

The Joy *of*

**Himachal
Temples**



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The Joy of Himachal Temples

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In Gratitude

To three women in my life; Rajashree gave me the freedom to travel and has taken the load, my mother-in-law Vijaya, a true travel spirit and an inspiration and my mother Janakam, who passed on the travel spirit and would have travelled so much if she could have.

To Indic Academy who opened up many temple experiences. Shefali Vaidya in particular urged the participants not just to visit temples, but also to share the experience in any manner. Their urging triggered this effort.

A huge amount of luck has made my travel possible, both on work and outside work. My sincere thanks to everyone who gave me these experiences.



This book celebrates the Joy of Himachal's temples.

Himachal leaves pleasant memories; river valleys, snow-capped mountains, smiling children, maggi, smart women cops, HRTC buses and so on. But the temple experiences are etched in my memory. Each temple, with a varying mix of stone, wood and slate, has its own charm. Some of them are popular pilgrimages, some are grand, some are in spectacular locations and some have aged more than 1000 years. But all of them have something in common; visiting them has been a joy.

The joy of the journey; mostly by public transport, sometimes on a scooter, and on rare occasions by a car. The joy of the landscape, the rivers, the hills, the fields and the skies. The joy of running into children. The joy of a temple courtyard with warm sunshine on a cold winter day. The joy of architecture, unlike that of the rest of India. The joy of a festival and the crowds. The joy of cleanliness and peace. The joy of lived harmony when different faiths pray in the same place. The joy of feeling and seeing faith.

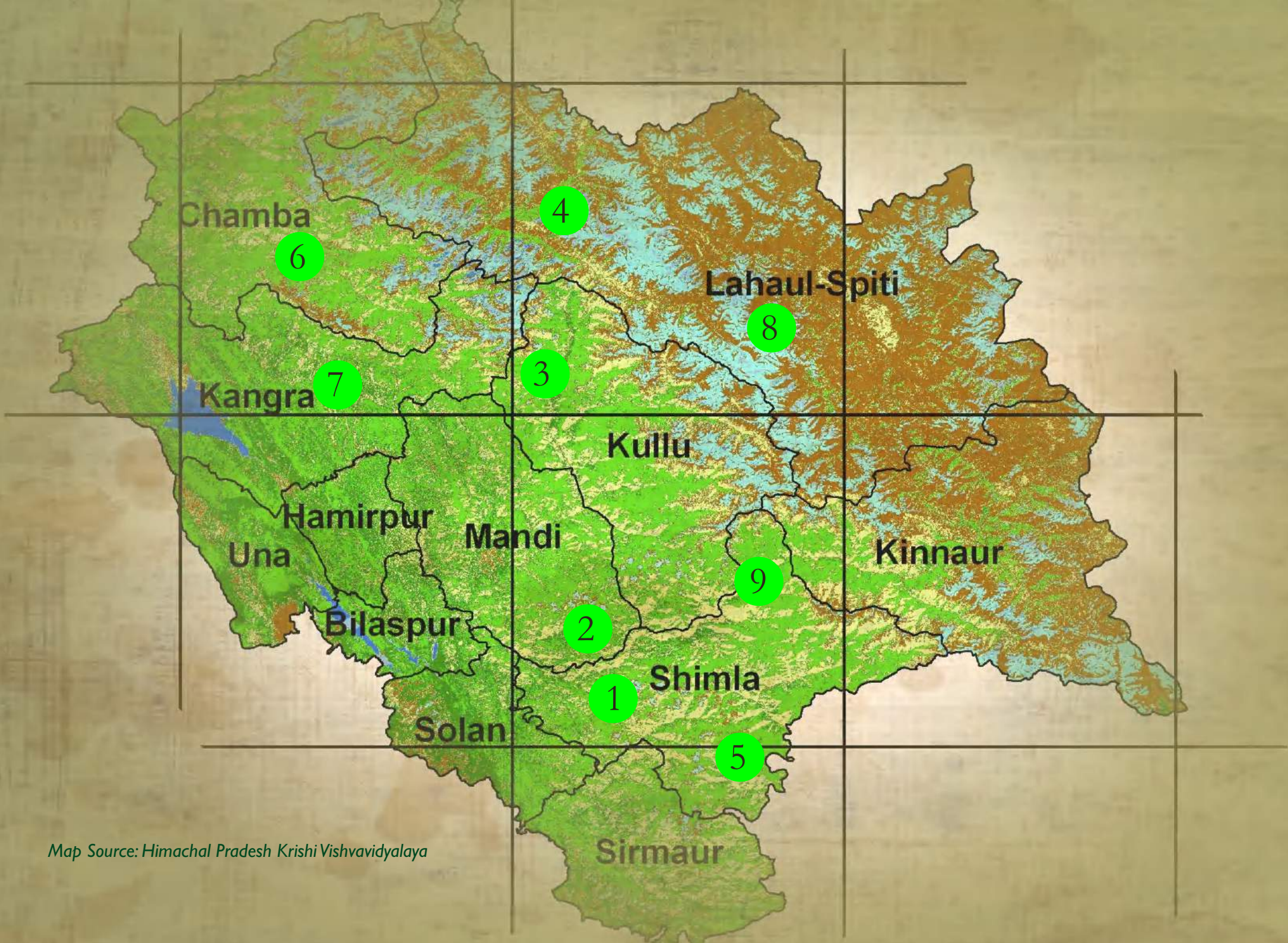
I try to capture my joy in this book.

I have covered almost fifty personal experiences, some in detail and some in brief. There is a bit of history, little bit of architecture, a bit of geography and a bit of logistics. I hope I have shared the experience and joy in their fullness.

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Map Source: Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishvavidyalaya

Region-wise List of Temples

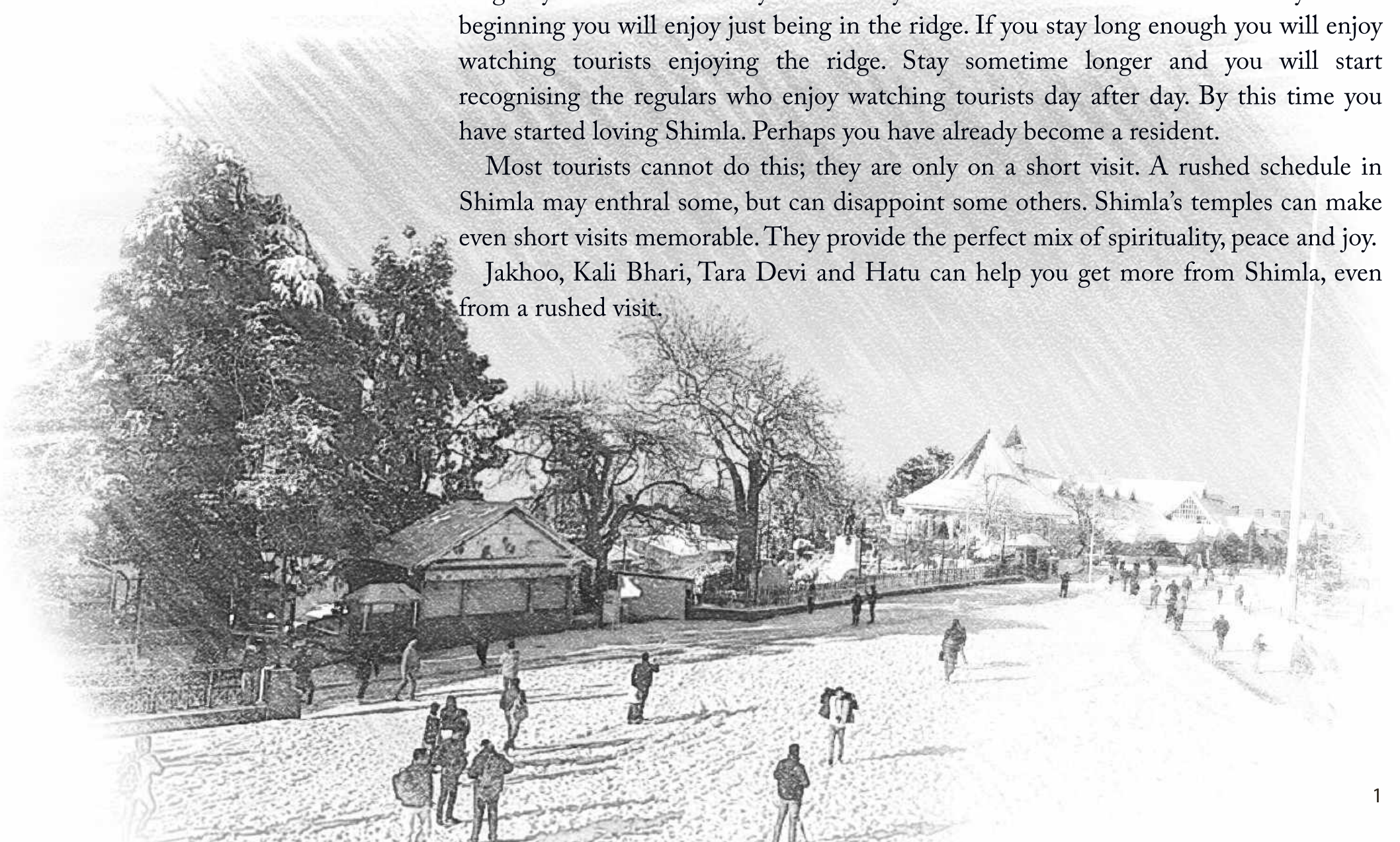
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1. When you are in Shimla

Shimla is neither a journey nor a destination. It is a different kind of a place. It is a long stay destination where you must stay for a while and walk around leisurely. In the beginning you will enjoy just being in the ridge. If you stay long enough you will enjoy watching tourists enjoying the ridge. Stay sometime longer and you will start recognising the regulars who enjoy watching tourists day after day. By this time you have started loving Shimla. Perhaps you have already become a resident.

Most tourists cannot do this; they are only on a short visit. A rushed schedule in Shimla may enthrall some, but can disappoint some others. Shimla's temples can make even short visits memorable. They provide the perfect mix of spirituality, peace and joy.

Jakhoo, Kali Bhari, Tara Devi and Hatu can help you get more from Shimla, even from a rushed visit.





The morning after a snowfall at the Jakhoo, Shimla

1.1 Hanumanji at Hilltop

I go to the Jakhoo temple every time I visit Shimla. February 2019 was no exception. I had reached Shimla in the evening and it had soon started to snow. It was a gentle drift which became heavier in the night. I set out very early the next morning to the temple, maybe at 5.30 or 6 a.m. The snowfall had covered the town through the night. The landscape was completely white. The town was still asleep, perhaps saying "Life would anyway be slow, so why rush the morning?" With all the silence, the walk through the soft and sinking snow felt even quieter.

There was a bit of mystery ahead. In normal weather, the steep climb to Jakhoo takes just over thirty minutes. It snows heavier near Jakhoo and I was not sure if the route was even open. With legs sinking in calf deep snow, I was making only slow progress, but cheerful progress. The route was open but there were no other footmarks on the snow. The snowfall had been heavier near Jakhoo and my feet sank almost knee deep. When I reached Jakhoo I was the only devotee.

In warmer times, the climb itself is an experience. A small board just behind the public library at the ridge challenges you right at the start. It tells you how long you ought to take (age and fitness adjusted!). It is a steep climb for a third of the way



Top: The beginning of the climb above the ridge

Left: The last one third of the climb that goes through dense tree cover



Hanumanji at eye level, Jakhoo

**TEST YOUR PHYSICAL FITNESS
WALK TO JAKHU TEMPLE SHIMLA
LESS THAN 30 YEARS AGE.**

UP TO 30 MINUTES _	ABSOLUTELY FIT
30 MINUTES TO 45 MINUTES _	FIT
45 MINUTES TO 60 MINUTES _	NEED IMPROVEMENT
OVER 60 MINUTES _	UNFIT

AGE 30 YEARS TO 50 YEARS

UP TO 45 MINUTES _	ABSOLUTELY FIT
45 MINUTES TO 60 MINUTES _	FIT
OVER 60 MINUTES _	NEED IMPROVEMENT

AGE 50 YEARS TO 70 YEARS

UP TO 55 MINUTES _	ABSOLUTELY FIT
55 MINUTES TO 70 MINUTES _	FIT
OVER 70 MINUTES _	NEED IMPROVEMENT

OVER 70 YEARS

YOU ARE FIT IF YOU CAN WALK TO JAKHU

SHRI HANUMAN TEMPLE TRUST
JAKHU SHIMLA

Fitness chart for the Jakhoo climb

```
graph TD
    Start[YOU ARE HERE] --> DCM[DREAMLAND MARKET]
    DCM --> HL[HOLI LODGE]
    HL --> SHT[Sh. HANUMAN TEMPLE]
    DCM --> DCR[D.C. RESIDENCE]
    DCR --> SBBNT[Sh. BABA BALAK NATH TEMPLE]
```


winding past a café run by prisoners, some hotels, shops, a Church in disuse and some colonial bungalows. It levels out for the next one third of the way along a large playground and a row of houses. The last one-third is a steep climb on steps. This part is thickly wooded and full of aggressive monkeys. There is a somewhat inconvenient and slightly expensive rope-way. There is also a long winded road that takes you through all of Shimla's traffic. You can avoid the climb with either of these, but you should climb for the experience and the memories.

The temple is at the top of the ridge and is the highest point in Shimla. It marks the place where Hanumanji heard Sage Yakoo's chanting and stopped, before resuming his search for Sanjeevini. The temple complex has a 108 feet tall Hanumanji who looks down at the mall road and Shimla ridge below. The sunrise and the sunset are fabulous at Jakhoo. The slanting rays break through the tree leaves to light up the saffron coloured temple walls from different angles. The shadow of the trees adds to the effect. The evening aarti is great community experience.

The Panditji is of a ripe age and perhaps lives at the ridge itself and must have served Hanumanji for several decades. He serves the devotees tirtha, some prasada, a flower or two and then caringly applies the tika. He picks up every rupee offered to him and puts them in the hundi. Even if it was intended for him, he takes nothing of it for himself.

*Top: Looking up at Jakhoo from Christ Church at the ridge
Left: The Panditji must have been performing the aarti for decades*



I had taken my drone along that morning. With freezing and numb fingers I managed to fly the drone for a few minutes. The drone's eye view of Hanumanji standing amidst the blanket of snow was incredible. But the temperature took its toll. My thin gloves could not stop the cold that quickly turned into searing pain. I rushed down hoping for warmth. Luckily, ten minutes down, where the trail levels a bit to meet settlements, a tea stall was stirring to life. The owner looked at me and lit up a fire. Then brought me a cup of tea. Life came back. I have gone back twice since then for a warmer experience.

Right: Sunlight pours through the trees and leaves at Sunrise and plays up the saffron walls



*Right: The last flight of steps starting from the car park, for those who bye-pass the climb
Above: The promise of a peaceful Jakhoo complex*



1.2 Daily routine at Kali Bari

There are grand temples, there are popular temples and there are temples at great locations. Then there are some that are just part of everyday life.

Kali Bari temple in Shimla is a part of the daily life. It is an interesting blend of native history and migration. Kali is Shyamala. She represents what is native to the city and gave the city its name. Then as Kali, she gave an identity and a sense of connection to the Bengalis who accompanied the British into the city in its early years.

Kali Bari temple is at the western end of the ridge, a few hundred meters after Scandal Point where most tourists stop. My

client in Shimla has a habit of walking to the temple every day. I have accompanied him at times. The temple is grand because of this routine that devotees, like my client, keep.

One June, we were at the temple when it had started raining. I took a glance outside from within the temple. There is a small but open courtyard and you can look at all of Shimla from there. There is a bench if you are tired of the walking. A tiny oil lamp is embedded on the wall, shielded from the rain and snow; it must have been here since 1845. Then the sight of modernity, a solar lamp post. The sight of the bells in the background of dusk completes the serenity. The locality is nothing such, it is noisy, but faith does create an oasis.

