Namgyal turns up at Tashi's house at 8 am with a donkey. Oak and I have been staying in Photoksar for the last week or so, and Tashi and her family have been extremely hospitable. Namgyal takes our tramping packs, extracts a rope, and ties things on to the wooden saddle. We say bye to Tashi. “See you in 10 days” I tell her in Hindi, grateful for our shared second language, when I don’t know any Ladakhi, and she has very little English. Off we go for our adventure, straight from the village.

Of course, it’s less than 5 minutes until we run into Namgyal’s dad and his friend, coming back from milking the cows with Mountain Dew bottles full of milk. I’m not sure exactly what they tell Namgyal, but it’s along the lines of “You’ve loaded the donkey wrong!”. They re-tie everything. Namgyal shakes his head despairingly. He’s 18, and has just finished school. He’s taken two days of leave from his job building roads to take us, and our stuff, up the valley.

Shortly after, we run into another person we’ve met in Photoksar, Tshering and her sister. They’re with the village’s 500 sheep and goats, and are herding them up the valley by throwing little pebbles at their fluffy behinds. The other day, Tashi explained the village rotational system, decided once a year (though with many minor swaps); everyone takes turns taking the livestock up the hills and away from the village each day, leaving the nearby grass to make hay for winter. The sheep and goats know who they belong to, and trot into the right stone pen when they are back for the evening.

Skirting around the sheep and goats, I’m grateful I don’t have to carry my pack, loaded with food we bought in Leh, and alpine equipment we’ve taken all the way from Aotearoa. I hope this easy first day will help us acclimatise. We walk, listening to Ladakhi folk songs from Namgyal’s phone, the rushing of the water, and ask Namgyal lots of questions along the way. He tells us the mountain names he knows, and points out *lachu*, wild rhubarb. With a few donkey protests and an afternoon siesta, we get to the head of the valley around 5 pm, while Namgyal turns around so he’ll have a shorter walk back to work the next day. “The way to the lake is up past the ridge on the right” he points out before he leaves. I’m not used to having a guide, but Namgyal seemed excited to get paid to show us the route. He scoops up some of the dried yak dung around the campsite, as this is a summer meadow and his mum has asked him to bring some back for their fire. While he’s interested in the ice axes and crampons on the outside of our packs, Namgyal doesn’t seem to wish he was coming further.

The next day, it’s 3.5 hours of slow, sputtering uphill to our base camp, above Tso Marpo, the red lake. We find a flat spot at the outlet lake beside a glacier we first saw on Google earth (34.00631, 76.70465), many months ago. It’s at about 5300 meters. Remembering the acclimatisation adage go high, sleep low, we have a recovery siesta, then extract rope, harnesses, and crampons to go up a twin peak (5615m) directly behind the red lake. There’s a smooth cornice between two summits, and if I’m this out of breath, I must be acclimatising. I haven’t done much adventuring at high altitude before, and Oak and I are commenting on the struggle up a relatively gentle hill, and constantly checking the other doesn’t have a headache or other symptoms. The next day, we mostly rest, with a brief foray to stash our heavy alpine equipment and scope out tomorrow’s route.

Our alarm rings at 3:30, and soon we're trotting below some of the best stars I have ever seen, toward the Chelung Kangri glacier. Our goal is to link three summits (Spang Nala Dome, Sum Nomo Kangri, Spang Nala Kangri) climbed on separate days by a French team in 2019. The sun is rising when we get to our stashed gear, and our crisp cramponing is only slowed by frequent stops for breath. We get to a rocky ridge leading up to Spang Nala Dome (5850m). I'm not feeling that hungry—an altitude symptom that will keep bothering me for another few days—but Oak gives me some chocolate. The ridge turns out to be much further than it looks, or maybe it's because we are higher than either of us have been before. Eventually, we get to the top about 7 am. Previous climbers, perhaps these French people or others we didn't know about from our research, have left prayer flags, and Oak jumps above the peak to get a few metres higher.

I'm nervous about Sum Nomo Kangri (5700m) across Chelung Kangri, which looks much steeper than the first ridge womble. Fortunately I'm distracted by beautiful patterns of icicles on streams flowing along the glacier, and carefully choosing the right footing. When we get closer, everything is easier than it looks, and though the snow is already softening, cautious route selection gets us to the top. We're treated to incredible 360 degree views, south to the rest of the Zanskar range, north to the Karakoram, across to where we started. We're able to go down the south ridge, avoiding retracing any steps, staying higher for Spang Nala Kangri, the final and most elegant peak in our linkage.

