

Kargil

Ladakh's best kept secret



KARGIL

LADAKH'S BEST KEPT SECRET

The name Kargil is believed to be derived from 'Gar khil', which means 'meeting place'. Historically, Kargil was known as Purig and is the westernmost region of the vast Tibetan plateau. Some parts of Kargil are at relatively lower elevation and receive the moisture that manages to cross the mighty Himalayan mountain ranges that rings Ladakh in the west and south. These parts of Kargil are more productive for agriculture, vegetables, fruits and plants than other parts of Ladakh.

Kargil has a long and fascinating history with various dynasties and as a hub for trans-continental Silk Route trade that linked Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the world beyond. Its history is still evident in the forts and palaces that dot its landscape, ancient rock carvings and petroglyphs, and rich diversity of linguistic, social, religious and ethnic communities found in Kargil today. In addition to its cultural and spiritual heritage, Kargil's rugged landscape is ideal for adventure activities such as mountaineering, trekking, river rafting, rock-climbing, ice hockey, ice skating, speed skating, and snow skiing.

Kargil is located at the threshold of several biogeographic and is home to species native to Central Asia, Tibet and alpine Himalayan ecosystems. This includes large, charismatic species such as snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*), Himalayan brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), ibex (*Capra ibex sibirica*) and a rich diversity of bird and plant-life.

Kargil is also an important frontier region that gained international fame due to the Indo-Pakistan war in 1999 over control of strategic mountain ridges along the Line of Control that separates them. This war is popularly called the Kargil War and several battle sites such as Tiger Hill, Drass, Batalik, Tololing are well-known across India.

Kargil offers something for everyone, be it history, culture, nature, adventure or social heritage. It is made up of a series of valleys, with each having its own unique history, geographical speciality and distinctive culture.

DRASS: This is the westernmost part of Kargil district and borders Kashmir valley. The highway that connects Kashmir and



Suru valley



Balti ghazal

Ladakh reaches Drass after crossing Zoji-la, which also allows moisture-laden clouds through. As a result, Drass receives more snowfall than other parts of Ladakh. Most residents of Drass belong to the Dardic community. It is famous for horse polo, ice hockey and for the war memorial dedicated to the martyrs of the 1999 war.

KARGIL TOWN: Kargil town is located on the banks of the Suru river, which is an important tributary of the Indus. A number of valleys such as Sodh, Suru, and Drass meet at Kargil town. In the past, Kargil town served as a meeting place for traders from Kashmir, Punjab, Baltistan, Zangskar, Leh, Sinkiang (presently Xinjiang) to exchange goods and ideas. This history is reflected in the diversity of communities that call Kargil home.

SURU VALLEY: Suru valley extends from Kargil town to Zangskar valley. It's in the rain shadow of the Great Himalayan Range and receives relatively higher levels of moisture than other regions. It's one of the most fertile and productive regions in Ladakh. It has a long history of trade with different regions in Ladakh as well as Kashmir and Kishtwar located on the other side of the Himalayas.

Kargil's rugged landscape is ideal for adventure activities



Razi Khar, Chiktan

ZANGSKAR: Zangskar valley is an isolated area south of Suru valley. Zangskar enjoys sub-divisional status within Kargil district and shares borders with Himachal Pradesh in the south, Kishtwar in the west and Leh district in the east. Zangskar is primarily Buddhist with a small Muslim population in Padum, the sub-divisional headquarters. The main access road to Zangskar comes over Penzi-la and connects it with Kargil town. When this pass gets blocked in the winter, Zangskar becomes isolated till it opens again in summer. During the winter, this valley can only be accessed by air or by trekking over the frozen Zangskar river (Chadder trek).

SODH: Sodh is the area east of Kargil town, which was part of the famous Chiktan dynasty founded by Tha Tha Khan. The area is dotted by numerous villages and includes several palaces and sites of spiritual importance.

DARCHIKS-GARKONE-BATALIK: These villages are located along the Indus and inhabited by Dardic communities. These areas are located at lower elevations than other regions in Ladakh and are equally famous for the quality of their vegetables, flowers and fruits as they for the unique culture of the Dardic community.

SHAKAR-CHIKTAN: This area is often regarded as the cultural heartland of Purig. Many of Kargil's traditional songs and dances find their origin in this valley. It is also home to several spectacular palaces and forts. Another interesting aspect of this region

is their time-tested legacy of communal harmony between their mixed population of Buddhists and Muslims, especially in Kuksho and Dargo villages.

WAKHA-MULBEKH: The origins of these villages go back several centuries but little is known of its early history. For instance, the sculptors who carved the Buddhist Chamba in Mulbekh remain shrouded in mystery and it has several elements that predate the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh

SHARGOLE-SAPI: Shargole is located on a side valley from the road that connects Wakha-Mulbekh and Kargil town. This area was an independent kingdom and conducted regular trade with Suru valley, which is located to its west. The area is famous for its important Buddhist paintings, the alpine lake called Sapi-Tso and its rich diversity of herbs.

The communities of Kargil

PURIG-PA: Technically, Purig-pa refers to all residents of Kargil district. It is commonly used to refer to Kargili residents who belong to Tibeto-Mongol ethnicity.

DARDS: The Dards are said to be the original inhabitant of Ladakh and trace their origins in Gilgit. They are believed to belong to the Caucasian race, while other communities in Ladakh are of Tibeto-Mongol origins. This community have been divided into small sub-groups, such as Shin, Yashkon, Karamen and Dom. Overtime, many of them have adopted Islam and Buddhism, while some still follow their traditional animistic beliefs and practices (Bon-chos).

ZANGSKAR-PA: The Zangskar-pas are residents of Zangskar valley, who share cultural and linguistic traits with neighbouring regions of Kishtwar (Jammu) and Lahoul (Himachal Pradesh).

