

Ladakh diary

Anand and I have been planning to go on a motorcycle trip to Ladakh for a long time and we finally decided to stop talking and do something about that!

20/4:

- Took a cab at 4:00 AM to the Airport. Anand took the bus, likes to live on the edge that one. :) Our flight departs from Bangalore at 7:00 AM and reached Delhi by 9:00 where we have an hours' layover and then we take another flight to Leh where we reach by 1:00 PM.





- So much for our plan, the flight to Delhi is delayed by an hour! We have a connect at Delhi at 11:10! ***nervous!***
- Thankfully the delay turned out to only be about 15 minutes. We're well on our way.



21/4:

- It's funny that I started writing this yesterday.. We had to cancel the trip due to unexpected heavy snowing in Leh causing flights to be cancelled.
- We landed in Delhi and got to know immediately that flights to Leh have been cancelled. We approached the Indigo kiosk for help and had to stand in a queue with fellow passengers to get that sorted. All said and done we got a return flight

booked and came back to Bangalore last night around 10.



Not the best of ends.. but hopefully there's more to be written in this journal.

2/5:

So, here we are less than a month later and we're going to go again end of this month — May 27th - June 4th. Here's hoping for a better experience this time around!

5/5:

This time, I intend to do a few things that I had glossed over the last time.

1. **Weight train** - Ladakh's roads have terrible terrain and you need to manoeuvre a 200 kilo motorcycle about which requires strength. I intend to start on a regimen of squats, pull ups, plank and push ups everyday at least until our trip. (I am hoping the training also alleviates and maybe fixes the pain I have on my right arm due to rotator cuff impingement.)
2. **Get Experience riding on dirt tracks** - city riding is not the same as riding trails in Ladakh. We need experience riding in off road conditions. So we're planning to take the bikes to off-road tracks in Bangalore and get some practice.

25/5:

This is still happening! Since I last wrote in this diary, we've had a war, a ceasefire, I got a new motorcycle— a Triumph Scrambler 400x, my rotator-cuff tear got confirmed and we are still flying!

I spent the day attending a training course for riding off-road. We drove to a small hilly area near Nandi Hills to an academy called "Tribal Adventure." The sessions were informative and the practice drills helped me build confidence with the motorcycle. It was an awesome experience and I learnt a lot. I'm feeling a lot more confident about the trip ahead.



That's me on the far right there. Well, let's hope I don't jinx it. :)

27/5:

Finally, we're boarding the flight to Mumbai! We're flying there en route to Leh. Let's hope this time goes better than last. Of course, to add to the drama there have been terrible rains in Mumbai.



If things go well, we should be landing in Ladakh a day in advance. Today is also Anand's birthday and I'm hoping it's special for him.