Walk to Kali Bari temple next time you are in Shimla. You will see the daily routine of faith.





1.3 Tara Devi, watching Shimla

Tara Devi is a quick hike off Shimla. It is gentler than the climb to Jakhoo, but slightly longer and farther from the city. It overlooks Shimla from a ridge top and gives fantastic views. The appeal of the view is of course in the eyes of the beholder.

There is a road that leads right up to the temple, save for a flight of 50 or 100 steps. The hiking trail is a better option. It starts on the Shimla-Chandigarh highway, next to the Tara Devi railway station. Most of the hike is a gentle slope except for a short, sharp climb after two thirds of the distance. It is a 40 minute walk for someone who is fit, perhaps an hour or 90 minutes if done leisurely. The trail is easy to follow, except when it crosses the ridge and seems to be going down rather than up for a while.

I went early morning in January. The chill crept up the limbs once I was barefoot. The modern construction didn't help and the floor was ice cold. The large wooden mandapa was a relief but stepping out was a test of will. I stood just long enough to take a few pictures. To return to the highway, I took another rough trail on the southern side. It drops down steeply to the highway. It is just a 300 mt descent but it tests your balance. Once I was on the highway, an accommodating HRTC bus stopped where it need not and brought me back to Shimla.

Top: The western parts of Shimla from Tara Devi temple. The central parts are not a great sight.

Right: Winter morning sunshine on the second half of the trail





January morning sunshine at Tara Devi temple

The Tara Devi Temple

1.4 Hiking to Hatu

I first went to Hatu temple in the late 1990s. I was in Chandigarh for work and wanted to see Shimla. I had never been to Himachal till then. I took a late night bus from Chandigarh and arrived in Shimla in the small hours. It was not a pretty sight. I decided that I have to leave the city and head some place else. Some tourist map in the bus stand (which was then within the city) suggested Narkanda and a hike to Hatu peak as a good one day trip. I took the next available HRTC bus (to Rampur) and headed out, my first ride on the legendary HRTC. I got off at Narkanda. A broad trail led up to the Hatu temple. It is a 7 km, 400 mt climb through a densely wooded forest; probably took two or three hours.

The temple was a simple structure. The ridge was deserted that day. Suddenly two men appeared with a goat and slaughtered it. It wasn't the kind that you expect and took some repeated blows. That was my first experience of seeing a ritual slaughter. I didn't know whether to look away or look on. Then a few teenagers appeared and started chatting. They were Himachalis and fond of going deep into the mountains. They rued that there are too many tourists now in Hatu (I was the only one on the ridge that day). I remarked that perhaps it will push teenagers like them to unexplored trails. I hiked down, had paratha and pickle at the Himachal Tourism restaurant, took the next bus to Shimla and then back to Chandigarh. That was all I could take of Shimla then. I am fond of Shimla now.

In 2016, on the way from Shimla to Sarahan, I stopped at Narkanda for a night. The next morning I rode a bike upto the temple. It was a monsoon day. There weren't many people still, but the ridge had a totally new civilisation. The temple had become grand. A guest house had come up for pilgrims to stay. I don't know what the then teenagers would have to say now about all this. Perhaps they are running the guest house now. But just like in the first visit, the clouds denied me the Himalayan vista that Hatu is famous for.

Hatu peak is just 70 kms from Shimla, three hours if you stop for chai in the hills. Head out if Shimla has not grown on to you just yet.

*Traffic, crowds and noise; you wish you had a clue.
Head to Jakhoo and Hatu, before you bid adieu.*



Hatu Mata Mandir

2. Karsog, life beyond Shimla

More people should visit Karsog. Perhaps not.

It is so close to Shimla, just 100 kms north. The journey is fabulous. It goes past the famed Mashobra and Naldhera. Then it drops steeply through beautiful villages to touch Sutlej and the hot springs of Tattapani. Then it climbs the sheer cliff face and goes through a lonely valley. Then it goes along the gentle slopes of Churag and Chindi. Finally it reaches the vast farm lands of Karsog. It offers so much, but there are not many takers. That is good for Karsog in a way.

Karsog has temples larger than you would expect and carries more legends than you can imagine. When you see Mamleshwar, Chindimata, Mahunaag and Kamaksha temples, you would thank yourself for going beyond Shimla; and thank the people of Karsog for their warmth and smiles.

2.1 Legends of Mamleshwar

Mamleshwar temple is in Karsog and is legendary. I was hiking down from Chindi and everyone told me to go to the temple and I did. It is at the edge of the somewhat crowded town. There is a steady stream of devotees to the temple. I was sitting in the temple complex and noticed an old man cutting wood. It was some labour. It sounded unfair that he had to do this job at his age. I later realised that it was his faith. There is a legend of eternal fire in the temple that was lit by Pandavas during their exile. It has to be kept alive. The old man was cutting wood to keep the fire alive.

The temple also has a drum used by Pandavas, "Bhim ka Dhol," a really large one. Pandavas also cultivated the land and there is a single grain of wheat that is supposed to weigh more than 200 gms. Then there are five Shivalings in a row in the courtyard which Pandavas had worshipped. The temple complex has several stone sculptures. Both the stone and the sculptures are unlike what you would find in the State. Probably they were carried from elsewhere? I told the priest they remind me of granite sculptures in South India. He shrugged, perhaps implying "If Pandavas have lived here, why are you surprised about sculptures?" Mamleshwar is truly legendary.



The faith and gratitude (top) that keeps the legendary fire (left) alive



Top right: The wood and slate Mamleshwar temple

Top and left: The temple has a collection of sculptures unusual for the current wood and slate architecture



2.2 Beautiful things at Chindi

Chindi is a few kms before Karsog. After Chindi, the road from Shimla starts descending towards Karsog. It is home to a few beautiful things. The Chindimata temple is large, built with generous amount of wood. The carvings on wood are exquisite and show up the rich tradition of wooden temples in Karsog. The temple is multi-layered with rectangular, square and circular slate roof levels one above the other. The temple has a small circular tank. A few steps lead down to it; concentric circles, made of stone. It is both aesthetic and uncommon in Himachal.

Chindi has a middle school with happy kids. Towards evening I strolled down the slopes that



*The Chindimata temple (top)
and the tiny pond with
concentric steps (left)*



overlook the school playground. Volleyball was in progress. Some girls stopped playing and asked me to take a picture. Some more joined. The group became larger and then the teacher too joined the shoot. Then the school bell rang and the kids disappeared in different directions.

Chindi also offers a beautiful downhill hike. A trail starts from the electricity transmission towers at the top of the ridge. It cuts through forests, goes through several apple orchards and joins the peas fields of Karsog. It is a gentle two hour walk full of pleasant encounters with matriarchs, children and farmers.

For comfort, Chindi has a very nice Himachal Tourism resort with immense rooms. Chindi, along with the rest of Karsog, is a beautiful break from Shimla. Don't think much.





2.3 Smiles of Mahunaag

Mahunaag is off the Shimla-Karsog road. A little while before the road reaches Churag, a branch turns right towards Mahunaag. It is 12 kms to the temple from there. I got off the bus at the diversion. There was no sign of a bus to Mahunaag and I started walking. It is a very pleasant level walk on a lonely stretch of road. The views are splendid. I had covered probably 10 kms before a bus showed up. There is a forest rest house at Mahunaag. The caretaker was short of hearing but the conversation needed little dialogue. He gave me a room, made me sign a register and said food is made to order only.

The Mahunaag temple is dedicated to Karna. The belief is that the generous Karna takes the form of a

Top: Slate roof houses around Mahunaag.
 Far right: The uncharacteristic outer wall of the Mahunaag temple
 Right: The long walk to Mahunaag from the Shimla-Karsog road



bee (Mahu) to fulfil his devotees' wishes. For some reason, it has become popular for legal matters. Several lawyers and judges are devotees and regular pilgrims to Mahunaag. The temple structure appears like a large and simple shed at first glance. But that is just the outer enclosure. The temple is inside the structure and is traditional with lots of wood, slate roof and a raised balcony. The temple also has an enormous concrete front-yard which gives fantastic views of the Karsog valley.

My memory of Mahunaag is the village walk. Early in the morning I set off randomly. I ran into matrons who were happy to get clicked. Then I met a girl who I thought was a college girl back on vacation; tall, fair and slim. I was hesitant to ask her for a picture but eventually did. What a fantastic expression she gave; a direct smile, a little bashful smile and then a quizzical smile. Turned out she is just into Class X and wants to join police. Mahunaag also has a large open school. The primary starts early and kids were just arriving. Pictures happened; of one kid, then her friends, then her gang and then the whole class with the teacher. The teacher was also retiring that day. I hope to go back one day and give his retirement day photo.

It started with one photo of a girl who arrived early to school, then all her friends and then the whole primary class with the retiring teacher





Smiles of Mahunaag



2.4 A temple for the fields

The Karsog valley is a large gentle slope and a great farmland. In fact, in Karsog, there are patches of fields within the town. Mamleshwar temple in Karsog is at the edge of the town. The vast fields start right behind the temple and then stretch forever. I

saw a quaint temple set amidst fields about 100 meters away. It is a traditional temple with wooden pillars, brick lattice and slate roof. It appeared like a Devi temple and I could not make out anything more. Later on I realised that the temple is for Annapurna. It could not have been more apt. Right among farmland, a temple for Mata Annapurna.



2.5 Kamaksha at Karsog

Kamaksha temple is about 5 kms away from the Mamleshwar temple. Public transport to the temple is sporadic. I spent a lot of time in Mamleshwar and missed the bus to Kamaksha by a whisker. I took the long road to Kamaksha and it was a nice walk overlooking the gently sloping farmland. It was April, just around harvest time and the fields were full and green.

The Kamaksha temple itself was a revelation. It suddenly appears out of settlements. It is a huge wooden temple with multilevel slate roof and balconies. The rest of the village looks tiny in comparison to the size of the temple.

I had a choice to wait for a bus to appear or walk back. I had a hunch there should be a shortcut through the fields and someone confirmed it. I walked back and what a walk it was. The first stretch was a bit of an embarrassment; I was unable to recognise the crops. It turned out to be peas, wheat and patches of potato.

I walked past beautiful Himachali women gathering grass with grace that would shame models; a little girl Priyanka who was studying outside her house and wants to be a doctor; and a lady with shining eyes harvesting peas. Somewhere in the middle of the fields a group of men were chatting.



*Top: The Kamaksha temple with layers of wood
Left: The start of the walk through the stream and fields back to Karsog*



The harvester of Karsog



One of them, the brother of the local BJP MLA, insisted on guiding me to Mamleshwar. He would tell me how Modi made the irrigation project happen in Karsog. Now a network of small underground pipes carry water through gravity to the fields. He was confident that BJP would win all the Lok Sabha seats in Himachal in 2019 (which it did).

Kamaksha, the other temples of Karsog and the people of Karsog, they are all worth your time from Shimla.



Top: Priyanka with her friends. She wants to be a doctor.

Middle and below: Dressed up, in the fields.

Bottom: From Mamleshwar, the trail through the fields to Kamaksha. The concrete path runs till the Annpurna temple which is visible behind the tree alongside the path.



*Chirag, Chindi and Mahunaag; wheat, apple and peas crops.
Fields full of legends; from Shimla, a skip and a few hops.*

Along the Shimla-Karsog road



3. More from Kullu-Manali

Manali doesn't have to be just a Rohtang visit or a snow scooter ride in Solang or the apology of paragliding. You can do more instead of idling on the crowded mall area or suffering Manali's traffic jams. You can go for a family friendly hike in Solang valley or you can take the slightly steeper one to Bijli Mahadev. You can explore the Parvati valley and all its offerings or you can visit several grand temples of Kullu. The region is steeped in legends and is home to countless temples; after all, on Dussehra, a whole town turns into a temple.



The Devas arrive in Kullu, from everywhere



The last day of Kullu Dussehra, which is a week after Vijayadasami



3.1 When the whole town becomes a temple, Kullu Dussehra

Kullu, the thin riverside town doesn't look pretty with narrow streets. The general untidiness is a misfit with the rest of Himachal. However, it lives its glory for a week every year, during Kullu Dussehra. That is when the whole town becomes a temple.

Kullu is the land of Devtas. Each family has its Devta and each village is a small kingdom with its own Devta. The tradition continues till today. The Devtas speak through their oracles, Gurs. They advise and mediate on local problems; bless every function and address every sorrow. People say even elections are decided before polling by the Devta, with the sacrifice of a goat.

Raghunathji in Kullu is the presiding Devta and is the Lord of all Devtas, with a legacy tracing back to Ayodhya. Each year, Raghunathji invites all the Devtas to Kullu for a week for Dussehra. This is a literal invitation. The District Magistrate writes a formal letter to each Devta on behalf of Raghunathji. The Dussehra starts on Vijayadasami, the day when it ends in rest of India, and continues for a week after that. Each year about 225 Devtas arrive on foot to Kullu, carried by their own villagers. They first visit Raghunathji to pay their respects. The Devtas cross

each other in the narrow corridors of the temple and there is much friendly jostling. They then make their way through narrow alleys to the maidan in Kullu. From Manali, Devi Hidimba, wife of Bhima, arrives last. She receives a personal invitation when she is at the edge of Kullu town. She is special, she is the grandmother of Kullu Raja and the one who granted the Kingdom. After Hidimba Devi and Raghunathji arrive at the maidan, the Rath Yatra starts and kicks off the week long celebration. Each Devta has a designated area. The villagers live, cook, eat and celebrate with their Devta for a week. The joy and revelry at the maidan are grand. Women are dressed in Kullu fineries and children are awestruck at the chaos. Every flavour, smell, sound and colour permeate the maidan for a week.

I first saw the last day of Kullu Dussehrah in 2017 and resolved to come back. In 2019, I managed a whirlwind trip to see the opening. If you want an extended Dussehrah in India, start off with Kolkata for the Pujo, then spend time in Baroda or Ahmedabad for the Garbha, head to Mysore for the Vijayadasami procession and then come to Kullu to celebrate with the deities and the whole town. It is a festival with no centre of gravity, the coming together of countless Devtas in one place, all around you. There is raw festivity, crowds and celebration. After all, the whole town is a temple for seven days.



3.2 The variety of Manikaran

Manikaran is a pilgrimage for Sikhs and the area around is bewildering mix of experiences. Manikaran is on the banks of Parvati river which flows westwards towards the Kullu valley. The river cuts a narrow, deep valley. People say that large parts of the valley don't see sunshine at all. For most of its length till it meets Beas at Bhuntar, south of Kullu, it is hardly even visible from the road.

Manikaran Gurudwara is set amidst hot springs. The small sarovar is indoors, perhaps as protection from the cold. It is always comfortably warm with the hot spring water. There are elaborate arrangements to stow away your shoes and clothes before the bath. There are even small plastic mugs. The Langar is cooked in the hot springs directly. Needless to say, the kitchen is always warm.

Kasol is near about and is a Mecca for Israelis, if you can overlook the oxymoron. I first saw Kasol in 2013 and couldn't believe the Hebrew only menus in its shacks. It is a favourite jaunt for Israelis after their mandatory defence service.

The nearby Kheerganga is a popular destination for "Kasol Kids," as a traveller Jitaditya Narzary calls them, who look for a cookie cutter short hike, selfies, cheap hash and revelry. So much so there have been murders and camping is no longer allowed.



Top: The bridge across Parvati river to Manikaran
Left: The Gurudwara



Top right: The secretive Parvati river
Top left: The Parvati valley before Kasol
Right: The Malana dam that has brought a motorable road close to Malana



Parvati valley has one of India's first private hydro plants. It scavenges water at mountain top and brings it down 800 mts through a tunnel within the mountains. The power plant built a road up the mountains. In 2013, I took the chance to drive up what was still a kacha road for construction trucks. I had to sign a no liability declaration before I was let up the road. The road brought the legend of Malana closer to civilisation.

