



WHERE Northern India **START** Manali
FINISH Leh **DISTANCE** 587 kilometres
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HIMALAYAN HIGHWAY

Northern India has some of the highest roads in the world. CTC member **Colin Ward** travelled there with CTC Cycling Holidays

Ten months earlier I'd been reading the CTC Cycling Holidays brochure at the breakfast table. One stood out: 'An adventurous tour traversing the Himalaya to the Buddhist kingdom of Ladakh.' The following summer – a stone lighter and with many training rides under my belt – I was in Manali in northern India.

I glanced at the local paper, the Himachal Pradesh edition of The Tribune: '15 Killed in Bus Mishap', read the headline. Two days before we arrived, a bus was hit by a boulder on the Keylong-Leh Highway and it plunged 200 feet down into a gorge. It was the same road we were due to travel.

Our departure from Manali was delayed by 24 hours while the road was cleared. We had already had a 50km shakedown ride on our reassembled bikes, the day after we'd flown into Delhi and then up to Kullu on a smaller Kingfisher plane. So there was nothing to do but wait. We watched rain gush off the roofs and

- 1) Low gears essential
- 2) Heavy rain caused a rockslide
- 3) Waiting to start in the valley
- 4) Altitude sickness is an issue
- 5) A short hop from New Delhi
- 6) On the way to 5,300m up
- 7) Roads were often unsurfaced

listened to the thundering Beas River.

That afternoon the sun appeared, and in the hotel bar at seven, tour leaders John and Pat Ashwell told us that the road to our first camp at Marhi was expected to be clear by morning. A great cheer went up and glasses were charged with Kingfisher beer to toast the road menders.

DO NOT PASS

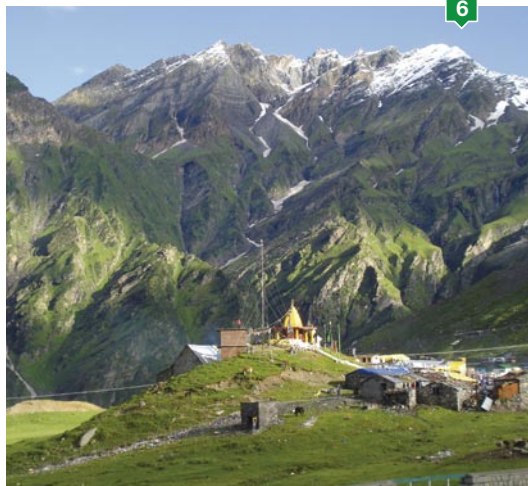
A pair of saffron-robed Buddhist monks sat chanting their mantras in the hotel foyer as we departed. They gave us white silk scarves, which streamed in the breeze. The sun was shining, the road was drying and we were optimistic. A beekeeper and groups of happy tourists in taxis waved to us as we began to climb.

After 25km we ate our first roadside lunch while looking down on our morning hairpins in the valley below. There was very little traffic on the climb to Marhi, which I was grateful for as it meant I could ride in the middle of the road; I was scared of the precipitous drop at the edge.

High above our camp, the road to the first big pass – the 3,950 metre Rhotang La – zigzagged up the steep mountainside. We could see the bright red and yellow trans-Himalaya trucks queuing near the top. Apparently, rocks had fallen on a truck carrying bottled gas, blocking the road. All we could do was keep our fingers crossed that it would be cleared by morning.

It wasn't. After riding and pushing through thick mud for a couple of hours, we passed a long line of waiting lorries and reached the place where the police had stopped the traffic. Gas bottles had been unloaded and

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DO IT YOURSELF

» Return flights from London Heathrow to Delhi are about £500-£600, and it costs around £90-£120 each way to fly from Delhi to Kullu and back from Leh. For suggestions on routes, including Manali to Leh, read *Himalaya By Bike* by Laura Stone (£16.99, Trailblazer). See also the website himalayabybike.com

the damaged truck bulldozed out of the way so that the road workers could dynamite the fallen rocks.

