

This article first appeared in July 2001 issue of On The Hill magazine. Please note that this article covers the areas of the North and West Himalaya; principally the states of Jammu & Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. It does not include Sikkim or the far Northeast of India (Arunachal Pradesh).

Indian Himalaya

Vital Statistics

Religion: Largely Hindu in the Himachal Pradesh, and Buddhist in Ladakh.

Sizeable Muslim communities, particularly in Jammu & Kashmir. Relatively small pockets of Christians in all areas.

Time difference: GMT + five and a half hours

Currency: Rupee (at the time of writing, there was approximately Rs 50 to the dollar, Rs 70 to the pound).

International telephone code: ++91. Note that international lines to and from outlying regions are unreliable. Many dual-band mobile telephones work in Delhi, but not in the hill regions.

Getting There And Around

By Air: A number of Asian and European carriers fly to Delhi, including Emirates, British Airways and Air India. Return flights on Emirates start from £516 including taxes, for travel before 15th July. For details of Emirates flights from London, Manchester and Birmingham, telephone STA on 0870 160 6070 or visit www.statravel.co.uk. It is imperative that the return leg of all flights is re-confirmed with your carrier at least 72 hours before departure. Individuals returning to Delhi from the mountains less than three days before flying home are strongly advised to re-confirm flights at the start of their trip.

When To Go

Many people who are forced to take their annual holiday during the summer months complain that they are unable to visit the Himalaya at this time, as the region is swamped by the monsoon. Yet some sections of the Indian Himalaya lie

beyond the monsoon belt; in fact, summer is the only time that you can trek through certain areas.

The main trekking season in the state of Jammu & Kashmir (which includes Ladakh and Zangskar) runs from June to October, although certain high passes may be impassable until August due to late-lying snow. (See the Jammu & Kashmir warning in the 'Safety' section). The best months for trekking in the Himachal Pradesh are May, September and October. The summer months signal a meltdown in Delhi; any residents of the city who can afford to dodge the heatwave and escape to higher, cooler altitudes do so. Hill stations such as Shimla, which were popularised by the British during the Raj, are now visited by holidaying Indians during June, July and August. A few specialist activities, such as traverses of the frozen river of Zangskar, and heli-skiing, take place in the winter months.

What To Take

People planning to trek or tour in the Indian Himalaya during the summer months need to take equipment that will deal with four main weather conditions; cold nights, extremely sunny days, strong winds and the occasional downpour. Equipment should be as light in weight and as versatile as possible. Suggested items include:

- long-sleeved shirt
- shorts (but avoid wearing in towns and villages)
- thermal top (for evenings or bad weather)
- wind-resistant 'trekking' trousers
- fleece jacket
- second fleece (or duvet jacket if sleeping above 3500m)
- windproof top
- waterproofs or umbrella
- wide-brim or legionnaire sunhat
- warm hat
- gloves
- boots with ankle support

- socks
- ice axe (if crossing snow-clad passes, particularly early in the season)
- water filter or iodine tablets
- water bottles
- sleeping bag (warm to -10°C if sleeping between 3500-4500m)
- foam mat or Thermarest
- rucksack
- large holdall (for porter load)
- first aid kit
- insect repellent & bite cream
- sunblock & aftersun
- UV-proof sunglasses
- trekking poles
- headtorch & spare batts
- binoculars (optional)
- map & compass
- camera, spare batts, film
- insurance, passport, visa & trekking permits (see Paperwork section)
- photos of family and pics of life in UK (to break the 'ice' with local people)
- money
- guidebooks and phrase book (see Further Reading section)
- whistle (for attracting attention in an emergency)
- rubbish bag for carrying out litter (but bring used batteries back to UK)

Depending on whether you trek independently (not recommended at this time, see 'Safety' section) or with a commercial organisation, you may need to take the following items:

- paraffin or multifuel stove & fuel bottles (consider buying Indian stoves)
- tent
- water containers (for campsite convenience)
- trowel for digging toilet

Health

Check with your GP or local travel clinic on the inoculations required. Note that some injections that may be a necessity in the south of the country may not apply in the north. Certain vaccinations require a course of injections spread over weeks or even months, so plan ahead.

