



Himachal Pradesh

Crowned by the rugged peaks of the western Himalaya, Himachal Pradesh is North India for the thousands of foreign and domestic travellers who come here every year. Few states can match such incredible diversity – rolling foothills, lofty hill stations, madcap traveller towns, serene pine forests, endless apple orchards and the high-altitude deserts of Lahaul and Spiti, cut off from the outside world by snow for six months of the year.

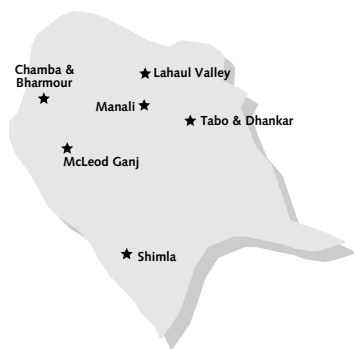
The mystique of the mountains is overpowering. The mighty peaks of the Dhaula Dhar, Pir Panjal and western Himalaya ranges rise above Himachal, providing a setting for a host of adventure activities from treks and rafting to skiing and Buddhist meditation. Tibetan Buddhist culture abounds in the ancient monasteries of Lahaul and Spiti and the bustling traveller centre of McLeod Ganj, home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile.

In the far east of Himachal, Shimla is India's most popular hill station, and further north is Kinnaur, the eastern gateway to Spiti and an increasingly popular destination for domestic hill tours. In central Himachal, Manali and the Kullu Valley provide a base for hippies, honeymooners and thrill seekers. Across Himachal, the lower hills bristle with castles, forts, temples and palaces.

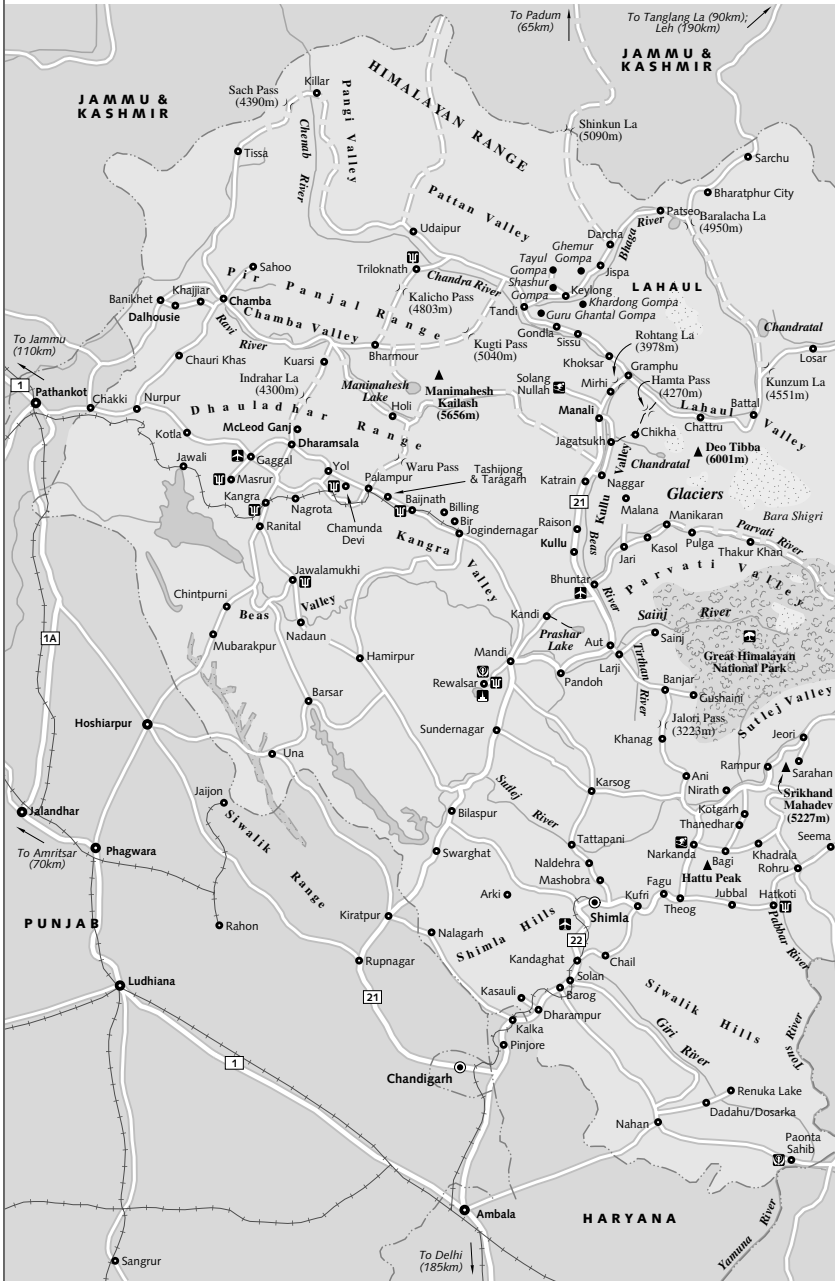
Manali is the start of the main overland route to Ladakh. Increasingly popular, the Great Himalayan Circuit starts in Kashmir, slices through the mountain valleys of Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti to Kinnaur and ends with some luxury in Shimla. Even the beaten track is a dirt road between mountain walls – no wonder Himachal is most people's favourite northern state!

HIGHLIGHTS

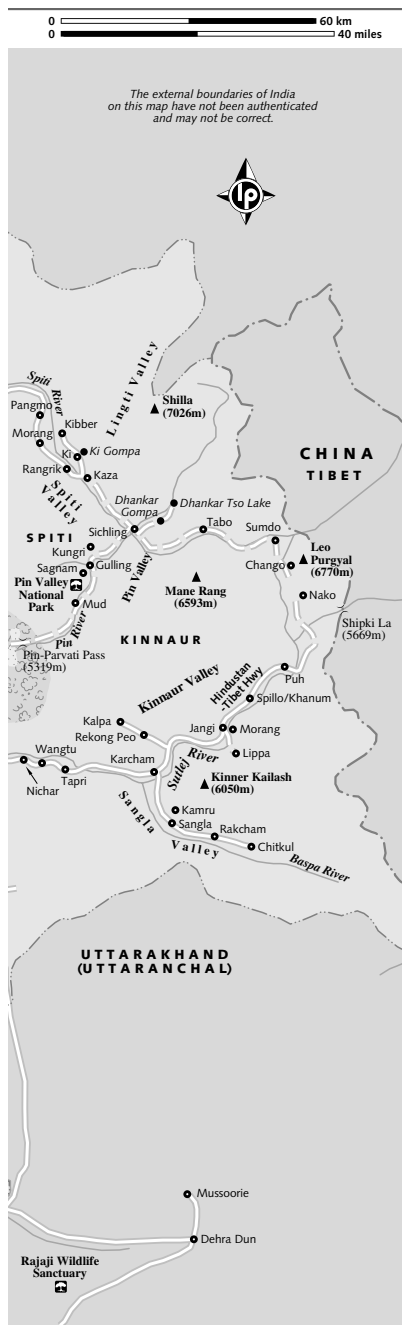
- Sink a *chottapeg* (little drink) in a Raj-era hotel in **Shimla** (p282), India's favourite hill station
- Accumulate karma credits with the Tibetan refugees of **McLeod Ganj** (p319)
- Ski, trek, climb, paraglide, raft or zorb in the backpacker playground of **Manali** (p306), Himachal's adventure-sport capital
- Encounter chilled-out people and centuries-old temples in little-visited **Chamba** (p335) and **Bharmour** (p337)
- Leave the crowds behind by jumping off the Leh–Manali bus in the serene **Lahaul Valley** (p339)
- Seek inner peace at the Buddhist monasteries of **Tabo** (p344) and **Dhankar** (p344), set amid stunning mountain scenery in the remote Spiti Valley



HIMACHAL PRADESH



HIMACHAL PRADESH



History

Ancient trade routes dominate the history of Himachal Pradesh. Large parts of northern Himachal were conquered by Tibet in the 10th century and Buddhist culture still dominates the mountain deserts of Lahaul and Spiti. The more accessible areas in the south of the state were divided up between a host of rajas, ranas and *thakurs* (kings), creating a patchwork of tiny states, with Kangra, Kullu and Chamba at the top of the pile.

Sikh rajas came to dominate the region by the early 19th century, signing treaties with the British to consolidate their power. The first Westerners to visit were Jesuit missionaries in search of the legendary kingdom of Prester John – a mythical Christian kingdom lost in the middle of Asia. Interestingly, there are several Aryan tribes in North India to this day, including the Kinnauris of eastern Himachal, most following a mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism.

During the 19th century the British started creating little bits of England in the hills at Shimla, Dalhousie and Dharamsala. Shimla later became the British Raj's summer capital and narrow-gauge railways were pushed through to Shimla and the Kangra Valley. The British slowly extended their influence until most of the region was under the thrall of Shimla.

The state of Himachal Pradesh was formed after Independence in 1948, liberating many villages from the feudal system. In 1966 the districts administered from the Punjabi – including Kangra, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti – were added and full statehood was achieved in 1971. Initially neglected by central government, Himachal has reinvented itself as the powerhouse of India, with huge hydroelectric plants providing power for half the country.

FAST FACTS

- Population: 6.1 million
- Area: 55,673 sq km
- Capital: Shimla
- Main languages: Hindi, Pahari and Punjabi
- When to go: April to June, October to November (July to October in Lahaul and Spiti)

Climate

The main seasons for visitors are May to July and September to November – advance reservations for accommodation are recommended at this time. During the monsoon the middle hills can be chilly and damp, and snow closes many mountainous areas from November to April, including the mountain valleys of Lahaul and Spiti. However, this is also the peak skiing season in the Kullu Valley and around Shimla.

Information

PERMITS

The border between India and Tibet is politically sensitive and foreigners need an inner line permit to travel between Rekong Peo in Kinnaur and Tabo in Spiti. You can obtain the permit easily, with two passport photographs and photocopies of the identity and visa pages from your passport, in Shimla, Kaza and Rekong Peo – see those sections for details.

Activities

Manali is India's adventure capital, with a host of wild and exhilarating activities on offer – see the boxed text, p310.

