



KHARDUNGLA CHALLENGE (72 KM)

Informative handbook

Friday 11th September 2026



World's Highest (5370m)

Train Hard, Arrive Early: Respect the Mountains



Whether you are a returnee or a first-time KC participant, here's a checklist to ensure a safe run!

- ✓ Read this informative handbook in its entirety
- ✓ Please check our [website](#) and social media accounts for regular race updates
- ✓ Schedule to arrive in Leh at a minimum of 15 days ahead
- ✓ Ensure that you are in Leh on 29 and 30 August and visit the Ladakh Marathon Expo for bib collection
- ✓ Once you have arrived in Leh please ensure to contact the Ladakh Marathon Team
- ✓ Ensure that you have undergone the medical check in Leh which is for your own safety
- ✓ Ensure you have proper clothing as per our guideline
- ✓ Familiarise yourself with the route map of this challenge
- ✓ Ensure that you have provided the organizers with emergency contact and medical details

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1. About the Khardung La Challenge

From a Frozen Rink to the Roof of the World: The Birth of the Khardungla Challenge

Picture the scene: It is 2012, in the high-altitude desert of Ladakh. The inaugural edition of what was promised to be one of the world's most iconic ultra-races is just days away. The course is mapped, a brutal, breathtaking 72 Km across the Khardungla pass (17618ft) cutting through the Himalayas. The logistics are set. There is only one glaring, catastrophic problem.

The registration sheet is completely blank. Not a single runner has signed up.

For the race director, a total lack of participants for a debut event would mean immediate cancellation. But the race director knew that the foundation for a legendary event had to be laid right then and there. The race had to go on. Faced with an empty starting line, the race director looked to the only pool of elite athletes he had immediate access to the Rimo Ice Hockey Club, the local team he owned.

Ice hockey in Ladakh is a sport defined by fast, freezing sprints on natural outdoor rinks. The players were tough, disciplined, and intimately familiar with the biting cold. Recognizing their potential, a team was selected along with a few other young Ladakhis to run a 72 Km ultra-marathon over Khardung La.

This daring experiment resulted in an inaugural field of just 11 locals, anchored by these Ladakhi hockey players. They didn't have carbon-plated shoes, specialised ultra-running gel packs, or months of tailored endurance training. What they did have was pure grit, iron lungs, and a physiological advantage that money couldn't buy: they were completely acclimatised to the punishing, thin air of the mountains.

The Ultimate Leap of Faith

These 11 pioneers from Ladakh laid the foundation for high-altitude ultra-running in the region, acting as the ultimate catalyst for a sport that has since exploded nationwide.

What started as a daring experiment born out of a local hockey club is now globally feared and revered as one of the toughest ultra-races on the planet. The physical demands of the course remain staggering:

- **72 Kilometers** of brutal, beautiful terrain.
- **13,090 Feet:** The daunting starting altitude down in Khardung Village.
- **The 4,000m Crux:** A relentless **60 kilometers** of the race is contested entirely above 4,000 meters (13,123 ft), where every breath is a battle.
- **17,618 Feet:** The breathtaking Khardung La pass before the long descent to Leh.

The Legacy Continues

Every year, elite endurance athletes from across the globe travel to Ladakh to see if they can survive the thin air and towering elevations of the Khardung La Challenge. But no matter how international the starting line becomes, the soul of the race remains rooted in the courage of those original local hockey players who looked at a massive Himalayan pass and decided to run.



2. Course Description, Weather and What to expect

Majority of the course is on asphalt-paved road surfaces. However, certain sections between Khardung Village on the Nubra side and South Pulu on the Leh side, feature rough roads. Also, due to the high altitude, the course is subject to unprecedented climatic conditions. In past years, participants have experienced rain and snow conditions with extreme temperatures. Additionally, the Leh-Nubra highway undergoes regular widening by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO). Participants should be prepared for any such eventuality.

Temperatures at start time of 3:00 AM is around 1°C to 2°C in Khardung Village. In case of bad weather, temperatures may drop below freezing to between -10°C and -14°C; in the year 2018, temperatures at Khardungla Top fell to -14°C. Volunteers, like participants, must endure these harsh conditions while providing aid for nearly eight hours at 17,618 ft. As participants descend from Khardungla Top to Leh, temperatures typically rise to about 10°C to 15°C or higher, depending on the weather.

