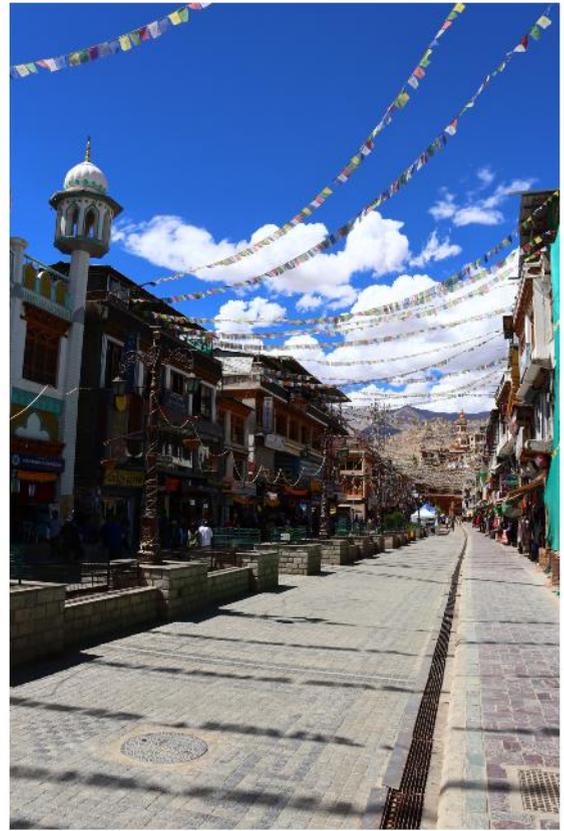
Our time in Leh was a whirlwind of culture and calm. The Leh Market and Moti Market were vibrant sensory feasts, offering a deep dive into local life, from the aroma of spices to the gleam of traditional Ladakhi silver jewelry and Pashmina. We then traveled back through time at the majestic, nine-story Leh Palace, the former royal residence, which offers a stunning panorama of the entire valley. For a sense of peace, the white-domed Shanti Stupa provided breathtaking sunset views and a quiet place for reflection. Towering above the city, the ancient Tsemo Monastery gave us a glimpse into the region's rich history and Buddhist art. Finally, the massive, hilltop Thiksey Monastery was a powerful highlight, structurally echoing Tibet's Potala Palace, where we felt the deep rhythm of monastic life. Every location was a unique and great experience, painting a full picture of Leh's heart and soul.



