



The Spiti River flows through the 'alien landscape' in Kaza.



MYSTICAL SPITI VALLEY

A road trip to remember

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SAIM BIN MUJIB

Do you want to have a travel experience that is spiritually rich as well as full of adventures in the solitude of mountains? Well, going to Tibet is off limits for most of us. And yet there are places like that mystical land which can be easily accessed. On my recent month-long trip to Himachal Pradesh in India, I travelled through the Indian Himalayas, breathed in the ancient mystical air of unique Indian-Tibetan Buddhist culture and summited Mount Kanamo (5,970 metres). However, this story is about the 9-day-long 1800 km Spiti Valley road trip I took with two friends. Whenever it comes to Himachal Pradesh, the first thing that pops up in mind is Shimla or Manali. But there are places in this hilly Indian state that might force you to rearrange your travel bucket list. One of the options may be a tour through the famous Spiti Valley near the Tibet border. Surrounded by the great Himalayan giants, this



Chandratul lake PHOTO: SHIFUL ALAM



there for the delicacies. The harvesting season begins around October. There were many apple orchards on both sides of the road, on the slopes of the mountains. In the evening, after reaching Sangla, a town in the Kinnaur district, we checked in at a hotel called Apple Pie. I had to unpack my down jacket as the temperature was hovering around 5° Celsius. The next morning, snow-covered mountain peaks reminded me that I was in the Himalayas. It was hard to check my emotions as I saw the white mountains after three difficult years. I was grateful too, as I remembered the dark Covid-19 pandemic days. Our destination for the next day was Chitkul, the last Indian village near the border of Tibet. The 22-km journey from Sangla took an hour and a half. The beautiful road was sculpted in the mountains. We reached Chitkul at noon, which was at an altitude of 11,300 feet. I spent the evening next to the rapidly flowing Baspa River. It was hard to ignore the temptation to cross over the mountains that separate India and Tibet. One day was too short to comprehend the beauty of this village. Our next day's destination was Kalpa. We had to take a special permit, required for foreigners, from a village called Reckong Peo near Kalpa. After a three-hour scenic drive, we reached Kalpa at noon. However, the sight of the Chini Bazar from Kalpa street with the Kinnar Kailasa mountain in the backdrop will stay forever in my memory. In the morning, we hit the road again after collecting the permit from the District Magistrate's office. On day four, 162 km to score, the destination was Tabo.



am and boarded a pre-booked hotel. We stayed in Shimla for two days. The actual journey, the Spiti Valley road trip, began on the 14th. We rented a car, which we booked from Bangladesh, for the trip. The rent was 4,000 rupees per day including all costs. You can make the trip by HRTC bus service too. However, this bus trips will deny you the opportunity to stop over and visit attractive places. Several ancient gompas or monasteries, lakes, the world's highest post office, highest suspension bridge, highest motorable village and many more exciting places lay beside this long, high-altitude route. I am sure you would not want to miss these attractions to save some



bucks! On the first day, we went from Shimla to Sangla, a 214 km journey through a thick pine forest which took around 8 hours. Our driver told us that this forest was the densest pine forest in the world. On the way, we ate fresh cherry fruit from a nearby garden. However, we did miss the famous apples of Himachal. We were too early

morning, after reaching Tabo, we went out to see Tabo Monastery, touted as the oldest gumpa in India. The monastery was founded more than a millennium ago in 996 AD. The monastery complex houses a unique collection of Buddhist paintings and statues that illustrate the history of Tibetan-Indian Buddhism. Our next destination was Kaza. On the way, we visited Dhankar Monastery. Strategically built at the highest location in Spiti Valley (3,894 metres), it was once the capital of Spiti in the 17th century. We arrived at Kaza, the largest township and commercial centre of the Spiti valley, in the afternoon. We stayed here for two days to visit some of the most interesting sites around it -- world's highest post office in the village of Hikkim at 14,400 feet, the highest motorable

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village, Komic. In Chicham village, we saw the Chicham Bridge, claimed to be the highest suspension bridge in the world. But the main attraction here was the Key Monastery. The way this temple and its other buildings are built around a mountain is spectacular. The artefacts, history of this monastery and the view from its balcony were simply the feed for another story. When I entered the old part of the monastery, it felt like I had gone back thousands of years! From Kaza, we went to Losar. The plan was to visit the famous Chandratul Lake the next day, on the way to Manali. In the evening, it started snowing after reaching there. I couldn't be happier to see such a beautiful sight from my homestay room. The next morning, we left Losar through the Kunzum La Pass, the highest point on the Spiti road trip at 4551 metres. From Losar, the road to Manali was almost inaccessible. At noon, we arrived at Chandratul Lake, which is also known as Moon Lake. It is a wonder to have such a huge lake at about 14,000 thousand feet above sea level. There is also a myth that fairies come at night to this huge lake! We spent the night at Sissu. The next morning, we reached Manali, ending a 9-day trip packed with self-discovery and realization. This road trip can be completed in fewer days. But to enjoy the rustic landscape, cliffhanger roads, treacherous curves, and high passes, I will recommend you to extend the tour as much as you can. If you love nature and adventure, Spiti has to be your next trip. **COSTS:** Your expenditures will depend on the duration of the trip and where you stay and eat. Around Rs 50,000 may be required for a 15-day Dhaka-Spiti Valley round trip.

PHOTOS: SAIM BIN MUJIB



Dhankar Monastery. PHOTO: SHIFUL ALAM

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vast barren land of rocks -- also known as the cold desert -- might offer an experience you will never forget. Moreover, this trip usually starts and ends in Shimla or Manali, providing you with the opportunity to enjoy these tourist hotspots. Strongly influenced by Tibetan culture, the valley is completely different in terms of landscape, food, and lifestyle from other Himalayan regions. The popular route to go to Himachal Pradesh is to go via Delhi. The options were taking a Dhaka to Delhi flight or going there by road through Kolkata. I dropped both and took an Indian domestic flight to Delhi via Agartala, saving some money and time. After arriving in Delhi on May 10, I felt the heat in my bones. However, Delhi was just a transit, and on the night of May 11, we boarded a government-operated HRTC bus to Shimla, but not before seeing the Red Fort and Jama Masjid. The next day, we reached Shimla at 9:00



Key Monastery is one of the main attraction of Spiti valley.