3. Elevation Profile

From/To	Distance	Elevation gain/loss	Stage
Khardung to Khardungla top	32.2km	1396m	I
Khardungla top to South Pulu	14.3km	-708m	II
South Pulu to Mendak mor (turn)	12.1km	-590m	III
Mendak mor to Finish point	13.4km	-565m	Finisher

4. Altitude and Acclimatisation

Running at high altitude tests the limits of one's endurance. Acclimatisation is very important which is why participants of this challenging race are asked to come a minimum of 15 days in advance. People acclimatise differently with some taking several days. It is imperative to take complete rest on Day 01 of arrival in Leh and then take it easy on Day 2. Participants are advised not to train too hard too soon. For more information on altitude sickness and running, we recommend that all participants read the following articles

[Healthy in high Himalayas](#)

[High altitude travel and altitude illness](#)



5. Preparation and Tips

We hope you are training diligently for this toughest ultra-marathon.

- **Discipline:** Disciplined and rigorous training sessions will help you mentally prepare for this challenge. Training should consist of schedules with an emphasis on building endurance, strength and mental resilience. Incorporating interval training in your regimen will help you adapt to the elevated conditions we experience in Leh. Finally, arriving in Leh 2-4 weeks ahead of the race day will help with altitude adaptation.
- **Matching the Pace, Not the Ego:** If you choose to run with a buddy or team up with a fellow participant on the course, you must align on a sustainable, aerobic pace. Do not let a faster participant drag you into a heart-rate spike that causes you to blow up later. Conversely, be willing to ease off slightly to keep your partner within a safe zone.
- **The "A-B-C" Verbal Check:** Silence in the dark can breed dark thoughts. Establish a simple rule with your running partner to check in every mile with a verbal confirmation. Ask each other simple questions to check for high-altitude confusion (HACE): "*What was the name of the last checkpoint?*" or "*How much water do you have left?*" If their answers are slurred or slow, you know it's time to flag down a support car.
- **Sharing the Wind and Light:** If the headwind is brutal on the climb to North Pulu, take turns drafting. Have one participant take the lead for 10 minutes to block the wind while the other follows closely behind, then swap.
- **Differentiate Pain from Injury:** High altitude will cause discomfort—your muscles will burn, your lungs will ache, and you will feel profoundly tired. Accept this as part of the tax the mountain demands. However, if you feel a sharp, structural pain in a joint, chest tightness, or a sudden loss of balance, that is an objective warning from your body. Listen to it and slow down.
- **A Note on True Strength:** Being mentally strong at 17,000 feet does not mean being reckless. The strongest runners are the ones who can look at the mountain calmly, acknowledge their vulnerability, and make calculated, intelligent decisions to protect their well-being. If you find yourself entirely alone in the dark, remember that every single volunteer, support vehicle, and marshal on that road is a part of your extended team. You are never truly isolated.
- **Navigating the Psychological Shadow of the Dark:** In extreme conditions, isolation amplifies every minor doubt. A slight ache in your knee can feel like a structural failure; a gasp for air can trigger sudden panic. Stay calm and change how you process your surroundings.



When the vastness of the mountain pass feels overwhelming, shrink your world. Stop thinking about the 40 kilometres left to run. Focus entirely on the small pool of light cast by your headlamp. Tell yourself, "*I am just running to that next boulder,*" or "*I am just taking 50 strong paces.*"

Fear and anxiety spike your heart rate, which consumes precious oxygen you can't afford to waste. Every 15 minutes, conduct a calm, logical head-to-toe check.

- *Are my shoulders tense and up by my ears? Drop them.*
- *Am I clenching my jaw against the cold? Relax it.*
- *Is my breathing rhythmic or shallow? Deepen it.*





6. Race Protocols and Medical checkup

- 1) Participants must always follow the organisers, race officials, course Marshals, and volunteers' instructions. The organiser reserves the right to disqualify participants who refuse to follow instructions of the race officials.

2) Interacting with Biker Road Marshals

Biker Road Marshals constantly patrol the mountainous highway to monitor participant safety and manage course integrity. They are equipped to handle emergencies and communicate directly with medical teams. However, as certain stretches of the course lack network coverage, emergency support may take time to reach you. Should an issue arise, we advise you to remain calm and practice deep breathing while support is on the way.