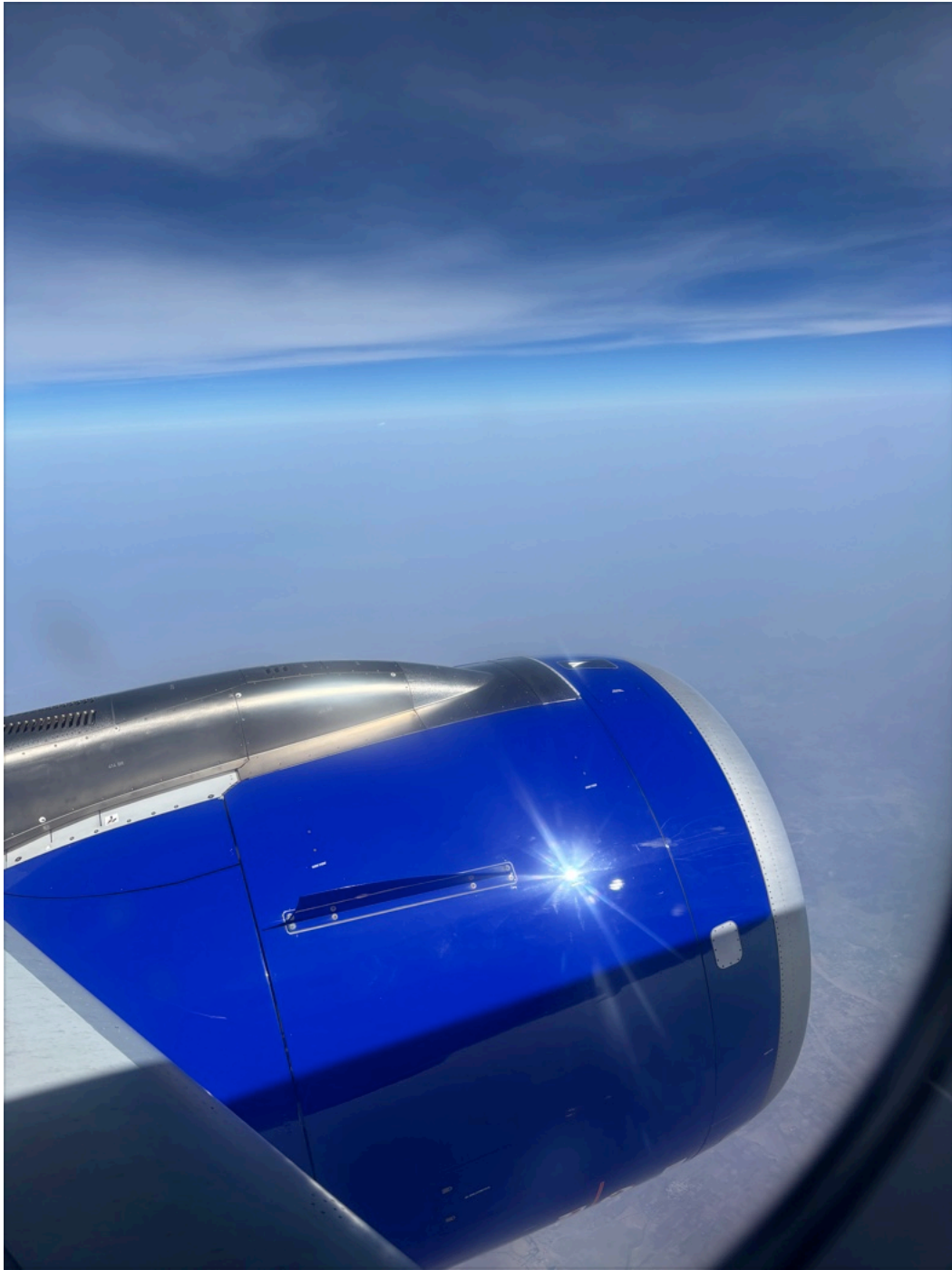


We got a window and an aisle seat without paying a dime as the flight was fairly light on passengers. Here's hoping our luck lasts.

Bombay is a funny airport. You have exit out of the airport and get back to catch your "connecting" flight between terminals 1 and 2. So we coughed up 350 bucks to a cabby to ferry us over. Oh well. At least we're here on the flight, ready to go!



Beautiful weather for flying!



... and we're here. This truly is fantastic!





We finally were allowed to de-board and after getting access to our luggage, caught a taxi to the hotel.

The hotel is pretty comfortable. Had a really tasty meal — some roti and gobi sabji. We went for a short walk after that.





Wow, that nap turned out to be rather long! It's 5:30 PM now, planning to go out now and explore a bit.

We rented an Avenger for a day and went exploring. We went down to the highway that leads to Pangong T'so and enjoyed the beautiful mountain vistas.





We returned back to Leh market and had some Thupka which is wheat noodles and vegetable soup, a specialty here and Ladakhi momos which are made of wheat instead of rice.



I'd say that was a pretty relaxing first day :). Hopefully, it continues throughout the trip!

28/5:

We started the day with a really well brewed cup of masala tea in the hotel with the company of this beautiful black-billed magpie:



After that, we went on a relaxing ride to Shanti stupa temple in Leh.





This offered one of the best views in all of Leh. You are able to see miles with crystal clean air:



We took the cheap ₹30 tickets which are being used for temple renovation. The temple was quite beautiful:



Anand, as per custom had the best poses:





We climbed further up to the top of the stupa and were rewarded for our efforts with this majestic view:



This is one of those instances where pictures don't do justice to the place:



We were overwhelmed by the raw beauty of the valley and were humbled by nature.

We decided to stretch further south from the Leh town to Karma

Dupgyug Choeling monastery. Anand was particularly interested in a series of stupas which looked quite beautiful and seemed to be situated near this monastery.

After a ride of about 10kms from Leh, we were able to access the monastery. It looked to be a school for monks and it was charming and serene, perhaps almost disconnected from the rest of the world.



It wouldn't be a stretch to say we stood out like a sore thumb there:



However, the series of stupas were nowhere to be found. We approached a monk and asked him where we could find such a thing. He merely pointed us to the left and went back to reading his book.

The "left" turned out to actually be getting out of the monastery and exploring the fields opposite to it and we were richly rewarded for our efforts.