Tsemo Monastery



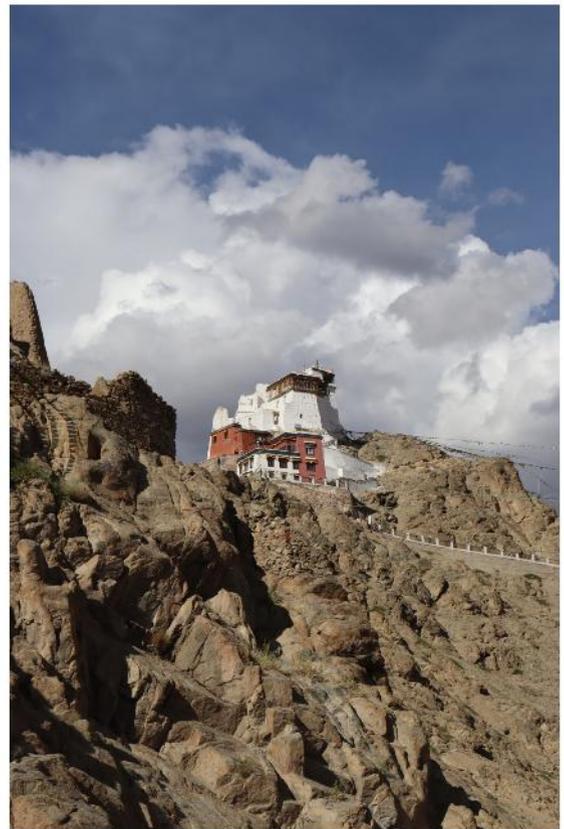
Moti Market



Leh Market



Jamia Masjid



Leh Monastery



Leh Palace



Views from Leh Palace





A Settlement near Leh Palace





Chapter 3: The Shinga Frame

Stepping onto the artisan street in Leh was like walking into a living workshop, thick with the scent of sawdust and warm earth. Here, the traditional art of crafting the shinga (wooden frames and lintels) for Ladakhi windows was on full display. I watched one elder, his hands weathered and sure, expertly operating a large saw, reducing rough-cut timber into workable, dense blocks—the foundation for a future home. Nearby, a younger craftsman used a hand planer to shave these blocks into smaller, precise planks, the material softening under his touch. Further down the lane, another artisan meticulously checked his dimensions, using a compass and square to mark the intricate joinery according to the specific usage in a rab-sal or door frame. The sound of tools varied: a patient, rhythmic hand carving from one corner, contrasting with the careful, steady work of another, achieving fine, decorative details solely with traditional chisels and mallets. Finally, a lone artisan worked calmly, applying natural oils to the finished pieces, bringing the deep grain of the wood to life, preparing the shinga to offer both beauty and essential solar warmth to a cold-desert dwelling.





Timber Workshop



Artisans working on Shinga frames



Shinga Frames





Stage-1



Stage-2



Stage-3

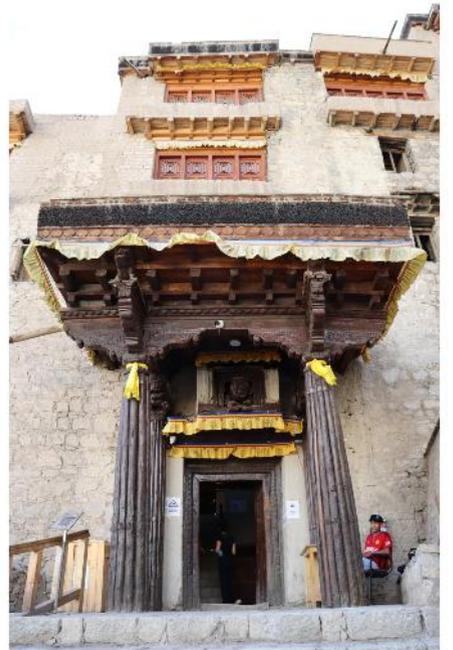
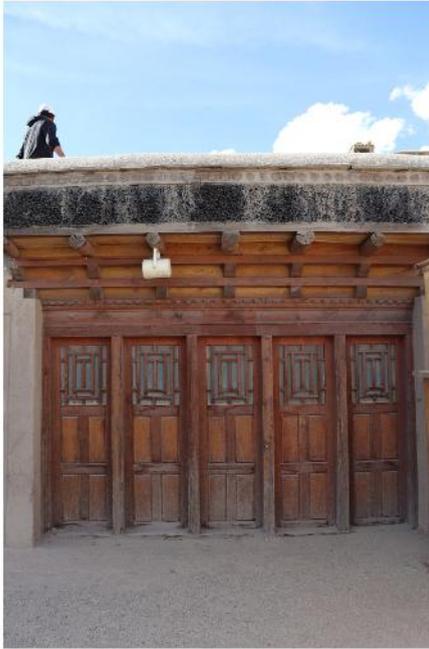
The intricate carving of the shinga begins by adhering a detailed paper design onto the prepared timber plank. The artisan first uses a small, precise saw to roughly cut and remove the larger, excess sections of wood, establishing the main architectural outlines. Following this foundational work, the craftsman transitions to skilled hand carving, employing various chisels and gouges to meticulously refine the contours, deepen the grooves, and add the fine, decorative elements, yielding the completed, beautiful window component.