BALTI: This group shares cultural, linguistic and social traits with the people of Baltistan. Several villages in Kargil still retain their traditional Balti practices and dialect.

HOR: In various Tibetan dialects, 'Hor' refers to Central Asia. There are numerous families in Kargil who trace their origins in Central Asia and have now become assimilated in Kargili society.

SIKHS: There is also a small Sikh community in Kargil, whose ancestors were involved in the Silk Route trade. These families



Apricot blossoms

arrived in Ladakh as traders and stayed back even after the trade between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent ceased in the mid- Twentieth Century.

Altitude and health-related precautions

Kargil district is located at an average altitude of over 2,700m above mean sea level. Though marginally lower than Leh district, Kargil's altitude is significantly higher than Kashmir and the Indian sub-continental plains. Though most people do not experience symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) in Kargil, many trekking routes are located at much higher elevations. It's therefore a good idea to be cautious and be alert for symptoms of AMS. The most common symptoms of AMS are headache, disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, coughing, irregular breathing, and inability to concentrate. One should avoid smoking tobacco, alcohol and caffeine-based drinks as they dehydrate the body and interfere with the process of acclimatisation. It's important to get as much rest as possible for the first 24 to 48 hours after arrival in Ladakh. High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema (HAPO) and High Altitude Cerebral Oedema (HACO) are serious forms of AMS, which can be life-threatening and require immediate medical attention. Kargil has a District Hospital and an army hospital, which are equipped to provide medical aid. The best way to acclimatise is to ascent gradually. Kargil town's moderate elevation makes it an ideal place to help your body acclimatise, even as you enjoy Purigi hospitality.

Reaching Kargil:

The easiest way to reach Kargil is by road. The nearest airports are in Srinagar (204 kms) and Leh (225 kms), which are connected by commercial flights to Delhi and other cities in India. The drive from Leh to Kargil is scenic and travels along the historical route that was used to travel between Kashmir and Ladakh. The daily Srinagar-Kargil bus service operates only in the summer, while the daily Leh-Kargil service operates throughout the year. Once Zoji-la is blocked by snow in the winter, Kargil can only be reached by road from Leh.

Alternatively, there are several trekking routes from Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Leh district to different parts of Kargil. Most of these routes can only be traversed in summer, while the famous Chadder trek (over the frozen Zangskar river) can only be used at the peak of winter.

Travel

There are regular bus services to most parts of Kargil district from Kargil town. However, the frequency of this service is infrequent for distant locations such as Padum—and in the case of Zangskar is subject to Penzi-la being open for vehicular traffic.

The most convenient way of getting around Kargil district is by a hired taxi, who have a fixed rate for different routes. One can also bring their own private vehicle in the summer, when the mountain passes are open for traffic. However, driving on mountain roads requires special skill and awareness of driving etiquette. In this regard, hiring a taxi is a better option for commuting within the district and to areas outside.



Traditional purigi dress

Infrastructure				
List of Tourism Department bungalows, Kargil district				
No	Name	Location	Distance from Kargil town	Facilities
1	Tourist Bungalow, Drass	Drass Town	60 km	8 rooms
2	Tourist Bungalow-I, Kargil	Kargil town	-	Presently occupied by LAHDC, Kargil
3	Tourist Bungalow-II, Kargil	Kargil town	-	5 rooms
4	Tourist Reception Centre, Kargil	Kargil town	-	2 dormitories
5	Tourist Bungalow, Mulbekh	Mulbekh	40 km	3 rooms
6	Tourist Bungalow, Heniskut	Heniskut	85 km	3 rooms
7	Tourist Bungalow, Chiktan	Chiktan	72 km	4 rooms
8	Tourist Bungalow, Garkone	Garkone	72 km	4 rooms
9	Ceremonial Tower, Trespone	Trespone	22 km	4 rooms
10	Tourist Bungalow, Sanku	Sanku	40 km	3 rooms, 1 dormitory
11	Tourist Bungalow, Purtikchay	Purtikchay	64 kms	2 rooms, 1 dormitory
12	Alpine Hut, Tangole	Tangole	75 kms	2 rooms, 1 dormitory
13	Alpine Hut, Parkachik	Parkachik	85 kms	2 rooms, 1 dormitory
14	Tourist Bungalow, Rangdum	Rangdum	130 kms	3 rooms, 1 dormitory
15	Tourist Bungalow, Padum	Padum	240 kms	8 rooms
16	Tourist Bungalow, Karsha	Karsha	245 kms	2 rooms, 1 dormitory

In addition, there are homestays, guest houses and hotels in different places like Kargil town, Drass, Padum, Mulbekh, and Garkone. Please check the website or call for more details.

EXPLORE TIMELESS HISTORY

Kargil has a long and fascinating history of innovations and adaptations to the harsh trans-Himalayan conditions. It also had trade and social relations with Central Asia, Tibet, China, and the plains of the Indian sub continent for several centuries. This facilitated an exchange and adoption of artefacts, ideas, and technology. The legacy of this history can be observed in contemporary Kargil with its rich heritage of art, crafts, traditions, festivals, beliefs, and linguistic diversity.

Pre-historic petroglyphs

Unknown and mysterious hands have etched on rocks across Central Asia over hundreds and thousands of years. Ladakh is a treasure trove of this art, which allows us to peek into the minds of prehistoric people, their world and their imagination. These petroglyphs have survived several millennia on the weathered rocks that litter the landscape and depict wild animals, hunting scenes, and spectacular figures. While many sites in Ladakh have been documented, many others remain unknown.