We found, after some exploration, hand-carved stone carvings of teachings of Buddha carved under a series of big stupas. They stood in a barren field as far as eyes could see, surrounded by beautiful mountainous vistas.



Each one these eight stupas had murals with various teachings of Buddha.



We climbed up the watch tower nearby to take even more pictures:





This one made me pause and reflect:



Next, we decided to ride back into town to checkout the Leh palace. This palace was constructed during the time of King Semge Namgyal in the 17th century.

This place is under the maintenance of the Archeological Survey of India. After paying the modest entry fee of ₹25, we were allowed to access the place.



In addition to offering a commanding view of the Leh town,



the palace also boasts a unique architecture. It's built with wood, stone and thick mud.

ASI had quite an informative presentation on the history and cultural significance of the place.

After our visit to the palace, we enjoyed a delicious thupka at "The Tibetan Kitchen":



We realised amidst all of these adventures that we'd lost track of time and it was nearing 4 PM already. Realising which, we rushed back to our hotel for our first tour briefing.

We returned the Avenger which had served us well over the past day and got our new motorcycles. A Royal Enfield Himalayan 411:



There was some paperwork which we filled out in order to rent the motorcycle. We'll be using this to cover the areas around Leh, over the next six or so days.

Thank you for sticking by me this far. Hopefully, more adventures await the next couple of days.

I'll leave you with this:



29/5:

Woke up insanely early at around 5:00. I'm usually up till 12 and wake up around 6/7. Since I've been sleeping earlier, I've been waking up a bit earlier as well.

Today's agenda is mostly around Leh:

- Martyr's Hall of Fame
- SECMOL

- Sham valley
- Sangam point

We got our bikes and got geared up in the morning, ready to take on the rides.



After we left Leh, we started our day with a trip to Martyr's Hall of Fame. This celebrated Jawans who've held Ladakh against the Chinese and Pakistani forces.



Arrayed outside were various pieces of artillery that were used by the Indian army in battles of 1962 with China and 1974 with Pakistan.



We had demonstrations of battle lines and various battle points in the frontier regions such as the Siachen glacier from the Jawans.



Also on display were various weapons that were captured from the enemy in battles past.

Finally, there were memorials of Jawans who lost their lives in these battles. A humbling reminder that no price is big enough to repay for their sacrifice.



We ended up purchasing a few souvenirs and started on our next destination: SECMOL.

About an hours' drive from Leh through some beautiful mountain roads is SECMOL, a school with alternate methods of teaching.

A beautiful idea— a small school that teaches life skills for Ladakhi students with emphasis on practical aspects of life and living in harmony with nature.

Some of their projects include:

- Insulated buildings as alternative to heaters
- Greenhouse and garden
- Sewage compost system
- Sun stoves
- Natural Refrigeration cellar

We had demonstrations of some of these by an ex-student.







After SECMOL, we began our journey to Sri Pathan Saheb Gurudwara, which is run by the Indian army.



What an otherworldly place! We spent some time meditating at the temple and enjoyed an amazing lunch (free!) at the gurudwara.



That concluded our tour of the sham valley. As should be a theme by now, again quite surreal!



For our last destination for the day, we rode through some beautiful winding roads to Sangam point which is the meeting of rivers Zanzskar and Indus.

This is also the tallest river rafting point in the world. Anand wasn't feeling great so we decided to stay back and let some members of the trip enjoy their rafting!

Here are some pictures:





We plan to return back to hotel after the rest come back as we've already seen the Leh Palace and Shanti Stupa yesterday.

The ride back to Leh was nice and relaxing, although mostly highways.

We'll know more about the plan for Nubra valley tomorrow. I also have a few repairs to be done for my motorcycle which I plan to get done this evening. Until then!

30/5:

Here we are ready to pack and depart to Nubra valley and one of the highest motorable roads in the world. Excited!

If yesterday's ride was slightly challenging, today's' going to be quite technical. I fear a bit for the folks with pillions as it might be challenging to deal with the additional weight in tricky terrain. We'll see.