Intricate Carvings



Chapter 4: Doors and Windows of Ladakh



Leh Palace



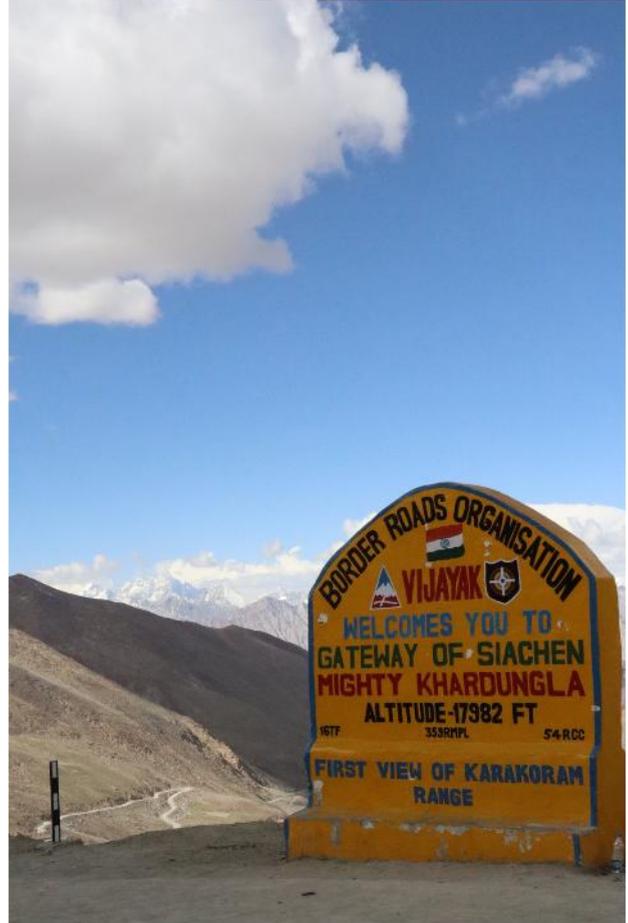
A Residence in Rhongo

The doors and windows of Leh homes are truly works of art, beautifully connecting dwelling and cosmos. The robust, carved main door whispers a promise of shelter. Yet, it's the large rab-sal windows, with their sturdy shinga lintels, that sing. Positioned to capture every available ray of sun, they pour golden light into the deep rooms. Looking out, the thick-walled openings frame the silent, snow-dusted peaks, transforming the sublime Himalayan panorama into a daily, breathtaking masterpiece.

Chapter 5: Dunes of Hunder



City of Leh



Khardung La Pass

Blasting toward Khardung La, the sheer excitement of riding a bike on such brutal, high-altitude terrain was absolute. But the thrill was constantly tempered by the cold; the temperature dropped instantly as we gained height, biting through every layer—a harsh reminder of the air's thinness. Our late arrival, initially a frustration, became our greatest reward. We crested the pass to find it deserted, the usual tourist chaos replaced by breathtaking solitude. Standing amidst the frantic snap of prayer flags, the biting wind was a small price for the profound, personal victory of having that silent, snowy summit entirely to ourselves.



First View of Karakoram Range



Maitreya Buddha



Diskit Monastery

Arriving in the late evening after crossing Khardung La, we found a sanctuary of profound peace at Diskit Monastery. The colossal Maitreya Buddha statue surveyed the whole of Nubra Valley as the ancient gomba climbed the hillside behind it. By luck, we witnessed the monks offering their prayers during an hour devoid of other tourists, creating a moment of intense serenity. From that high vantage point, the panorama was spectacular, especially as the setting sun bathed the distant sand dunes in a soft, golden hour glow. To complete the experience, a cup of local tea—surprisingly rich and warming against the thin, cool air—truly tasted out of this world, cementing a memory of monastic calm and immense beauty.





Nubra Valley

The Nubra Valley presented a spectacular and overwhelming study in natural contrasts: sheer, steep mountains rose dramatically from a vast, exposed desert floor. Cutting relentlessly through this arid landscape, the Shyok River flowed with a full, surging might, a noisy testament to glacial power. The raw beauty was humbling, yet the drive along the cliffside was genuinely terrifying. Strong, incessant winds didn't just push us; they blasted us with stinging clouds of fine sand. More unnerving was the continuous, sharp sound of rocks falling from the towering cliffs above, a constant reminder that we were traversing volatile terrain. This perilous passage etched itself immediately into our minds, creating a blend of stark fear and intense awe—an experience we will never forget forever.



Hunder Sand Dunes

Immediately after leaving Diskit, we descended toward Hunder Village, plunging straight into the heart of the literal cold desert. The scene was magnificent: pure sand dunes set against the colossal, stark mountains. The famed Bactrian camels, with their thick double humps, moved across the landscape with an ancient grace. Our ride through this sandy terrain, right alongside small, trickling streams, was beautiful, but the true magic arrived with the sunset. As the sky melted into brilliant shades of pink and gold, the whole scene became completely unreal. It was one of the most beautiful sunsets I have ever witnessed, cementing Hunder's image as a place where the desert and the mountains merge into perfect, luminous harmony.



