

DON'T GIVE THIS A PASS

ANANDA BANERJEE stops by at quaint Himalayan villages and finds a crazy mix of people, legends and unique architecture while trekking to the Jalori pass

It's unique how the transit economy has changed the face of Banjar, a small, Himalayan town in Kulu district, a trekker's halt before the Jalori Pass. At 10,800 ft, Jalori is the nearest mountain pass from Delhi, approximately 600 km away, and features on every adventure tourist's map. And Banjar has all the city goodies that you will ever need ahead, if you are out camping or fishing. There's a non-functional traffic light lost in a maze of advertisements, signalling the need to assemble and park there. Narrow streets fork out from it, almost wriggling their way through overstocked shops that would seem to tumble off any moment. But it is when locals smile at you with a genuine warmth in between their chores and play guide that you know that the long arm of civilisation is yet to have them in its grasp.

A few turns from the cloistered local market and we drop suddenly into wide scenic vistas of rolling mountains and rich terrace farms, each a different shade of green, as if the signature of the farmer tending the soil. Nature seems to be in harmony with a happy people. Giggling women pass by with firewood,

their nimble-footed grace putting our hefty strides to shame. Our trail snakes up to Jibbi amid flowering rhododendrons nestled in between towering pine, oaks and deodars.

In between Banjar and Jibbi, a small walk takes us to Chehni Kothi, a towering 1,500-year old castle built with stone slabs and wooden beams. It was once the fortified residence of Rana Dhadhia, the erstwhile king of Kulu. It used to be 15 storeys high but after the earthquake of 1905 only 10 floors remain. The ground floor has a bigger spread than the upper floors which recede a little with each level to look like a conical temple spire. It may look sturdy but given its age it is quite fragile, especially the balconies. But it sure makes for a spectacle, one that you feel great about discovering. Locals tell us that the Chehni fort even has a 400-metre escape tunnel, which is now closed and a Krishna temple.

However, it is the Shringa Rishi temple at Bagi which is most visited for its intricate woodwork and pagoda style. Rishi Shringa is considered the patron deity of the Banjar Valley, which locals say, is his *tapa bhoomi*. He was the chief priest at the *Putreshtiyajna* of Raja Dasratha, a ritual for the birth of a son, after which Lord Rama was born. Legend has it that his retreat was so tranquil that sages and hermits from all over made the valley their own.

As word spread, people from far away places (Kulu, Manali and Mandi) began to visit the valley. They brought with them their goats and sheep to graze. Slowly, as people realised the valley could offer them all that they needed, they began to settle in the area.

The first rulers were the Maraich people, who were reputed to be over three metres in height. Later, the region came under the control of the Thakurs and then under the rule of the king of Kulu.

According to fables, people found a *pindi* (sacred stone) in the forest of Skeeran. A mythical talking tablet, it



(Above) Chehni Kothi, the towering 1,500-year old castle. (Centre) A mountain biker crosses a village. (Below) A board proclaims Ghayagi as the mini-Switzerland of India

PLACES OF INTEREST

Raghupur Fort: Raghupur welcomes you with snow-capped peaks. This picturesque site, located at approximately 3,540 m, has an old fort built by the Kulu king. The fort is surrounded by wide trenches with a small pond inside. The walls of the fort are marked by bullet holes from sieges. There is a good camping ground here as well as fantastic views of the Outer Seraj valley.

Sareul lake Sareul is a small lake (or a large pond) located at about 3,050 m. This lake is tranquil and known for being the seat of local goddess Budhi Nagin. Pilgrims walk around the lake, pouring an unbroken line of ghee. This is good camping ground with small caves to explore. The area is surrounded by dense forests interspersed with meadows of wild flowers.

Lambhari Top At 3,600 m, Lambhari offers beautiful views of the Himalayan peaks. Additionally, there is an abundance of effective ayurvedic/naturopathic plants growing in the area, including Kauri, Patish, Losar, Talshi, Chunkari, Tangun and Dhupnu.

Sakiran Top The Skirandhar ridge leading to Lambhari offers beautiful views of the Himalayas at Sakiran. There is a beautiful temple of Rishi Shringiji.



(Above) A marriage procession. (Below) The local market and a temple

urged every bystander to put it in a temple. The villagers did build a temple in the Skeeran forest but finding it hard to travel there, they built another temple of Rishi Shringa at Bagi village. The deity is made of brass and stone and is seen riding a chariot.