Malana is a settlement at 8000 feet. The villagers of Malana believe they are descendants of Alexandar who stayed behind after the war. They keep away from strangers. You have to pay a fine if you touch something or lean on a wall in the village. It is left by the Government to its own laws and grows the truly world famous "Malana Cream," cannabis. Every here and there, a doped gent would be crouched and



someone else maybe on a roll. The neighbourhood is famous for constant rave parties. Once in a while there is a raid to keep the crime statistics seemingly honest. The Malana–Kasol area is truly a blot on the otherwise straight-forward honesty of Himachal. It even murders solo hikers every now and then.

This area has a bewildering variety, tough Israelis fresh from service; weak kneed Kasol Kids; inbreeding and wary villagers of Malana; kids coming with a single aim of getting stoned; trekkers to the Pin Parvati pass; and power plant engineers. Amidst all, Manikaran is still true to its antiquity as a pilgrimage. That is what I did on my second trip in 2017, with my friend Virendra Dhir on his birthday.

Malana (below) and its producer-customers (left)





3.3 Source of Itihaasa, Beas Kund

Beas Kund is marketed twice. Once for the Rohtang visitors, since it has the most footfalls. To meet their demand, tourist guides created a Beas Kund near the Rohtang Pass. The authentic one is deep inside the Solang Valley. Beas Kund is the source of the Beas river and is where Ved Vyas bathed and meditated.

A new bridge crosses the Solang river just north of Manali and connects to the Rohtang tunnel, named only because it bye-passes Rohtang pass, though it is in Solang valley. Beas Kund trail starts just before the bridge. I didn't trek to the Beas Kund

The Hanuman Tibba (left) and the Solang valley trail (below)



itself but was attempting Friendship Peak in the neighbourhood. The trail leads to Dhundi which is a popular first day camp site. Dhundi provides deep views into the Solang valley and is beautiful. A long day of climb leads to the next camp-site for Friendship peak. From the camp-site a small detour leads to a high ridge line. The ridge overlooks the Beas Kund, the Hanuman Tibba and the Pir Panjal range. Beas Kund is tiny and is almost like a private bath that has been chiselled for Ved Vyas. It is hard to believe how much wisdom poured out of this lake to narrate the humungous Mahabharata. But one look at the Hanuman Tibba and Pir Panjal range clears those doubts. They are massive and rise up vertically from the Beas Kund valley.

That completes a trio of mis-naming, a fake Beas Kund for tourists in Rohtang; the Rohtang tunnel which is in Solang valley; and the source of Solang river called Beas Kund.

Beas Kund hike is popular from Manali and a number of agencies can arrange this trek for willing families. It is worth going, for the Beas Kund is Itihaasa, what it was.



Top: The trekking route to Friendship Peak has a short detour for a top view of Beas Kund

Right: The Solang Valley is a soothing trail to hike with family



3.4 Hidimba @ Manali

Hidimba is the wife of Bhima and the mother of Ghatotkacha. The temple is in Manali and the whole Manali region in itself is dedicated to her. Most drive to the temple; and many take autos from mall road which are priced for the tourist. A more pleasant way is to walk through the Dhungri Van Vihar forest trails to the temple. It is set amidst deodhar trees. For first timers in Himachal, it is a great introduction into a trail walk. The museum at the edge of the trail has a cross section of a 500 year old deodhar tree. The tree witnessed epic events of modern Indian history, from the second battle of Panipat to Indira Gandhi's election as Prime Minister. Perhaps it was too much for it to take.

The temple is set in a clearing and there are trees all around. The deity is Mahishasuramardini and the Hidimba is only three inches or so tall. The present structure is about 500 years old but is probably an improvement over a pre-existing temple. It is open on all sides and has a four tiered roof. Some call it Pagoda style and some argue it is an adaptation of the Indian Vimana style which is common in the plains of India. Either way, it is impressive. The complex is soothing. There is a lot of space for people to sit, talk and gaze. For a while, you can forget the chaos of Manali.

Top: The Hidimba temple set amongst a forest

Right: The tree that watched Indian history from the second battle of Panipat



3.5 Lightning ascent, Bijli Mahadev

Bijli Mahadev is near Kullu in Himachal. It is at a hill top. Legend says that lightning strikes the temple regularly. Some say every year, some say on the same day every year, some say every 12 years and some say before every disaster. There are records from 150 years ago that testify to a grander multi-tiered temple which perhaps was lost to fire. There is a tall wooden pole (60 feet) next to the temple. It practically acts as a lightning magnet. A sharp metal piece (possibly iron) is drilled to the top for further help. There is a warning sign next to the pole not to touch it. In any case, when the lightning strikes, it shatters the Shivling which is then put together with butter and ayurvedic herbs to heal the wound. That is why it is Bijli Mahadev and some also call Shivji as Makkan Mahadev. It may sound quirky, but the legends are deep. In South India, there are a group of five temples for Shiva signifying the



The Mahadev temple and its lightning attractor

five elements; earth, water, fire, sky and space. After all, lightning is the play of all the elements!

Even if you don't believe the legend it is a beautiful light trek. You take a bus from the left bank of Kullu that winds its way to the start of the trail. After that, it is a relentless 3 km climb to the ridge which hosts the temple. The trail is well marked and is paved. Just short of the ridge line there are a clutch of maggi stalls. They are probably late risers and none was open when I reached in the morning.

The setting of Bijli Mahadev mandir is stunning. It is a great place to lie down and watch the world, the way you ought to from a mountain. Sheep are milling about, eating all the grass of the meadow before autumn steps in. The entire Beas valley stretches below and is a treat to the eyes. At the end of the ridge, the hills drop steeply on the southern side by 4000 feet. The sangam of Parvati and Beas river is at the foot of the sheer drop. A little further south is the short Bhuntar airstrip, cupped by the Beas river on three sides. To the north are


great views of the Pir Panjal range. The Beas river stretches on the west along with the entire Kullu town. Streams cut through Kullu and the mountains to join Beas. The Parvati valley and the Parvati river are to the east. Bijli Mahadev temple sits overlooking all of this. If a stormy cloud is looking to send something down, the ridge top location is the shortest route it would find to earth.

I spent maybe three hours just sitting and watching the world; and somewhat ominously storm clouds gathered. I looked at the pole and decided to head down. On the way back, the trail continues down well below the road and was tempting to take. The trail wound through orchards. I helped myself to late season apples, one from the tree and another that had already fallen. The day started early, ended early and ended pleasantly.



*Top: The Beas Valley and the Bhuntar airstrip south of Kullu
Right: The trail to Bijli Mahadev after it levels out and the meadows of Mahadev that the sheep feast on*





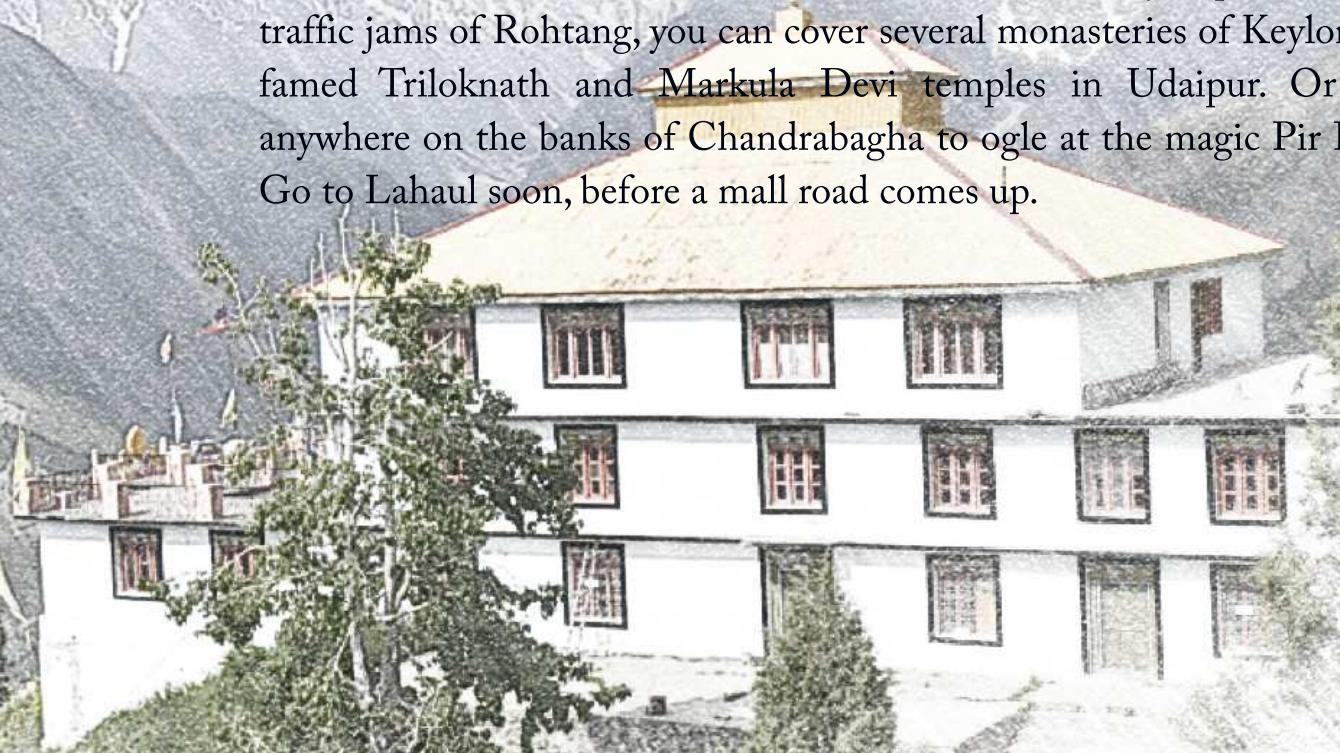
*The flesh has seen Manali, Solang and Rohtang.
The spirit wants a hike, are your knees strong?*

The Bijli Mahadev temple and its grassy ridge

4. Take the tunnel to Lahaul

Lahaul was far away from Manali at the best of times. Reaching Rohtang itself would have drained most tourists' energy. Going beyond Rohtang to Lahaul was a multi day affair. During the rest of times, snowfall closed off Rohtang pass. Lahaul simply became inaccessible.

There is a permanent change now. A new tunnel can take you through the mountains to Lahaul in an hour from Manali. In a day trip without the fear of traffic jams of Rohtang, you can cover several monasteries of Keylong or visit the famed Triloknath and Markula Devi temples in Udaipur. Or simply stop anywhere on the banks of Chandrabagha to ogle at the magic Pir Panjal creates. Go to Lahaul soon, before a mall road comes up.





Buddha's vision from Kardang Monastery

4.1 Buddha's vision from Kardang

Kardang is one of the many monasteries in Keylong. Probably one of the oldest at about 900 years. It has been rebuilt several times and looks quite modern.

It is across the river from Keylong, the largest town in Lahaul. It is along the Bhaga river, which joins Chandra a little downstream of Keylong to become Chandrabagha. That's the name for Chenab in Himachal before it enters Pakistan.

From Keylong, going to Kardang requires a steep trek down to the river and then up. There is a longer option by road crossing the Bagha just at its Sangam with Chandra. I had a scooty and took the easier option of the ride which also took me through other monasteries. The Kardang monastery sits high on the steep mountainside. The Keylong monasteries have statutes, scrolls and paintings. Kardang too has several things to see, including rock carvings that I unfortunately missed. The most striking part of the Kardang monastery is outside of it.

A sitting Buddha, maybe three or four feet tall, made of sandstone that you could mistake came from Orissa. The Buddha is seated on a pedestal that is chest high, with a small pot of plants next to him. He overlooks the snowy peaks of the north in Ladakh and beyond. To follow Buddha's line of



Snowcap mountains loom behind Kardang monastery



vision is to live the entire Buddhist philosophy in a single moment. There is absolute nothingness in terms of civilization. The view jumps over the Bagha river, all of Keylong on the opposite bank, the grassy slopes above Keylong and the treeless rock faces further above. You see Buddha and then the sharp snow clad mountains at the distance in one frame. Few places summarise their philosophy in just the setting. Kardang is one such.

There are several things to see before and after the monastery. The road hugs the steep mountain-face along the river. At every step, the fields of Keylong present themselves beautifully; sometimes gently sloping down to the river; and sometimes

Lahaul is a green valley. The fields around Keylong are a delight to see, sometimes stretching to the river gently, sometimes dropping off the cliff.



they stretch flat till the edge of a cliff face. There is a lovely meadow before the monastery which is invaded by several cows and bulls. A herd was diving into their early supper when I had gone. I ran into two kids, absolutely dirty and cheerful, playing in a little stream.

To return to Keylong, I took another route just upstream of the town. It is not advised, but I haven't taken good advice generally. The track descends steeply to the river. Bagha, at this point, cuts through a deep gorge and is barely ten feet wide. That is another sight to see.

Kardang monastery offers a lot; sights, drive, farms, meadows and the line of vision of Buddha.

Top: All of the Bagha river rushes through a barely ten feet wide gorge

Far Right: A thin mountain stream and two unsupervised kids

Right: The meadows around Kardang are a munching ground



4.2 Harmony lived every day, Triloknath

Triloknath is small, but it is the primary temple in the Lahaul valley of Himachal. The valley is cut off for six months each year. The snow blocks the passes and the residents just live out the winter. Every now and then, a chopper addresses emergencies; and drops firewood and ration when the winter sours. That will soon change as the tunnel near Manali makes it accessible throughout the year.

The Chandrabagha, as Chenab is called in Lahaul, defines the Lahaul valley. A thin strip of green stretches on both sides of the river all along its length. Every now and then small and large streams join it. The road to Udaipur snakes along the river on its right bank and cuts across its streams. Suddenly, across the river, there is a sharp rock outcrop with a vertical face, almost as if someone chiselled it. Triloknath temple is on a flatland on top of it.

It is a simple temple with a deep message. Its original identity is claimed as both Hindu and Buddhist, 1000 or 2000 years old. The deity is worshipped as Shiva by Hindus and as Avalokiteswara by Buddhists. The form of worship defines harmony. There are both Hindu and Buddhist priests sitting together. The pujas alternate between the traditions every few hours. The festivals



Triloknath in Lahaul. An ordinary looking temple with extraordinary antiquity. It is a benchmark for co-existence of faiths.



also keep flipping between Hindu, Buddhist and common festivals. This is not photo-op secularism but deep lived harmony.

The landscape around is spectacular. From the temple, there are amazing views of Chandrabagha snaking through the thin valley. There are stunning patches of paddy fields with tall mountain-faces rising beyond them; roads branching down steeply towards suspension bridges that add magic to the landscape; and deep valleys on the left bank of the river cutting through the Pir Panjal range. I was on a scooty and went through this area leisurely, taking more than 4 hours to cover the 40 km distance along the valley.

Next time you go to Manali, spend a day or half in Triloknath. It is closer now. You can see the lived harmony of Lahaul.

The valleys of Pir Panjal, Chenab river and its suspension bridges. The landscape around Triloknath is a pilgrimage by itself.



4.3 Treat at Tayul

Tayul monastery is off the Keylong-Leh highway and well above it. There is no road. By the time a road was planned to the monastery, forest regulations had come up which banned construction. The Shashur and Kardang monasteries were lucky to have got the road prior to that. There is a thin trail to the Tayul monastery. It is a stiff climb that goes straight up for 400 or 500 mts from the road. After a gasping climb, I found the familiar sight; locked monastery. Nearby, there was a running tap with some clothes under it. That meant someone is around and I started looking for them.

*Left: The easier part of the steep climb to Tayul Monastery
Below: The Monastery set in the background of snow-caps*





I ran into a lovely lady who had come to help her aunt, who stays put near the monastery all winter and summer. She shouted out for another lady who is supposed to mind the monastery. She wouldn't appear easily. I was offered chai to kill time. I said I'll come back after darshan and I did.