Ancient rock art

Ladakh has a long history of passing travellers. Many of them have left a record of their passage on rocks and boulders. These include Buddhist *Chamba* statues that unknown artisans have skilfully carved on rock faces in the unknown past. Kargil has several sites with early Buddhist rock art that have endured historical changes and the ravages of time. The most notable of these rock arts are in Kartse Khar in Suru valley, Padum town in Zangskar, Apati village in Sodh, Stiangbo in Drass and in Mulbekh. Many of these works show influence of the Gandhara dynasty that ruled over major parts of Afghanistan and north India in the 10th Century CE.

Forts and palaces

The landscape of Ladakh is peppered with remains of forts and palaces (*khar*) built at different times of its history. These structures were built by kings and chieftains on mountaintops from



Buddhist rock art in Kartse Khar



Rock art near Padum

where they could govern their people, while also enjoying a strategic advantage and breathtaking views of the surrounding area. Lechen Palkhar in Leh is probably the most famous such palace, while Razi Khar in Chiktan is possibly the most spectacular palace in Ladakh. Its remains still tower over Chiktan village and provide a glimpse of its former glory and the vision of Tha Tha Khan, who founded one of Purig's most famous dynasties. There are several other forts and palaces in Kargil, including Bodh Kharbhu, Padum, Pasar Khar (Yurbalaltak), Karpokhar, Chuli Khar (Pashkyum), Heniskut and Staktse khar. While some of these structures are still intact and open to visitors, many are in a state of ruin after being destroyed by the invading Dogra army in the mid-nineteenth century. These structures tell many stories of the intertwined history of Ladakh, Central Asia, the Indian sub continent and Tibet.

Material heritage

Kargil has a rich cultural, religious and social heritage. Kanika *chorten* (stupa) in Sani village of Zangskar is believed to be the oldest Buddhist structure in Ladakh and dates back to the reign of Kanishka. Kargil is also home to the revered *astana* of Sayed Mir Hashim in Karpokhar village, Pithang mosque in Sodh as well as the historical Trespone Imambara and the Baroo and Gongma Kargil Khankas, which are visited by people of different faiths. Kargil also has several picturesque and important Buddhist monasteries that house priceless religious and historical treasures. This includes the monasteries of Phugtal and Karsha in Zangskar, and the Urgain Rzoneg cave monastery near Shargole.

Several Kargili villages still retain their traditional structure, which are environmentally and culturally appropriate for the region and tested over several centuries. One can visit ancient villages such as Rgyal Wakha near Wakha-Mulbekh and the Dardic village of Kaksar. Mushi Aziz Bhat *sarai* is another echo from the past that is located close to the heart of Kargil town. This *sarai* was built in the nineteenth century in a traditional Ladakhi style, with entrances for horses and Bactrian camels (Double humped camels used for trade with Central Asia). The structure is currently dilapidated and its artefacts are housed in the Munshi Aziz Bhat Muse-

um of Central Asian and Kargil Trade Artefacts. Another museum has been established at Hundurman Broq village, about 15 kms from Kargil town, which houses artefacts from traditional Kargili homes. This museum is located in a hamlet that is believed to be almost a thousand-years-old and still retains its other-worldly charm.

Non-material heritage

Kargil also has a rich treasure of tradition practices, beliefs and festivals. Mamani is one such festival that is believed to be rooted in the pre-Buddhist religion of Bon. Villagers and family members gather together on a fixed day in the winter month of January (around 19) to share meals together. Different communities in Kargil mark this festival as a celebration of togetherness for their immediate community and to share traditional Ladakhi dishes that are nutritious and healthy. People in Kargil also mark Ladakhi New Year (Losar) as a celebration of their cultural diversity and heritage. In addition to these, each community has their own unique festivals, such as Nawroze (Balti) on 21 March and Bon-onah (Dards) in October/November, which mark different aspects of the annual calendar.

» Suggested itinerary

Day 1: Arrive in Kargil

Day 2: Visit Kargil and Hundurman museums, Bartse Imambara

Day 3: Travel to Zangskar (if Penzi-la is open) to visit Sani, Karsha, Padum Khar and rock art.

(Optional) Trek to Phugtal to visit its famous monastery.

On the return trip, visit the Chamba in Kartsekhar and the *astana* of Sayed Mir Hashim in Karpokhar. You can also visit some of the palace ruins at these villages. Stay in Kargil town.

Day 7: Travel to Chiktan to see Razi Khar and visit other palaces en route such as Bodh Kharbu. Also, visit the picturesque village of Rgyal Wakha.

Day 8: Explore Kaksar village to experience its ancient charm and warm Purigi hospitality.

Day 9: Leave for Leh/Srinagar.



Hundurman Broq

IMMERSE IN A VIBRANT CULTURE

Kargil has been a melting pot for ideas and people from different parts of Asia and beyond. This is reflected in its social fabric, which includes numerous ethnicities such as Purig-pas, Baltis, Zangskaris, Dards, Tibetans and Hor. In addition, several major and minor religious groups have also found home in Kargil, including Bonism, Tibetan Buddhism, different sects of Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism and Dardism. Each community has added to this the indigenous culture and enriched it. Contemporary Kargili culture is thus a vibrant mix of these diverse influences and processes.

Polo

Polo or hrata-Polo (horse polo) has been an integral part of Kargili culture for hundreds of years, if not more. Believed to have originated in Central Asia, polo travelled to Kargil through trade and migration as people moved across these forbidding landscapes. In time, Kargil developed its own rich tradition of horse grooming centred on polo. Many folk songs and dances are dedicated to the game of polo, which in the past was regarded as a royal game. In the past, every village would have its own pologround (shagaran) and villages like Sapi and Bodh Kharbu still organise polo matches during important festivals. Some of Kargil's most famous and important polo-grounds are in Tambis, Goshan, and Chiktan. In modern day Kargil, Drass has emerged as an important centre for traditional and modern forms of polo.