Travelling to altitude is not without risks, especially if you are being taken passively (i.e. by bus or aeroplane). People flying into high altitude towns such as Leh should allocate two or three days to rest and allow the acclimatisation process to begin, before undertaking any form of exercise.

Check This Out: *Altitude Illness, Prevention & Treatment* by Stephen Bezruchka M.D. (ISBN: 1-871890-57-8) published in the UK by Cordee.

Safety

People pull all kinds of scams in India, particularly in Delhi. The general rule of thumb in the capital city is: if anyone comes up to you saying anything about anything - it's a scam. By all means go along with it, but expect to spend or give some money at some point during the 'sting'. The best ones I encountered were: the man claiming to be from the ministry of tourism, who apologised for all the other people pulling scams, before whisking me off to various emporiums; and the shoe-cleaner who flicked slime on my friend's shoe without either of us noticing, and then charged an astronomic amount to clean it off. If you do agree to any service, rickshaw ride etc. negotiate the rate first, and don't let anyone do anything until the price has been agreed. At the end of the day, everyone is just trying to earn a buck - preferably yours.

Driving on Indian roads is a hazardous activity at the best of times: every year many people die or are injured as a result of vehicles driving off roads and plummeting down cliffs. This risk can be dramatically reduced simply by not travelling at night.

At the time of writing (March 2001, shortly after the author returned from a visit to the region) the political situation in the state of Jammu & Kashmir was turbulent. The Travel Advice Unit of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, and the staff of

the British High Commission in Delhi, strongly advise against travel in all parts of the state except for Ladakh (Zangskar is part of Ladakh). Even travellers to Ladakh and Zangskar are urged to be cautious, particularly in light of the murder of a German tourist by suspected Kashmiri terrorists in 1999. As a result, no specific treks into Jammu and Kashmir (except for Ladakh) are described in this article. Kashmir, with its towns such as Srinigar, remains one of the most beautiful parts of the Himalaya, but with continued acts of terrorism, kidnappings and murder, any travel, including road travel, is really too dangerous to contemplate. All travel to Leh should be via air from Delhi, or by road via Manali.

In addition, several acts of violence were committed against westerners in the Himachal Pradesh in the summer of 2000. As a result, all visitors to the Indian Himalaya are advised to travel in large groups of four or more, and to hire local guides.

The situation is constantly changing: readers intent on visiting any part of the Indian Himalaya are strongly advised to visit www.fco.gov.uk/travel, or look at Ceefax p470 onwards.

Email

Internet access is cheap and plentiful in Delhi. Elsewhere, connection is not guaranteed. It may be more effective to compose your message off-line, and allow the provider to send your message on your behalf when connection becomes possible. You may also be recommended to ask people to send email messages to the provider's email address, as maintaining a connection to sites such as Yahoo! and Hotmail can be difficult. In these instances, put the provider's email address in the email that you are sending, and ask the recipient to 'cc' it to both your normal address and the temporary one.

Money

The Indian Rupee was, at the time of writing, fairly stable. You end up with a wad of notes for your money, so you may wish to divide this about your person. As well as being a smart move from a safety point-of-view, it can also be extremely embarrassing to present a large number of bills when trying to pay for an item of

low value. When changing money in Indian banks, ask for a reasonable quantity of low denomination notes (RS 10, 20, 50) as shopkeepers in rural areas rarely admit to having any change, and usually try and give you some extra products in lieu of cash.

Language

A number of languages are spoken in the Indian Himalaya. Here we highlight one of the most common (Hindi) and one of the rarest (Zangskari):

	Zangskari	Hindi
Please	Ju	(intonated)
Thank you	thugs je che	Shukriya
Hello	Jule!	Namaste!
Goodbye	Jule!	Namaste!

Many Indians speak excellent English; those that do not, usually want to improve their English by speaking to visitors like you! This can make learning their language quite difficult.

Delhi

Anyone heading for the part of the Indian Himalaya which lies in the north-west of the country, is almost certain to pass through Delhi. Entire books have been written on what to see and do in the city. Suffice to say that Delhi is a great place to put on a few pounds before heading for the hills; or losing a few pounds if you get sick! Hotel accommodation ranges from just a few dollars a night to many hundreds of pounds. If you are planning to spend several weeks in the mountains, it is (in the author's opinion) worth spending a sufficient amount in order to eat and sleep well. Plenty of local and western restaurants abound on Connaught Circus and in the grounds of the major hotels, so at the end of your trek if you are busting for Pizza Express or TGI Friday, you'll find them here.

