

Travel

INDIA

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LAKES *of* LADAKH

FROM SURREAL LANDSCAPES TO LAKE SIDE CAMPING AND BIRD WATCHING, THE THREE MAJOR HIGH-ALTITUDE TSOS (LAKES) OF LADAKH OFFER A RARE EXPERIENCE FOR NATURE ENTHUSIASTS. **PRIYANKA PRADHAN** DISCOVERS THE ALLURE OF THESE NATURAL BLUE WONDERS

PHOTOS: PRIYANKA PRADHAN



TSO KAR



How to get there:

- From Tso Moriri: 86km; 3-hour drive to Korzok village (Tso Moriri)
- From Leh: 160km; 3.5-hours by road to Tso Kar
- The Leh-Manali road (NH1) passes 30km west of Tso Kar.

KEY FACTS:

- Tso Kar means 'white lake' in Ladakhi, owing to the large resource of salt and borax found in the lake. It is India's most brackish lake.
- The basin is also the breeding area for the great crested grebe, Brahminy duck, bar-headed goose, brown-headed gull and the common tern.
- Due to the high altitude, the climate is extreme in the winter — -40°C temperatures are not uncommon — it can go up to 30 degrees in the summer.
- Snowfall is occasional, but not frequent in the summer.

It was the middle of June in Rupshu valley, southeast of Ladakh. The stillness in the air was palpable and the cold, almost unbearable. Suddenly, millions of micro-crystals, almost invisible to the naked eye, toppled from the sky, making their transformative journey toward the ground. In a few moments, the first snowflake landed gently on my shoulder.

At 14,700ft above sea level, the only sound was that of strong winds, sweeping across the barren landscape — a partially frozen lake, nestled between patches of lime-green pondweed and laced with sparkling white salt along the shores. Tso (lake) Kar had already cast its spell on me.

The freak summer snow started to cast a misty sheen over everything in sight when my only other companion across the 10km stretch of Tso Kar joined me in admiring the surreal view. We surveyed each other from a distance until I recognised him — he was the beautiful male black-necked crane.

According to Buddhist legend, various past incarnations of the Dalai Lama were carried from monastery to monastery on the backs of these mystical birds — the reason why they're revered in local culture today, as symbols of peace. But ornithologists are just as fascinated by the black-necked crane, which is known to traverse across China, Tibet and Bhutan, specifically to the Tso Kar basin in Ladakh for its summer breeding season, each year. Here, the male of the species puts up quite a show — a spectacular mating dance, in order to be chosen as a suitor. My friend appeared to be working on that agenda, when I had spotted him.

Habitat destruction and shrinking freshwater sources have rendered his kind endangered today, with only 5,000-6,000 of the species left in the wild, as estimated by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

I left to offer him some privacy, and hoped that he found his mate soon.

In my quest to find some form of shelter, I hiked about three kilometres north of the lake to find the nomadic settlement of the pastoral Thugje tribe. A hot cup of butter tea, locally known as *po cha*, and a few warm, smiling faces were proof enough that kindness is, in fact, a universal language. The tribe lives in tents made of resilient yak hair, which they sometimes offer to weary travellers, as paid accommodation.



- Pangong Tso is about 4,350m above sea level.
- It is 134km long and extends from India to Tibet, covering a total of 604sqkm.
- Approximately 60 per cent of the length of the lake lies in Tibet.
- The Line of Actual Control — the border between India and China — passes through the waters of Pangong Tso on the east side. The west end of the lake is disputed territory between Pakistan and India.

TSO MORIRI

The drive to base camp at Tso Moriri was accompanied by a flock of the bar-headed geese flying alongside — the world’s highest-flying species of birds. The sunset had cast a kaleidoscope of hues and the crystal blue waters of the lake had faded to reflect the colours in the sky, which was a signal for the birds’ nestward journey after a day of swimming, feeding and lounging on the brackish lake side — their annual summer retreat.

The infamous Korzok wind-chill woke me up at sunrise, just in time to watch the glorious phenomenon unfold. As the colours of the sunrise melted into each other, the sounds of Ladakhi goats being herded across the rocky terrain and the aroma of steaming pots of tea created an extraordinary symphony for the senses.

Grazing fields lie along the lake’s 19km shoreline, offering ample vegetation for herds, at least in the summer. Come winter, these grazing grounds can be buried under three feet of snow, making it very difficult for the herbivores to sustain themselves.

For the domesticated variety of local ‘Changra’



How to get there

• From Leh: 240km — roughly 7-8 hours by road from Leh.

• From Pangong Tso via Chumathang: 235km direct route (for Indian nationals) or 339km via the indirect route.

goat, caretakers make sure expensive fodder and supplements are bought from neighboring regions in winter, in order to supply the global pashmina business. The Ladakh region is the source of the finest pashmina wool in the world, out of which, the richest variety comes from goats of Korzok and Rupshu regions, owing to their diet from grazing fields such as that of the Tso Moriri basin.

Even the 34 species of birds found here, including 14 species of water birds, the Tibetan Kiang, wild horses, yaks and Himalayan marmots rely heavily on the rich resources of the Tso Moriri.

My own survival, however, was sustained chiefly by a constant supply of Maggi, *thukpa* and momos, but I did enjoy an occasional meal of traditional Ladakhi fare, particularly the *skyu* (staple wheat flour dish) and *tangtur* (wild vegetables).

KEY FACTS:

- Tso Moriri is the largest high-altitude lake in Indian territory.
- The brackish lake sits 4,500ft above sea level.
- The lake covers a total area of 120sqkm with a width of 3km and length of 19km.
- The lake is part of a protected wetland reserve under the Ramsar site, and is known as Tsomoriri Wetland Conservation Reserve.





A DAY AT THE LAKE: (top to bottom) Brown headed gulls flock together on the shores of Pangong Tso, Ladakh's most famous lake; a shepherd's kids – siblings – play and tend to their herd of goats in Korzok, where Tso Moriri is located.

PANGONG TSO



How to get there

- From Leh: 171km to Spangmik, Pangong Tso by road.
- From Nubra valley: 175km from Diskit to Spangmik by road.
- From Tso Moriri: 235km – A very scenic route, but gas stations are few and far in-between.

And finally, I set foot on the banks of Ladakh's most famous lake, the Pangong Tso, as seen in one of Bollywood's top grossing films, *Three Idiots*. I tried to shake off the association and take in the lake side vistas with a fresh perspective, but after 10 minutes of running into 'Rancho café', 'Three Idiots restaurant' and a chalkboard saying "Rancho and Pia couples' soup available here", I gave up.

The movie may have put Pangong Tso on the world map six years ago, but the lake is still reeling from the effects. Such is the level of commercialisation, that the lake has turned into a raging picnic spot, with loud music from car stereos and baskets of chips and soft drinks – sadly, most of which are left behind, forming ugly patchworks of trash along the shores of the lake.

But the ravages of human interaction are cause for much more than just mild irritation. The adverse ecological impact on the fragile ecosystem of the lake resulting from the mounting heaps of plastic garbage, sound and air pollution has seriously threatened the habitat of migratory and nesting birds. In the long-term, prolonged littering and polluting by tourists may result in complete habitat destruction, loss of natural flora and fauna and shrinking of the lake, according to WWF India.

The charm of what was once referred to as 'the enchanted lake' seemed to elude me completely. I left the beautiful lake side at sunset, on a pensive note. Perhaps the delicate ecosystem of Pangong Tso is in need of as much attention, love and understanding as the volatile political borders of India, Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and China, through which the waters of the lake flow, ever so seamlessly. **W**



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