Archery

Archery (Dah-phangs) has a very important place in Ladakhi culture. In the past it was crucial for hunting and war and over time became an integral part of Kargili society and culture. Archery is still practised during important festivals and has many passionate and skilled practitioners across the district. Traditional archery uses bows crafted by artisans using indigenous materials, while modern archery uses machine-made bows. Though archery is

practiced through the year, the true passion and magic of this sport is best experienced in the winter and spring, when local tournaments are held across the region. Archery is one Kargil's most important traditions that enables people to bridge time, space, generations, and technology.

Cultural festivals

Kargil's cultural calendar includes several important festivals. For instance, Mamani is celebrated by all communities in different ways to underline a sense of community in the peak of winter. Similarly, Losar or Ladakhi New Year is also celebrated by different communities in Kargil. Dardic communities celebrate a special harvest festival called Bon-onah in autumn. Several Buddhist monasteries in Kargil have their own festival that mixes religious and cultural elements. These festivals provide an opportunity to sample ethnic food, observe local dances and music and understand the diversity of Ladakhi culture.

Handicraft and indigenous products

People in Kargil have traditionally depended on agriculture and animal husbandry for survival, and supplemented it with trade. The climate in places such as Suru valley allow for two seasonal crops each year. In addition to barley, wheat and buckwheat, Kargil is famous for the quality of its fruits, especially local varieties of apricots and apples. Ladakhi apples are crunchier, juicier, smaller and more nutritious than non-Ladakhi varieties. In fact,

Kargil has been a melting pot for ideas and people from Asia and beyond.



the villages of Hardass, KarkitChoo, Shilikchay, Poyen and Batalik are known as the 'apricot villages' of Ladakh.

Kargil also has a long tradition of hand-weaving to produce clothes, carpets, headgears etc. Many regions have developed their own unique styles and designs. In the past, these products were made by each household for their own consumption. In addition to their aesthetics, these products are well-suited for the climatic conditions of Kargil and the raw materials like wool were produced locally.

Performing arts

Kargil has a long tradition of performing arts, especially music and dance, during social events and festivals. While many dance and music forms developed locally, others reached Kargil from other regions. Each community in Kargil has their own unique dance and music tradition. For instance, the Balti community is known for its unique style of qawalli, while the Dards have their own dance and music forms. Similarly, Zangskaris are famous across Ladakh and neighbouring regions for their unique songs and dances. These songs and dances are best experienced during social and cultural festivals that take place throughout the year.



» Suggested itinerary

Kargil is an ideal base to explore the cultural diversity of the region.

Ripe apricots and apples are available in Kargil around July-August. Dried apricots are available throughout the year in the market.

October: Travel to Garkone, Darchiks to experience the Bon-onah harvest festival.

October: The J&K Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages, Kargil organises the Zangskar Festival in Padum.

Festivals in Kargil

January (3rd week)	Mamani Food Festival
21 March	Nawroze
June-July	Ladakh Festival, Kargil
July/August	Apricot Festival (Kargil)
July 12-13	Stongdey Gustor (Zangskar)
July 21-22	Karsha Gustor (Zangskar)
26 July	Vijay Diwas (Drass)
August 6-7	Sani Nasjal (Zangskar)
November	Bon-onah festival
December	Losar



DISCOVER UNTAMED KARGIL

Kargil is located at a threshold where alpine mountain habitats of the Himalayas, Tibetan steppe and the cold deserts of Central Asia converge. Kargil is endowed with a rich assemblage of species diversity, be it for herbs, plants, mammals, butterflies or moths. This is partly due to Kargil's location and partly due to its varying altitudinal gradients. In addition to being a staging ground for birds migrating between Siberia and the Indian sub continent, several species breed in Kargil, while others stay here throughout the year. Kargil is also home to snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*), Himalayan brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), ibexes (*Capra ibex sibirica*), long-tailed marmots (*Marmota caudata*), golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), oriental turtle doves (*Streptopelia orientalis*), wild garlic (*Allium carolinianum*), wild rose (*Rosa ecae*), juniper (*Juniperus sp*) and many other species.

Ethno-botany

Kargil is rich in plant diversity, with botanists constantly discovering new species in the region. Altitudinal changes in are marked by changes in plant types and the gradients in Kargil can be rather dramatic as the landscape climbs from the Himalayan ranges to the Tibetan and Central Asian plateaus. One of the most interesting ways to explore the botanical diversity of Kargil is under the guidance of a trained *amchi* (practitioner of Tibetan medicine), who are intimately aware of the seasons, habitats and locations of different herbs. *Amchis* traditionally husband wild herbs, which have medicinal properties and use them to heal a diversity of ailments. In the past, residents of Kargil would harvest these wild herbs and vegetation to supplement the cereals and vegetables they grew.

Summer wildlife

Given the extreme seasonal variations in Kargil, summer is a good season to spot many of the region's wild residents. In this season, Kargil adorns a green blanket of vegetation. This is the best time to observe plants as they start to flower and fruit and see migratory birds as they return to breed or journey onwards. Summer is also the best season to spot some of Kargil's small and



Wild tulips



Common hoopoe

Kargil is endowed with a rich assemblage of species diversity.



Long-tail marmot



Pawmarks of a Himalayan brown bear



Snow leopard

» Suggested itinerary

Summer:

Day 1: Arrive in Kargil from Srinagar or Leh.

Day 2/3: Travel to Drass to observe alpine habitats and birds, mammals and butterflies that are present in the area.

Day 4: Travel to Suru valley/Rangdum/Zangskar to observe different groups of vegetation/birds/mammals.