She led me into the house and upstairs where her aunt was living and offered Chai, the local twisted snack and a ton of biscuits. We chatted for a long time as they also finished up their lunch. I promised to send them prints of their photos (which I did before I left Keylong); and then moved on to the house of the minder. Another round of tea as she too wouldn't take no for an answer.



The first and the second cup of tea amongst friendly strangers and a perfect backdrop

Just as I started to make my way down, there was a crackle on the tracks. A group of ladies were sitting, chatting, laughing and knitting. The matron in the monastery had mentioned that some villagers are coming up to cut grass. These seemed unlike grass cutters with their knitting. But they were just passing time before getting onto the work. They gladly posed for a group picture and then, with deftly manufactured shyness, individually. Then, as I was going back, I glanced towards the river valley. There was a small house perched on the cliff

face, with a flat roof. A lady in traditional clothes was standing on top of the roof; in an almost warrior like pose.

That is what a monastery visit in Lahaul gives, unexpected treats, group chat and incredible sights of people, even if the monastery is closed.



Above: The group of grass cutters, knitting and chatting before the work starts
Top right: Devotees coming up the steep trail to Tayul
Right: The warrior pose on a roof overlooking the valley



4.4 Faiths flow together at Guru Ghantal

Guru Ghantal is one of the several monasteries around Keylong. It is at Tandi, about 8 kms before Keylong. That can be a lot of distance in these regions where a landslide can block you off for months.

It sits overlooking the confluence of Chandra and Bagha rivers that make up Chandrabagha. The monastery can be neatly hidden within the landscape. It is made of stone, the kind that is common in Himachal. If you take away the prayer flags and the streaks of yellow paint, it will disappear into the surroundings. That is how it is built.

Bagha from right joins Chandra from left and flows ahead as Chandrabagha



The Himachal Government may insist on traditional form of construction for the new hotels that are inevitable in Lahaul. Hopefully the hotels too hide themselves into the landscape like the monastery does.

Guru Ghantal is another interesting example of integration, a bit reverse. The monastery has a deity of Kali who is worshipped as Vajreshwari. Just like predominantly Hindu style temples (Triloknath or Markula) integrate Buddhist traditions, Kali seems to have been assimilated into the Buddhist way of life. Just like Chandra and Bagha, Hindu and Buddhist traditions have their own identity in Lahaul. They start in the same land and then merge and flow together like Chandrabagha.

Guru Ghantal Monastery at Tundi overlooks the rivers merge and flow



4.5 Markula Devi in Udaipur

Markula Devi temple is in a simple location in Udaipur on the banks of Chandrabagha river. The territory ahead leads to Killar and onwards to Kshitwar in Jammu; and is one of the least accessible and unexplored parts of India.

It is an unusual temple. The valley is short of Hindu temples, Triloknath and Markula among the few. In addition, its architectural style has no parallels in rest of Himachal. It is

believed to be 1300 years old, supported and improved by Chamba, Kashmiri, Lahaul and Ladakh rulers over several centuries. There are seventh century textual references to a Sun temple on the right bank of Chandrabagha. Some believe this refers to Markula temple which was originally a Sun temple. The rich carvings in its interiors have both Buddhist and Hindu themes, attesting to the co-existence of faiths in the valley. The Devi is worshipped as Kali by Hindus and as Vajravarahi by Buddhists. It is a small temple, but rich in detail, antiquity and character.





4.6 Wayfarer and guest at Shashur monastery

Keylong in Lahaul is home to many monasteries, at least six or seven in the vicinity of the town. Shashur monastery is one such, about five kms up a dusty track from Keylong. I had reached the monastery on the wrong day. All Lamas had left for a Puja somewhere else, which seems to be a usual thing in the July season. It was closed both times I tried visiting. But the monastery is set beautifully and it was worth the trips. From the Bagha river, you can see the monastery in the backdrop of snow caps. From the monastery till the land meets the Bagha river deep below, it is a continuous stretch of green fields.

*Shashur monastery(right) looks down all the way to Bagha(above)
The entire mountain slope(far right) is full of fields*



The visit was memorable otherwise too. I was making my way up on a scooty early morning and was waved down somewhere midway. A man and two women asked me to be careful and slow. I nodded and then asked if I can take their pictures. A brilliant round of smiles and laughter followed. Then the lady asked, "Will you give me a copy?" I said yes and thought I could send them once I go back to Mumbai. When I went back to Keylong it seemed simpler to take copies there itself. I took some and went back. The group had gone off to their work. A small girl recognised the faces and said she is my dadi; and led me to the house.

A busy daughter in law was thrilled to see the photos. She took me up to the living room. Fresh banana shake with their own cow's milk was served; followed by tea and the local snack. I was left to chat with the patron of the house. We talked, about the tunnel, the farming and life. It was time for me to leave. He then said, "Come," and took me one level up, to their personal family shrine. I prayed. It is a privilege to be let into the family shrine. When I stepped out I realised I arrived as a wayfarer and am leaving as their guest.



*Top: Friendly advisors on the way to Shashur monastery
Right: The grandkid, her friends, the joy of collecting flowers and
the cane basket of yesteryears*

*The secret land of Lahaul, along the Chenab river.
The light at the end of the tunnel, crowds will soon discover.*

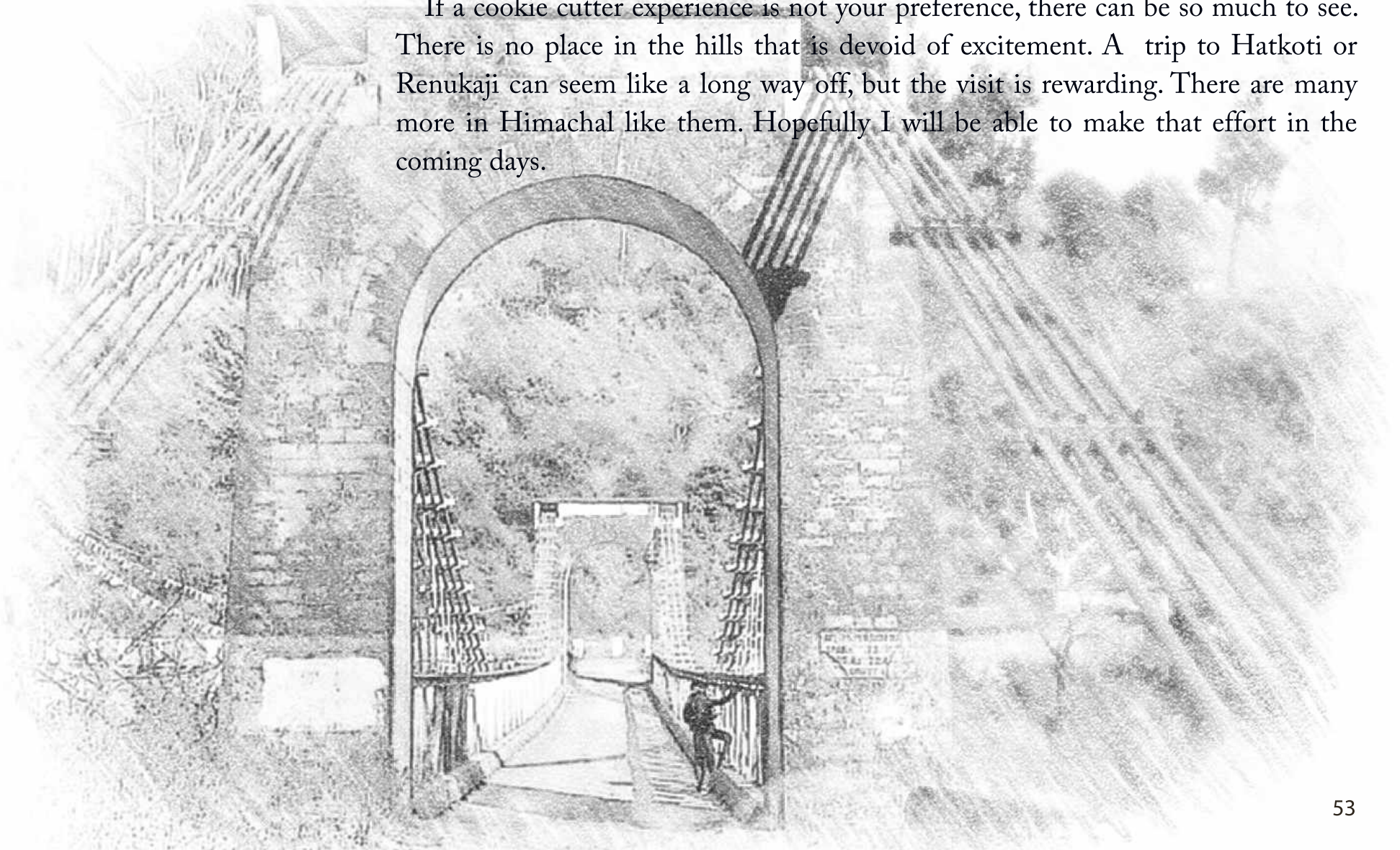


Shashur monastery from the Bagha river

5. Trips by themselves

Some temples and pilgrimages in India take a bit of effort. They are off the beaten track and there are not many other popular things to do, apart from the temple itself. Still, they are always worth the effort and time.

If a cookie cutter experience is not your preference, there can be so much to see. There is no place in the hills that is devoid of excitement. A trip to Hatkoti or Renukaji can seem like a long way off, but the visit is rewarding. There are many more in Himachal like them. Hopefully I will be able to make that effort in the coming days.





Hateshwari Mata temple at Hatkoti

5.1 Antiquity of Hatkoti

Surprisingly, the region between Shimla and Dehradun is not well travelled. There are several routes to travel between them but not many people do. Hatkoti is on one of the routes, about 100 kms east of Shimla. The road from Shimla to Hatkoti passes through Karapathar. You can see all the snow you want at Karapathar without the crowds of Kufri and Shimla. This is also the Yamuna river territory. Every drop of water that falls on the southern side feeds the rivers Giri, Pabbar and Tons. All of them make their way to join Yamuna and eventually reach Allahabad, Varanasi and Bay of Bengal. The ones that fall on the northern side make their way into Sutlej and eventually to Chenab and Indus in Pakistan and then to the Arabian Sea. The road also passes by Jubbal. If you choose to take the small detour you can see the large brick and wood Jubbal palace.

The Hateshwari temple is at Hatkoti further east from Karapathar, where the road meets the river Pabbar. At Hatkoti, Pabbar opens up into a wide valley. The temple overlooks the valley and the paddy fields. It has an antiquity well beyond memory. I asked and was told patiently, "This temple is eternal, every now and then someone makes it bigger or stronger, but it has always been there." It does appear



Above: The Shiv (left) and Shakti (right) temples in Hatkoti.
Left: The five stone temples called Pandava's toys.



so. There are five near identical stone temples that are called Pandavas' toys. These are in the Nagara style. The temples of Hateshwari (Mahishasuramardini) and Shiva are in the pent roof style. There is bhandar between the Shiva and Hateshwari temples which has identical architecture. The deity and inscriptions are dated around 1300 years old. The varying styles themselves indicate centuries of history around this temple complex.

I had visited in late December. In the afternoon the large temple complex is a place to soak up the warm sunshine. There is a covered area for chit chat too. I sat and listened to a conversation. The depth of knowledge and global awareness stunned my



The Hatkoti temple, its open courtyard and bhaitak are places to socialise and to soak up the Sun



assumptions. If you like idling there is so much to do in Hatkoti. You can wander in any direction. Guests are assumed to be non-threatening and it is easy to strike up a conversation. There is an under construction dam and I even slithered up its spillway without anyone objecting.

The route from Hatkoti towards Dehradun is bliss. It snakes along the Pabbar river almost at level; jumps over the confluence of Tons and Pabbar at a place called Tiuni; and

then runs along the Tons river for a long time. Outside visitors are rare. There is no Gujarati, South Indian, Chinese, Vaishnavi Dhaba. I stopped at what looked like a quaint resort and looked for lunch but it turned out to be a riverside settlement. A Gujar family offered tea with fresh milk and took offence when I offered to pay. She said, "This is how we, the Gujjars, are."

Temples, rivers and hospitality; that is Hatokoti.



Pabbar river flows alongside the road (above) to join Tons. It gets prettier after crossing the Uttarakhand border; driving along Tons river (bottom left) you can run into unexpected hospitality of the Gujjars (below).





5.2 Silence at Renukaji

Renukaji is one of the quietest lake-fronts in India. I could not spot more than a dozen overnigheters on Christmas day in 2017. It deserves far more, considering the lake and the forest reserve are just three hours from Chandigarh. Hidden inside Sirmour district of Himachal, it remains aloof from the rest of the State in every aspect.

It is the birthplace of Lord Parashurama. His mother, Renukaji, took permanent refuge in the lake and is said to rise from the lake once a year to fulfil Parashurama's request. The large Renuka lake is named after her and there is a smaller lake for Parashuram. Aptly, the overflow of Renuka lake feeds Parashuram lake. There is a small nature reserve and a zoo. Most importantly, there is absolute silence and peace. Apart from the usual traps of boating and a few noisy tourists during the day, there is not much to disturb peace.

There is a lot of silence and peace in Renukaji, the occasional paddle boat notwithstanding





It is really difficult to say how to reach Renukaji. The nearest landmarks are Nahan, Paonta Saheb, Kala Amb or Kumarhatti, which themselves need other landmarks to recognize. I reached Renukaji from Kalsi, a site near Dehradun that hosts a Buddhist edict. Kalsi is at the confluence of the river Tons and Yamuna and is an interesting story by itself. The road from Kalsi to Renukaji goes through the Sirmour district. The region is unlike the rest of Himachal Pradesh and is considerably poorer. It is an example of how development can by-pass some regions entirely. The road goes along the river Giri, on the right bank for a while and on the left bank till it reaches Renukaji.

By the time I reached Renukaji it was late evening. The only obvious place to stay was the Himachal Tourism resort but I was turned away. Then someone mentioned I could stay at the guest house that is

managed by the Temple Trust. It was basic, but served the purpose for a single traveller. Himachal tourism has some of the best cooks in the State and the restaurant was open for dining. Pakoras and chai, a leisurely walk around the lake, staple dinner and good sleep were all assured.

Somewhere amidst all these I went to the temple when it was just about to close. The poojaris were very endearing and narrated the Sthala Purana to me. I have a lingering memory of one of them being a Maharashtrian. In the morning, the magical December mist had just begun to unfold, but I had to leave. It was a brisk drive back through Nahan, high on the hills and then driving through the lush fields of Haryana to Chandigarh. Renukaji left an uneasy feeling within me that I should have spent more than a brief night there.

Sometime again, Renukaji.

The road to Renukaji from Kalsi goes along Giri river for a long time. A new bridge has made this suspension bridge redundant, but it shows how engineering can be beautiful.