- The Active Check-In: Whenever a biker Marshal passes you or pulls up alongside you, give a clear, intentional visual signal. A simple thumbs-up and a verbal "I'm okay" lets them keep moving to check on other participants.
 - Never Hide Distress: If you are feeling dizzy, disoriented, or nauseous, do not try to pretend you are fine when a Marshal rolls past. If you look like you are weaving or stumbling, they have the authority to halt you for a mandatory medical saturation check. Be completely honest about your physical state.
 - Emergency Signalling: If you are in trouble between aid stations and a biker marshal/ support vehicle is approaching, use your mandatory safety whistle or wave your headlamp/arms across the road to command their attention immediately.
- 3) Participants must conduct themselves in sportsmanlike manner and respect race officials, fellow participants, and the local people of Ladakh.
 - 4) All participants are to refrain from display of political, religious, or racial propaganda of any nature on apparel or gear worn or used by participants during the race(s). Any participant found in violation of this rule will be disqualified.
 - 5) During the race if a participant is found boarding any of the support vehicles, he/she will be disqualified.
 - 6) Use of portable/supplementary oxygen is not permitted. Participant will be disqualified if he/she is found using supplementary oxygen.
 - 7) Participants must run/walk the entire course on their own strength. Friends, family can run to join the runner starting from Shanti Stupa to run alongside them up to the entrance of the main market in Leh. However, if a participant receives physical support to move forward from a pacer or spectator, it results in automatic disqualification.
 - 8) Selfie sticks, GoPro mounts, or any camera rigging that is not attached directly to the head or torso are banned on the course of all six races.



- 9) Littering is strictly prohibited. Please carry out your empty gel sachets and energy-bar wrappers or dispose of them in bins at aid stations.
- 10) If the vitals of a participant are found to be abnormal before start or during the race, then our medical team will have the right to pull you out of the race. Their decision is final and binding.
- 11) No family member/friend/support crew is allowed to accompany or stay with participants in Khardung Village. If a participant travels to Khardung Village in advance for acclimatisation, then he/she will have to return to Leh and report at the NDS Stadium on Thursday 10th September at 8:00AM for race briefing and travel together.
- 12) Participants must be present in Leh and report at the NDS Stadium for race briefing to travel together with fellow participants.
- 13) Please ensure that timing chip is fastened securely to bib. Your net running time can only be measured if you step on the timing mats laid out at the start and finish line. Likewise, you must step on all mats laid out enroute the marathon course. **You will be disqualified if your intermediate times are not recorded.**
- 14) Participant safety is of utmost importance to us” - the medical check-up is organised with this in mind. A pre-medical check-up for participants will be held on 10th September after you have arrived in Khardung village. The organiser reserves the right to disallow/disqualify any participant who is known or suspected to be physically unfit. At any point should you feel unsure of your ability to complete this challenge or physically not well, we recommend you take advice from our team.





7. Bib Collection, Race Kit and Participant Benefits

Bib collection details:

- Dates: Saturday 29th and Sunday 30th August 2026.
- Venue: NDS Indoor Stadium Leh.
- Timings: 10 AM to 5 PM
- **NO BIBS WILL BE GIVEN AFTER THESE DATES.**
- Participants must collect their bibs in person and bring a photo ID. Bibs will not be issued to anyone other than the registered participant, and no authority letters will be accepted for this purpose.
- This is a timed race with timing chips.
- Each participant receives two bibs, one for the front and one for the back.
- Please make sure bibs are pinned properly and visible throughout the race, otherwise disqualification will occur.
- Please ensure that timing chip is fastened securely.
- Your net running time can only be measured if you step on the timing mats laid out at the start and finish line. Likewise, you must step on all mats laid out enroute the marathon course.
- **You will be disqualified if your intermediate times are not recorded.**

Race kit includes:

- Race Day T-shirt by **PUMA**
- Running jacket
- Beanie cap
- Ultra sun hat
- Upper and lower inners
- Arm sleeves (for sun protection)
- Bags for layering on/off





8. Reporting, Race briefing and getting to the Start line

- Reporting and Race briefing date: 10th September 2026
- Reporting time: 8:00 AM
- Reporting place: NDS Indoor Stadium, Leh

Day 1: Thursday, 10 September

Drive from NDS Stadium in Leh to Khardung – vehicles will leave at sharp 9:00 AM. Drive 72 km across the Khardungla pass and reach Khardung village by 1:00 PM, a journey of about 3 hours. Participants need to carry light packed lunch and water for the day. Overnight accommodation is in homestays inclusive of high tea followed by an early dinner. Khardung is at an altitude of 3982m. A pre-medical checkup for participants will be held upon arrival in Khardung by race medics at Ladakh Marathon Station.

Day 2: Friday, 11 September

Today is race day – start time 3:00 AM and participants must reach the start line by 2:45 AM. An early morning breakfast is provided on race day at the Ladakh Marathon Station.