Day 6: Return to Kargil town.

Day 7: Travel towards Chiktan to observe Tibetan and Central Asian plant types and the possibility of sporting mammals such as ibex and Ladakh urial.

Winter

Day 1: Arrive in Kargil from Leh (look out for ibex and urial en route)

Day 2-6: travel to Chiktan to spot snow leopards, wolves and ibex.

Day 7: Return to Kargil town and head out to Leh

large mammals, such as Himalayan brown bears and long-tailed marmots that hibernate through the long winters. This is also the best season to observe nature's adaptation to the challenges of extreme elevation as different species race to make the most of warmth and humidity in preparation for the dry and cold winters.

Winter wildlife

Winters in Kargil are cold and many parts receive several feet of snow. The landscape seems to go into a slumber as migratory species depart for warmer lands and plants shed their leaves to wear a bare look. Many places become inaccessible as roads and paths get blocked by snow and glaciers stretch their icy fingers. Despite these challenges, this is an ideal time to observe some of nature's masterpieces who are supremely adapted to the cold and mountainous conditions of Kargil. The elusive snow leopards become more visible as they follow prey species such as ibex and domestic livestock to lower parts of valleys. Other carnivores such as wolves (*Canis lupus chanco*) and foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) as well as wild sheep such as Ladakh urial (*Ovis vignei*) and ibex that remain active through the winter as they struggle to survive the bitter cold of Kargil.

EXPERIENCE ENDLESS ADVENTURE



Chadar trek

The valleys and mountains of Kargil have been shaped by many powerful forces over several millennia. The most important force has been tectonic movements that caused the Indian plate to crash into the Asian plate and raised the Tibetan plateau into the sky. The rugged Kargili landscape is buttressed by the main Himalayan range in the south and west, the formidable Zangskar range in the east and the mighty Karakorams in the north. As a result, Kargil is divided into a series of valleys—some narrow and long, others wide and open and others hidden amongst tall crags—that are guarded by icy Himalayan peaks such as the Nun-Kun massifs, drained by the Indus and its tributaries, including Suru, Zangskar, Drass, Wakha Nallah, and Kanji Nallah and peppered by alpine meadows, snow-covered valleys, mountain steppe, wetlands, rocky canyons and high altitude cold deserts. Kargil offers opportunities for various adventurous activities to suit different tastes and abilities—the possibilities are, literally, endless. The only limits are that of human imagination, endurance, skills, daring and capability.

Walking on ‘water’:

Imagine walking on a river for several days in the biting cold of winter? This is exactly what you would do on the famous Chadder trek that takes place on the frozen Zangskar river. In the past this icy river was the only way in and out of Zangskar valley during the winter months when mountain passes would get blocked by snow. The residents of Zangskar still use this route in the winter and it is regarded as one of the toughest treks in the world. People from around the world try this trek to test their endurance against some of the most extreme weather conditions in the world.

Treks

Trekking routes crisscross and traverse the length and breadth of Kargil. Many of these routes were historically used by travel-



lers, traders and armies, while others have been developed more recently. There are treks for different levels of difficulty ranging easy to challenging. Trekking frees you from the confines of the road network and is an ecologically-friendly way to experience the cultural and natural diversity of Kargil and neighbouring regions. One of the most memorable treks in Kargil is from Shargole to Suru valley, while the trans-Himalayan treks criss-cross the mountain ranges of Kargil to connect with remote parts of Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Leh district.

Mountaineering

The opportunities for mountaineering in Kargil are well-recognised with famous peaks such as Nun (7,137m), Kun (7,035m), Pinnacle (6,930m), Bobank (5,671 m), White Needle (5,600) and several unnamed and unclimbed peaks. The climbing period in Ladakh is from early-June to mid-October, with the main climbing season being between August and September—when most of the Himalayas are inaccessible due to the Indian monsoon. Permission for mountaineering expeditions are given by Indian Mountaineering Foundation and the district administration provides necessary support on the ground. Given the inherent risks in mountaineering, the J&K state government has developed a well-oiled system for rescue service through a partnership between the district administration and Indian Air Force, which provides helicopters for such missions.

Kargil offers opportunities for various adventurous activities.

Rock climbing

Kargil's landscape has been shaped by the movement of glaciers and water over thousands of years. As a result, the district is peppered with interesting cliffs, rock faces and boulders. These provide varied levels of challenges to rock climbers. Some of the best known places for rock climbing in Kargil are in Kargil-Chutuk, Drass, Shargole, Suru valley and Zangskar. There are some interesting places in Parkachik in Suru valley, where one can combine the twin challenge of rock and ice climbing.

Rafting

Kargil's rivers offer some very exciting rafting experiences. These rivers run through some of the world's most dramatic landscapes, including deep gorges, narrow ravines, wide valleys, human settlements, hidden coves, and militarised zones. The Zangskar is one such river that is famed for white water river expeditions, which require skill and daring in equal measures. Kargil also offers rafting opportunities for beginners and amateurs along gentler stretches of Suru and Drass rivers.



Ice hockey and snow skiing

The climate and landscape in Kargil make it ideal for various winter sports such as ice hockey, cross country (Nordic) skiing and downhill (alpine) skiing. Drass valley, especially Pandrass, Matayin, Minamarg and Gumri areas, have slopes with different levels of gradients and challenge. The snow in this area remains till June and even July in some years. Other promising places for independent skiing are Suru and Zangskar valleys as well as Khumbathang and Kurbathang near Kargil town. Skiing is an ideal way to explore the virgin tracks and slopes in these areas in the winter.