PARAGLIDING

The soaring thermals over the Himalayan foothills provide perfect conditions for paragliding, particularly at Solang Nullah (p317) and Billing (p331).

RAFTING

The Beas River near Kullu and the Sutlej River near Shimla churn up some impressive white water for kayaking and rafting – see p291, p303 and p310.

SKIING

From January to March, skiers and snowboarders congregate at Solang Nullah (p317) and Narkanda (p292) near Shimla.

TREKKING

Himachal Pradesh is a trekkers' paradise, and dozens of agencies in Manali, McLeod Ganj and other towns offer organised treks to remote valleys and mountain passes. Daily rates for all-inclusive treks start at US\$50 per person, including guides, tent, food and porters.

The main trekking season runs from May to October, but monsoon rains affect some routes in July and August. Solo trekking is

not advised – a number of accidents and 'disappearances' have occurred in Himachal Pradesh (see the boxed text, p303).

Popular moderate treks include the trek to the Pin Valley in Spiti (p302), the Hamta Pass trek from Manali to Lahaul (p315), the trek from McLeod Ganj to the Chamba Valley (p328) and the trek from Padum to Darcha in Ladakh's Zaskar region (p391). Another possible trekking destination is the Great Himalayan National Park (p299) near Kullu.

Getting There & Away

The main route into Himachal is by bus, but there are small airstrips near Shimla, Kullu and Dharamsala that receive flights from Delhi. However, flights are often cancelled and travellers have reported being booked onto overpriced alternative flights by the airlines. If your flight is cancelled, make any new arrangements yourself.

You can get part way into Himachal by train via the old metre-gauge lines from Kalka to Shimla and from Pathankot to Jogindernagar.

Getting Around

Buses provide most local transport around Himachal Pradesh, though there are a few internal flights. Many people hire a car and driver for local sightseeing. Share jeeps join the buses on the trip from Manali to Lahaul and Spiti.

EASTERN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Eastern Himachal Pradesh is dominated by Shimla, the state capital, and the mountainous district of Kinnaur, which runs north to Spiti. The official district website is <http://hps Shimla.nic.in>.

SHIMLA

☎ 0177 / pop 144,900 / elev 2205m

Until the British arrived, there was nothing at Shimla but a sleepy forest glade known as Shyamala (a local name for Kali). Then a Scottish civil servant named Charles Kennedy built a summer home in Shimla in 1822 and nothing was ever the same again. By 1864 Shimla had developed into the official summer capital of the Raj. Every summer until 1939, the entire government of India fled here from the sweltering heat of the plains, with

all their clerks' books and forms filled out in triplicate. When the Kalka–Shimla railway line was constructed in 1903, Shimla's status as India's premier hill station was assured. The city was even briefly the capital of Punjab until the map was redrawn in 1966.

Strung out along a 12km ridge, Shimla seems poised on the verge of sliding into the valley. A jagged line of snow-covered peaks is clearly visible from April to June and October to November, which coincides with the main tourist season. Honeymooners also come here to frolic in the snow in December and January.

Orientation

Shimla sprawls for miles, but the official centre of town is Scandal Point. From here, the

flat open area known as the Ridge stretches east to Christ Church, where trails lead uphill towards the Jakhu Temple.

The long, winding, pedestrian-only Mall runs west and east from Scandal Point. Downhill is Cart Rd, with the train station, the Inter State Bus Terminal and taxi stands. A passenger lift provides a quick route between the Mall and Cart Rd, or you can go via the maze of alleyways of the Middle Bazar and Lower Bazar.

At the bus or train stations you will be besieged by porters offering to carry your luggage uphill for Rs 30 to Rs 50. Most double as touts, and hotels will increase your room tariff to cover their commission; ask to be taken to a prominent landmark such as Christ Church and walk alone from there.

FESTIVALS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Losar (Feb/Mar; Lahaul and Spiti, p343; Dec/Jan; McLeod Ganj, p325) Tibetans across Himachal celebrate the Tibetan New Year with processions, music and dancing, and masked *chaam* dances. The Dalai Lama holds open teaching sessions in Dharamsala.

Shivaratri (Feb/Mar; Mandi, p297; Baijnath, p330) Villagers march idols of local gods to the temples in Mandi and Baijnath as a tribute to Lord Shiva.

Sui Mata Mela (Apr; Chamba, p335) Four days of singing and dancing to honour Sui Mata, who gave her life to save the people of Chamba.

Dhungri Mela (May; Manali, p308) Animal sacrifices in honour of Hadimba at Manali's ancient Dhungri Temple.

Himalayan Hang-Gliding Rally (May; Billing, p331) Paragliders across the world gather on the slopes above Billing for competitions and record flight challenges.

Ki Chaam Festival (Jun/Jul; Ki, p343) The monastery at Ki holds whirling masked dances at this time, attended by villagers from across Spiti.

Lahaul Festival (Jul; Keylong, p340) A big trade and culture festival in Lahaul with market stalls, dancing and music.

Minjar (Jul/Aug; Chamba, p335) A harvest festival, held on the banks of the Ravi. Minjar – shoots of maize – are offered to Varuna, god of rains, in a week-long celebration.

Ladarcha (Aug; Kaza, p342) An ancient trade fair celebrated in Spiti, with Buddhist dances, mountain sports and bustling rural markets.

Pauri (Aug; Triloknath, p339) Buddhists and Hindus gather at the temple of Triloknath and light giant butter lamps in honour of Lord Shiva or Avalokitesvara.

Manimahesh Yatra (Aug/Sep; near Bharmour, p337) Shaivites trek for two days to bathe in Manimahesh Lake, one of Shiva's mythical abodes.

Phulech (Sep/Oct; Kalpa, p296; Sangla, p294) Villagers across Kinnaur fill temple courtyards with flowers of intoxicating fragrance and oracles carry out sacrifices and make predictions for the coming year.

Dussehra or Durga Puja (Oct; Kullu, p303; Sarahan, p293) Kullu celebrates the defeat of the demon Ravana with a huge fair and parade, led by the chariot of Raghunath (Rama). Sarahan celebrates Durga's victory over the demon Mahishasura with animal sacrifices in honour of Bhimakali.

Lavi (Nov; Rampur, p293) An ancient trade fair at Rampur on the old trade route to Tibet, marked by three days of haggling and high spirits.

Guktor Festival (Nov; Dhankar, p344) Masked Buddhist dances and processions at Spiti's Dhankar Gumpa.

Renuka Mela (Nov; Renuka Lake, p292) A six-day festival culminating in the ritual immersion of idols of Parshuram (Vishnu) and Renukaji in Renuka Lake.

International Himalayan Festival (10–12 Dec; McLeod Ganj, p325) Celebrating the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize, this festival promotes peace and cultural understanding with Buddhist dances and music.

Information

Laws banning plastic bags, littering, smoking and spitting exist. Enforcement is lax but police can hit offenders with a Rs 500 fine.

BOOKSHOPS

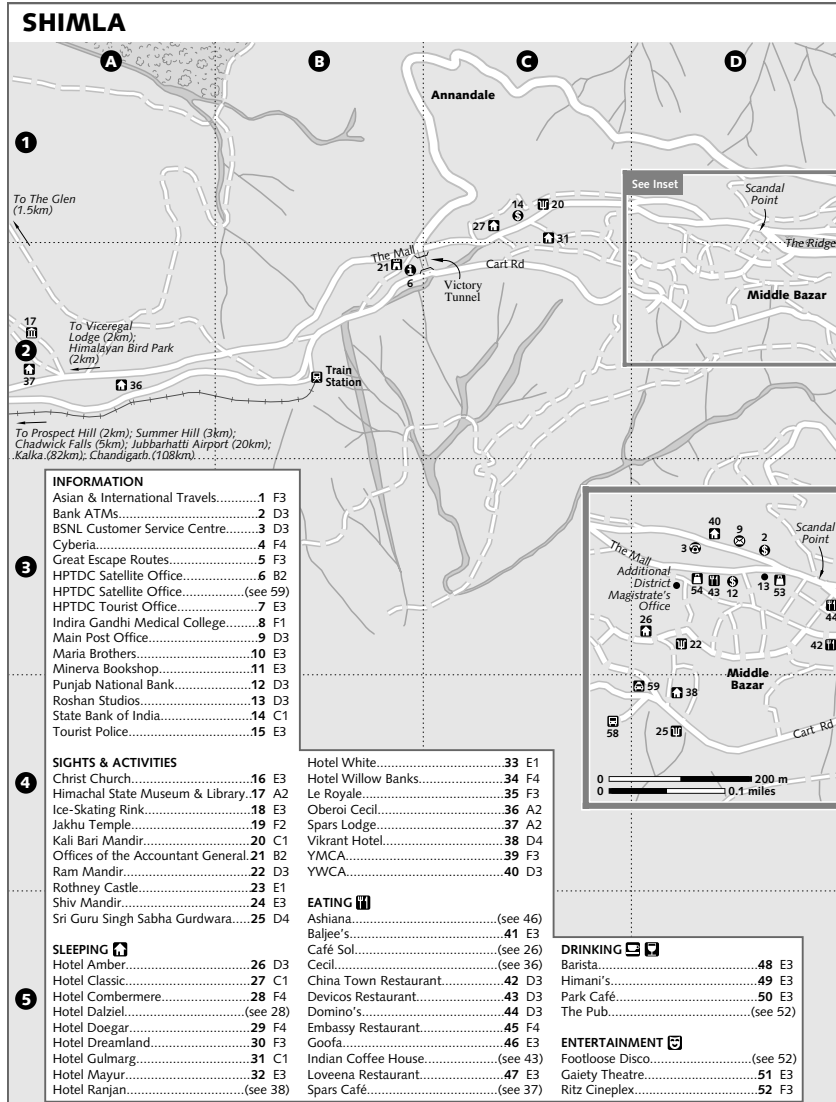
Maria Brothers (☎ 2565388; The Mall; 🕒 10.30am-1pm & 3.30-8pm) Second-hand and antiquarian books.

Minerva Bookshop (☎ 2803078; The Mall; 🕒 9am-6pm) Good for novels, maps and books on Himachal Pradesh.