Mountain Accommodation

Unlike Nepal, where tea houses have become all too familiar on popular trails such as Everest and Annapurna, many treks in the Indian Himalaya demand that

tents be carried, as few buildings exist en route. This inevitably entails employing porters for the longer treks.

Wildlife

Bharal, ibex, snow leopard, bear, forest leopard and musk deer inhabit the mountains. Despite the fact that many are on the endangered species list, and hunting is officially banned, some poaching still goes on. There are 10 National Parks in the Indian Himalaya and one, the Corbett National Park, also boasts tiger and elephant.

The Mountains

The Himalaya is what most people travelling to the region want to see. The Indian Himalaya has little (if any) sign of the regular Himalayan tourist trade. Entire villages turn out to greet you, and, yes, there are stunning rock walls and mountain formations. Some of the most popular treks include:

Lamayuru to Darcha (via Padum and the Shingo La)

Best time: July to September

Duration: Three weeks

A long, tough trek through the ancient kingdom of Zangskar that takes in a battery of 4500-5000m passes, so prior acclimatisation in Leh is essential before setting out. Can be trekked in either direction. The monastery at Lamayuru is worth a look. It is possible to do half of this trek by entering/exiting by road at Padum and driving to Kargil (but see the 'Safety' section).

Spituk to Hemis (via Markha Valley)

Best time: July to October

Duration: 7-10 days

More visitors to Leh complete this trek than any other, and with good reason. It links the yellow-hat monastery at Spituk with the red-hat monastery at Hemis; the latter is one of the most important for this particular sect of Buddhism. Hemis' annual festival is held at the time of the full moon in June. Every 11 years, an enormous thanka (painting) is unveiled. The next unveiling will be in 2002.

Song to the Pindari Glacier

Best time: May, June, September, October

Duration: 7 days

A relaxed trek that provides views of some of the most beautiful peaks in the Indian Himalaya. The Pindari River is an important tributary of the Ganges, but this trek, through pastures and forest, is walked by surprisingly few pilgrims.

Biking

Cycling through the Indian Himalaya has recently become very popular, and commercial tours along some of the 'world's highest navigable roads' abound. The roads in question are usually in a poor condition, so expect your bicycle - and your backside - to sustain a fair amount of wear and tear: pack all necessary spares.

Mountaineering & Ice Climbing

Climbing in the Indian Himalaya seems to have become less popular in recent years, due to the bureaucracy surrounding the obtaining of permits. The good news is that there are dozens of peaks still awaiting first ascents, and many conquered peaks still have unclimbed faces. The modern sport of ice climbing has only recently arrived in the Indian Himalaya.

I Did It! Frozen waterfall specialist Neil Pamment discovered more than he bargained for when he travelled to the Indian Himalaya in order to climb in a gorge that had never been visited by ice climbers.

"As we explored the region, we spotted frozen streams entering the main river on either side of the gorge. Some of those continued up for half a mile or more. One canyon we climbed was shoulder-width for over 100 feet. The only other place I had seen this type of ice was in Canada. Eventually we found what we had been looking for: steep, solid ice that no-one had ever climbed before. So we were quite excited by that. Some of the frozen waterfalls came straight down onto the river.

“The whole area appeared to be so inhospitable. We went up one valley; I was convinced that no-one had ever been up there before. But we kept finding chopped, dry sticks. We followed the canyon for about an hour. Then, as we were about to turn around, a monk popped his head up, and started waving and shouting. I was totally gobsmacked. This chap had appeared in the middle of nowhere. The valley turned out to be a shortcut between two villages. The inhabitants had manufactured a path by laying down logs, and in-filling with rocks. It was like a scene out of *The Hobbit* - totally surreal. All that separated me from a drop of a thousand feet were some bits of wood. The monk showed us a better way down along a trail that we didn't even know was there. He pointed out tracks of snow leopard and wolf to us, and he also showed us where the Zangskaris used to mine ore, and smelted it right there in the middle of the hills. The smelting community had lived in caves, the roofs of which were stained black from soot. He wasn't at all surprised to see us. The way the locals work is just different to westerners. They are in harmony and partnership with their surroundings.