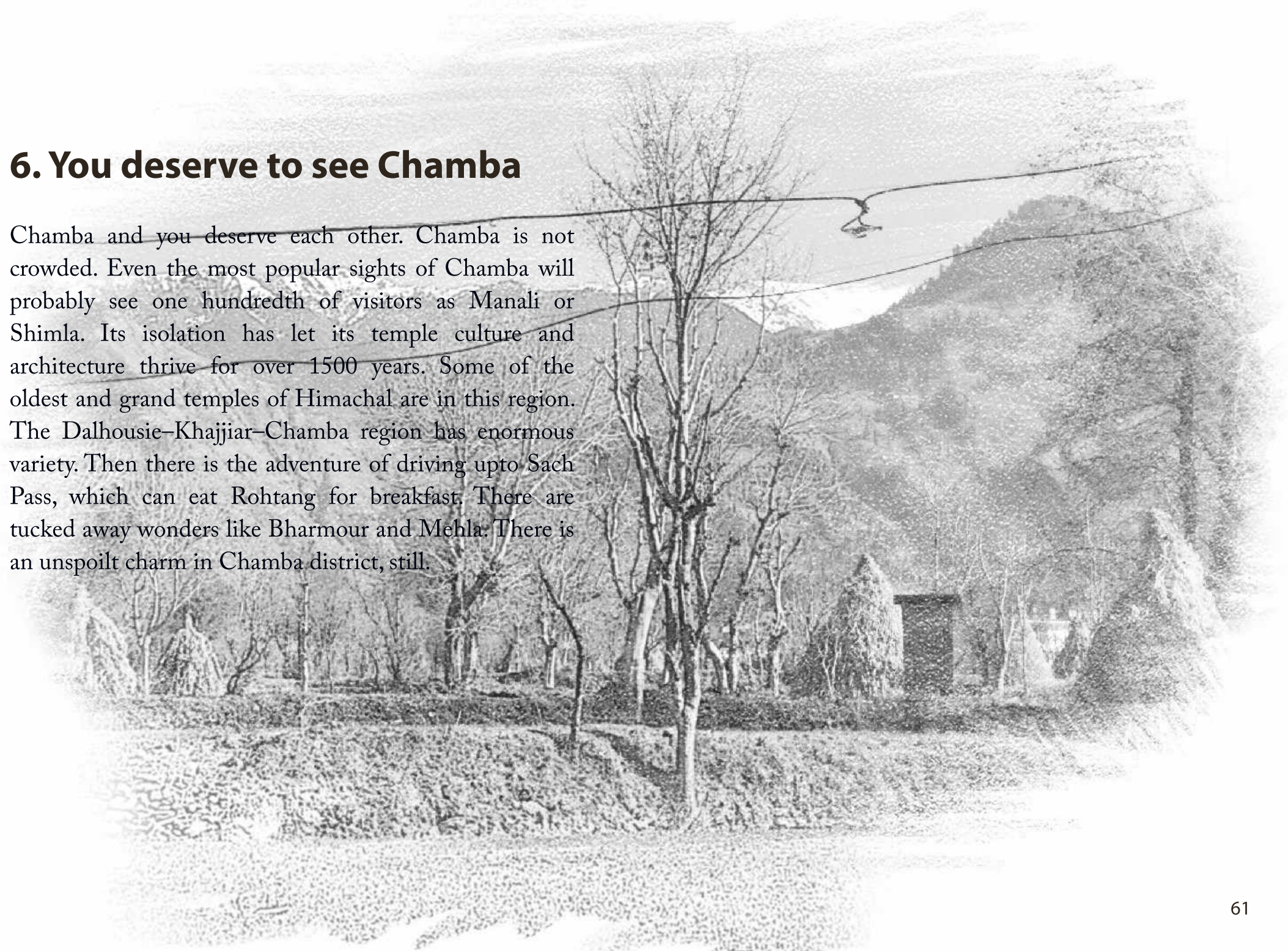
*Not in any tourist circuit, these places are bespoke.
Graceful, timeless and silent; the imagery they evoke.*

The stillness of mornings in Renukaji



6. You deserve to see Chamba

Chamba and you deserve each other. Chamba is not crowded. Even the most popular sights of Chamba will probably see one hundredth of visitors as Manali or Shimla. Its isolation has let its temple culture and architecture thrive for over 1500 years. Some of the oldest and grand temples of Himachal are in this region. The Dalhousie–Khajjiar–Chamba region has enormous variety. Then there is the adventure of driving upto Sach Pass, which can eat Rohtang for breakfast. There are tucked away wonders like Bharmour and Mehla. There is an unspoilt charm in Chamba district, still.





6.1 Mataji, Mountains and Maggi in Dainkund

There are several temples in Himachal on hilltops. They may not be grand. Some of them are not even known outside Himachal. But their location makes up for it.

Dainkund is one such temple. It is near Dalhousie which itself is a lesser known hill station. Dainkund is at a height of about 9000 feet. A hilltop ride from Dalhousie leads to a place called Lakarmandi which is like a roulette. Take the road ahead and you will go on to Khajjiar, an incredible bowl of a grassland. Take another branch and you will reach Kalatop, a thickly wooded area which makes for a great hike. It has one of the best forest rest houses in Himachal Pradesh.

The Kalatop forest rest house is an oasis within an oasis with a private Sunset through the dense tree cover



Like other Government rest houses in Himachal it is open for public, but could be often sold out weeks in advance.

The last branch leads to Dainkund but it is part of Air Force land. The road is blocked with a crude checkpoint in the night. The keys are with a restaurant owner close-by, but he won't open it till it is time. No amount of cajoling works; perhaps the fear of the Air Force is what it is. They wait for an Air Force jeep to come down in the morning to give the all clear. A km or two before the Air Force base, a trail starts towards Dainkund. It is a nice family hike on a ridge to the temple, not too strenuous for most people. It snows heavily and the repeated tourist flow melts and hardens the snow making it slippery to walk. After about fifteen or twenty minutes of climb, the ridge levels out to give a 180 degree plus view of Himalayas, if you are blessed with a clear day. After a climb and walk of 30 or 45 minutes, you reach the temple. Like most of the traditions of Himachal, this is a Devi temple, for Phaloni Devi. The temple itself is small and is a simple structure.

The Dainkund temple is a simple structure. What it lacks in architecture, it makes up in its location.



Dainkund is part of a complete experience; a forest resort stay at Kalatop, family ridge-walk, fresh snow, wide angle view of Himalayan snow-caps, the grassland of Khajjiar and then back to cosy Dalhousie. Then of course, there was the un-missable Maggi

experience. A couple served hot maggi, cooked over a coal and wood fire; both the cooking and eating open to the skies and the mountains. Mataji, Mountains and Maggi, in that order. Dainkund is the perfect place for the experience.





Brass Garuda at the Laxmi Narayan temple, Chamba



6.2 Shiva-Vishnu at Laxmi Narayan

The 1000 year old Laxmi Narayan temple complex in Chamba can take you all the way to Bhubaneswar. It is the largest in town and has the style of the Orissa temple complexes, large open space with Nagara style

temples rising up to the sky. The Laxmi Narayan complex dedicates three impressive stone temples each to Vishnu and Shiva. It is set in a large rectangular compound just above the market area of Chamba. The complex has a brass Garuda looking up to the sky, an extraordinary sculpture, reminding people how to worship.

Series of Nagara style temples at the Laxmi Narayan temple, Chamba

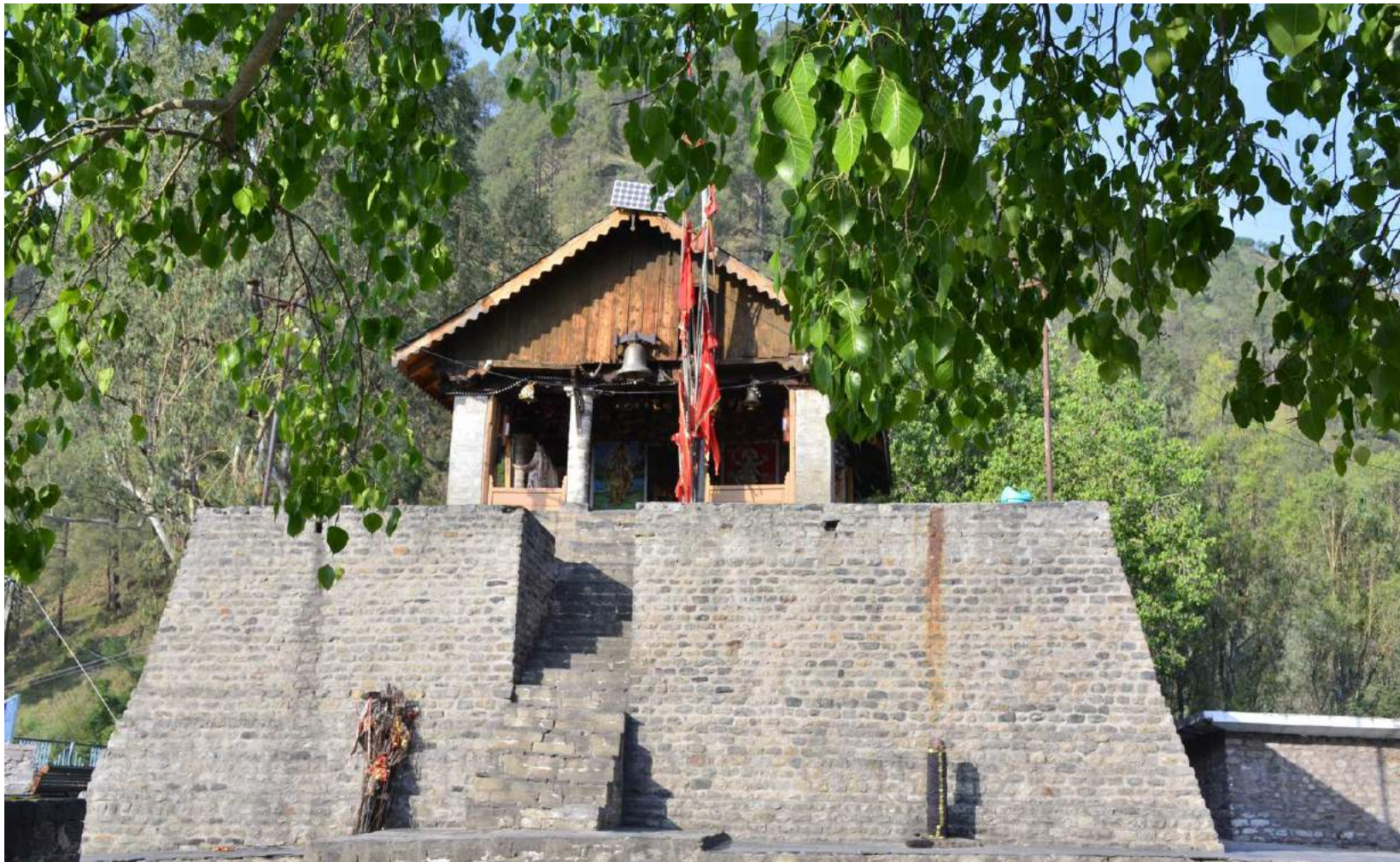


6.3 Chamunda, looking over Chamba

The Chamunda temple rises above Chamba town at a quiet location. A steep stone pathway leads up to the temple from the Chamba bazaar. It gets you a bit short of breath before taking the breath away. The view of Ravi valley from Chamunda has such an effect. Not many come to Chamba and even fewer come to Chamunda temple. The temple is simple, constructed on a

high platform set in open space. The site is supposed to have been a place of worship for perhaps 1300 years, as old as other locations in Chamba district. It has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. since, as a capital, Chamba too witnessed several cycles of battles and destruction.

A picture I had seen of the Ravi valley from the temple set off my fascination with Chamba district. I could visit only several years after that. The civilisation had slowly crept up the Ravi valley and had eaten up a bit of the green, but it was still a sight.





The Ravi valley at Chamba, from Chamunda temple



6.4 Hidimba @ Mehla

Mehla is a beautiful valley in Chamba district. It is on the left bank of Ravi, about 13 kms upstream of Chamba. The Chamba-Bharmour road goes along the right bank of the river and connects to Mehla through a new bridge. We were staying closeby, at the lovely Jamwal Villa Homestay and the host Manish suggested a short hike. He was spot on as Mehla is a beautiful area for casual hiking. Many trails cut through lovely streams on an undulating landscape. Then the trails climb up through several spurs with settlements one above the other. The climbs are steep but among lush greenery. You can stop wherever you like. On the way, you will meet the sweetest of villagers. The trails keeps climbing endlessly and can eventually take you across the Dauladhar to Dharamshala.

A memorable part of Mehla is the Hidimba temple. It is one of the few for Hidimba Devi. It is set innocuously in the Mehla village. As you keep asking one person or the other for directions to the trails, it suddenly springs up. A beautiful, tall stone temple out of nowhere. Long after you return, both the temple and the trails will stay in the memory.



The trails of Mehla and the Hidimba temple in the village

6.5 Temple from a single tree at Chatrari

Chatrari is a Shakti Devi temple set on a mountain slope high above the confluence of Budhal and Ravi rivers. It is one of the oldest temples in Himachal. The present temple structure has a history of 1300 years and perhaps the worship in Chatrari is even older. Not surprising, since there is a recorded history of 1500 years of uninterrupted dynasty in Bharmour-Chamba

region. The deity is so gracious that the sculptor, Gugga, is a legend in this region.

A motorable road leads up to Chatrari. The last bit of approach to the temple is a walk through the fields, turning at right angles and winding through narrow passages between homes. Then it leads to the temple complex open to the skies. The legend is all the wood for the temple came from a single deodhar tree. Given the height and girth to which deodhar can grow, it is very much possible.





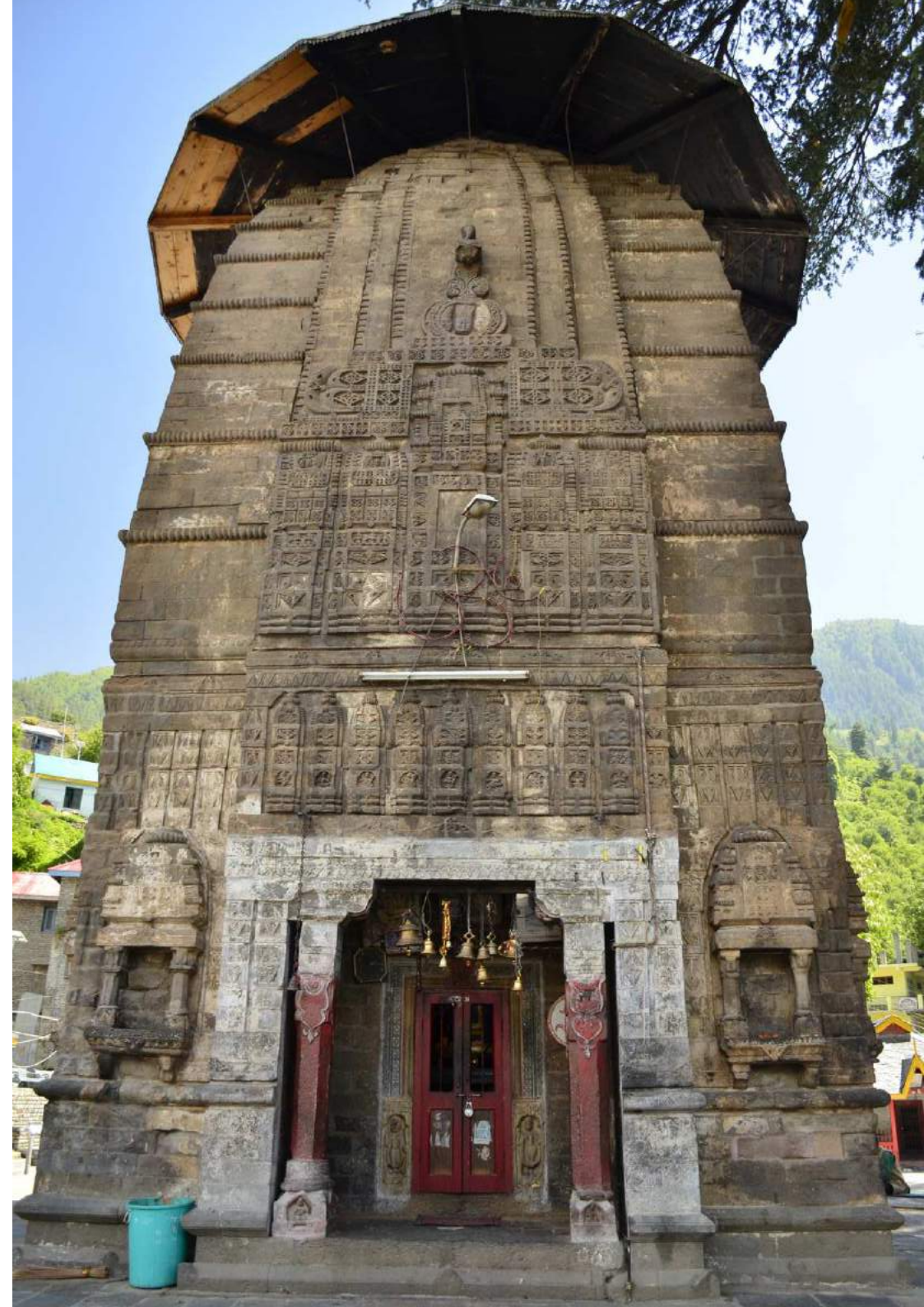
The Chaurasi complex at Bharmour overlooking mountains everywhere

6.6 Land's end at Bharmour

Bharmour is as far as the road will go. It is a genuine cul de sac. It is surrounded by 16,000 feet high mountains on three sides, the equivalent of a peninsula among hills. Bharmour is on the banks of the Budhil river which joins Ravi, one of the most secretive rivers of India. It keeps away from large cities and quietly steps into Pakistan, forming a section of the Indo-Pak border. You can take the road to enter the Ravi river valley which is squeezed between the Dauladhar and the Pir Panjal ranges. But there is no exit and you have to retrace to Chamba.