EMERGENCIES

Indira Gandhi Medical College (☎ 2803073; The Ridge)

Tourist Police (☎ 2812344; Scandal Point)



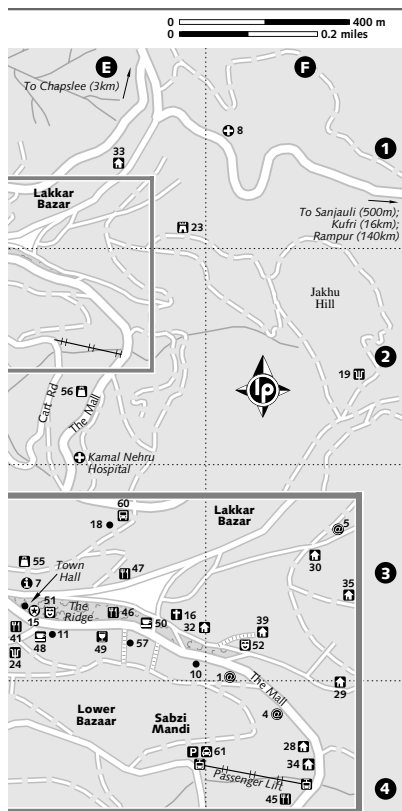
INTERNET ACCESS

The following are good internet bets, and all will burn photo CDs:

Asian & International Travels (The Mall; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am-9.30pm)

Cyberia (The Mall; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 10am-8.30pm)

Great Escape Routes (Jakhu; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-10pm)



SHOPPING

Fab India.....	53	D3
Himachal Emporium.....	54	D3
Music World.....	(see 26)	
Tibetan Clothes Market.....	55	E3
Tibetan Handloom Shop.....	56	E2

TRANSPORT

Ambassador Travels.....	57	E3
Government Deluxe Bus Stand.....	(see 6)	
Inter State Bus Terminal (ISBT).....	58	C4
Kalka-Shimla Taxi Union Stand.....	59	D4
Rivoli Bus Stand.....	60	E3
Vishal Himachal Taxi Operators Union.....	61	F4

MONEY

There are no money-changing facilities in Kinnaur, Spiti or Lahaul so stock up on rupees in Shimla. Numerous 24-hour ATMs are dotted around Scandal Point.

Punjab National Bank (The Mall; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes major currencies in cash and travellers cheques.

State Bank of India (The Mall; ☎ 10am-2.15pm & 2.45-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) West of Scandal Point; changes cash and Amex or Thomas Cook travellers cheques in US dollars or British pounds.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Roshan Studios (☎ 2803411; The Mall; ☎ 9am-6pm) Below the post office; sells print and slide film and offers one-hour processing.

POST

Main post office (☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) Looks after parcels and poste restante. There are several sub-offices west along the Mall.

TELEPHONE

PCO/ISD/STD offices abound.

BSNL Customer Service Centre (fax 2202598; The Mall; ☎ 24hr) West of Scandal Point; for sending and receiving faxes.

TOURIST INFORMATION

You can glean excellent local information from the Nest & Wings series of guide booklets.

HPTDC tourist office (☎ 2652561; <http://himachaltourism.nic.in>; Scandal Point; ☎ 9am-8pm, till 6pm low season) Helpful for advice, brochures and booking HPTDC buses, hotels and tours. There are satellite booths by the Inter State Bus Terminal and the Victory Tunnel.

Sights & Activities

HIMACHAL STATE MUSEUM & LIBRARY

About 2.5km west of Scandal Point by the telecommunications mast, the **state museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, camera Rs 50/100; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, Sun & 2nd Sat each month) has an impressive collection of Kangra and Mughal miniatures, Chamba embroidery, coins and jewellery, temple carvings, paintings of Shimla and weapons – including some massive blunderbusses.

VICEREGAL LODGE & BOTANICAL GARDENS

Built as an official residence for the British viceroys, the **Viceroyal Lodge** (Indian/foreigner Rs 20/50; ☎ 9.15am-1pm & 2-5pm, till 7pm Jun & Jul, tours half-hourly) looks like a cross between Harry

MONKEY BUSINESS

Shimla's simians are a genuine menace, staging daring raids through open hotel windows and threatening or attacking anyone who gets in their way. Shimla's monkeys weren't born bad – they were made this way by irresponsible feeding – but the 'monkey menace' has become so severe that the local government has started rounding up local monkeys and shipping them to nature parks in Tajikistan.

Visitors to Shimla should learn some monkey sense. Always lock your hotel windows and never leave clothes drying on balconies. Don't feed monkeys and never smile or make eye contact if confronted – it's the monkey equivalent of shouting 'bring it on!' On the walk up to the Jakhu Temple, do as the locals do and carry a stick. Walking sticks can be hired on the path for Rs 15 or you can buy one for Rs 50.

Potter's Hogwarts School and the Tower of London. Every brick used in its construction was hauled up here by mule. Today it houses the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, but tours of the buildings leave half-hourly. Tickets cost Rs 20 if you just want to look at the outside.

Opposite the lodge entrance is the **Himalayan Bird Park** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am–5pm), with a small collection of exotic pheasant, including the iridescent monal pheasant, Himachal's state bird.

The lodge is a pleasant 4.5km walk west from Scandal Point along the Mall, but it's poorly signposted – aim for the telecommunications mast, then stick to the largest road.

CHRIST CHURCH

This very English **church** (☎ 2652953; ☎ services 9am Sun) is the second-oldest church in northern India (the oldest is in Ambala in Haryana). Built between 1846 and 1857, it contains Rajera memorials and some fine stained glass. There's still a Sunday service, albeit with a tiny congregation.

JAKHU TEMPLE

Shimla's most famous temple is dedicated to the monkey god, Hanuman, and appropriately, hundreds of rhesus macaques loiter around harassing devotees for *prasad* (food offerings). Getting here involves a pleasant hike through the forest, starting at the east end of the Ridge, but the monkeys are frankly a menace – see the boxed text, above. Taxis from either stand charge Rs 250 return.

OTHER TEMPLES

The most popular temple for locals is the small **Shiv Mandir** just below the Ridge – crowds of school children drop in before and after

school and sadhus loiter on the steps soliciting donations.

About 1km west of the Ridge is the Bengali hut-style **Kali Bari** temple – enshrining an image of Kali as Shyamala. Vaishnavites gather at the modernist **Ram Mandir**, just above the bus stand in Middle Bazar, while Sikhs attend the huge white **Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara** near the ISBT.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

The Ridge is lined with grand examples of British architecture, including the **Town Hall**, oddly reminiscent of the mansion in Hammer Horror films, and the mock-Tudor folly housing the **post office**. At the west end of the Mall are the grand mock-Gothic **Offices of the Accountant General**. Above Shimla on the way to the Jakhu Temple, you can peek through the gates of **Rothney Castle**, former home of Allan Octavian Hume – see the boxed text, opposite.

WALKING

About 4km west of Scandal Point is **The Glen**, a former playground of rich British colonial-

INNER LINE PERMITS

Free permits for travel from Rekong Peo to Tabo in Spiti are issued by the office of the **Additional District Magistrate** (☎ 2651201; ☎ 10am–1.30pm & 2–5pm Mon–Sat, closed 2nd Sat each month), below the BSNL Customer Service Centre on the Mall. Permits are issued while you wait, but you'll need two passport photos and copies of the identity and visa pages from your passport. This office only grants permits for groups of two or more – solo travellers should try for a permit in Rekong Peo or Kaza.

A REMARKABLE CIVIL SERVANT

Regarded as an eccentric reactionary by his peers, Allan Octavian Hume was one of the most colourful characters of the British Empire. Born in Kent, England, Hume joined the Indian civil service in 1849 and quickly rose through the ranks of the colonial administration. Horrified by the shameful treatment of the indigenous population, he became an outspoken campaigner for social reform and eventually helped found the Indian National Congress, the first political party run for and by Indians, which still governs India today.

Hume was even more remarkable outside of politics. In his free time he assembled the largest collection of stuffed birds in Asia, which he housed in a private museum at Rothney Castle, his palatial mansion in Shimla. The whole collection was later shipped to the British Museum in London. Hume was also an avid student of the occult, holding regular seances at Rothney Castle with such luminaries as Madame Blavatsky, the Ukrainian clairvoyant. Hume even toyed with the idea of becoming a *chela* (student) of the lamas of Tibet, before devoting his energies to self-government for India.

ists, selected for its similarity to the Scottish highlands. The road here passes through the flat green meadow at **Annandale**, once the site of a famous racecourse, and a popular venue for cricket and polo matches.

About 5km away on the Shimla–Kalka railway line, **Summer Hill** has pleasant, shady walks. Pretty **Chadwick Falls** (67m high) are 2km further west, best visited just after the monsoon. There's an interesting temple and excellent views at **Prospect Hill**, about 5km west of Shimla. About 3km east of Lakkar Bazar, the village of **Sanjauli** has a Durga temple and a small Buddhist monastery run by Gelukpa monks.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Pony rides along the Ridge are a popular diversion. You'll pay Rs 40 for a quick turn around Scandal Point and Rs 400 for the trip up to Jakhu Temple.

From April to September, travel agents can arrange rafting trips from Tattapani on the Sutlej River, northwest of Shimla, for Rs 800. In winter there's an **ice-skating rink** (☑ Nov–Mar) near the Rivoli bus stand.

Tours

In the high season, HPTDC organises daily sightseeing bus tours of villages around Shimla. The tours leave from the Rivoli bus stand at around 10.30am. Seats cost Rs 160 to Rs 245. Contact the office for the current itineraries.

The taxi unions also offer one-day sightseeing tours to Kufri, Naldehra, Fagu and Mashobra (Rs 820); and Mashobra, Naldehra and Tattapani (Rs 1120).

Sleeping

Hotels in Shimla charge steep rates during the peak tourist season (April to June, October to November, and Christmas). At all other times, ask about discounts. In winter, heating can usually be provided for an extra charge. Touts abound in Shimla – claims that hotels are full or closed should be taken with a pinch of salt.

BUDGET

YMCA (☎ 2650021; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 200/350, with private bathroom Rs 450/660; ♿) Up the steps beside the Ritz Cineplex, the YMCA takes all comers, regardless of age, religion or gender. Rooms are pleasant and clean, and there's a net café and lockers for valuables. Book ahead in high season.