John asked the police officers if we could pass. They said no; it was too dangerous. Even if we could get through with our bikes, our bus with the food, support crew and camping equipment would be left behind. John made the tough decision to lead us back down to the Marhi campsite.

We waited the whole of the next day, drinking tea from a *dhaba* in the sunshine beside the river and listening to the dynamite explosions. Puffs of smoke issued from the road high above. Just after four o'clock in the afternoon, word reached us that the blockage had been cleared, but traffic from the north was being allowed through the narrow gap first.

With flights to catch from Leh to Delhi and from Delhi to London, we were now two days behind schedule – even if we sacrificed a rest day in Leh. There was nothing for it but to load the bikes on top of the bus and drive until we crossed the 4,800-metre snow-clad Baralacha Pass, which is where we'd have cycled to without the delays.

RIDING HIGH

The sky was very blue up here and the sun shone on multi-coloured rocky scenery that no photograph can do justice to. Riding downhill was easy, but as soon as I had to climb even the gentlest ascent my legs were like jelly and I was panting for breath. We were at a seriously high altitude and I found that the reduced oxygen level was really sapping my strength. In the afternoon we climbed the 21 hairpins of the Gata



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› Loops to the 4,950-metre Namkeela Pass. Then we descended just 300 metres to our campsite at Whisky Nalah.

This was our highest camping place. I felt cold and sick and had a bad headache. It was altitude sickness. I got straight into my sleeping bag and took a diamox tablet and a couple of paracetamol. Some of my companions suffered from symptoms much worse than mine; others appeared to suffer not at all.

I didn't feel fully fit the next morning but at least the headache was gone. I mounted up and rode for the first half of the day. In the afternoon, I hitched a lift in the bus. The day after was the big one – the 5,300 metre Taglang La – and I wanted to climb it.

We camped near to Tso Kar Lake at the north end of the Morei Plain. It was a warm evening and I took my camera to photograph a brilliant white stupa (a Buddhist place of worship) before dinner. When I woke in the night, there were a million stars in the sky and the Milky Way looked positively creamy. No light pollution up here!

Next morning, I didn't have a headache and the breathlessness had gone. The road would climb another 700 metres over 36km, the sort of ride I would think nothing of at home. After a short stretch of sand we had 10km of recently laid tarmac, where we bowled along as if we were on a Sunday morning club ride. The mountain air was fresh in my face and wild birds sang me on my way.

Then the road got rougher again. We began to string out as each cyclist found his or her own pace. I was slowing down and feeling weaker. Down below, I could see the bus slowly gaining on me. Surely I wasn't going to be swept up? Not this close to the top – I could see it! I drank some fruit juice and kept going.

Up ahead, I could see a string of prayer flags like coloured T-shirts on a washing line. It was the top! The guys that were ahead of me were waving and cheering. 'Well done!' they yelled in my ear, slapping me on the back. 'You made it!' 🌟

8) After getting off their own bikes, the group explored urban India by cycle rickshaw

9) The bus was the trip's luggage carrier and backup vehicle



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FACT FILE HIMALAYAN TRAVERSE

Route: Manali to Leh on Indian National Highway 21.

Distance: 587km total, including day rides to Nagar and the Khardung La, 447km by bike and 140km by bus.

Time taken: 10 days travel from Manali and Leh, including the ride to Nagar.

Conditions: High altitude mountains, with a sometimes lunar-like landscape. Road surfaces very variable.

Bike: Thorn Sherpa.

Others rode either traditional touring bikes or hardtail mountain bikes.

Accommodation: Mixture of hotels and organised camping.

Price: £1,895 in 2011, including flights, food and accommodation. For 2012, it is £2,295 for a 20-day tour (reference 1247). At time of writing, places remained. Other than that, you only need spending money – maybe £100.

More information: cyclingholidays.org