Bactrian Camels

Chapter 6: Journey to Hanle



Hanle

The journey to Hanle unveiled some of the most breathtaking landscapes on earth. For long stretches, the majestic Indus River ran right beside our road, a mighty, untamed presence. The sheer volume of water created a frightening, thunderous roar that was initially overwhelming. Yet, as the miles passed, the sound transformed, becoming a deep, rhythmic undertone—strangely peaceful and meditative. Riding alongside this sacred river, watching the arid mountains give way to vast, empty plains dotted with high-altitude lakes, was a continuous revelation. The landscape shifted from intimidating to sublime, delivering us finally to the hushed, remote beauty of Hanle.







The sight of Hanle was spectacular, immediately dominated by the ancient monastery, a place of profound cultural significance, perched high above. Below it stretched a landscape that felt stolen straight from a fantasy—vast, marshy grasslands, delicately cross-hatched by small, meandering streams. Wild horses grazed peacefully among the dense fields, where thick grass blades and scattered tiny flowers covered the earth. We spotted a few distant camps, but otherwise, the solitude was absolute.

The true magic arrived as the day gave way to dusk. The sunset over this pristine high-altitude plateau was perhaps the most peaceful I have ever witnessed. With only one other distant person in sight, the vast, quiet fields took on incredible, luminous colours. The golden light reflecting in the marsh and on the wet grass created an unreal scene, cementing the sunset at Hanle as a moment of pure, unforgettable serenity.





Hanle Monastery





Indian Astronomical Observatory



Muscovite Mica

Visiting the Indian Astronomical Observatory (IAO) on top of Mount Saraswati was surreal. At an altitude of 4,500 meters, it is one of the highest optical telescope sites in the world. It houses several instruments for deep space research, including the High Altitude Gamma Ray Telescope (HAGAR) and the Himalayan Chandra Telescope (HCT). The HCT is a 2.01-meter optical-infrared telescope, its complex, specialized mirror is made to withstand the extreme cold. The telescope is one of the most remarkable features: it is remotely operated via a dedicated satellite link from the Centre for Research & Education in Science & Technology (CREST) in Hosakote, near Bengaluru, thousands of kilometers away. This allows astronomers to conduct observations even in sub-zero winter temperatures without being physically present. The site itself was fascinating, with the ground glittering from natural deposits of muscovite mica, a truly fitting material for a place focused on light from distant stars.



Chapter 7: The Everest of Motorheads - Umling La



The 200-kilometer loop from Hanle to Umling La Pass and back stands, unequivocally, as the most testing and challenging ride of my entire lifetime. Period. This journey, deep into the remote Changthang, became a solitary battle against the elements and the brutal altitude, as my friend was unwell and couldn't join me.

The isolation was immediate and profound. As I began the relentless climb toward Photila Pass, there were absolutely no other vehicles in sight. I was the only bike on the road, with zero network coverage—completely alone. The experience was about riding right through the clouds and above them.



Before even reaching the top of Photila, the cold, insistent rain started, soaking me completely within minutes. My gear was saturated, and soon after, as the altitude increased on the way to Koyul and the Chimsule Bridge, the rain escalated into a vicious hailstorm. Battling through the ice pellets and driving wind, with the temperature hovering between 1 and 2 degrees Celsius, was physically and mentally exhausting. Being utterly alone with the weather turning hostile amplified the difficulty tenfold.

Yet, after enduring that brutal gauntlet, the ultimate reward finally appeared: the legendary Umling La. Reaching the summit, the 'Everest of Motorheads,' was a profound personal achievement. For my very first bike trip, to have conquered such unforgiving, solitary terrain is something I will never forget and will forever cherish. The sense of triumph that followed the brutal journey was truly magical.