Ice hockey and skating have a large following in Kargil and is practised on natural ice patches as well as curated rinks. Ice hockey and skating were introduced in Ladakh by security forces in the 1970s and have become very popular. There are regular ice hockey tournaments each winter in Kargil and many local players have represented India and J&K state in ice hockey. The best places for ice hockey in Kargil are in Drass, Shakar-Chiktan, and Shargole.

» Suggested itinerary

Kargil town serves as the ideal base for exploring various adventure activities in the region. Since these activities are seasonal, it's important to check in advance about accessibility, weather and feasibility for different activities. For instance, activities such as Chadder trek, ice hockey and skiing are subject to temperature conditions, which may vary each year. Also, some regions and routes may remain inaccessible by road due to snow even till mid-summer.

Some popular treks

- Sanku-Drass (1 to 2 days)
- Sanku-Shargole (3 to 4 days)
- Panikhar-Warwan (5 to 6 days)
- Panikhar-Pahalgam (5 to 6 days)
- Sankoo-Itchu-Rangdum (4 to 5 days)
- Rangdum-Heniskut (5 to 6 days)
- rangdum-Chuling-la-Marwah (7 to 8 days)
- Rgyalmothongos-Shafat-la-Marwah (7 to 8 days)
- Padum-Omasi-la-Kishtwar (7 to 8 days)
- Padum-Manali (7 to 8 days)
- Rangdum-Kishtwar (7 to 8 days)
- Padum-Lamayuru (9 to 10 days)

UNCOVER SPIRITUAL SECRETS

Many religions, communities and groups regard the Himalayan region as a sacred landscape. Kargil attracts people of many different faiths and has a plethora of sites sacred to different belief systems and religions. These sacred landscapes provide a unique opportunity to explore one's spirituality.

Hindu sites

The Himalayas are regarded as abode of gods in Hinduism and Kargil is home to several revered Hindu sites. One of the most important sites is Bheembhat or Bheem's rock, which is 5kms from Drass town. The rock is believed to be the solidified body of Bheem, the legendary Pandava from Hindu mythology. This is a pond near Pandrass village called Droatikund. According to local legends, Draupadi—wife of the five Pandavas—lived nearby and used to use this sacred pond to bathe. These sites are also revered by local residents and attract many devotees from different parts of India. There is a Plateau Nath Baba Temple on Kurbathang near Kargil town, which is dedicated to a Hindu sage whose hut was the only structure in the area that survived shelling during the 1999 war.



Bheembhat

Buddhist sites

Buddhism is said to have travelled from Kashmir to Central Asia through Kargil. Kargil still has several remnants from the early Buddhist period in the form of religious rock carvings of various Buddhist figures. The most significant of these rock carvings are located in Apati (Sodh), Mulbekh (National Highway 1), Kartsekhar and Baima Khumbhu (Suru), Padum (Zangskar) and Stigbo (Drass). Kargil is also home to several prominent Buddhist monasteries such as the ones in Bodh Kharbu, Wakha-Mulbekh, Shargole, Rangdum and different places in Zangskar valley.

Islamic sites

Over the last four to five centuries several important and influential Muslim scholars visited Kargil, such as Mir Syed Ali Hamadan, Syed Mohd Nurbakhs and Shamsh-ud-Din Araki. Their visits were instrumental in the introduction of Islam in Ladakh and there are several Islamic sites of spiritual importance in Kargil. One of the most important sites is the *astana* of Sayed Mir Hashim in Karpokhar village that is revered by people of different faiths and visited by thousands of people each year. Similarly, the Trespone



Kuksho

Imambara, Pithang Masjid (above Bartse village in Sodh) and Gongma Kargil Khankha are of spiritual significance to Muslims and people of other faiths. One of the oldest Muslim shrines in Kargil is Lartsey Masjid in Pashkyum village (on National Highway), which is revered by different local communities, especially by travellers on the Kargil-Leh road.

Dardic sites

Kargil is home to a large number of Dardic communities, especially in Drass and along the Indus in lower Ladakh. Many of these communities still follow their ancient traditions, while others have adopted Buddhist and Islamic practices. One of the most important social sites for Dardic (as well as some other) communities is the village Hlchangra, where they celebrate festivals, hold community meetings and socialise their youth. In addition, all Dardic villages and communities have a revered guardian in the form of a special tree called *Cbhili* (Juniper) or a big boulder called *Rachbo* or *Rachi*.

Gurudwara Guru Nanak Charan Kamal Sahab

The historic Gurudwara Guru Nanak Charan Kamal Sahab is located in Bagh Khomeini near Kargil town. It is believed that when Guru Nanak Devji stepped on this very site during his visit to Ladakh. This site is sacred to Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike and the Dogra administration had built their *mubafis kbana* (strong room) next to it. Entry to this site is currently managed by the Indian Army.

Communal harmony

At a time when the world faces threats of religious extremism and communal violence, Kargil serves as a beacon of hope for communal harmony and tolerance. Villages such as Wakha-Mulbekh, Shargole, and Chiktan have mixed populations who follow the two major religions of Ladakh: Buddhism and Islam. Some of the most interesting examples of communal harmony can be observed in the villages of Kuksho and Dargo, where Buddhists and Muslims families are part of same intertwined village community and have been living peacefully together for several centuries. In Kuksho, sites sacred to Muslims and Buddhist have been built next to each other. Similarly, in Kargil town the Sikh Gurudwara and Jamia Masjid Hanfiya mosque have shared a common wall for hundreds of years.



Baroo Khanka



Phugtal monastery



Astana of Sayed Mir Hashim, Karpokhar

» Suggested itinerary

Kargil town is an ideal base to explore the sacred landscape of the district.