“The ice climbing was as good as I have experienced anywhere. In Canada the ice is much more accessible and obvious. In Zangskar we were talking about a much higher altitude, and more esoteric in the way the icefalls are hidden. The access to one frozen waterfall was only six foot wide. It would have been so easy to just walk past and miss it. There are so many hidden gems. One ice climb went up for 1000ft, then levelled out into a small oasis, at a point where the water had carved out the rock into a bowl. Sat in the middle of the bowl was a dead ibex. It was bigger than a red deer, and frozen solid. It must have fallen a hundred feet or more. You could look into it where it had been partially eaten by birds. You could even touch its heart - if you wanted to! No-one would have been in that bowl before. There was no access to it other than by climbing up the frozen water; it would have been impossible for any other animal to get there. The fact that everything was so different to anything I had experienced before was one of the most exciting things about the expedition.”

Check This Out! Two books to whet your appetite for unclimbed peaks are:
Exploring The Hidden Himalaya, by Soli Mehta and Harish Kapadia (ISBN 0-340-

50449-8) published by Hodder & Stoughton, and High Asia by Jill Neate (ISBN 0-89886-278-8) published by Unwin Hyman. Although both books are now over 10 years old, they are still the accepted 'bibles' on the subject, and offer a wealth of information for people seeking virgin summits.

Skiing

According to the cognoscenti, the best heli-skiing in the world isn't in the Alps, or the USA. It's in the Indian Himalaya. Australian Roddy MacKenzie runs a heli-skiing operation from the Indian town of Manali, which, according to MacKenzie, is known for having one of the deepest snowpacks in the Himalaya. So if you've got a few thousand pounds to spare, then you can enjoy a week of being shuttled about from valley floor to mountain top. In between there's 2300m (that's nearly 7600ft!) of vertical descent from 5000m summits. Strong intermediate to expert skiers can contact MacKenzie's operation through Greater Himalayan Outdoor. Tel: +91 011 6083358. Email:gho@vsnl.com. People with smaller budgets will find that the Indian Himalaya has virtually untapped potential for ski mountaineering and ski touring; assuming that you're prepared to make your own way to the top of the passes.

Rafting

The Indus and Zangskar rivers can be rafted in the summer months. One or two operators are able to organise rafting expeditions. For details contact Ibex Expeditions, G-66 East of Kailash, New Delhi, 110065, India. Tel: 0091 11 6912641. Email: ibex@nde.vsnl.net.in. www.ibexexpeditions.com.

But I've been to Nepal before, so I've 'done' the Himalaya, right?

Not according to Garry Weare, author of Lonely Planet's guide to trekking in the Indian Himalaya...

"If you're considering a first time trek, or have already trekked in Nepal, then a trek in the Indian Himalaya provides some outstanding possibilities.

"A trek through the hidden valleys of Ladakh and Zangskar affords an unrivalled opportunity to appreciate a rich cultural history similar to Tibet. Trek across the

rugged, barren folds of the Trans Himalaya, through a landscape dotted with ancient Buddhist monasteries and tiny whitewashed settlements set amid fields of barley.

“Himachal Pradesh offers a fine selection of treks. Ascending out of the Kullu Valley, the trails wind through mixed oak and conifer forests to alpine meadows where Gaddi shepherds graze their flocks beneath the glistening peaks of the Pir Panjal and Himalaya ranges. Or complete a challenging trek from Himachal over the main Himalaya Range to Ladakh.

“For exceptional experiences there are fine opportunities to explore the Garhwal and Kumaon regions of Uttarakhand. Treks in the vicinity of Nanda Devi (at 7816 metres the highest peak in India) are hard to beat. Follow trails through traditional Hindu villages and across the bugyals - the renowned high altitude meadows - to appreciate the rich array of wildflowers. Or follow pilgrim trails to Gaumukh, the sacred source of the Ganges.

“Ensure you are well prepared. Expect to see only a handful of other trekkers, and allow time to savour the hospitality of remote villages and settlements a world away from the more popular trails in Nepal.”

For detailed descriptions of treks throughout the Indian Himalaya, get hold of a copy of Garry Weare’s guidebook, ‘Trekking In the Indian Himalaya’, which is published by Lonely Planet. ISBN: 1-74059-085-6.

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