YWCA (☎ 2803081; above The Mall) Closed at the time of writing, the YWCA should offer similar facilities to the YMCA, at similar prices.

Hotel Classic (☎ 2653078; fax 2802646; s/d with squat toilet Rs 330/440, with sit-down flush toilet Rs 550/660) The Classic is a worn but welcoming place and the location is handy for the train station and Scandal Point. A new coat of paint has brightened up the rooms and there are views over the Annandale meadow from the garden.

Hotel Dreamland (☎ 2806897; s/d from Rs 400/750) A steep climb behind the pavilion at the west end of the Ridge, the Dreamland has a range of well-cared-for rooms with TVs and modest views. Prices are often discounted so ask before you see the rooms.

Near the ISBT are several noisy cheapies offering basic rooms with bathrooms. **Hotel Ranjan** (☎ 2652818; d/tr/q Rs 300/400/550) and

Vikrant Hotel (☎ 2653602; dm Rs 150, d Rs 250-600) are both OK if you have an early bus in the morning.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Gulmarg (☎ 2653168; gulmarg70@yahoo.com; below The Mall; s Rs 300-450, d Rs 500-1450) Spread out over several buildings and annexes below the Computer College, this huge honeymoon hotel offers gloriously chintzy doubles with round beds and mirrored ceilings, and plainer boxy singles.

Hotel Dalziel (☎ 2652394; hoteldalziel@hotmail.com; The Mall; d Rs 450, new block Rs 550-900) Next to Hotel Classic, the Dalziel offers heritage on a budget. The old building – a former colonial bungalow – contains faded but clean economy rooms arranged around a huge wood-panelled dining room.

Hotel Amber (☎ 2654774; Middle Bazar; r Rs 550-1540) Near the Ram Mandir, this noisy but cheerful hotel has small but agreeable rooms with tiny TVs and shared balconies overlooking the market. There's also an excellent sweet shop and *dhaba* (snack bar).

our pick Spars Lodge (☎ 2657908; Museum Rd; s/d Rs 600/900) Just downhill from the museum, this place is a real find. Staff are charming, rooms are full of interesting little details and the excellent restaurant serves local trout in a dining room overlooking the valley.

Hotel White (☎ 2656136; www.hotelwhiteshimla.com; Lakkar Bazar; r Rs 600-900, ste from Rs 1200) Northeast of Scandal Point, this midrange place is well run and well priced. It's worth shelling out for one of the 2nd-floor rooms with views down over Shimla.

FIT FOR A MAHARAJA

For the full Raj treatment, book a room at **Chapslee** (☎ 2802542; www.chapslee.com; d with full board Rs 9500-12,500; ☎), the outrageously ostentatious former home of Raja Charanjit Singh of Kapurthala. Perched atop Elysium Hill, about 4km north of Shimla, this extravagant mountain retreat is crammed with chandeliers, tapestries, Afghan carpets, big-game trophies, Mughal ceramics, baroque furniture and pieces of Victoriana. There are just six sumptuous bedrooms, all with completely original fittings, plus a library, card room, sun lounge, tennis courts and – of course – a croquet lawn.

Hotel Doegar (☎ 2811927; www.hoteldoegar.com; The Ridge; d Rs 750-1500) Behind a crazy-paved façade, the Doegar has great views from the roof terrace and compact, fluffy rooms with thick carpets. We recommend upgrading to a deluxe room with balcony and a tub.

Hotel Mayur (☎ 2652392; www.hotelmayur.com; r Rs 950-1500) Overlooking Christ Church, Mayur is comfortable and well located, but not as grand as the glowing neon sign might suggest.

TOP END

Le Royale (☎ 2651002; Jakhu Rd; r Rs 1500-2500) With an eyrie-like location on the track up to the Jakhu Temple, the elegant Royale has an exclusive, hidden-away feel. Rooms are tasteful, there's a very inviting restaurant and bar, and the lawn has mountain views.

Hotel Combermere (☎ 2561246; www.hotelcombermere.com; The Mall; r from Rs 2500, ste from Rs 3200) The choice of well-heeled urbanites from the plains, with grand rooms and prices to match. A glass elevator provides access to 45 rooms and a gym, health club, restaurant and bar.

Hotel Willow Banks (☎ 2658125; www.willowbanks.com; The Mall; r from Rs 2750) After weeks of roughing it in the mountains, the Willow Banks shines like a beacon. There's a gym, sauna and health club, and rooms have every creature comfort.

Oberoi Cecil (☎ 2804848; www.oberoicecil.com; The Mall; s/d from US\$215/250; ☎ ☎ ☎) This spectacular green-and-white pile is easily the classiest place in Shimla. Colonial grandeur outside gives way to modern comforts within and the central atrium has a gorgeous bar and restaurant, open to nonguests. There's wifi throughout.

Eating

As well as the formal restaurants, there are dozens of Indian fast-food places in Middle Bazar serving samosas, potato cakes, *channa puri* (chickpeas and fried bread) and other snacks. Unless otherwise stated, the following eateries are open from 10am to 10pm.

Baljee's (The Mall; dishes Rs 15-100) Opposite the Town Hall, Baljee's is a great place to breakfast on omelettes, toast and dosas (lentil-flour pancakes), and there's a popular counter selling Indian sweets.

our pick Indian Coffee House (The Mall; dishes Rs 20-60; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) A Shimla institution, the Indian Coffee House is packed with local

office workers and civil servants, talking heatedly over small cups of coffee and cheap dosas.

Devicos Restaurant (The Mall; dishes Rs 25-90) Skip the fast-food stand at street level and head for the downstairs restaurant for a decent menu of Indian, Chinese and continental staples.

Loveena Restaurant (The Ridge; dishes Rs 30-100) Down some steps near the tourist office, Loveena is a clean and calm bolt hole to escape the bustle of Scandal Point. There's also a moody saloon bar.

China Town (dishes Rs 30-100; ☎ 11am-11pm) A tiny hole-in-the-wall place serving superior Indian-Chinese dishes in a boxlike dining room full of mock-Tibetan murals.

Embassy Restaurant (The Mall; dishes Rs 30-100; ☒) A laid-back canteen-style restaurant near the top of the lift, with good sandwiches and soup and tasty homemade cakes. There are great views from the back room.

Ashiana & Goofa (The Ridge; dishes Rs 50-120) Run by HPTDC, these linked restaurants serve good food in reasonably classy surroundings at Scandal Point.

Domino's (The Mall; pizzas Rs 80-355) OK, it's a Western fast-food chain, but travellers flock here for a taste of home after weeks of dhal and rice in the hills.

Café Sol (The Mall; dishes Rs 100-200) Housed in a glass bubble on the roof of the Hotel Combermere, this place serves an upmarket menu that stretches to Japanese and Thai, and there's a great cake counter for dessert.

Cecil (☎ 2804848; The Mall; mains from Rs 400, set dinner Rs 780; ☎ 12.30-2.30pm & 7.30-10.30pm) To eat out in style, reserve a table at the Cecil – lunch is à la carte and there's an extravagant evening buffet.

Drinking

Barista (The Mall; ☎ from 10am) India's chain coffee shops have finally made their way to Shimla, so you can enjoy cappuccino and English-style tea at Barista, opposite the Town Hall.

Park Café (The Ridge; dishes from Rs 40) Up some steps from the Mall, this laid-back, studenty café is a good spot for a hot drink and a snack.

The following places are good for a boozy night out.

The Pub (Ritz Cineplex, Christ Church; beers Rs 90) A very contemporary bar, serving a young, Indian crowd.

Himani's (The Mall; dishes Rs 60-150) Above a snack bar, this neon and marble place is straight out of the 1980s. It's male-dominated without being unfriendly, and the food is good, too.

Entertainment

The most popular entertainment is to stroll along the Mall and the Ridge and watch everyone watching everyone else.

Gaiety Theatre (☎ 2805639) The Shimla Amateur Dramatic Club puts on shows here. Even if there's no show on, it's worth taking a peek at the fabulous auditorium.

Ritz Cineplex (☎ 2652413; Christ Church; seats Rs 35-75) This modern, multiplex cinema has occasional imported blockbusters amongst the standard Bollywood fare.

Footloose Disco (☎ 2652413; entry singles/couples Rs 200/300; ☎ from 7.30pm) Sharing the same building, Shimla's only nightclub rocks to Bollywood soundtracks till late on weekends.

Shopping

Domestic visitors head to the bustling Lakkar Bazar to haggle for wood and handloom souvenirs, but foreigners will find more of interest in the crowded and atmospheric Middle Bazar, on the way down to the bus station. You can buy everything here from tin pots and peacock feathers to henna kits and bangles. Fruit and veg are sold at the heaving Sabzi Mandi at the bottom of the hill. For well-made, knock-off, brand-name clothes, head to the Tibetan market behind the tourist office.

Carpets, shawls and other Himachal souvenirs are sold at the **Himachal Emporium** (☎ 2011234; The Mall; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat); while Tibetan souvenirs are sold at the **Tibetan Handloom Shop** (☎ 208163; The Mall; ☎ 9am-6pm), aiding Tibetan refugees.

Stock up on clothes made from vivid Indian fabrics at **Fab India** (☎ 2650743; The Mall; ☎ 10am-8pm), or boost your music collection with Indian CDs and DVDs at **MusicWorld** (☎ 5538603; The Mall; ☎ 10am-6pm).

Getting There & Away

AIR
Jubbarhatti airport, 23km south of Shimla, is served by the tiny aircraft of **Jagson Airlines** (☎ 2625177), with an inconvenient 10kg baggage allowance. Weather permitting, there are flights from Shimla to Kullu (Bhuntar;

US\$122, 30 minutes) and Delhi (US\$137, one hour) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Bookings can be made with **Ambassador Travels** (☎ 2658014; The Mall; ☒ 9am-6pm). A taxi to the airport will cost Rs 520.

BUS

The HPTDC and private travel agencies offer private overnight deluxe buses (two-by-two seating) to Manali (from Rs 415, 10 hours) and Delhi (from Rs 440, 10 hours) leaving at around 8pm from near the Victory Tunnel. Buses to Chail (Rs 35, 2½ hours) and Tattapani (Rs 38, three hours) leave from the small Rivoli (Lakkar Bazar) bus stand, north of the Ridge.