Halfway there, we stop for lunch, eating it slowly for a longer rest. It's only 12:30, yet I'm completely shattered. The desire to finish the traverse we planned many months ago keeps me on edge, and convinces me to keep going.

Indeed, the final of these three sisters is more difficult than we thought, with gaping bergschrunds we nervously avoid, hoping the snow above them will hold. We skirt around closer to the East ridge, and find a way to the extremely aesthetic summit. There we find more prayer flags, and a business card of the previous French climbers. I'm happy with our efforts, and glad it all worked, but incredibly exhausted. On the way down, we decide to belay each other over a snow bridge, worried it will give way in the softening snow. As we stumble back to the base camp, our conversation is disjointed and random. We just pull ourselves together to make dinner, and are in bed before darkness.

The next day we head east. After yesterday's views showed us no easy high route, we drop down to the head of Photang Tokpo where we had walked with Namgyal and up the other side, eventually finding a lovely patch of gravel below a glacier for our tent. The lack of hunger means I'm low in energy, and I spend half an hour drinking a sugary Tang mixture from my bottle before helping Oak with tent setup. After four perfect weather days, the clouds have come in, and we're surprised by a five minute snowstorm. Our very limited weather forecasting only goes to tomorrow, and inReaches, which Oak and I have used on other long trips for forecasts, are illegal in India. Looking at the screenshots we have, we guess we'll have a few hours of good weather in the morning before the threatening clouds turn to storm. The map shows a very

steep section (33.99144, 76.77806) over the ridge to approach the next glacier east, so we plan to leave at 6, early enough to get to a safe campsite or turn back if things don't work out.

It's a relief that the steep section is manageable with careful route selection on steep snow and around 'schrunds. But at 10am as we're wiggling down a steep scree ridge, the wind changes. I stop to put on three more layers as snowflakes blow in my face. "I think there might be a flat patch down there!" I yell to Oak, looking at a stream coming off the glacier below. With almost wordless communication, we scramble down the slope, find the flattest tent site we can, remove the largest and pokiest rocks, and set up the faithful tent in record time. It's damp inside, and all my things are muddy from the wet moraine we're on, but we're okay. It's a relief to be warm and dry, through a section we were unsure about, and only one big day's walk out if things really don't go well. We pass the time reading Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire to each other and shaking the snow off the tent.

The next morning is still cold and overcast, with about 8cm of snow settled around the tent. We convince each other we should head for the pass we saw yesterday rather than go down toward Photoksar. My decision is aided by Oak making breakfast, and me getting to eat it in my sleeping bag. Then we pack up, tie in to our rope, and wander up the glacier in flat light. Halfway up, I suddenly find my leg falling into empty space. I look down into a deep but narrow crevasse decorated with incredible ice formations, and pull my leg out. Surprisingly, there's no convex rolls, but it's a reminder of the dangers of fresh snow and unknown glaciers. I'm glad we're roped up, and we step over several other slots without incident.

When we stop on the pass for a snack mid-morning, it starts to snow again, and the wind is blowing hard. I try to coil the rope and become incredibly flustered, leaving it a mess of loops. Yelling over the wind, we decide we'll have to head down soon, and be ready for the end of the journey in this unexpectedly inclement weather. But reluctant to leave the high mountains, we go for a quick ridge wander, and during this half hour the weather improves enough to convince us to set up the tent here, and attempt the peaks at the head of the glacier if the weather is better tomorrow. The afternoon includes hot chocolate, discovering two secret lakes in wind pockets, and bailing on a minor ridge peak because of rockfall.

The next morning, our decision pays off. It's overcast, but not too windy, and with our high camp it's easy to get to the peak (5800m, 33.96900, 76.79096) we'd lined up, taking much less time than expected. We'd had no idea if it had been previously climbed, but a large chunk of wood in a cairn cradle answers the question. With time to spare, and the weather holding, we then cruise around the other peaks (twin peaks 5730m 33.96534, 76.79502; red peak 5740m, 33.96631, 76.80000) above the glacier, alternating between snow and scree walking. The final peak (pt. 5740m) is a crumbly, steep piece of red rock. We get a few metres below the summit, but the final scramble is exposed and more difficult than the rest. We've left our rope at the low point of the ridge, and haven't brought any rock protection anyway. Remembering the head guide we talked to at the Ladakh Mountain Guides Association, who said that any rescues take two to three days, we admire views of the route to Lingshed, eye up a potential camping spot by

a lake across the next glacial valley, take some photos, and leave the summit for a bolder or better prepared party.