British Royal Navy Veteran I've met at Umling La



Chimsule





Umling La Pass



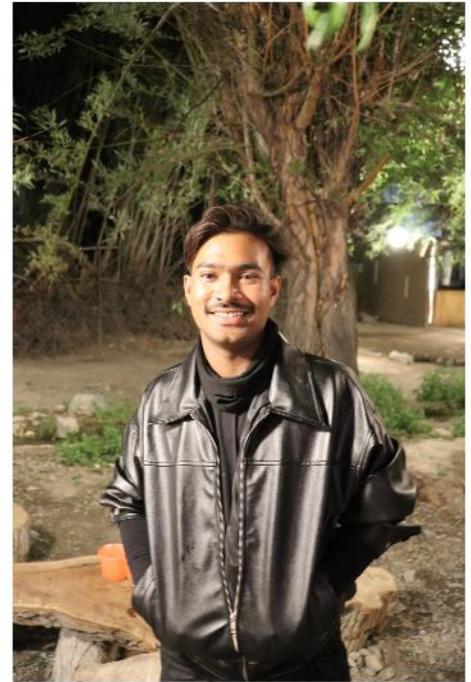
Chapter 8: Accidental Acquaintances



Kaif



Neeraj



Deepak

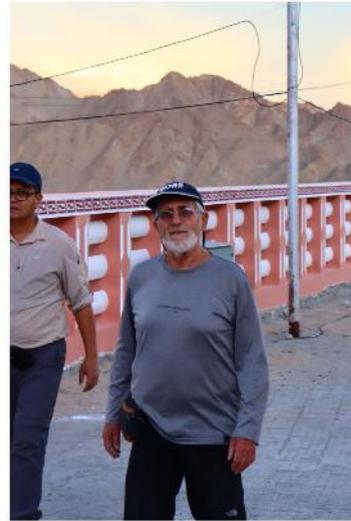
Our time in Hunder became special thanks to a chance encounter with three local friends. They were incredibly chill, and we immediately connected through easy conversation. Two were serving in the Indian Armed Forces, and the third worked with IndiGo, offering a fascinating glimpse into the lives of people in this remote region. They generously invited us to camp together, marking the start of a wonderful evening. First, they took us to a fantastic spot called the Artisan Cafe in Hunder, where the food—and the company—was truly amazing. Afterwards, we headed out to the famous sand dunes to set up camp. We spent the entire night together around a roaring campfire, sharing late-night conversations under the immense, starry sky. That evening spent with them in the vast Nubra Valley fundamentally changed my view of the region. Their genuine kindness and humble, welcoming nature perfectly balanced the rugged, unforgiving landscape. It made me realize that despite the isolation, the true warmth of Ladakh resides in the generous hearts of its people.



Mati



Rajan



Ruephel



Itzik



David



Andrews

My time in Leh was brightened by a chance meeting at Leh Palace. I met a group of six, including five friends from Israel, all impressively over 70, enjoying an unforgettable post-retirement "boys' trip," led by their local friend, Rajan. In an amazing act of kindness, they gave me a ride to tour the key sights. They drove me to the Shanti Stupa, Tsemo Monastery, and Thiksey Monastery, sharing endless tea and biscuits with genuine warmth. Finally, they dropped me back at my hotel. Their sweet, adventurous spirit—exploring the Himalayas in their seventies—was deeply inspiring. This encounter proved that the best part of travel isn't the landmarks, but the generous, wonderful people you meet along the way.



Chapter 9: The Village of Rhongo



Just 40 kilometres from Hanle, we discovered the incredibly peaceful and deeply secluded Rhongo Village, situated beautifully on the bank of the mighty Indus River. It was a serene haven far removed from the main paths. The low population here contributes to a quiet, timeless atmosphere. The landscape is dominated by small patches of lush grasslands, where local cows graze lazily, creating a perfect pastoral scene. The community here sustains itself through traditional farming, with locals working the fields in a peaceful rhythm that seems untouched by the outside world.

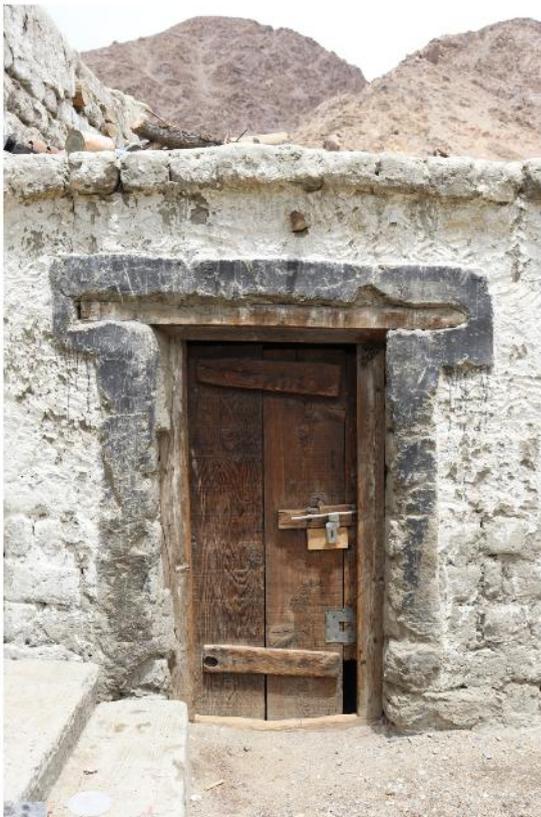
What truly highlights Rhongo's isolation is its limited access. We learned that the village is accessible only via bridges, but out of the three possible crossings over the waterways, only one is capable of handling vehicles. This necessity of funnelling all traffic over a single, dependable structure underscores the area's remoteness and protected solitude.