The Chaurasi temple complex at Bharmour is a mirror to the past. A past when a Hindu temple complex was a place of worship, a place for socialising, a place for learning, a place for playing and a representation of the civilisation itself. It is, as far as I can recollect, one of the largest temple complexes of Himachal Pradesh. It is at a remarkable setting, open on five sides. There is no wall, there is no roof. All four directions open to the town and the whole complex is open to the sky. It is a collection of temples, 84, believed to represent Lord Shiva's 84 companions on his journey to Manimahesh. There aren't 84 separate structures though. Many temples are tiny and many deities share a common space. The central temple of Manimahesh is breathtaking. Alongside the temple stands a deodhar tree, almost double its

*The Manimahesh temple, open to the skies
and the mountains*



height. The present temple structure is atleast 1100 years old and there are references to an earlier structure. The complex also has one of the oldest temples for Laksana Devi, first built 1500 years back and renovated several times since then.

The most delightful part of the complex are the schools. There are several of them around the open temple complex. You can hear the sweet cacophony everywhere. Then suddenly it is lunch break. Kids pour out of various schools and rush into the complex; a cricket match here, kids running all over and a bunch of girls just giggling away. Barely a few feet away you can see a group of men who have probably lived their life in this soil, sitting and chatting on the temple platform. Bharmour is far away and there is unspoilt innocence.

The open square is a reminder of life as it used to be. The temple is a playground for kids from the surrounding schools; and an adda for the men who have lived in this soil for decades.



Bharmour also has a fierce reputation for high quality farm produce. The Bharmour rajma is proudly spoken of as better than the Kashmiri one. There are walnuts and of course chukh, the famous red chilly pickle.

Just before reaching Bharmour, the road leaves the narrow river valley to climb up the mountain. You can stop anywhere to gaze at the terraced fields with the backdrop of snow-caps.

Bharmour and the rest of the Chamba district will overawe you, totally bereft of the commercialisation you will see in Manali and Shimla. It is an effort to reach there. Amritsar is the closest convenient airport and Pathankot is a more convenient railhead. The next time you visit Amritsar, take the effort to go up to Chamba and then Bharmour. There are 84 reasons for it.



*Tucked among mountains, a secret getaway.
Chamba is full of options, spin your lucky roulette.*

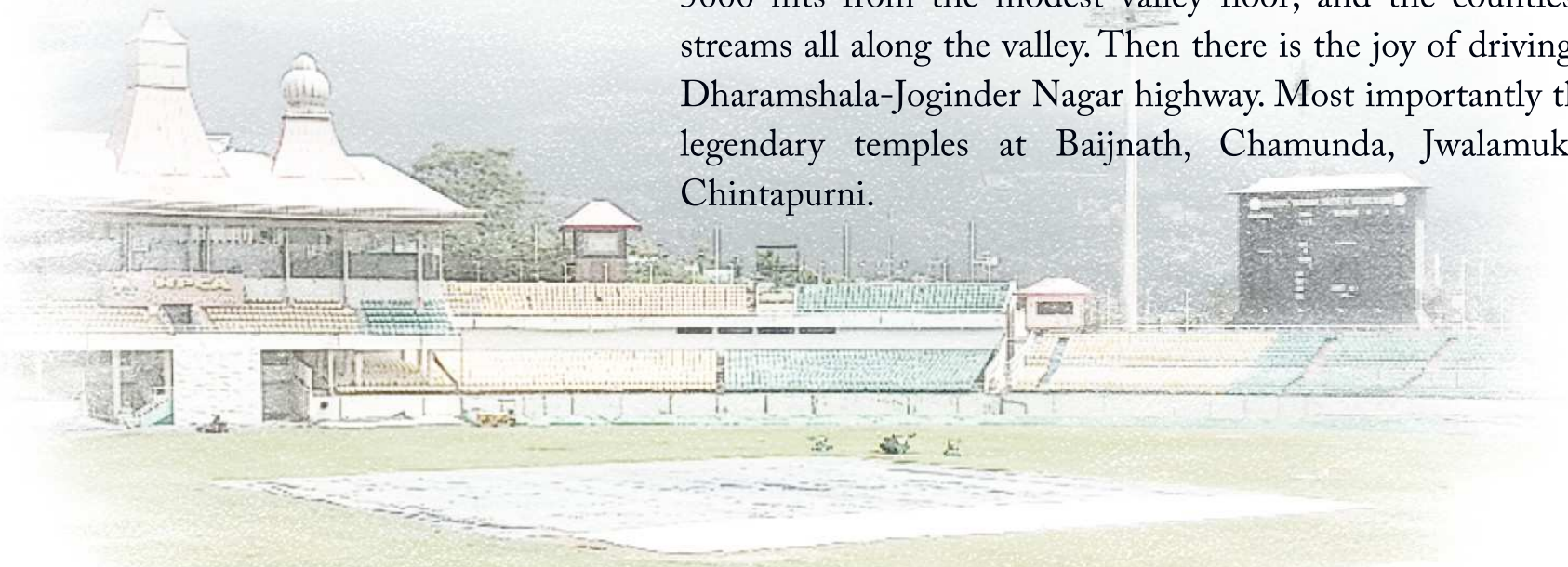


The end of the road and Bharmour

7. Foothills of Dharamshala

We are fascinated with hill stations and heights and not with valleys. That has kept the Kangra valley reasonably intact. Tourists spend too much time in Dharamshala and McLeod Ganj, crowding their narrow streets, eating Pani Puri, drinking hot chocolate and making a panting bee line to Triund.

There is much more magic in the modest heights of Kangra valley. Charming walks in Palampur, Andretta and Joginder Nagar; the joy of gaping at the snow curtains of Dauladhar that rise to 5000 mts from the modest valley floor; and the countless small streams all along the valley. Then there is the joy of driving on the Dharamshala-Joginder Nagar highway. Most importantly there are legendary temples at Baijnath, Chamunda, Jwalamukhi and Chintapurni.



7.1 Praying and playing at Chamunda

Chamunda is a popular temple on the Dharamshala-Palampur road. It is set beautifully, on the banks of the Baner river that collects its waters from the Dauladhar range. The river is shallow and wide at Chamunda. That is a source of joy. Devotees worship,

shop and play at Chamunda, as they should. I could never stop by Chamunda in any of my visits to the region. Then one July, I had a chance to drive from Dharamshala to Shimla and took the route via Chamunda. It was a festive day and there were celebrations all over. What I thought would be a quick stop-over dragged on due to unexpected crowds. Chamunda is popular, both for its legend and for the fun.



7.2 Keeping life alive at Dalai Lama Temple

Namgyal Monastery in McLeod Ganj is popularly called the Dalai Lama Temple. It is more than 500 years old at its original site of Lhasa, but got relocated to Dharamshala after Tibet fell. It is a “must see” for the travellers to Dharamshala. It is a large and modern concrete complex, but maintains its Buddhist soul. One of the levels that we pass is barren with a number of pillars holding up the level above. In the middle of that is a tree trunk, stretching from the floor and cutting through the ceiling. It is a tree, preserved where it was and is still living. That is how the monastery has been built, keeping all life alive, as Buddha would smilingly approve.



Top: The tree, still living among the pillars

Left: The prayer hall of the Dalai Lama temple





The Chinmaya Ashram (above) and its hallowed surroundings (below)



7.3 Serenity at Chinmaya Ashram

I was in Dharamshala on work and stayed in a Government guest house at Tapovan. It is close to the Himachal assembly building, outside the bustle of Dharamshala and on the undulating slopes of Kangra valley. I decided to walk around in the morning on what appeared to be a quaint road towards Kangra. I passed the assembly building and was pleasantly surprised to see Chinmaya Ashram (Sidhbari). The Ashram was out of bounds for me but a side entrance to the temple was open. I was alone at the temple and it was too early for a puja. There is of course no time bar for worship. The location was spotted as a hallowed place almost fifty years back by Swami Chinmayananda himself. I would soon find out why.

The Ashram is on a long ridge. There are lush fields on either side and the land slopes down gently towards them. I went down the western slope. A thin trail ran along a stream and I followed it as much as I could. I was walking through someone's fields first and then someone else's till it was time for me to turnaround. Back on the ridge, I looked back at where I had walked, in the direction of Dharamshala. This is how it looked. It is surely a hallowed place and it must have been even more so fifty years back when Swami Chinmayananda saw it first.



7.4 Nothing but fire, Jwalamukhi

There are legends and legends about Jwalaji. An impressive list of monarchs have recorded Jwalamukhi in their history; Tughlaq, Jehangir, Akbar and Ranjit Singh.

Jwalaji is where the tongue of Sati fell. Jwalamukhi is literally mouth of flame. That's what the deity is, a flame, leaping out of a small pit. There is no other deity, primary or subsidiary. The temple is as simple as that, a structure on a large tiled platform and flames leaping out of the ground and walls. Jwalaji, along with Chintapurni and Kangra make a trio of Shakti Peeths at a stone's throw from each other and an experience like no other.



The cool October mist in Jwalamukhi is such a pleasant contrast to the legend of fire.



The forest of wishes at Chintapurni

7.5 Tree of wishes at Chintapurni

Chintapurni is one of the Shakti Peeths where the feet of Sati fell. The Devi at Chintapurni fulfils every wish of her devotees, however extreme they are. The Sthala Purana attests to it. Parvati was satiated after her victory over the demons, but her aides, Jaya and Vijaya were not. They pestered her for more food. The compassionate Parvati cut off her own head so that Jaya and Vijaya could feed on the blood. She is actually depicted holding her own head.

Chintapurni is at the cusp of plains and hills in Himachal, at a height of barely 900 mts. It is slightly off the tourist circuit of Shimla-Manali-Dharamshala, but firmly in the pilgrimage circuit. I have been to Chintapurni twice. The first time Rajashree and I drove from Pragpur and it was leisurely. The second time was how a pilgrimage should be. I took an overnight bus ride from Amritsar to Jalandhar and then to Chintapurni. I was dropped off in the small hours. I found a place (which ripped me off for a few hours of stay) for a cold water bath and reached the temple which opens in the early hours.

Everyone comes with a wish to the temple; and ties a bandha on a banyan tree. The bandhas gather over days, weeks and months; in yellow and saffron.

The banyan tree becomes a forest of wishes. A reminder to Chintapurni of simpler wishes than those of Jaya and Vijaya.

On the second visit, I saw another beautiful custom. A small girl, perhaps in her early teens, was at the temple with a plate and

a lamp, sitting in the outer courtyard. She appeared like Devi herself at dawn and devotees prayed to her like she is. That's the joy of faith. You see divinity wherever you feel like.



Worshipping the Devi, Chintapurni



The Baijnath mandir at a perfect setting

7.6 Perfect Setting for the Soul, Baijnath

Timeless, grand, picturesque, popular, clean and peaceful. Very few temples have the perfect mix that Baijnath has. It is a perfect setting for the soul.

It is perched 50 meters above the undulating Palampur fields and at the edge of a cliff. The river Binduka cuts a shallow valley below, abutting the cliff. Baijnath overlooks the entire Dauladhar range that rises from 500 odd meters to almost 5000 meters in a single vertical span. In between is the shallow valley with a gently flowing Binduka. There are only a few temples that can match its physical setting; Kedarnath, Mahabalipuram, Tiruchendur and Somnath are some.

The temple has a recorded and verified history of 800 years; and possibly a timeless one before that. Shiva is worshipped as the Lord of Physicians in Baijnath. The temple is about fifty feet tall; very grand for this region. The architecture is impressive, with several elements of temple design integrated. Unlike most other temples of Himachal, it also has two balconies at the ground level.

The sculptures are a delight. They are richly carved; and the style and proportions of the sculptures are very uncommon. A standing Nandi and a slightly kneeling Ganpati are wonderful. Someone leaves a dash of hibiscus on the Ganpati and that sight alone captures the joy of worshipping a deity.

Baijnath is maintained by ASI, so there is a nice, clear and grassy perimeter; and photographs are allowed. The temple excels in cleanliness even for Himachal standards. The calm of the temple is incredible even though it is on the highway. For a



Baijnath is a beautiful example of Nagara architecture and more

complete temple experience, Baijnath is one of the places to head to. I first went to Baijnath with Rajashree in 2013 and wished for something. I have been there twice since then, once to thank and the second time with my son; and there will be more times.

Beyond Baijnath, the region has so much to offer. Bir-Billing which is next door is an international paragliding destination. It is on the top of the bucket list for the NCR crowd, so much so a Volvo runs between Delhi and Bir. Palampur has beautiful tea estates. It markets its tea as exotic Kangra (which is overrated). The Chinmaya Ashram is an oasis and is calmer than the mountains around. Then there is a stretch of grand Devi temples of Chamunda, Kangra, Jwalamukhi and Chintapurni. Then the unique views of Dhauladhar hills from Andretta. Then there is the Barot valley and its funicular which I hope to see one day. It is an endless list.

The piece de resistance is the toy train that runs from Joginder Nagar to Pathankot. It was built to ferry material for a hydroelectric project in colonial times. The narrow gauge train travels through unparalleled (and totally underrated) variety of landscapes overlooking lakes, rivers, gorges, forts, fields and snow-clad mountains. It is actually a train that transports people daily, unlike the touristy toy trains of other hill stations.

If you have a chance to spend two or more days outside Delhi, head to Baijnath region. Gaggal airport of Dharamshala is just 50 kms from Baijnath. A short and beautiful drive through tea gardens; and then you are at the perfect setting for your soul.





The temple is full of beautiful sculptures, worshipped with a simple offering

*Gliding, hikes and tea; a slow chugging train.
Hallowed sites of Kangra and its undulating terrain.*



The undulating Kangra valley from Dharamshala

8. Take time for Spiti

Spiti needs time. It needs acceptance that barren land can create lasting memories. It takes at least two days of road travel to reach Spiti. The roads, where they exist, are punishing; and can get blocked. The Kunzum pass is closed for a better part of the year.

But Spiti is probably what Ladakh may have looked like in the eighties. The relative isolation makes people warm. You can speak to anyone like you have known them for years. Its long unproductive winters have also cultivated a sense of living life without expectations. In recent times a hydro electric plant failed and could not be repaired before summer. The valley simply waited the winter out without electricity. All of this makes a great offering, if you have the time to take it.