Once we find a way around the cornice that laces the ridge into our next valley, the way downhill is straightforward. Dropping down, I feel hints of regret. We've got two nights of food left, and don't have the time to get all the way to Lingshed, nor climb any more peaks. And there are so many interesting peaks we've seen that we could explore with more time. Future expeditions in the area could consider opening a route up the long south ridge of Machu Kangri from our camp at 33.98018, 76.80063. The cluster of peaks at 33.94481, 76.77380 are also particularly impressive and look approachable from the south east. It's nice to have some unfinished business, though. I want to come back. I'm also exhausted, and looking forward to some more restful days. Like Chelung Kangri, the glacier we cross on our way to our lake campsite is twined with interesting melt stream formations, which break up the monotony of a flat trudge. Despite flurries of snow and a cold wind, we convince each other to swim in the lake after we've set up camp. It takes me over an hour, all my clothing and sleeping bag, and several cups of hot chocolate to warm up, but the thrill might be worthwhile. Perhaps my calling is swimming in unswum lakes rather than untested transalpine routes.

All that remains is a long valley trudge, exclamations at seeing proper plants for the first time in a week, and cheeky marmots poking up from their burrows. Or so we think. Reaching the road around 2 pm with no signs of a hitchhike, we check the map, and find an alternate route back to Photoksar—if it works. We weave our way through a tightening canyon in the heat of the day, noticing how strange it is to be hot after our time in this place of storms and snow. We find a 300+ metre waterfall fed by snow we cannot see, and camp on a grassy island in the middle of a river. It's strange to sit outside on a soft surface, not even needing all my layers. Dinner, consisting of leftover cous cous with some spare cashews for heartiness, is surprisingly nice. Afterwards, we entertain ourselves by attempting to stew lachu, or wild rhubarb, that Namgyal had shown us on our first day. The flavour is excellent but rather chewy compared to the cultivated variety.

The next morning I try to appreciate the winding canyon, and the improbable route through it, and not think of the work to do, the rubbish to take to Leh, travel to arrange, as we finish the journey. Back in Photoksar, we're greeted by Tashi, visit Namgyal and his family, and are asked for photos and stories of our route. The whole village seems to have heard about it, and several other people ask how our journey has been. I'm glad we can tell them about it, that we don't have to leave immediately, only showing our route to people far away. Explaining our route over the second glacier where we climbed peaks, we learn it's called Mantang. This name isn't on any map, and knowing it is a gift. Of course, people are more interested in what they recognise—photos of Namgyal and the donkey, the yak we encountered without a herd on our last day, than endless accounts of white snowy stuff. Dinner with Tashi and her family —thukpa soup with greens— is warm and friendly. The next morning, before we depart to Leh, before the end of it all, I'm delighted to be woken by Tashi's mum bringing smoking juniper into our room at 6am, chanting her morning prayer. We have learned much from this place and people. There are many mountains waiting above these dry valleys.

We tried to do this journey in the most ethical way possible, but I don't know how to say if we succeeded. One aspect we felt strongly about was spending time with the people we were visiting, not just coming an leaving. As we are both in a more transient era of life, between university and seasonal jobs, we were able to spend two months in Ladakh, and six months in India, while only a fraction of that was an actual mountain expedition. This also made the carbon involved in flying across the world feel more justifiable. Partly for the carbon impact, though with the added benefit of making our journey slower so we could acclimatise, showing us more of the landscape we were to walk in, and helping us meet local people in the trans-Himalaya, we travelled by bus and shared vehicles from Delhi to get to Ladakh, and spent several days at various stops on the way.

We had connected with an NGO doing work in Photoksar before we came, and were able to meet lots of the village locals while helping with the NGO's mission to set up sustainable tourism in the village, and giving the people who lived there options other than subsistence farming. I can't honestly say that we were able to help much in this short time, but I was very thankful for the opportunity to understand more about what life is like in a village in this part of the world. As part of the tourism initiatives, some people are setting up a guided trekking route to Tso Marpo, the lake up the valley that we followed on our first day. We had the chance to organise a short safety training session for five of the people who wanted to be guides. Most of them were proficient in moving in mountains, but not used to thinking about clients who might find rough ground or walking across rivers unfamiliar. I had hoped we could show a few locals the basics of moving on steep snow with tools like ice axes and crampons, but realised this wasn't a priority for anyone we talked to. Living here all their lives, most liked the scenery, but were thinking more about feeding their livestock, irrigating crops, or guiding tourists than seeing the mountains as a source of exploration and pleasure. Who am I to question that? Our time with Photoksar friends helped me understand that being from the mountains doesn't have to mean climbing them, that it can be loving your place without any sort of risky snow travel.