Religious festivals

21 March	Nawroze
July 12-13	Stongdey Gustor (Zangskar)
July 21-22	Karsha Gustor (Zangskar)
August 6-7	Sani Nasjal (Zangskar)
November	Bon-onah festival

REMEMBERING KARGIL WAR

The war in 1999 over Pakistan's intrusion across the Line of Control (LoC) with India made Kargil a household name in India. In fact, the war is popularly called the Kargil War. The residents of frontier villages and Kargil town suffered many hardships and tragedies during the hostilities of the war, but remained steadfast in their support of the Indian Army.

Many of the battle sites are along the sensitive LoC and out-of-bounds for visitors. However, the general lay of the land can still be understood from some strategic points that are open to everyone such as Drass town. Access to the more sensitive areas is regulated by civilian authorities in Kargil District in coordination with security agencies such as the Indian Army. The Kargil War Memorial in Drass and the museum developed by the Indian Army near Kargil town provide poignant reminders of the war, its impacts and the sacrifices made by soldiers and civilians.

Kargil War Memorial

Indian Army maintains war memorials in Kargil to honour the sacrifices made during the war and as a mark of patriotism and bravery. The Kargil War Memorial in Drass is easily accessible as it is next to the national highway that connects Srinagar and Kargil. This is the best place to pay homage to the sacrifices made by soldiers and civilians in Kargil. Every year, the Indian Army organises Vijay Diwas (victory day) at this memorial on 26 July to mark the end of the war, celebrate victory and to honour the martyrs who died during the war. The Indian Army also maintains a second, smaller memorial in the Sodh region. The Apati War Memorial is some distance from the national highway but right along the road that connects Kargil town and Batalik.



Kargil War Memorial, Drass

Valleys and villages near LoC

Drass is perhaps the best place to observe some of the sites where battles were fought in 1999. On a clear day, one can observe sites such as Tiger Hill, Mushkoo, and Tololing, which became famous due to the war, from the village itself. In some cases, with special permission, one may be able to approach closer to these sites, though it's difficult to visit the actual area without permission and support from the army authorities.

One area that is open to visitors, though it still requires clearance from the army, is Hundurman Broq. This hamlet is believed to have been occupied for several hundreds of years. However, it was abandoned more recently due to its proximity to the LoC and its residents moved to other parts of the valley. The hamlet has now been converted to a museum for artefacts that are traditionally used by local villagers. Periodically, civil society groups in Kargil organise exhibitions of different narratives and memories that local residents have of the 1999 war.



Kargil War Memorial, Apati



Tiger Hill in Drass

» Suggested itinerary

Day 1: Arrive in Kargil town from Leh. Alternatively, if arriving from Kashmir, then halt at Drass for the first night.

Day 2: Travel to Drass and stay the night. Visit the Kargil War Memorial. The Tourist Department's bungalow was severely damaged during the war and offers excellent views of Tololing, Tiger Hill and Mushkoh valley. If permission is given, you can approach closer to these sites, though you cannot actually visit them. This will give you a good sense of the terrain and the challenges faced by the Indian Army in driving out the intruders during the war.

Day 3: Return/Travel to Kargil town. Visit the Indian Army Museum and Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum of Central Asian and Kargil Trade Artefacts.

Day 4: Travel to Hundurman Broq to get a first-hand experience of the vulnerability of local villagers during the war.

Day 5: Travel to Batalik and visit the Apati War Memorial en route. Foreign nationals will need inner line permits from the district administration to visit Batalik. Due to its proximity to the Line of Control, you will not be able to visit the actual village of Batalik or remain in the area for long. However, travelling along this route will give you a good sense of the theatre of the battles in 1999. Return to Kargil the same evening or stay in Garkone for the night.

Day 6: Explore Kargil town.

Day 7: Leave Kargil for Leh or Srinagar by road.

The residents suffered many hardships during the hostilities of the war.

» Suggested itinerary

Day 1: Travel from Leh/Srinagar to Kargil town.

Day 2: Rest and explore Kargil town. Visit Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum of Central Asian and Kargil Trade Artefacts, Indian Army's war museum, visit Hundurman Broq, Gurudwara Guru Nanak Charan Kamal Sahab, Plateau Nath temple, Baroo Khankha, Gongma Kargil Khankha or try river rafting.

Day 3: Travel to Drass: visit Bheembhat, Dropadikund, Kargil War Memorial and Stiangbo rock art site. Stay at Drass or return to Kargil town.

Day 4: Travel to sites in Sodh such as Apati War Memorial, Apati rock art, Pithang Masjid, Passar khar, visit Batalik. Stay at Garkone.

Day 5: Explore Dardic villages of Darchiks, Garkone and Batalik.

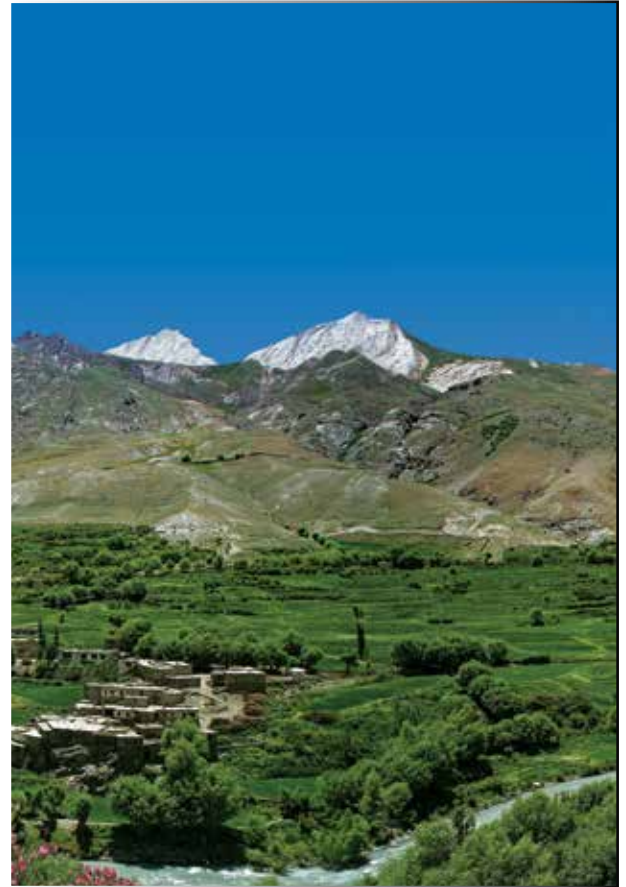
Day 6: Visit Shakar-Chiktan: Visit Razi khar, take a detour to visit Kuksho-Dargo, Bodh-Kharbu khar and monastery, and Staktse khar, Stay at Mulbekh.