Other government buses leave from the large and chaotic **Inter State Bus Terminal** (ISBT; ☎ 2656326; Cart Rd). The computerised booking counter takes reservations up to a month in advance. See the table, below, for services.

TAXI

The **Kalka-Shimla Taxi Union** (☎ 2658225) has its stand at the ISBT, while **Vishal Himachal Taxi Operators Union** (☎ 2805164) operates from the bottom of the passenger lift. Set fares include the following:

Destination	One-way Fare (Rs)
Airport	520
Chail	1020
Chandigarh	1170
Dehra Dun	3300
Dharamsala/McLeod Ganj	3200/3500
Kasauli	950
Kullu	2400
Manali	2700
Naldehra	520
Narkanda	1020
Rekong Peo	3400
Sarahan	2600
Tattapani	1020

TRAIN

Shimla is served by a narrow-gauge toy train from Kalka, just north of Chandigarh. Although the steam trains are long gone, it's a scenic trip, passing through 103 tunnels as it creeps up through the hills. Tiny Shimla train station is 1.5km west of Scandal Point on Cart Rd. The left-luggage office is open 9am to 5pm daily.

Ordinary trains (Rs 36/228 in 2nd/1st class) run downhill to Kalka at 2.25pm and 6.15pm, returning at 6am and 8.30am. To travel in style, catch the posh *Shivalik Ex-*

BUSES FROM SHIMLA

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Chamba	300	14	4 daily
Chandigarh	85/178 (ord/dlx)	4	every 15min
Dalhousie	270	12	5pm
Dehra Dun	174	9	7 daily
Delhi	215/516/685 (ord/dlx/AC)	9	hourly
Dharampur (for Kasauli)	47	2½	regular
Dharamsala	190	10	5 daily
Hatkoti	79	5	regular
Jammu	260	12	1 daily (check locally for time)
Kullu	167	8½	5 daily
Manali	197/300 (ord/dlx)	10	5 daily
Mandi	112	6	hourly
Nahan	102	5	7 daily
Narkanda	50	2	regular
Paonta Sahib	137	7	6 daily
Rampur	100	5	hourly
Rekong Peo	181	10	hourly
Rohru	87	6	regular
Sangla	181	10	8.20am
Sarahan	132	8	3 daily

press at 5.40pm (returning at 5.30am; Rs 280, 1st class only) or the *Himalayan Queen* at 12.10pm (returning at 10.30am; Rs 167, chair car only). All 1st-class prices include food.

The *Himalayan Queen* service connects with the *Himalayan Queen* trains to and from Delhi (Rs 329/97 in chair car/2nd class). The train from Delhi's Nizamuddin station leaves at 5.30am.

Getting Around

The only way to get around central Shimla is on foot. Fortunately, there's a two-part **lift** (Rs 7; ☎ 8am-10pm, till 9pm low season) connecting the east end of the Mall with Cart Rd, a five-minute walk above the ISBT. Taxis from the train station to the bottom of the lift cost about Rs 60.

AROUND SHIMLA

See p289 for information on buses and taxis from Shimla to the following towns.

Shimla to Tattapani

About 12km north of Shimla, the small village of **Mashobra** has an old colonial church and some pleasant walks among deodar trees.

Reached by a drawbridge, the huge white **Hotel Gables** (☎ 0177-2480171; r from Rs 2200; 🍷) was a former residence of Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India. Rooms are plush and the views are sublime.

About 15km north of Mashobra, **Naldehra** has a famous **golf course** (☎ 0177-2747739; green fees Rs 250, club hire Rs 250; 🕒 7am-6pm Mar-Nov), set amongst the cedars. Ponies can be hired for treks along the ridge and there are more pine-scented walks.

At the golf course, **Hotel Golf Glade** (☎ 0177-2747809; d Rs 1000-1200, huts Rs 1500-5000) is an up-market HPTDC property offering smart hotel rooms and warm log huts, arranged around an inviting restaurant and bar.

Tattapani

☎ 01907 / elev 656m

About 30km below Naldehra on the banks of the Sutlej River, sleepy Tattapani is known for its steaming sulphurous springs, which spill out onto a sandy river beach. The village has several temples linked to the cult of Rishi Jamdagam, and you can walk to holy caves and former palaces. White-water rafting expeditions along the Sutlej run from June to September (Rs 900 per day).

SLEEPING & EATING

Trimurti Inn (☎ 230749; r Rs 100-500) Uphill towards the new bridge, this place could use a lick of paint but rooms are bright and cheerful.

Rainbow Resort (r Rs 220-300) Next door to the Spring View Hotel, this place also has a private bathing block; rooms are simple and some look towards the river.

Spring View Hotel (☎ 230853; r without/with bath-room Rs 250/300) The best choice here, with a good restaurant and its own bathing pools above the beach. Rafting can be arranged and there's a resident Ayurvedic masseur.

Kasauli

☎ 01792 / elev 1850m

Perched on a hillside 75km southwest of Shimla, Kasauli is another former Raj retreat sent amongst the pines. It has several Raj-era buildings and numerous peaceful walks through the forest offering grand views over the Punjabi plains.

There is no direct bus to Kasauli from Shimla; instead catch a southbound bus from Shimla and change to a local bus at Dharampur.

SLEEPING

Hotel Anchal (☎ 272052; hotelanchal@yahoo.co.in; r Rs 400-850) A rare cheap option in Kasauli, with so-so rooms and modest views. Ask for bucket hot water.

Hotel Ros Common (☎ 272005; d from Rs 1200) A charming HPTDC heritage hotel in a small colonial bungalow, set in lovely gardens that are great for afternoon tea.

Chail

☎ 01792 / elev 2150m

The hilltop village of Chail, 65km south of Shimla, was created by the maharaja of Patiala as his summer capital, after he was expelled from Shimla for getting a little too friendly with the daughter of the British military commander! If you fancy a few overs, Chail has one of several 'world's highest cricket grounds', a 3km walk from the village. As well as forest strolls, there's a **wildlife park** with deer and birds.

SLEEPING

Hotel Pineview (☎ 248349; r Rs 150-300) The only budget accommodation in town, this place is OK but still hardly great value. Shared rooms have bucket hot water.

HPTDC Palace Hotel (☎ 248141; hptdcchail@sancharnet.in; r from Rs 1200, ste from Rs 3700; ♿) A grand, grey-stone mansion, set in 28 hectares of immaculate lawns, this hotel has all the immodest luxury you'd expect from a former maharaja's palace.

Narkanda

☎ 01782 / elev 2708m

Halfway between Shimla and Rampur, to the northeast, Narkanda is a nondescript truck-stop town, but from January to March it transforms into a modest **ski resort**. The HPTDC offers seven-day skiing packages for Rs 4955, including accommodation, meals, equipment and tuition, but not transport – see <http://himachaltourism.nic.in> for dates.

Manali's **Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports** (☎ in Narkanda 242406; www.dmas.gov.in) runs all-inclusive 14-day ski courses for US\$240, also on fixed dates.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Mahamaya Palace (☎ 242448; r Rs 400-800) On the main road, this genial place has a suitably alpine mood, an inviting, dark-wood restaurant and large, worn rooms with mountain views.

HPTDC Hotel Hatu (☎ 242430; hotelhatu@sancharnet.in; d Rs 700-1300) Off the main road, just east of the centre, this government-run place has snug rooms and a restaurant and bar for some après-ski.

Pabbar Valley

☎ 01781 / elev 1400m

Running northeast to Kinnaur, the calm Pabbar Valley is easily accessible from Shimla by public bus. Set in rolling fields at the mouth of the valley, the Durga temple at **Hatkoti** was founded in the 8th century AD. Built in classic Kinnauri style, the slate-roofed temples attract large numbers of Shaivite pilgrims during the Chaitra Navratra and Asvin Navratra festivals in April and October. Pilgrims' quarters are available at the temple or you can stay at the **HPTDC Hotel Chanshal** (☎ 240661; dm Rs 75, d with AC Rs 700-800), 10km north of Hatkoti towards Rohru.

Local buses connect Hatkoti to **Jubbal**, 29km west, which has a fanciful slate-roofed palace built by the former Rana of Jubbal.

Nahan

☎ 01702

Most tourists just flash through Nahan on the bus between Shimla and Dehra Dun, but the

cobbled streets of the old town are crammed with crumbling temples and buildings from the days of the rajas. During the **Bhawani Dwadshi** at the end of the monsoon, idols of Hindu gods are led through the streets and ceremonially bathed in Ranital (Rani lake) in the town centre.

About an hour by bus from Nahan, **Renukija** (Renuka lake) is a popular picnic spot for Indian families. The week-long **Renuka Mela** festival (p283) is held here in November to honour the goddess Renukaji.

There are several decent hotels in Nahan, including **Hotel Renuka** (☎ 223306; s/d Rs 150/450) by the maidan, and **Hotel Regency** (☎ 223302; s/d Rs 250/450), just around the corner. The open-air Milan Restaurant here serves the best food in town.

There are frequent buses to Paonta Sahib (Rs 34, 1½ hours) and Dadahu/Dosarka (Rs 30, 30 minutes), start of the 30-minute walk to Renuka lake. Taxis charge around Rs 500 to Renuka lake or Paonta Sahib.

Paonta Sahib

☎ 01704

Well off the tourist track on the Uttarakhand (Uttaranchal) border, Paonta Sahib is famous as the childhood home of Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Sikh guru. Sikh pilgrims flock here to pay their respects at the sprawling **Paonta Sahib Gurdwara** on the banks of the holy Yamuna River. The town overflows during the **Holi festival** in March, when it can be difficult to find a room anywhere in the area.

On the riverside about 100m from the temple, **HPTDC Hotel Yamuna** (☎ 222341; d from Rs 500, with AC from Rs 1100; ♿) is a standard HPTDC hotel – unexciting but well looked after, and there's a good restaurant and bar.

There are hourly morning buses to Shimla (Rs 137, seven hours) and several daily services to Dehra Dun (Rs 35, two hours), Nahan (Rs 34, 1½ hours) and Delhi (Rs 140, seven hours).