The best part about a Himalayan trek is the quaint charm you discover between villages. Jibbi is a decent village with a few shops and a good eating joint on the main road run by a lady from Delhi who is married to a local

and has some amusing stories to share. Don't miss out the *gharat* installed in the backyard of the house. It is quite something which one doesn't see around these days. Marvel of village engineering. See a few foreign faces at Jibbi bazaar.

From here on, each small turn on the mountain road takes us higher and higher. On the near empty roads, we are occasionally met by young herders, tending their flocks of sheep and children returning after a day well spent in

school. Later, we come face to face with a group of mountain bikers hurtling down at us in their fluorescent outfits. and contrary to my expectations, all are my fellow country men. A healthy sign that young India is slowly graduating to adventure sports.

We stop at the village of Ghayagi by a rustling brook to cool off and quite by providence meet Payson Stevens. He is a remarkable man, who divides his time between Del Mar in California and this mountain village with his author wife Kamla Kapur. He has followed two parallel tracks in his career, one as a NASA scientist, another as an artist, designer, writer, conservationist

GETTING THERE

By Air

You could fly down to Bhuntar Airport, an hour-and-a-half from the Tirthan Valley.

By Rail

If boarding train from anywhere else in the country, you may bypass Delhi and stop over at Ambala (8 hours by road from the Tirthan Valley) or even continue to the railhead at Kiratpur (7 hours).

By Road

To get to Tirthan (550 km from Delhi) one must turn off from Aut, just before the Pandoh Tunnel an hour before Kulu on the Manali highway from Chandigarh. From Aut it is 26 km of a pleasant drive along the river via Larji to Banjar.

One of the most popular ways to come to the valley is the air-conditioned Volvo bus which can be availed opposite Imperial Hotel on Janpath, New Delhi at 6 pm. It stops for dinner enroute at about 9.30 pm and reaches Aut about 7 am.

For more information log on to

<http://tirthanvalley.com>

<http://www.sunshineadventure.com>



A meadow at the pass

and filmmaker for over 30 years. He welcomes me to his beautiful house and over a cup of tea and mango cake discusses the many issues concerning the Himalayan environment. Like damming of the rivers that was changing their flow patterns, disturbing the fish and eventually drying them up. Later, we go up to his studio to see his ongoing series of paintings, which he is painstakingly finishing for an upcoming exhibition in Delhi. The paintings revolve around the great Himalayan national park, a part of a pristine forest ecosystem that he has campaigned for since its formation in 2000.

After bidding goodbye to Stevens, we move up to Shoja, another small hamlet where some enterprising locals have set up guest houses, offering the occasional wandering tourist peace and escape from the crowd. Snow-fed rivulets gush their way over the rocks to drop into pools and spread themselves out over flats where every stone is visible through crystal clear waters, home to the wilder brown trout and

its more coveted cousin, the rainbow trout.

More notable here, than perhaps elsewhere in the Seraj valley, is the peculiar architectural style of many of the older houses. The upper storeys are a skeleton of open frames, so designed for the storage of hay during winter months. This is also orchard country, rich in apricots, plums and apples and trust me, the home-made jams and preserves are mouth-wateringly memorable.

One can see a glimpse of Jalori pass from here and it does not take too long to reach the top as well. This small loop of a road, at over 10,000 ft, was in the British Raj a key link between Shimla and Kulu. As a connecting corridor, it is not devoid of human intervention. A temple and about a dozen small shops providing refreshments line up the ridge, one even deciding to rename the pass with its carpet green meadows and wandering herdsmen as the mini Switzerland of India. I find such platitudes disturbing for the simple reason

that our merry pastures need no comparison, the Himalayas will always be bigger than the Alps.

Perhaps, they haven't seen the army of peaks which recede into the horizon, for as far as the eye can see. Perhaps they haven't seen the shadow dance on the slopes as the sun floats in and out of the clouds. Perhaps they haven't seen the surprise burst of wildflowers in the meadow. Just off the road, which bends downhill and on course towards Shimla, I come across a wedding party and its accompanying band with drums and long-stemmed trumpet dragons, struggling to carry their wares down. The arrival of the party stirs things up as it means good business for the locals. Then there's a lone rider, a German on his solo trip, who zooms down past the shiny brass without so much as casting a curious glance. Chasing a Himalayan record is most important. There's space for everybody, the fast and the furious, the lonely and the rowdy. For the pass to the heavens is open for all. 