Day 7: Visit Rgyal Wakha, Mulbekh Chamba, Shargole, Sapi, Sapi Tso and Lartsey Masjid in Pashkyum. Return and stay in Kargil.

Day 8: Suru valley: Visit Kartsekhar Chamba and Baima-Khum-bhu rock art, Sayed Mir Hashim's *astana* in Karpokhar, Trespone Imambara. Return to Kargil. Shop for handicrafts and dry fruits grown locally in Kargil.

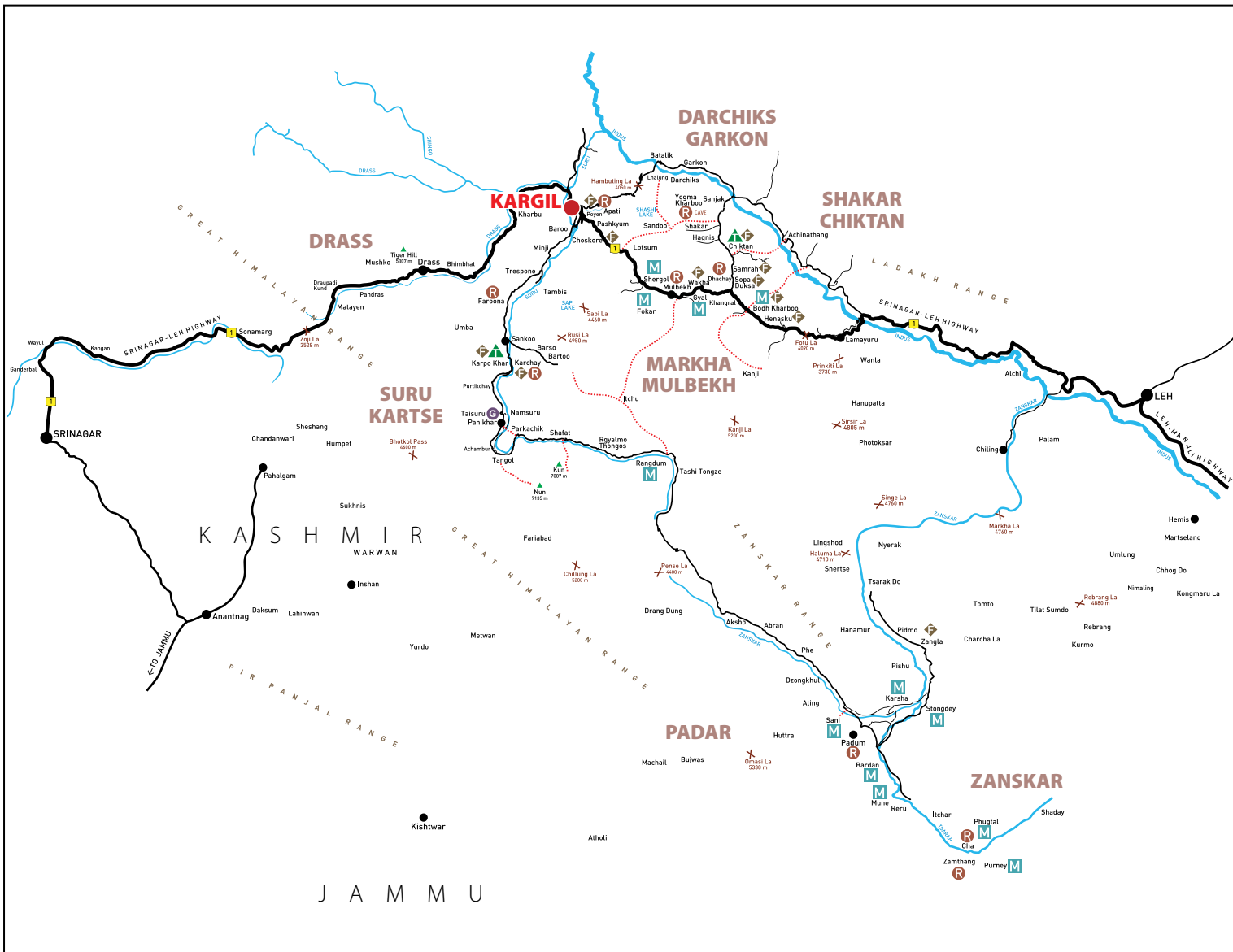
Day 9 to 14: Visit Zangskar (Suru can be covered en route): Explore Padum rock art site and khar, Sani monastery, Pipithing stupa, and monasteries at Karsha, Stongde, Zongkhul and Phugtal, Zangla khar and try river rafting.

Day 15: Leave for Leh/Srinagar by road.



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|  FORT |  TREKKING ROUTE/
KACCHA ROAD |
|  ROCK-CUT CARVING/
PETROGLYPH |  CAPTAIN HERBERT W
CHRISTIAN GRAVE |