KINNAUR VALLEY

The old Hindustan–Tibet Hwy (built by the British as a sneaky invasion route into Tibet) runs northeast from Shimla through Kinnaur, providing access to mountain villages with slate-roofed temples and vast orchards of apple trees that provide Himachal's most famous export. The Kinnauris, or Kinners, are a proud, Aryan people who mainly survive

from farming and apple growing. You can recognise Kinners all over India by their green felt *thepang* hats.

With an easy-to-obtain inner line permit (see the boxed text, p296) you can travel north to the mountain deserts of Spiti (p341). For most of the last decade, the road has been blocked between Rekong Peo and Spiti – forcing travellers to change buses and cross the river on precarious ropeways to complete their journey. At the time of writing, the road was open all the way to Tabo, but there's no telling how long it will stay that way – check locally before travelling north of Rekong Peo.

For more information on the Kinnaur Valley, visit the local government website at <http://hpkinnaur.nic.in>.

Rampur

☎ 01782 / elev 1005m

The gateway to Kinnaur, this nondescript town was once the capital of the Bushahr rajas. Today, Rampur is mainly a place to change buses or break the journey from Shimla to Rekong Peo. Many drunk truck drivers stop here overnight, creating quite a threatening atmosphere, particularly for single women. Most places to stay are below the bus stand, in the bazaar that cascades downhill from the highway.

If you decide to stick around, the delightful, terraced and turreted **Padam Palace** was built in 1925 for the maharaja of Bushahr; only the garden is open to visitors. There are several ancient temples, including the stone **Raghu-nath Temple** on the highway and the **Purohit**

Mandir and **Sri Sat Narain Temple** down in the riverside bazaar. The gaudy modern **Dumgrir Budh Temple** on the main road recalls Kinnaur's Buddhist past.

The huge **Lavi Fair** (p283) is held yearly in the second week of November, attracting traders and pilgrims from remote villages.

SLEEPING & EATING

Rampur is a popular liquor stop for truck drivers, so there are some crummy options in the budget range.

Satluj View Guesthouse (☎ 233924; dm Rs 50, r with bathroom Rs 200-275) Down some concrete steps, just uphill from the bus station, this place has tatty but cheap rooms on several levels. The restaurant has good food and cold beers, but almost comically bad service.

HPTDC Hotel Bushahr Regency (☎ 234103; r from Rs 600, with AC from Rs 900) A standard HPTDC property on the western edge of Rampur, combining rooms with plenty of space to spread out and a decent restaurant with slightly lackadaisical service.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Rampur's chaotic bus station has frequent services to Rekong Peo (Rs 84, five hours) and to Shimla (Rs 100, five hours) via Narkanda (Rs 51, three hours). Buses to Sarahan (Rs 32, two hours) leave every two hours. Three daily buses run to Sangla (Rs 80, five hours).

Sarahan

☎ 01782 / elev 1920m

The former summer capital of the Bushahr kingdom, Sarahan is dominated by the fabulous **Bhimakali Temple** (entry by donation; ☞ 7am-8pm), built from layers of stone and timber to absorb the force of earthquakes. There are two towers here, one built in the 12th century, and a newer tower from the 1920s containing a highly revered shrine to Bhimakali (the local version of Kali) beneath a beautiful silver-filigree canopy.

There are some strict entry rules. Male visitors must wear a cap (which can be borrowed inside the temple), shoes must be removed, smoking is banned, and cameras and leather goods like belts and wallets must be left with the guards. Behind the temple is a small display of ancient ceremonial horns, lamps and weaponry, and across the courtyard is the squat **Lankra Vir Temple**, where human sacrifices were carried out right up to the 18th

A BAD TIME TO VISIT KINNAUR...

Most of the time, Kinnaur is peaceful and calm, but all that goes out the window during the Durga Puja celebrations in September/October. This is the main holiday season in Bengal and thousands of holidaymakers flood into Kinnaur from the plains. Simultaneously, the annual apple harvest lures hundreds of fruit wholesalers from across India. It can be impossible to find a room anywhere in Kinnaur, from Rekong Peo and Kalpa to the far end of the Sangla Valley. If you do end up stuck without a room, you'll have to search for a bed in a drivers' dormitory or try your luck at local shops.

century. The tradition lives on in a tamer form in the Astomi ritual during **Dussehra** (p283), where a menagerie of animals is sacrificed to Bhimakali, including goats, chickens and buffaloes.

There are peaceful walks in the surrounding hills – stroll downhill to the **Buddhist gumpa** in Gharat village, or gird yourself for the treks on the slopes of **Bashal Peak**. The flamboyant **palace** of the last maharaja of Bushahr is just behind the Bhimakali Temple.

SLEEPING & EATING

Apart from the temple guesthouse, all hotels offer significant discounts out of season.

Temple Guesthouse (☎ 274248; dm Rs 25, r Rs 150-300) Rooms here form part of the ancient temple precinct and the more expensive chambers have intricate wood-panelled ceilings. Dorm rooms are more basic, but all bathrooms have hot water.

HPTDC Hotel Srikhand (☎ 274234; dm Rs 75, r from Rs 700) Classier than most HPTDC properties, with tastefully decorated rooms, a respectable restaurant and panoramic views across the valley from the upper floors.

Hotel Sagrika (☎ 274491; r Rs 400-700) Nearby on the main road past the temple, this place is popular with Bengali tourists and very busy in season. Rooms have carpets and hot showers but no TV, and there's a restaurant.

Trehan's Guesthouse (☎ 274205; r Rs 500-600) Small but well formed, Trehan's has friendly owners and compact rooms with thick carpets and TVs. Pricier rooms have views worth paying for.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Three direct buses ply daily from Shimla to Sarahan (Rs 132, eight hours), or there are buses from Rampur (Rs 32, two hours) every two hours. From Rekong Peo, take a bus to Jeori (Rs 76, four hours), and change to a local bus to Sarahan (Rs 13, 45 minutes). Taxis from Jeori to Sarahan cost Rs 300/500 one way/return.

Sangla Valley

☎ 01786 / elev 2680m

The Sangla, or Baspa, Valley used to be described as 'the most beautiful valley in the Himalaya' but today the valley is marred by the dams and barrages of the Baspa Hydroelectric Project. It's still a pretty spot and a good place to see traditional Kinnauri archi-

ecture, but you need to head north to Spiti to get a real sense of peace and isolation. The hair-raising road to the valley begins at Karcham on the Rekong Peo–Shimla highway, passing the gushing outflow pipes from the hydroelectric plant.

SANGLA

The largest village in the valley, Sangla was once a fairy-tale village of low wooden houses and slate-roofed temples looking out over a pristine valley, but hydroelectricity is changing Sangla beyond all recognition. Wooden houses are being rebuilt in concrete and new hotels are springing up on every corner. It hasn't quite been spoiled – yet! – but you'll have to head into the hills to find the peace and quiet that the valley was once famous for. Walk down to the lower village to admire the old stone houses and Hindu and Buddhist temples. The **Bering Nag Temple** forms the centrepiece of the annual **Phulech Festival** (p283) in September.

Sleeping & Eating

Ask about discounts outside of the main tourist season in September and October. Note that all hotels are booked solid during Durga Puja.

Hotel Mount Kailash (☎ 242527; r Rs 300-1000) Across the gully and backing onto apple orchards, Mount Kailash has a gentle mood and a sunny front lawn. Cheaper rooms have running hot water and buckets rather than showers.

Baspa Guesthouse (☎ 242206; r Rs 350-660, ste Rs 1000) Run by a genial Kinnauri family with an obvious love for the colour green, Baspa offers a range of carpeted rooms with hot water and good views from the upper floors.

Sangla Resort (☎ 242201; r Rs 600-800) Just below the bridge into Sangla, this cute stone chalet is set in peaceful gardens. Rooms are spotless and the shared terrace and balconies have great valley views.

From April to October, several companies operate all-inclusive tented camps along the Baspa River – contact **Banjara Camps** (☎ 242536; www.banjaracamps.com; s/d tent Rs 3500/3900) or **Kinner Camps** (☎ 242382; kinnercamps@vsnl.com; tent Rs 2500) for bookings.

The bus stand has half a dozen identical 'Tibetan restaurants' serving *momos* (Tibetan dumplings), *thukpa* (noodle soup), chow mein, fried rice and Indian snacks.

Getting There & Away

Buses run to Rampur (Rs 80, five hours) at 6.30am, 10am and noon, or there are four daily buses to Rekong Peo (Rs 30, three hours). Local buses run up the valley to Chitkul (Rs 30, two hours) at noon and 5pm, returning at 6.30am and 1.30pm.

Share jeeps can take you to Karcham (Rs 30, two hours), on the main Shimla–Rekong Peo bus route. Alternatively, take a day trip to the valley by share jeep from Rekong Peo for Rs 1500 to Rs 2000.

AROUND SANGLA

Clinging to a rocky spur 2km above Sangla, the village of **Kamru** was the former capital of the kingdom of Bushahr. The village is modernising rapidly but there are some impressive slate and stone houses and temples. The village is dominated by the tower-style **Kamakhya Devi Fort**, the former home of the *thakurs* (kings) of Bushahr (shoes and leather items should be removed and heads must be covered). Kamru is reached by a sealed road through apple and walnut orchards, starting just west of the bridge into Sangla.

Further up the valley from Sangla are the smaller villages of **Rakcham** (3050m), 14km from Sangla, and **Chitkul** (3450m), the last stops on the old trade route to Tibet. Although quieter than Sangla, both are being developed as resorts.

Rekong Peo

☎ 01786 / elev 2290m

Rekong Peo is the main administrative centre for Kinnaur and an important transport

hub, but there's little to delay the traveller for longer than it takes to arrange the permit for onward travel to Tabo in Spiti. A steep walk above town near the radio mast is the **Kinnaur Kalachakra Celestial Palace** (Mahabodhi Gompa), with a 10m-high statue of Sakyamuni and great views across to Kinner Kailash. For a longer stay, take the bus uphill to Kalpa.

Known to locals as 'Peo', the town is spread out along a looping road about 10km above the Hindustan–Tibet Hwy. Most hotels are around the main bazaar at the bottom of town or uphill from the bus stand. A set of concrete steps connects the bus stand and bazaar, passing through fragrant groves of wild marijuana.