The Dhankar monastery looking over the Spiti valley

8.1 Hanging on to its cliff

Spiti is sparsely populated. It is part of the Lahaul-Spiti district which has a population density of 3 people per sq km. It is less than one hundredth of India's population density and is similar to Iceland or Australia or Mongolia. I was sold on this area by one of the earliest Outlook Traveller books on Himachal. It had a trek called Spiti left bank trek. I stepped out with an ambition to do it alone. Once I reached Spiti, I quickly gave up on the trek idea. The heights, landscape and desolation scared me off the idea of solo trekking. The trip became a languid travel over ten days or so.

Dhankar was one of the stops. It is a mud cliff, all sides and edges ragged by raging winds. The snowfall drags down some of the mud every season. As a result, it looks like a giant termite mound. Dhankar has a monastery and a fort. The fort appears as if it is stuck on to the ridge line and may come off any time. They overlook the spectacular and broad confluence of two great rivers, Pin and Spiti, which eventually become the Sutlej.

I reached on a September afternoon. There is a guest house within the new monastery where I choose to stay. It is simple, but had a great attraction. A thesis on Spiti architecture printed in A2 size paper. Fantastic to hold and read. There were just a



The old monastery and fort (above) look like they can be blown off the cliff. The new monastery (left) has a cosy guest house too.



handful of tourists. A landslide that I had crossed earlier in the week had become worse. It had shut down traffic to Spiti from the Shimla side.

I ran into a small group of serious young photographers from Karnataka who were setting up their tripods. They used only a short window of sunlight in the morning and evening and were maniacal in their attention to detail. They had an early morning plan to climb up the mountain to get a shot of the monastery. I went along with them. The monastery itself is at about 12500 feet and we went some bit higher. The Sun slowly crept up on the ridge line and the shadows receded. The monastery and rivers went from grey to bright to glistening.

The Dhankar fort has at least three separate structures. In each structure there are chambers one above the other. Several windows look out into the Spiti valley and the confluence of the rivers. The whole complex is full of antiquities and it seems like you have walked into the past. There are also outdoor distractions. A short hike of one or two hours leads to the Dhankar lake on a mountaintop plateau.

Dhankar stares at you as you travel through the Spiti valley. It is difficult to miss it. So are the memories, difficult to forget.



The hike to Dhankar lake (left) gives brilliant views (top) of the confluence of Pin and Spiti rivers.

8.2 Mud out of mud, Tabo monastery

Tabo is the first major stop in Spiti while coming from Shimla-Kinnaur route. Tabo has India's oldest surviving monastery, more than 1000 years old. It is a monastery that is difficult to capture in pictures or words. Tabo is barren, by and large, with brown mud all around. The Tabo monastery is made of the same mud and is unpainted, unlike the rest of monasteries in Spiti, Lahaul and Ladakh. The expanse and the architecture merge into the land.

There are a number of single storey structures that are spread out like in a temple complex. From outside, it looks very unremarkable. Photography is not allowed inside and explaining



Nature and manmade structures look alike in Tabo



*The smug nameplate (above) that declares the antiquity of Tabo.
The new complex (below) and the many structures (right) that
make up the old complex.*



the treasure within is impossible. There are paintings and sculptures everywhere. The only thing that can be said about Tabo is that it looks exactly like what it must have been in the tenth century.

After a day long journey from Reckong Peo, I had reached Tabo around 3 or 4 p.m. There is a guest house in the monastery. I experienced what traditional construction really means. I woke up in the middle of the night sweating. It was extremely warm and I had to get down to a T Shirt. I asked the host the next morning if what I felt was normal. He laughed and said, "This must be your first stay in a mud house. That is how weather proof a mud house is!" It is natural, not durable, but cares while it lasts.

Tabo is a long way from Chandigarh or Shimla. People reached Tabo more than 1000 years back. You could too!



8.3 Praying to a pass, Kunzum La

Chandratal lake is a popular jaunt of travellers going to Spiti, though technically it is in Lahaul. It is a pretty lake, but oversold with the promise of camp-side revelry. For people arriving in Spiti from Shimla and Kinnaur, it is a small detour on the way out towards Manali. It is a pleasant farewell stop. A narrow 12 km long dirt track leads to the camp-site from the main road.

To reach Chandratal from Spiti, the Kunzum La has to be crossed. Kunzum separates Lahaul and Spiti. The Lahaul waters join Chenab and the Spiti waters join Sutlej. The pass remains closed for a good part of the year, cutting off access to Spiti from Manali. Rohtang is the first pass to be cleared of



A trip to Spiti has a mandatory send off with camping at Chandra Tal. Mercifully, camping at the lakeside is banned and the camps are set up a couple of kms away from the lake.



snow in summer and Kunzum's turn comes after that. Like every natural feature, Kunzum La is also worshipped. There are stupas, Kunzum Devi, flag masts and fluttering prayer flags in bright colours.

I was headed towards Chandratat in a HRTC bus. The plan was to get off at the fork and walk the dirt road to Chandratat. The bus stopped at Kunzum La to let people pray for a few minutes. Then someone pointed at another traveller and told me, "Why don't you join him! He is also walking to Chandratat, but from the pass itself. It is shorter from here." I was hesitant to join a stranger but I did. It was a dramatic walk.

The pass is just above 4500 mts. The path climbs another 100 mts or so and then goes gently downhill to the camp which is at 4100 mts. For two or three hours it was a a bliss to walk; panoramic view of the Chandra river, the Lahaul and Spiti valleys, the glaciers, snow clad mountain peaks, barren landscape and everything that you can ask for. Chandratat is a bit of a hype. The hike from Kunzum La is certainly not.



KunZum La (above), the trail from the pass (below) and the views from the trail (left)





8.4 Smiles of Lahlung

Lahlung is tucked away into the Lingti valley and has a small, but a 1000 years old monastery. The ride was through a desolate 12 km long dirt road from Dhankar. The landscape is totally barren till Lahlung. The monastery was closed when I reached but I was told to wait. Eventually the priest appeared with his grand daughter; a four or five year old girl.

The monastery looks its age, full of paintings and sculptures. There was a single dim light adding to the mystique. Photos are not allowed but he nodded when I asked. Then I noticed the girl. She was staring at me, not the curious stare of kids, but a penetrating, probing look. Then she changed her mood a bit. When I was about to leave, I asked her for one more photo and she broke into a childlike smile. The looks she gave stay with me even today. I will, one day, give her the photos.





Ki Monastery appers like a pimple on the mudface



8.5 The pleasure of doing nothing at Ki Monastery

Ki Monastery forms the grand trio of Spiti monasteries with Dhankar and Tabo. Ki is 1000 years old. It appears much larger than the other monasteries in size. It also houses the largest number of monks.

It is best seen from any direction. From Kaza, it presents its vertical face in full glory; it looks like a building pinched out of mud. White and dark brown structures stick out of the mountain face. It follows the contour of the worn out rock and mud face and has several levels sliding one down the other.

While coming from Manali towards Kaza, it amplifies the emptiness all around it. It is across the river Spiti on its left bank. The right bank of Spiti is flat and empty. The river is also fairly broad and shallow. The Ki monastery rises out of mud with much larger mountains behind it, all lit up brown by the bright Sun. Ahead of Ki, from the road towards Kibber, it shows up the length of the monastery. From the monastery's rooftop, the view of Spiti, the mountains across and the flat brown land are grand. I have gazed at the monastery from all around. I also went across the Spiti river to take a look at it from far, to heart's content.

I kept going back to this place over two days for one reason or other and hung around for a long time. No one asks you why you are around. There was a Thai national negotiating a long monastery stay. She was allowed only three days. An IT looking kid was taking spiritual guidance from one of the monks. Another was killing time waiting for the lone bus that would take her ahead to Kibber. Noticing the time that I had spent, a monk opened the Lhakang and then took me to see the rooftop.

There is a lot of energy in the monastery. There were monks chatting and laughing; playing volleyball; watching volleyball; and chanting. I was roaming around in a scooty which was a novelty then in Spiti. The monks borrowed it and went round and round a small square with absolute glee.

I don't remember a single fact about the monastery, but each hour idling at the monastery is etched in mind. If you have a day to idle in Spiti, idle at Ki monastery.



The Lamas in Ki are full of life





Joy of a Scooty

8.6 The gaze of Buddha at 12,500 feet, LangZa

The river Spiti is the spine of the region. Kaza is its largest town and is at about 3650 meters altitude. The Spiti river valley is somewhat narrow all along and opens up at Kaza. There is hardly any vegetation at that altitude. A number of villages rise up the valley at different heights. Each has a patch of land that is cultivable, some large, some small.

Langza is one such village. It has less than 150 people. It is at 4300 meters. It is a sharp 600 mt climb from the valley on barren mountain face. The road snakes through gaps in the mountains. It then suddenly opens up to the vista. There is immense amount of space in front. You can see tiny specks of the village and houses at a distance. A snow-capped peak like an inverted ice cream cone towers far behind and above the village. You lose a sense of proportion at that moment.

It was early afternoon when I reached LangZa. There are a couple of houses that host. There was no one around at the only place I was hoping to stay, the one which had running water and western style toilet. A toddler asked me to settle down in the house and said his dad will come in a while. Time kind of doesn't make sense here and the father eventually came, hosted, guided and cooked for me.



Losing the sense of proportion at the first sight of LangZa (above)
Homestays in LangZa (left) are cosy and caring. This one had the prized western toilet.



Buddha gazes at the vast LangZa valley

The womenfolk are totally engrossed in the farm work and don't waste a minute of sunshine in summer, especially for distractions like tourists who won't help them in their winters.

The centrepiece of the village is the Buddha statue, giant, maybe 40 or 50 feet high. He overlooks the vast plains and it is difficult to get a sense of proportion with all that space. Right behind the Buddha is the 21,000 feet Chau Chau mountain. With snow all around the year, it looks like an ice cream cone. Langza also has a small monastery and I went up to the rooftop in the morning. It has a magical panorama.

Langza is also known for fossils. Two beautifully dressed women were bent on selling some to me but I didn't buy. I had plans for Annapurna trek that autumn. The Kali Ghandaki river upstream of Jomsom is famous for the



Early morning sunshine in LangZa lights up the valley and the hills



revered Saligrama and I thought I should buy it there. When I look back at the picture of the two women now, I felt maybe I should have bought some in Spiti.

The road from Kaza goes ahead to Hikkim which has the world's highest post office. It is perpetually sold out of normal postcards! You can buy special ones at a price less steep than Hikkim's elevation(4440 mts) and then they find their way to where it is intended. The road leads further to Komic which has a monastery at 4600 meters. Kids borrowed my scooty there for a ride. I ran into an army or ITBP patrol who would not tell me where they were going. With a straight face they said they are trekking. Now that we know about Galawan, I hope they went a long way eastwards. If you are high on energy, make your way to Langza. The Buddha, at 4300 meters, more than takes the breath away.



*The kids at Komic taken in by the scooty (top). The ITBP patrol (above) which I hope went well east
Right: The Saligramas I should have bought*



*Mud, snow and landslides; a land that is stark.
Maybe the Gods shaped it, maybe a Buddhist monarch.*



Buddha at Langza with the village and the mountains behind him

9. Along Sutlej

Sutlej is a bountiful river. The riches of Punjab and Haryana owe a lot to Sutlej and Beas rivers. It starts in Tibet, but collects a major part of its waters in India, from Spiti, Kinnaur, Rampur and Mandi. Sutlej flows a long distance in India, close to 1000 kms, but without fuss. Even today, its right bank is least explored. It hardly touches any popular city before it reaches the plains. Even the Chandigarh-Manali road cursorily crosses Sutlej without much drama and moves on.

Sutlej nurtured one of India's longest kingdoms till modern times in the Bushahr dynasty, which at its prime covered the area between Sutlej and Yamuna rivers. In turn, the Bushahr kingdom also provided Himachal Pradesh Raja Virbhadra Singh, a four time Chief Minister with more than twenty years of office.

Sutlej also nurtured several fascinating temples including the legendary Bhimkali temple at Sarahan. A distinctive style of temple building too is attributed to Sutlej valley, a fusion of the chalet and pagoda style temples. Some people dispute the attribution to Sutlej, but there is no doubt about another of its gifts. Sutlej built independent India's first modern temple, the Bhakra (-Nangal) dam.



9.1 Sun and Sutlej at Nirath

Depending on the source you rely on, there are 2 or 4 or 12 Sun temples in India. Konark takes most of the mind space, deservedly. Nirath, in comparison, is unknown. Nirath, on the banks of Sutlej just before Rampur, hosts a small and quaint Sun Temple that is about 1000 years old. I was biking back from Chitkul to Shimla and got a travel tip just in time. Swathy aunty, who has an incredible travel spirit even though she is close to 80, suggested that I stop at Nirath. So, I went.

The town is a sliver of settlements between the Hindustan-Tibet highway and the Sutlej river. The temple is tucked a bit away and you would miss it if you just stick to the highway. It has its own Goshala and a tiny grazing ground. A calf was lounging by its dining area munching on the lush August grass.

The temple is believed to be one of the five established by Parashurama himself. The deity is Surya. There is also a combined image of Shiva-Vishnu carrying Trishul as well as Sankha-Chakra. It was almost noon when I visited and there was no one around. The temple compound was locked, but there was a way to jump in. The temple too was locked. By the time I was ready to leave, someone came and opened the gate, and pointed out a mobile number scratched on the wall — a contact for the Pandit.



The Goshala and the Sun temple at Nirath

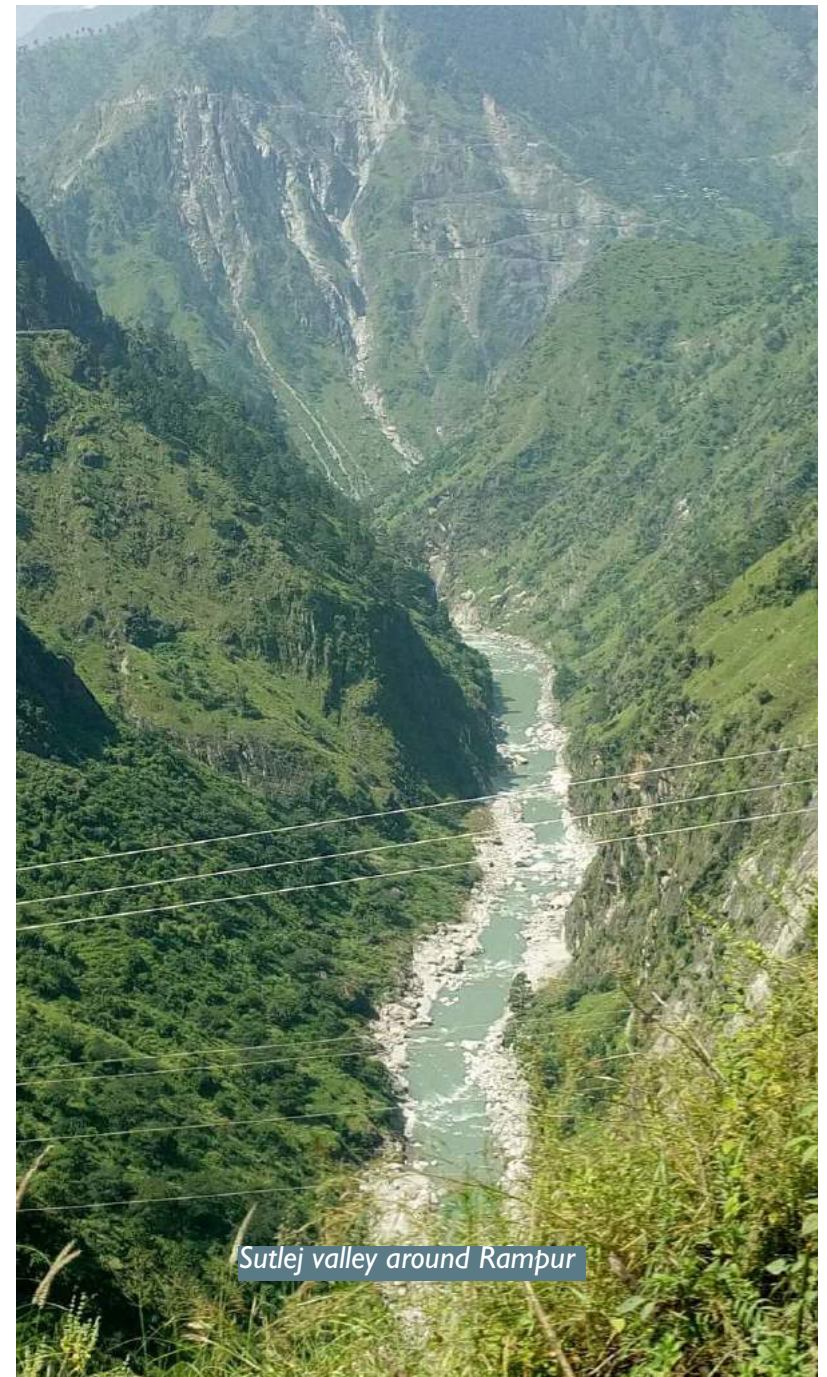
Perhaps I could have and should have called him. Perhaps he was gently reminding me, like hill people would, that I should not have jumped in.