As recently graduated students, we both are generally inclined to spend as little money as possible while travelling. Having a grant to cover accommodation costs meant we were able to stay with two different families in the village, one of whom, Tashi's family, had never had guests before. This gave us a much richer experience culturally than camping somewhere on the outskirts of the village, which we had considered, and enabled us to pay them the going rate for accommodation, which we would otherwise have felt was out of reach. One highlight in Photoksar was visiting the 16th century gompa (monastery) with Tashi. She and other members of the Photoksar youth club had restored it by hand in 2020 and 2021. The dirt floors, whitewashed walls, oil lamps and ancient paintings inside, with access on a stone path on the side of a cliff above the village, made our visit feel very sacred.

We also chose to do an expedition in India, because I had grown up there. Although the ancestors on my Indian side are not from anywhere near Ladakh, having a heritage there, as well as a decent command of Hindi, the lingua franca though not the first language of anyone in Ladakh, also helped us connect to many more people our whole time there.

I still don't know how to think about the overtones of colonisation that roll off most mountaineering expeditions. It is ultimately a sport for the privileged and wealthy, and while we tried to address some of this inequity on a surface level, ultimately we are writing in English about an expedition conducted by New Zealand citizens to an audience in the western world. Oak has been working on a short and very amateur film about our journey, under ten minutes; we'd like to investigate translating it into Hindi or Ladakhi, to make it easier to share with the people who belong to these mountains. This journey taught us both so much about life in Ladakh, about the intricacies and joys of planning expeditions in a different place, and the behaviour of tired donkeys. It's something I will remember all my life.

Item	**Cost (INR/GBP)**	**Notes**
Return flights from Auckland to Delhi x 2	114,071 / 957	Largest expense by far
Two days of donkey and guide hire	4800 / 40	This was the going rate which Namgyal (our guide) was happy with
Visa/permits	4000 / 34	Visa's were easily obtained
Accomodation in Leh	6000 / 50	We stayed at a guesthouse with the NGO we would work with in Photoksar.
Over ground transport Delhi - Photoksar	14000 / 117	As we stopped to see friends along the way, this is an amalgamation of the cost for several bus and train trips together.
Accomodation in Photoksar	9000 / 76	We stayed with two different families. One hosted us for a discounted rate because we were volunteering with their NGO. The other we payed the usual rate of 1500 per person per night.
Equipment-Alpine Rope	13500 / 113	Having an extra-light alpine rope was critical to our expedition crossing glacier at high altitude
Food supplies for expedition	10700 / 90	All made and bought in India, though some items were more local, from Zanskar, including yak cheese and dried apricots

Carbon Footprint

Item	Carbon emissions (metric tonnes, approximate)	Notes
Return flights x2 people, Christchurch to Delhi vi HKG	10.4 metric tonnes	Spent 6 months in India total to make the most of this enormous carbon cost
Delhi-Leh by bus x2 people	0.0245	A 36hr bus ride.
Leh-Delhi by flight	0.409 tonnes	Much faster than bus but the greater amount of carbon made us think that going by road on the way there was worthwhile
Leh-Photoksar return by shared jeep (one way) and bus	0.0269 metric tonnes	Very bumpy road
Carbon offset donation to Clean Air Task Force	$300 NZD	Consistently rated as one of the most effective carbon technology and advocacy NGOs
Donation to Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh	$200 NZD	A local NGO focused on climate adaptation in Ladakh we connected with

Carbon cost calculated with: https://sustainabletravel.org/our-work/carbon-offsets/calculate-footprint/
Clean air task force website:
https://www.catf.us/
Himalayan Institute of Alternatives website:
https://hial.edu.in/index.html

Photos of glaciers for reference (**July 2025**):

Chelung Kangri Glacier looking towards Sum Nomo Kangri from Spang Nala Dome

Glacier above Tso Marpo

Chelung Kangri Glacier from the slopes of Spang Nala Kangri peak. Chomothang in background.

Upper slopes of Mantang glacier

Lower extent of Mantang glacier