Khardung Village: Embracing Remote Homestays

Khardung Village sits at over 13,000 feet, where modern luxury does not exist.

- **Basic Comfort:** Expect simple, clean rooms with traditional floor bedding and heavy blankets for sub-zero nights.
- **Traditional Facilities:** Facilities include dry toilets or basic plumbing. Hot water is heated on a wood stove and provided manually by the bucket.
- **Heartfelt Hospitality:** Hosts show immense pride through care, offering hot tea and local meals. Accepting their food is a sign of respect.
- **Patience is Mandatory:** Expect shared amenities and space constraints. Staying calm and cooperative saves the physical energy you need for the 72 km ultra-marathon.
- **Be a Considerate Guest:** Conserve hot water, keep your gear organised, and respect quiet hours. Remember, your hosts are waking up at 1:30 AM to support your race day.



9. Drop Bag Submission details and layering on/off locations

The submission timeline of drop bags is:

- **Submission Date:** Thursday, September 10, 2026.
- **Location:** NDS Stadium Grounds, Leh (during the official mandatory race briefing).
- **The Process:** This is where you submit your layer-on/layer-off bags designated for **Khardungla Top** and **South Pulu**. The bags are loaded directly into official support vehicles to be driven up the mountain pass before the highway closes for race morning. You are expected to carry only your absolute essentials for your overnight stay in Khardung.

There are two locations to Layer on/off during this race:

- Khardung La Top
- South Pulu





10. Race Day Information and Cut-off

- Race Day and Start Time: Friday, 11 September 3:00 AM
- Start Line: Khardung
- Finish Day and Time: Friday, 11 September 5:00 PM
- Finish Line: Main Market, Leh

Cut-off time: Stage-wise cut-off is as under. Please make sure that you step on timing mats located at each cut-off point.

Cut-off Points	Cut-off time	Stage
Khardungla top	11:00 am / 8 hrs	I
South Pulu	1:30 pm / 10 hrs 30 mins	II
Mendak mor (turn)	3:00 pm / 12 hrs	III
Finish point	5:00 pm / 14 hrs	Finisher

Operating at extreme altitudes in a harsh mountain landscape means that safety is entirely dependent on your communication with the race network. On the Khardungla highway, you are never truly isolated because of deployment of a highly active network of mobile logistics support, including dedicated Biker Road Marshals. Treating these marshals and aid station crews as your lifelines keeps you safe and moving forward efficiently.

All support along this route will be withdrawn from various stages after respective cut-off time has lapsed.



11. Aid Station Log-In Discipline and Support during the race

➤ Aid Station "Log-In" Discipline

Every time you enter an official aid station or checkpoint, you are entering a zone of accountability.

Ensure Your Bib is Read. Even if you are rushing or just refilling your hydration pack, make sure the race officials at the timing or tracking desk clearly see your front bib number. They log your arrival and departure times to track your progress up and down the course of the race. State your Intentions: If you plan to spend more than two minutes at an aid station—such as changing your footwear or layering on/off, briefly tell a volunteer: "I'm changing my shoes, I'll be out in five minutes." This keeps the crew from worrying if your tracking log suddenly stalls.

➤ Aid Station Support facilities

Hydration and Aid stations will be located at every 5km interval and shared with the participants of Silk Route Ultra. There will also be mobile units along the course of the race providing drinks and snacks. Hydration & Aid stations will provide with:

- Water - refill facility - by our hydration partner **BISLERI**, participants are requested to bring out their own hydration packs and bottles
- Energy drinks served in biodegradable cups by our energy partner **FAST&UP**
- Snacks are free of plastic wraps and include fresh fruits, dates, boiled potatoes, salt, jaggery etc.



- **Toilet facilities** along the course are environment friendly dry pits. Medical facilities along this ultra-marathon course are provided by the Indian Army – XIV Corps, Ladakh Scouts Regimental Centre, ITBP and the Administration of UT Ladakh.



➤ The Strict Rule on Toilet Breaks & Wandering Off

The terrain along the route consists of steep drop-offs, loose scree, and hidden mountain hazards. Wandering off the paved or marked road can quickly turn dangerous.