Nirath is best visited as a part of a deeper jaunt into Rampur, Sangla or Kalpa. About two hours from Shimla, the drive will cross Narkanda, from where you can drive upto Hatu peak for great mountain views. Just after Narkanda, the road drops by 7000 feet to touch the Sutlej valley. That descent itself is a spectacular experience. In and around Nirath, you can see the magic that Sutlej weaves, especially in monsoons. Sutlej has been tamed by a series of dams, but still retains the frenzy it is known for. The drive is also along the apple country that eventually leads to Kinnaur.

Nirath is small but the journey has its own rewards.



Nirath Sun Temple



Sutlej valley around Rampur



The Bhimkali temple rises majestically among the mountains



9.2 Shaktipeeth at Sarahan

Most temples in Himachal are small. That is the burden of the terrain. There are a some exceptions. Sarahan is one of them.

Sarahan is on the Sutlej valley, just before the famous Kinnaur district. The road from Shimla drops down steeply to the Sutlej valley. The drive after that is magical. It hugs the river for the entire stretch until it reaches a place called Jeori. A branch road climbs up to Sarahan. A paramilitary camp is on the way. I was on a bike and when I was crossing the camp I was waved down by an ITBP soldier. I was a bit tentative; it was a hired bike and I didn't know what to expect. Then the soldier offered me tea. The camp serves tea to everyone who passes by. He was chatty, but gave out zero details of what the camp was about and there are strict warnings of no photographs.

Sarahan is high up on the hills, about 800 meters above the Sutlej river valley. Sarahan marks the killing of King Banasur by Lord Krishna and the kingdom that Krishna's son, Pradyumna, started. It is deemed to have had an uninterrupted reign till modern times. The Bhimkali temple is one of the 51 Shaktipeeths and Sati's ear is supposed to have fallen here. The temple also has a fearsome reputation of human sacrifice until 17th century, which travellers have written about. It is a really large temple in the mountains. A beautiful mix of stone, wood and slate, it both stands

Bhimkali temple is a superb example of stone, wood and slate construction



out and blends into the landscape. It has a lovely perimeter, many small shrines and two tall towers, one marking the old and the other the new temple. The deities are at different levels and Bhimkali is worshipped in kanya form in the upper storey. There is also a small guest house within the temple that is open to public.

Sarahan is a beautiful hill country. The temple overlooks the majestic peak of Shrikand Mahadev. In winter, the pictures of Sarahan amidst towering snow-clad peaks is a visual treat. There are endless small roads around Sarahan, leading to no place in particular. There is also a pointless man-made park amidst all the natural beauty. Maybe it was made to



Bhimkali temple feels immense once we are near the complex. In August mist, it tries to hide itself, adding to its mystery and myth.



consume a budget that was there for doing something. I went to Sarahan in August, when the whole region is covered by clouds and mist. Visibility beyond a hundred feet was just a pale haze. Every now and then the mist would clear a bit and I could see a bit more of the hills. Towards evening, the mist settled rapidly; and the Sutlej river lifted itself into view appearing out of the mist. It was also apple harvest season. Anywhere I walked, I could stretch and pick an apple. For the lazy, there are even crates of plucked apples left on the road; trucks would come at their own schedule to pick them up.

For some reason, I had carried "Rain," the first book written by my friend Sriram. I finished the book while I was in Sarahan. The monsoon, the solo trip and the general forlorn character of Sarahan were a complement to the soulful theme of the book. If you have two days around Shimla, visit Sarahan; and if you can spare few hours hours for great prose, read "Rain" by Sriram; preferably together.

Sarahan is just before Kinnaur district starts. It is an apple country. In the plucking season, crates full of apples are left on the streetside to be picked up by the trucks (or) passers-by who may want to forage.



The Sarahan country in monsoon season has just one colour, green. Here and there, Sutlej cuts a silt mud coloured strip through the valley.

A wide-angle photograph of a suspension bridge spanning a river. The bridge has a concrete deck and metal railings with wire mesh. In the background, a concrete dam with a yellow gate is visible, set against a steep, green, rocky hillside. The sky is overcast.

A suspension bridge across Sutlej

*Along its course it builds, dams that are modern temples.
Sarahan on Sutlej; one of its fine samples.*

10. When you are the temple

The wise will tell you, the temple is within. It could be, but a physical form helps. The temples of Himachal provide all the outside help. A physical setting that is made for a spiritual experience. Nice people who show you how to grow with faith. Architecture that is immortal.

Every now and then Himachal also reminds that the temple is within and all around. There is no particular compulsion to restrict faith to a physical form.



10.1 Let the fish be

There is a lovely masonry bridge on the Palampur-Bajjnath road, just before Bajjnath. It crosses a thin stream. The water is shallow and just a few inches deep. There is a small depression right under the bridge which forms a pool. Rajashree and I had stopped at the bridge as the random activity had triggered our curiosity. There were fish in the pond. They are not to be disturbed, leave alone the thought of catching them. They are

really large and normally won't survive for long from humans in the shallow pool. But they are left alone here, worshipped and fed. The bridge, fittingly, is called Macchiyal bridge. The first avatar of Vishnu is Matsyavatar you see.

Just a few kms away in Jogindernagar, there is a Macchiyal lake with the same custom. In faraway Kumaon in Uttarakhand, there is another equally famous Bajjnath temple, which I am yet to see. It has a temple pond with fish, which are of course left alone. This is also a common sight in South Indian temples. But a fish pond in the middle of nowhere and left intact; that is Himachal.



10.2 Snow Lingam

It snowed on a February evening and night in Shimla. Not the one off flakes, but many inches of snow. The Shimla snow experience hit the roof and the sky. The snow cover stayed the next day too. In the evening I went for a walk to the mall road.

Someone had gathered up the snow and made a Shivling right on the road. Someone else had added some flowers. People were neatly going around the Shivling; some were taking selfies. I went again the next day. The municipality had cleared the snow from the road, as they do everytime after it snows; but had left the Shivling alone to its own elements.



10.3 Worshipping a bridge

I had hired a scooty in Spiti. It was a fantastic experience moving from village to village, exposed to the wind and Sun. When I was going up to Kibber from Kaza, an old man asked me for a lift. Scooty is not well powered for Spiti and the renter had cautioned that it can't take doubles (not that I had company). It was already very high altitude where the old man had stopped me and there was a climb to make. The tiny engine can end up gasping or stalling. I told him, "If it works I can take you along but I will be really slow." The speed was more due to my fear of slippery gravel and the fall that would be long and only one way. He nodded. We made the full climb and the road levelled out. Before we reached Kibber, he got off and vaguely pointed to the empty land where he was going.

From Kibber I moved towards the famous Jhoolah bridge. Chicham is a village on the left bank of Spiti. The road from Kaza comes up to Kibber. Then there is a chasm that is 1000 feet deep. It is not a hill slope, it is a chasm as a dictionary would define, straight down. There are three ways to get around the chasm to reach Chicham. Take a roundabout road. In Spiti, the longer the road, the more the chances of it getting blocked in snow or landslide. Second is to walk down and then up the chasm. It is possible for



The featureless Kibber-Chicham landscape (left) and the chasm in between (below).



the high altitude folk in general but not for the elderly.

The last, Jhoolah, is the most commonly used. Cross the chasm on a tiny trolley that hangs from a rope tied to poles at each end. The rope has a small slack and gravity takes the trolley across. But it is an assisted crossing. The trolley can go only halfway by gravity and needs to be pulled by someone for the rest of the distance. There is of course the fear of heights and falling, suspended on a rope looking down 1,000 feet. Life is full of choices even then, you could die hitting the rocks or the river. Then there is a small problem of people getting their fingers entangled in the pulley every now and then. My host in Kaza was a paramedic and had warned me to be careful when I told her I was heading there.

The Government decided to make a bridge across the chasm twenty years back. The bridge work started, but for one reason or the other, kept getting stalled. There are not enough voters in either of the villages to make the Government move faster. Somehow by 2016 the two pylons of the suspension bridge were ready. It was time for the first girder to be fixed on to the ropes.

The steel rope trolley across the chasm. Vertigo probably scares more than the engineering.



That is why the old man had appeared, the same man who had taken the lift. He was there to do a Puja before the first girder was fixed. No one seems to have called him since the workers were busy on the job. But it is his bridge; probably he had waited for two precious decades of his life which was already in its afternoon. So he decided to walk up and do the Puja. That is faith, hope, gratitude and blessing, all rolled into one emotion, one act. I was happy to have been a part of his faith, atleast for the distance he was on the scooty. The bridge is now ready and open and is a busy selfie spot for yuppies. I would have loved a picture of the old man walking proudly on his bridge.



There is finally hope for the bridge and the old man comes to do his part.



10.4 Worshipping the path

A borrowed tale to end. Akanksha Damini Jhosi is a filmmaker and story-teller. This is her experience. While on a morning walk, she ran into this woman. She was praying, nowhere and to no one in particular. When asked, she said "I am worshipping the path."

Gratitude and faith, rolled into one simple and immense act. This is Himachal, where the whole land is divine. This is India, where every feeling is faith, the path, the Sanatan Dharma.



Source: Akanksha Damini Joshi

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*A temple, a tirtha, a yatra; the joy of known forms.
When the heart feels gratitude, mind worships without norms.*



Temples to See

There are so many temples to see in Himachal Pradesh. I am yet to see several regions even cursorily. Hopefully, these experiences would come soon. My immediate wish list is this;

1. The temples of Kullu and Mandi districts.
2. Temples of Kinnaur, especially a Krishna temple in the middle of a pond that I have to first identify.
3. The festivals of Lahaul and those of Spiti.
4. Rewalsar and Parashar Lakes.
5. The Yatras of Manimahesh, Kinnaur Kailash parikrama and Shrikand Mahadev.
6. Masrur rock cut temples.
7. Walking to Shikari Devi temple and Kamurunaag.

References

These stories are personal memories. Where the write-ups include facts or technical details, the following works have been excellent references. The two dissertations are great reading for temple history, architecture and iconography. The authors went on to write scholarly books on temples and culture of Himachal Pradesh.

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The following books seem out of print and I hope to read them someday.

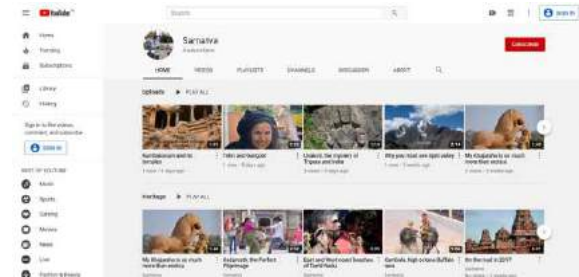
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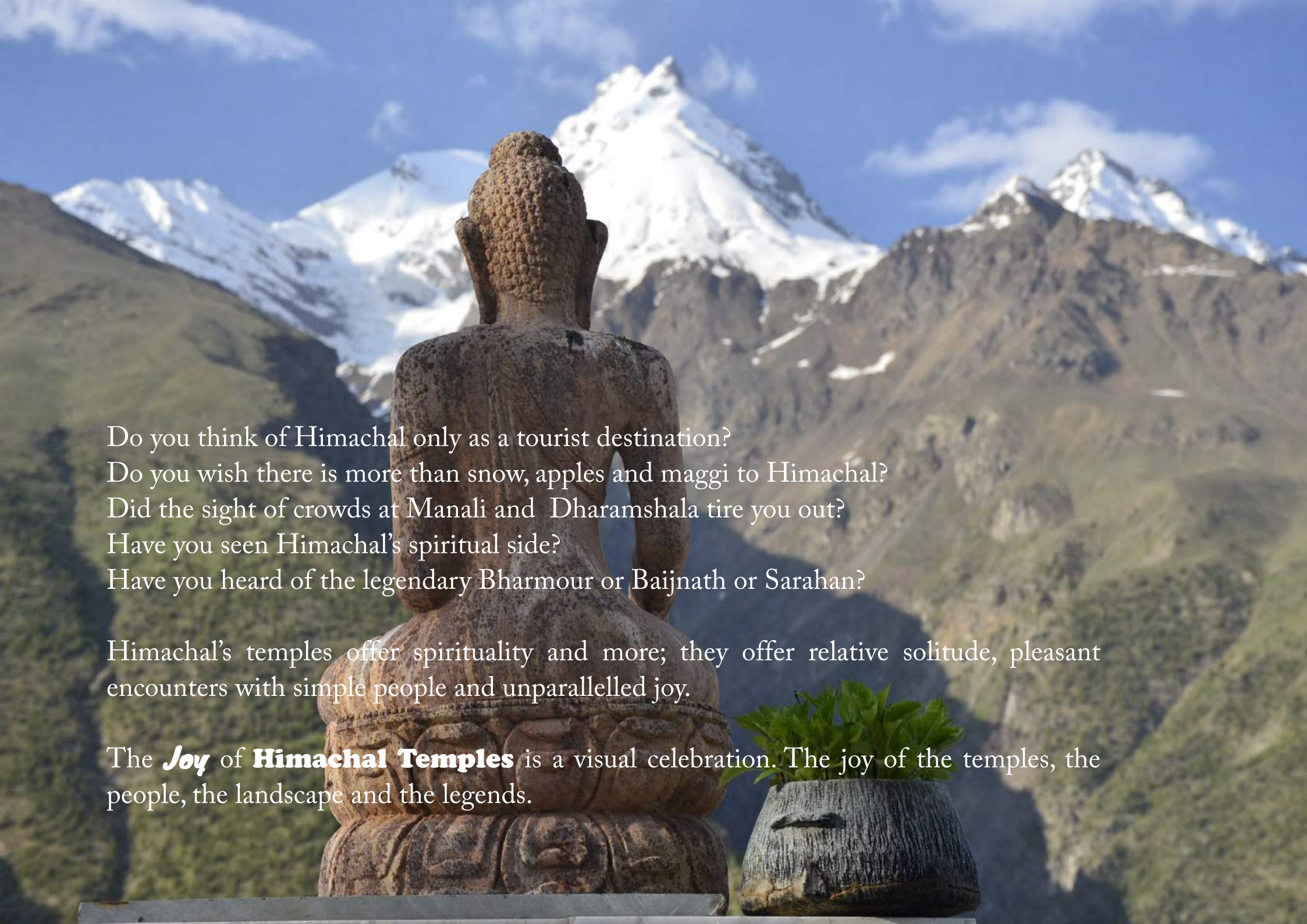


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Do you think of Himachal only as a tourist destination?
Do you wish there is more than snow, apples and maggi to Himachal?
Did the sight of crowds at Manali and Dharamshala tire you out?
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Have you heard of the legendary Bharmour or Baijnath or Sarahan?

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