30/5, 10:30 PM:

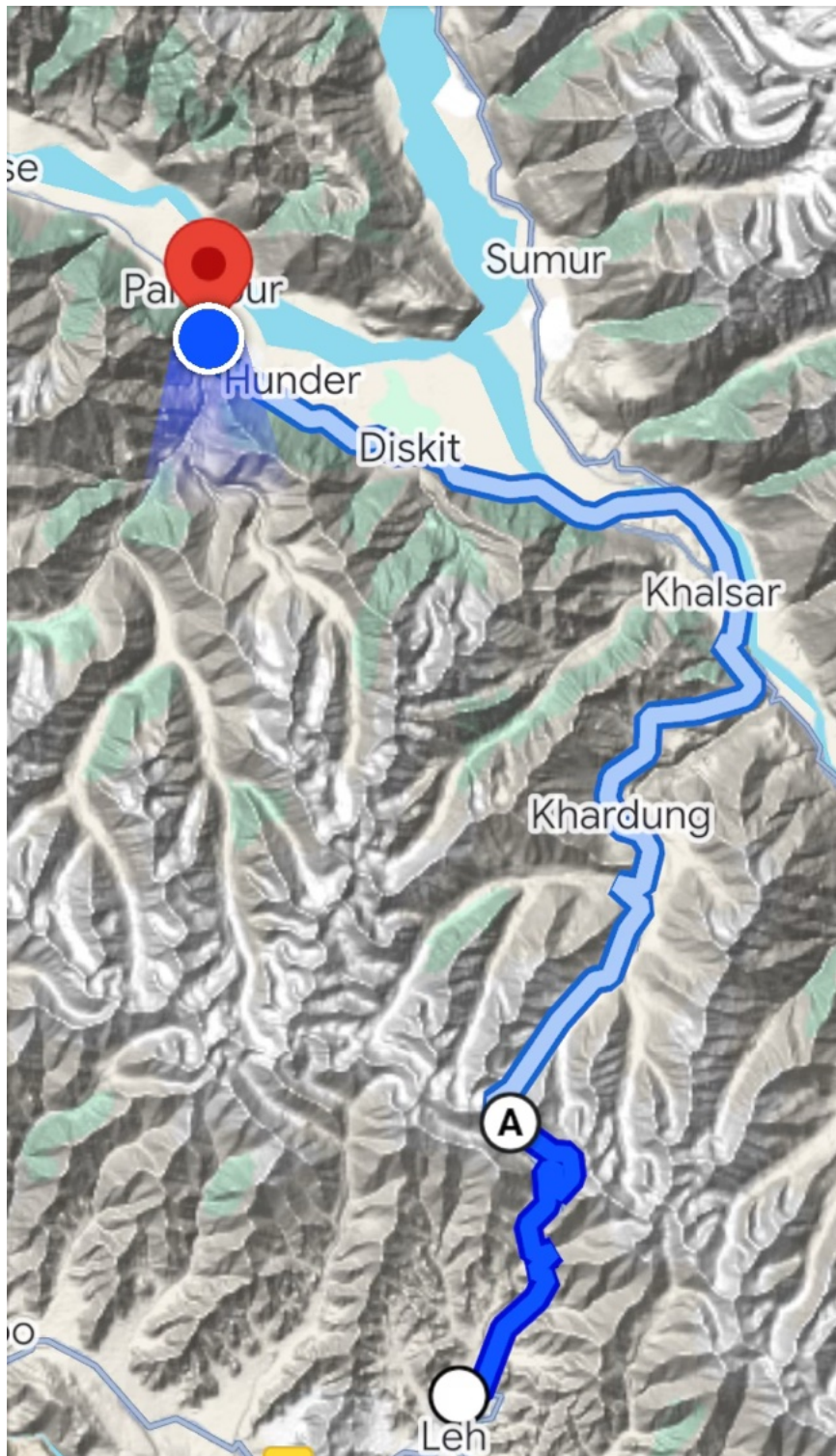
What a day it was! I'm writing this wearing five layers of clothing and still freezing in a tent at 2 degrees celcius with a stream nearby and rain outside.

We got our full set of gear today morning before embarking on a challenging ride.



The goal was to get to Nubra by taking the pass at Khardung-la, one of the highest motorable passes in the world at 17582 ft from sea level.

We started by taking the road from Leh into the mountains North towards Khardung-la.



After navigating some interesting twists on the mountains, we started climbing swiftly and the elevation started to increase.

We started seeing snow at about halfway to Khardung-la and it started becoming quite commonplace.



At the tallest point in Khardung-la pass folks were shovelling snow from the road and we had to ride through narrow passageways with a long fall on the other side.

We managed to hold our nerves! The snow did make up for some light relief in the form of snowballs!



Once we descended from Khardung-la we reached the village of Pullu which has an army base where we had some delicious maggi served so hot, the cold ran away!