There is nowhere to change money here. The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 222897; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) below the bazaar provides local information and arranges inner line permits – see the boxed text, p296. Uphill from the bus stand, **Raj Internet Café** (per hr Rs 60; ☎ 9.30am–7pm) is the only place to check email.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most places to stay are in the main bazaar.

Hotel Snow View (☎ 222048; r from Rs 250) Above a shopping arcade in the bazaar, this noisy option has just a handful of plain rooms with bathroom windows that look onto the valley. There's a cheap *dhaba* upstairs.

Ridang Hotel (r Rs 350–700) A smart white hotel in the main bazaar, with a good restaurant and a range of large tidy rooms, some carpeted and all with TV.

WHAT PRICE HYDROELECTRICITY?

Until 2002, Kinnaur was one of the quietest corners of Himachal Pradesh. Then hydroelectricity took the state by storm. A series of vast concrete dams and turbine stations now harnesses the mighty force of the Sutlej River, providing power to Himachal Pradesh and most of the surrounding states. The Nathpa Jhakri power station is India's largest power plant, capable of generating 1500 megawatts – equivalent to two nuclear power stations – and there are half a dozen similar facilities strung out along the Sutlej and Baspa Rivers.

Although hydroelectricity is one of the cleanest sources of energy, the effect on the landscape of Kinnaur has been dramatic. Whole valleys have been sacrificed to create giant coffer dams and water that once flowed serenely past forested mountains now surges out of enormous concrete pipes. The projects have flooded Kinnaur with money, leading many villages to demolish their traditional wood and stone houses and rebuild in concrete and steel. Other villages have vanished completely beneath reservoirs, and displaced villagers have been offered minimal compensation. While hydroelectricity is undeniably improving the quality of life for Kinnauris, the loss of natural habitats and cultural heritage will be felt for generations.

INNER LINE PERMITS

Inner line permits allowing travel to Tabo in Spiti can be obtained in one day from the tourist office in Rekong Peo for Rs 150. You'll need two passport photos and photocopies of the identity and visa pages from your passport. Alternatively, make arrangements through your hotel. You'll have to show the permit with your passport at the checkpoints in Jangi and Sumdo.

There are more cheapies uphill from the bus stand; all have rooms with geysers in the bathroom, but all could use a lick of paint. **Hotel Shambhala** (☎ 222858; r Rs 300-350) and **Sairag Inn** (☎ 223477; dm Rs 50, r Rs 300-350) are decent value for money.

There are heaps of cheap *dhabas* in the bazaar.

Hotel Mehefil (ITBP Rd; mains Rs 30-130) Near the start of the steps up to the bus stand, this cosy bar serves cold beers, pegs of whisky and above-average Indian food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus stand is 2km from the main bazaar by road or 500m by the steps that start by the police compound at the top of ITBP Rd.

There are hourly buses to Shimla (Rs 181, 10 hours), via Jeori (for Sarahan; Rs 76, four hours) and Rampur (Rs 84, five hours). To Sangla there are direct buses at 9.30am and 4pm (Rs 30, three hours) or you can take any bus heading south and change at Karcham (Rs 47, one hour).

For Spiti, there's a 7.30am bus to Kaza (Rs 165, 12 hours) via Nako (Rs 78, five hours) and Tabo (Rs 130, 10 hours). A second bus leaves for Tabo at 4pm. You need an inner line permit to travel on this route – see the boxed text, above. See p345 for more on this route.

Local buses run frequently to Kalpa (Rs 7, 30 minutes), or you can take a chartered taxi (Rs 200) or shared taxi (Rs 30). Taxis charge Rs 1500 to Rs 2000 for a day trip to Sangla and Rs 3500 to Shimla.

Kalpa

☎ 01786 / elev 2960m

Tourism is bringing many changes to Kalpa, but for now this remains one of the most

peaceful villages in Kinnaur. Reached by a winding road above Rekong Peo, the village is a pleasing straggle of slate-roofed houses spread out over a ridge with breathtaking views across to Kinner Kailash. The surrounding orchards provide fancy-free walks and there are several simple guesthouses in the village, plus a growing number of modern hotels on the ridge above town.

According to legend, this was the winter home of Shiva, and there are some impressive Kinnauri-style temples in the **Narayan-Nagini** temple complex, plus a colourful **Buddhist temple** at the top of the village. In September/October villagers pile wildflowers in the centre of the village as part of the annual **Phulech Festival** (p283).

SLEEPING & EATING

The following hotels are booked solid during the Durga Puja holiday season (September/October) and offer discounts at other times.

Chini Bungalow (☎ 226385; r Rs 250-450; ☒ closed Nov-Mar) Signposted up the lane branching right past the Blue Lotus Hotel, this cottage has a flowery garden facing the mountains. Rooms are simple but clean and well cared for.

Kailash View Guesthouse (☎ 226158; r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 250/300) A 500m trek through fields above the village, cosy Kailash View looks out over orchards. It's a modern building but the simple rooms have a villagey feel.

Hotel Blue Lotus (☎ 226001; r from Rs 500) Close to the bus stand, this neat midrange place has a better-than-average restaurant and a wide, sunny terrace facing directly across to the mountains.

Hotel Kinner Villa (☎ 226006; r Rs 900-1500) Reached via a steep 1km walk through orchards and farmland beyond Kalpa, Kinner Villa is a genuinely tasteful country retreat. Rooms have magnificent views and there are heated lounges facing the valley for winter.

For meals, try the restaurant at the Blue Lotus or the string of *dhabas* on the road down to the Buddhist temple.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses run throughout the day between Kalpa and Rekong Peo (Rs 7, 30 minutes), or you can take a taxi (Rs 30/200 shared/chartered) or walk – follow the well-worn stepped path rather than the winding road.

CENTRAL HIMACHAL PRADESH

Running north towards Lahaul, the Kullu and Parvati Valleys are popular with hippies, honeymooners and adrenaline junkies. Many people continue north over Rohtang La (3978m) to Lahaul, Spiti and Ladakh.

For more information on Kullu district, see the websites www.kullu.net and <http://hpkullu.nic.in>.

MANDI

☎ 01905 / pop 27,400 / elev 800m

Formerly a trading stop on the salt route to Tibet, Mandi is the gateway to the Kullu Valley and the junction of the main roads from Kullu, Chandigarh and Pathankot. The town feels more Punjabi than Himalayan, with a large Sikh community and a sticky air reminiscent of the plains. Sprawling around the confluence of the Beas River and the Suketi Khad stream, the town is dotted with ancient Shivaite temples – at least 81 according to official figures – and you can do a day trip into the hills to visit the holy lakes at Rewalsar and Prashar.

Orientation & Information

Mandi is centred on a sunken shopping complex called Indira Market, arranged around a pretty garden square. Most places to stay and eat are nearby, while the temples are concentrated along the river. The bus stand is on the east side of the Beas, a Rs 10 autorickshaw ride away.

There's nowhere to change travellers cheques, but the SBI Bank near Indira Market has an ATM and the Hotel Evening Plaza can change US dollars cash. **Xpert Net** (per hr Rs 30; ☎ 10am-10pm) is upstairs near the SBI Bank, opposite the road to the Raj Mahal.

Sights & Activities

Mandi is crammed with stone temples, most of them spread out along the river. The brightly painted **Bhutnath Mandir**, dating from the 7th century AD, is the focal point for the animated **Shivaratri Festival** (p283) in February, honouring Lord Shiva.

If you follow Bhutnath Bazar to the river, you'll find bathing ghats (steps or landings) with a giant statue of **Hanuman** and a long

avenue of carved stone *sikharas* (temple towers). Most impressive are the **Panch Bah-tar** and **Triloknath** mandirs, facing each other across the river. Also worth seeking out is the **Akardash Rudar** mandir, near the British-built bridge over the Beas.

Perched at the top of Tarna Hill is **Rani Amrit Kaur Park** with superb views and the colourful **Syamakali Temple**, decorated with paintings of the various bloodthirsty incarnations of Kali. You can walk the 5km from town or take an autorickshaw (Rs 40).

Sleeping

All the hotels are around Indira Market.

Shiva Hotel (☎ 224221; r Rs 200-400) Behind the market is this modest but inexpensive hotel. There's a small restaurant and bar, and the more expensive front rooms overlook the orderly bustle in the central market square.

Evening Standard Hotel (☎ 225123; r with cold/hot shower from Rs 275/330) A few doors up, this is a reliable cheapie offering clean rooms with TVs and a resident moneychanger. Again, front-facing rooms are best.

Raj Mahal Palace Hotel (☎ 222401; www.rajmahalpalace.com; r from Rs 440, with AC from Rs 880; ♿) A timely refurb has restored this historic hotel to its rightful position as the best place to stay in Mandi. Tucked in behind the main palace buildings, the rooms are bright, cosy and clean as a whistle. There's also a fabulous restaurant in the garden.

Eating

There are plenty of *dhabas* around Indira Market.

Treat Restaurant (Indira Market; dishes Rs 25-130) On the ground floor of the market, this small but rather swish place serves up Chinese and South Indian food in air-conditioned surroundings.

Raj Mahal Garden Restaurant (mains Rs 40-150; ☎ 7am-11pm) The best choice in town, set romantically under trees at the Raj Mahal, with a choice of indoor and outdoor dining, excellent food and a fully licensed bar.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The bus station is across the river in the eastern part of town. Local buses run to Rewalsar (Rs 18, 1½ hours) hourly until early evening. See the table (p298) for details of long-distance bus services.

TAXI

Taxis at the bus station charge Rs 900 to Kullu, Rs 600 to Bhuntar airport and Rs 500 for a return trip to Rewalsar. Expect to pay around Rs 1500 per day for longer trips to the Banjar Valley and Great Himalayan National Park.

REWALSAR LAKE

☎ 01905 / elev 1350m

Around 24km southwest of Mandi, the sacred lake of Rewalsar is revered by Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs. The Indian monk Padmasambhava departed from Rewalsar in the 8th century AD to spread Buddhism to Tibet, and Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs came together here in the 17th century to plan their resistance against ethnic cleansing by the Mughals.