Rhongo offered a profound sense of tranquillity, a stark and beautiful contrast to the raw, high-altitude desert that surrounds it. This tiny village, quietly nestled by the Indus and guarded by its bridges, felt like a secret corner of Ladakh, preserving a humble and calm way of life.



The homes in Rhongo are a fascinating study in local ingenuity and adaptation. Given the very low rainfall and snowfall in this high-altitude desert, the houses feature flat roofs, a key architectural difference from mountain regions that see heavy precipitation. The construction relies on locally sourced materials, primarily sun-dried clay bricks. These are set into thick walls, which provide excellent natural insulation against the harsh, outside cold. A distinct traditional aesthetic is maintained through the hand-crafted frames, featuring unique "shinga" frames for both the windows and the doors. Once the masonry is complete, the walls are skillfully plastered with lime. This final layer is applied by hand, and everywhere you look, you can observe the subtle, personal hand imprints left by the builders, truly bringing the final house to life. This architecture is a direct reflection of the people and the rugged environment they call home.







The village of Rhongo's approach to sanitation is a direct and ingenious response to the extreme water scarcity of the region, eliminating the use of water entirely. The most prominent and currently used structures are closed, two-level dry composting toilets. Users access the upper level, where a simple hole in the clay slab facilitates waste collection. All waste drops to the lower level, which can be accessed from the back of the structure. Locals regularly pour soil or ash on top of the collected material to aid decomposition. When a significant amount is gathered, the nutrient-rich compost is harvested and used as essential manure for their fields, completing a sustainable cycle. An older, now rarely-used model was an open toilet where stones provided a visual barrier. Once used, the soil would be added to the spot to allow decomposition. The prevalence of the sophisticated two-level system today reflects a highly efficient and environmentally conscious method of surviving and thriving in this remote desert environment.



Chapter 10: Ultimate Bike Trip



This journey, logging over 1,200 kilometres across the vast cold desert of Ladakh, was the greatest test of my life. As my first bike trip, it was an experience defined by exhilarating beauty and relentless challenge. It was just two people and two saddlebags tethered to a Royal Enfield Himalayan, tackling terrain that demands everything you have. Crucially, I was the lone rider throughout the entire odyssey, a distinction that amplified the solitude and intensified every mile.

The drive was fueled by the sheer, unadulterated beauty of the terrain. The landscape was a majestic, painted canvas of stark mountains and deep, silent valleys. Yet, this stunning scenery was relentlessly unforgiving. We were in a constant, unpredictable battle with the region's notorious weather: temperatures under the sun reached 17°C–19°C, but plummeted to a cold 6°C–7°C when cloudy, and dropped to a brutal 1°C–2°C in the rain or hail. The isolation I felt as the sole operator was immense, especially in the high passes where zero network coverage meant zero backup. The most demanding challenge lay in the blinding visibility. When heading to Umling La.



The physical tests were memorable. Near Agham Village, we had a chilling dunk: falling over, bike and all, in an ice-cold glacier water crossing. That moment served as a painful reminder of the environment's power.



Yet, despite the brutal toll—the hail, the falls, the exhaustion of constant focus—the pure sheer happiness of riding was unwavering. It didn't matter if the road was smooth or non-existent; the feeling of covering those 1,200 kilometres, of proving myself against the desolate, high-altitude vastness, was the ultimate reward. From the warmth of the locals to the final triumph of conquering the world's highest road, this first solo adventure was a lesson in self-reliance and the intoxicating joy of the open road amidst sublime, testing natural beauty.





Nidhay at Umling La