It was 3:00 PM when we left Pullu towards Nubra. There were more twisties and mountain passes and I had a lot of fun riding standing up and cornering. As we descended from the mountains, the scenery shifted from cold climes to sandy deserts.

While we were approaching Nubra we got caught up in a sandstorm! Much of the roads here are basically a layer of gravel on top of sand and that was great fodder for some nice skids. We stopped for a bit at an intersection and had nice hot Kahwa chai (a unique Kashmiri tea made from root of Kahwa plant without milk) until the sandstorm subsided.

We managed to survive this and reached a small adventure outpost in the desert where we can do zip lining and ride ATVs. This was my first experience riding an ATV and I found it interesting if a bit monotonous as the terrain was just sandy deserts. I should try one in Bangalore.

After this we ascended up yet another set of twisties to "Diskrit Gompa" which has this humongous Buddha statue and a fantastic view where you can see for miles!





We took a nice group photo here and started our ride to our campsite.



And soon after we reached camp, it started raining and the temperatures fell to 1/2 degrees celcius. We were supposed to have a nice campfire here but rain played spoilsport and we had to cut it short and retire to our tents.

31/5:

We had to change to wearing six layers of clothing to combat the cold and still couldn't get a night of sleep.

It's going to be an interesting ride to pangong lake today which the marshal says is going to involve 40kms of off-roading. Excited and slightly nervous! And of course assuming the rain relents.

Ah the rain has relented indeed and it's bright and sunny!





Here's hoping our luck holds through the day.

We started our day by visiting a small farm where double-humped camels —which are unique to this region— are herded for rides.

We stopped about an hour later at a cafe near this nice home stay for a hot cup of kahwa.



After that break we had a hard ride of about three hours through off-roads involving cliffs, crevasses and dirt, we reached Pangong T'so lake!





This lake truly is magnificent. Its uniqueness can be attributed to it being a border between India and China.

Once we reached our stay for the night near the lake, we were allotted cabins:



After we had a cup of hot tea, we went exploring the lake. Crystal clean waters and beautiful colours of the setting sun awaited us as we took our bikes to the lake shores.





Words won't be enough to describe the beauty and serenity of this place. At least, not mine!



Neither will these pictures, but I'll try:



This is truly one of the most beautiful places on earth.

We then spent sometime exploring the lake shore and there were some opportunities to recreate the scenes from the movie "3 idiots".





It soon started to get chilly as the time went past 6 PM. When we got back to our cabin we were freezing. Temperatures fell to -2 degrees.

Not having much more to do as starting a campfire would've been foolish near log cabins, we retired for the night shivering between rugs of wool and tried to get some sleep.

1/6:

We woke up to bright sunshine which improved our moods and temperatures!



The temperatures during the night had reached -5 degrees. However, a few brave souls amongst us managed to get out at 2 AM and capture pictures of the Milky Way!



Today we'll be travelling to Hanle, one of the eastern most parts of Ladakh bordering China.

We started riding from Pangong lake at half past 10 as we had to fix a flat tire in one of our bikes.



After about two hours of riding through rough terrain, we reached the memorial place for the martyrs of Rezang-la company from the 1962 Indochina war.



Hearing the story of the defence of Rezang-la during the Chinese aggression by Major. Shaitan Singh was truly inspiring and humbling.





One of the Jawans explained to us the battle positions and terrains involved during the war in the region. The region was of great strategic importance due to its connecting position between the Ladakh, Himalayan and Kailash ranges of mountains.

We also watched a short documentary on the ultimate sacrifice of the 114 soldiers who died protecting the position thereby deterring further incursions by the Chinese in-land.

We spent some time meditating on what it means to sacrifice oneself for the nation.



We had our lunch at the cafeteria at Rezang-la and started our ride towards Hanle.

The terrain was mostly arid deserts and dirt with some beautiful red cliffs thrown in for variety. We managed to navigate through without much trouble as we'd gained enough experience by now on dealing with these.

Driving through these terrains on one hand makes one appreciate cities, roads and civilisation. On the other hand, it also relieves you of concerns of sticking by well paved paths and makes you take the less

travelled ways.

I suppose that's the balance one should strive for in life. One of the signposts put up by "Border roads organization" which maintains roads in Ladakh, read:

"Life is a journey, not a race"

I think that's worth remembering.

We managed to cross into Hanle and reach Nyoma, one of the villages bordering the town where we had lodging at a "home stay" run by a very nice family.

Here are some pictures of Nyoma I managed to take before retiring for the night after the hard ride:





2/6:

We'll be travelling to Umling-la today. _The_ highest motorable pass in the world and will return back to Hanle.