- Stay on the Main Road Shoulder: If you need to stop for a bathroom break, do not wander far from the highway. Moving behind distant rocks or dropping down steep embankments removes you from the direct sightline of patrolling biker marshals and medical cars. If you lose your footing or slip on a loose rock out of sight, nobody will know where to look for you.
- The "Drop-Bag Screen" or Aid Station Toilets: Use the designated toilet facilities available at major aid stations and checkpoints whenever possible. If you must go between stations, stay close enough to the road shoulder so that your running vest or headlamp remains visible to the course traffic.
- Inform Your Buddy: If you are running with a partner, always tell them if you are stepping aside for a break. Have them wait on the road shoulder to maintain visual contact and signal a Marshal if you take an unusually long time.
- Always remain alert to the sounds of support vehicles. Keep your ears free of headphones or music so you can instantly hear a support vehicle approaching from behind on narrow switchbacks.



Facilities along the course of the Khardung La Challenge are supported by the Indian Army – XIV Corps, Ladakh Scouts Regimental Centre, ITBP and the Administration of Union Territory of Ladakh.



12. Mandatory Gear (Non-Negotiable)

You must always carry these items with you on the course (or wear them during the sections as required).

Equipment Item	Specifications	Purpose / Rule
Hydration Pack / Vest	Minimum 1.5L to 2L fluid capacity.	Refill-only race. No single-use plastic water bottles are given on the route. You must carry your own hydration pack.
Two Official Race Bibs	One pinned to the front, one to the back.	Must always be visible. Altering, folding, or covering the bib results in immediate disqualification.
Headlamp with Spare Batteries	High lumen output (200+lumens recommended).	Khardungla Challenge starts at 3:00 AM in pitch darkness.
Windproof & Waterproof Shell	Technical jacket with an adjustable hood.	Protects against sudden blizzard squalls and biting mountain wind chills at the 17,618 ft summit.
Thermal Insulation Layers	High-quality synthetic or merino wool upper and lower inners.	To withstand sub-zero temperatures (dropping down to -5°C or even -14°C in severe storm years).
Warm Winter Cap / Beanie	Fleece or merino wool covering the ears.	To prevent rapid head heat loss on the high mountain passes.
Warm Gloves	Windproof or thermal material.	Essential to prevent finger numbness during freezing night or high sections.
UV Protection Sunglasses	High-quality lenses (preferably with a strap/chum).	Absolute must to protect your eyes from intense high-altitude UV rays and snow blindness if the pass is covered in snow.
Whistle	Attached to your hydration vest.	For emergency signalling if you are disoriented, injured, or facing severe altitude sickness.
Sleeping Bag (Minimum -5°C Grade)	For overnight stay in Khardung Village	Required for the staging/overnight logistics prior to the start at Khardung Village.



13. Participant Assistance and Finish Line Policy

The Finish Line is at Main Market, Leh.

- **Self-Propelled Progress:** Participants must progress under their own power (walking, jogging, or running). Being carried, dragged, or physically supported by pacing partners, spectators, or anyone else to advance toward the finish line is strictly prohibited and may result in disqualification. Friends, family can run to join the runner starting from Shanti Stupa to run alongside them up to the entrance of the main market in Leh. However, if a participant receives physical support to move forward from a pacer or spectator, it results in automatic disqualification.
- **Official Assistance:** Race volunteers and medical staff are permitted to provide physical assistance only within the final few hundred meters of the race.
- **Crossing the Finish Line:** Regardless of any volunteer assistance provided in the final stretch, participants must cross the finish line entirely on their own feet.
- All participants must respect the finish line area and ensure that celebrations do not interfere with other participants' finish line experience.
- There will be Doctors and Physiotherapists at the finishing area to take care of participants.
- A sumptuous hot lunch is served at the finishing area by our hospitality partner **The Grand Dragon Ladakh.**
- Podium finishers are felicitated at the finish line, and all finishers will receive a Finisher medal.





14. The Power of your Impact

Your participation in the Ladakh Marathon has a direct impact on the local economy and represents something much larger.

- **Direct Financial Assistance:** The tourism and agricultural seasons in these high valleys are incredibly short. The income generated from hosting Ladakh Marathon runners goes directly into the hands of local families. Even if the amount seems small to a traveller, it provides critical financial support for winter supplies, heating fuel, and children's education.
- **Sustainable Sport Tourism:** By staying locally and cooperating gracefully with the basic conditions, you help prove that mass athletic events can positively lift remote communities without destroying their environmental integrity.
- **When you stand on the start line in the freezing dark, you won't remember the lack of a modern shower. You will remember the incredible warmth of the local family who wished you "Julley" (the Ladakhi greeting/blessing) and handed you a cup of hot tea before sending you up the mountain.**