These journal updates have been sporadic because there has been no power in the areas we've been travelling!

I want to jot down some thoughts I've been having about this trip. Ladakh challenges you in many ways:

- your skill as a rider
- your resourcefulness under duress
- your strength and endurance

Yesterday, the shoes I had swapped with Anand broke down near Rezang-la. I was riding the rest of the way to Hanle with my hush-puppies'.

Obviously, that's less than ideal to ride with in harsh terrain. So Anand insisted that we figure out a way to get me some shoes somehow. Unfortunately we were nowhere near civilisation to get access to some.

However, the people in Ladakh are amazing. One of the owners of a nearby "homestay" let me borrow their used hard boots for riding. And they served me very well for the remainder of the trip.

Coming back to our ride to Umling-la, we woke up nice and early under bright sunshine:



Anand and I took our motorcycles to the above mentioned homestay and borrowed the boots. Ladakhi people have been amazing!

After a good breakfast, we started our journey in earnest to Umling-la. In some sense we've been preparing throughout this trip for this one journey. Riding to Umling-la involves ascending to an elevation of approx. 19000 ft, navigating harsh mountain terrain, twists and low-oxygen at that elevation. It's the ultimate test of mind, body and resourcefulness.

And one where my body failed me. AMS, otherwise known as, altitude mountain sickness affects you when you encounter higher elevations where your body is deprived of oxygen.

Riders start their Ladakh trip by gradually approaching terrains of higher altitudes there by letting their body get used to the elevation

and low oxygen levels. The way body copes is by thinning the blood. One can improve/accelerate this process by taking blood thinners such as Diamox. Another way is by letting the body naturally acclimatise. I chose the latter route as I prefer drugs as a last resort.

I made through Khardung-la which had an elevation of 17000 ft and felt pretty confident that my body can withstand higher altitudes. Unfortunately, I was mistaken.

On the trip to Umling-la, the first 75% of it that is off the 60kms from Hanle, about 45kms is through torturous mountain terrain and off-roading and the remaining 25% (about 15kms) is through good tar roads but at an elevation of 19000 feet.

We made the first 45kms and stopped at a cafe near Chushul when I started feeling nauseous and developed a bad headache.

I had some "Black tea" at the cafe and promptly spilled it out. I had to take the backup vehicle for the reminder of the journey to the top of umling-la (15kms) after parking the bike in the cafe. I took a paracetamol and started feeling better after about an hour of two and I did ride my bike on the way back.

So, in a way I did make it, but I've not felt the satisfaction that the rest of the company have felt. I needed to get stronger. One day I'll probably attempt this again and do it right. But, for now, we did make it:



The rest of the day's ride back to Hanle was uneventful and while I did spend some time sulking, my mood improved after understanding that you can only control so much. Sometimes, life happens and you just get back up and give it another go.

3/6:

We woke up next day in Hanle to bright sunshine which lifted my spirits considerably.



Today, we return back to Leh to mark the end our trip. And on the way, we look to cover:

- Hot springs of Chumathang
- Thicksey monastery
- Rancho school from “3 idiots”

The day was sadly marred by an unfortunate incident involving a missing backpack of one of the members of the company.

However the rest of us managed to ride to reach “hot springs” of chumathang. The ride was interesting for the intense snowfall through which we rode to reach Chumathang from Hanle. Again another example of Ladakh throwing an unexpected challenge. The people in these lands are strong because they have to be to survive here!



There are spots among the river here that "boil" generating tremendous heat, enough to boil an egg!



We suspect this is due to a chemical reaction as we were able to smell a strong effervescence of sulphur and were careful not to touch the waters. I need to confirm if that's the case though.



After finishing our lunch at a cafe near the hot springs we rode hard to cover almost 200kms to reach Leh by the evening.







Unfortunately, we couldn't make to Thicksey monastery by the evening as it closes at 5. However we did manage to reach the Rancho school of the "3 idiots" fame.





There's not much to see here, but we did manage to grab a few souvenirs.

We reached Leh at around 7:00 PM and returned our bikes and gear that we had rented at the start of the trip.



...

4/6:

Well, that should've been the end of the trip and back home except Anand had the bright idea today to sneak a visit to Thicksey monastery before our flight and we did!

The place was beautiful, serene and difficult to navigate. Almost reflective of the rest of Ladakh! Here are some pictures:





... and that's that. Thanks for tagging along with me through this journey!





Quaraenido invienetis!