A country road winds up to the lake and right around the lakeshore, where you'll find the ochre-red **Debung Kagyud Gompa**, with an active *thangka* (Tibetan cloth painting) school and a large central Sakyamuni statue. Just beyond is the pale blue **gurdwara** built in honour of Gobind Singh in the 1930s. In the other direction, the **Tso-Pema Ogyen Heru-kai Nying-mapa Gompa** has artful murals and atmospheric *pujas* (prayer ceremonies) at around 7am and 3.30pm. Uphill from the lake is the towering white **Zigar Drukpa Kagyud Institute**, with outsized statues of Tantric deities. A 12m-high statue of Padmasambhava is under construction on the hill above the lake. On the far side of the lake are a number of small **Hindu temples** dedicated to the sage Rishi Lomas, who was forced to do penance here as a dedication to Shiva.

Local taxi drivers can arrange tours to other temples and viewpoints around the lake, including the **Buddha Cave** on the ridge, where Padmasambhava allegedly meditated (you can also walk here from the lakeshore).

You can check email at **Tso-Pema Internet** (per hr Rs 20; ☎ 8am-8.30pm), near the Nyingmapa gompa.

Sleeping & Eating

Nyingmapa Gompa Guesthouse (☎ 240226; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 80/200) These austere but clean rooms appeal to Buddhist pilgrims looking for spiritual rather than physical comfort.

Dribung Kagyud Gompa Guesthouse (☎ 240364; r with shared bathroom Rs 100-200) The guesthouse at the red gompa has simple but cosy quarters for pilgrims and nonpilgrims. Bucket hot water is included.

HPTDC Hotel Rewalsar (☎ 240252; dm Rs 75, d in old bldg Rs 200, in new bldg Rs 350-550) Pick the new building over the old building at this big HPTDC-run hotel near the taxi stand, or save a few pennies in the dorm.

Hotel Lotus Lake (☎ 240239; r & TV Rs 200-500) Close to Hotel Rewalsar, this tasteful modern place is Buddhist run and the tidy, tiled rooms gleam.

There are several *dhabas* and simple Buddhist restaurants. Best is the **Topchen Restaurant** by the Nyingmapa gompa – good *momos* and *thukpa* go for around Rs 35.

Getting There & Away

Frequent buses go to Rewalsar from Mandi (Rs 18, 1½ hours), making for an easy day trip. A taxi from Mandi costs Rs 500 return.

MANDI TO KULLU

About 15km south of Kullu near the village of Bajaura is the **Basheshar Mahadev**, the largest stone temple in the Kullu Valley. Built in the 8th century AD and intricately carved, the temple is a larger version of the classic hut-style *sikhara* seen all over the Kullu Valley.

Hidden away in the hills between Mandi and Bajaura is scenic **Prashar Lake** (2730m), home to the striking, pagoda-style **Prashara Temple**, built in the 14th century in honour of the sage Prashar Rishi. Prashar is an 8km walk from the village of Kandi on the Mandi-Bajaura road, accessible by local bus (ask for times at the bus stand).

Southeast of Mandi is the little-visited **Banjar Valley**, offering peaceful walks and trips to unspoiled villages. The town of **Banjar** has a few simple hotels, and you can hike the steep 6km to the village of **Chaini** to see one of the

LONG-DISTANCE BUSES FROM MANDI

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Aut	30	1	half-hourly
Bhuntar airport	50	2	half-hourly
Chandigarh	140	6	10 daily
Delhi	275/500 (ord/dlx)	12	10 daily
Dharamsala	102	6	6 daily
Kullu	55	2½	half-hourly
Manali	87	4	half-hourly
Shimla	112	6	hourly

tallest temple towers in Himachal – damaged by the 1905 earthquake but still impressive at seven storeys. A popular longer walk is the trek to the 3223m **Jalori Pass**.

GREAT HIMALAYAN NATIONAL PARK

This 750-sq-km **national park** (☎ 01902-265320; www.greathimalayannationalpark.com; per day Indian/foreigner Rs 10/200, camera Rs 50/150) provides a home to 180 species of birds and rare mammals, such as black bears, brown bears, musk deer and the ever-elusive snow leopard. As well as conserving wildlife, the park runs programmes that provide a sustainable living for people living on the periphery of the conservation area.

Wildlife is best spotted on a five- to eight-day organised trek, accompanied by a park ranger. Arrangements can be made through the park rangers at the Sai Ropa Tourist Centre, 5km before Gushaini, or with private companies in Manali (p310). You need travel insurance that covers emergency helicopter evacuations.

To get here, catch any bus on the Mandi–Manali route to Aut, then take a taxi to the park entrance.

BHUNTAR

☎ 01902

Bhuntar has the main airport for the Kullu Valley and a handful of hotels catering to airline passengers. This is also the junction town for buses to the popular Parvati Valley, but most people prefer to stay in Kullu.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel SunBeam (☎ 265790; s/d from Rs 200/350) A decent budget choice about 500m north of the airport in the main village bazaar. Rooms are what you would expect for the price.

Hotel Amit (☎ 265500; d Rs 400-1900) Next door to the SunBeam, Amit offers smarter rooms with welcome mod-cons – TV, phones, carpets and a spic-and-span restaurant.

There are several *dhabas* at the bus stand, or more substantial meals are available at **Malabar Restaurant** (dishes Rs 35-80), opposite the airport.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is next to the bus stand. **Jagson Airlines** (☎ 265222; www.jagsonairlines.com; Bhuntar bus stand; ☎ 8am-5pm) has flights to Delhi (US\$198, 1½ hours) and Dharamsala (US\$122, 30 minutes) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday,

and flights to Shimla (US\$122) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. However, it imposes a 10kg baggage limit. Based at Hotel Amit, **Air Deccan** (☎ 265076; www.airdeccan.net; ☎ 8am-5pm) has a daily flight to Delhi (Rs 4000) without this restriction.

BUS

There are very regular services to Manali (Rs 40, three hours), Kullu (Rs 9, 30 minutes) and Mandi (Rs 50, two hours). Buses to other destinations pass through three hours after leaving Manali. For the Parvati Valley, there regular services to Manikaran (Rs 25, three hours) via Kasol (Rs 23, 2½ hours) and Jari (Rs 15, one hour).

TAXI

The taxi stand is in front of the airport; fares include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)
Jari	400
Kasol	550
Kullu	200
Manali	900
Mandi	600
Manikaran	750

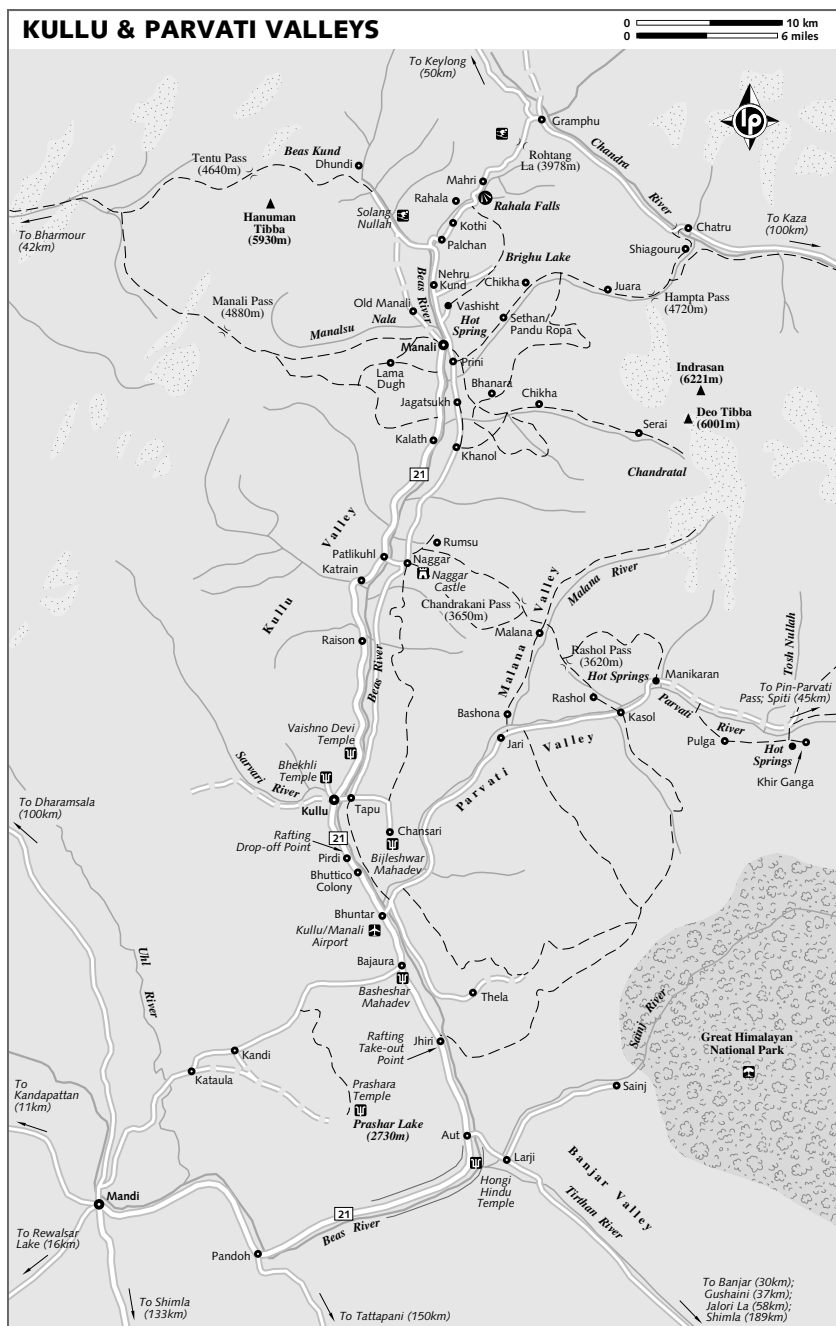
PARVATI VALLEY

☎ 01902

Running northeast from Bhuntar towards Lahaul and Spiti, the Parvati Valley is a well-established traveller hangout. Several small towns along the valley have been transformed into hippie resorts, offering cheap accommodation, international food and a nonstop reggae soundtrack to crowds of dreadlocked and taffeta-skirted travellers. The attractions of the valley are peaceful scenery, the hot springs at Manikaran and a plentiful supply of wild *charas* (marijuana), with all the risks that this entails – see p1140. There are some excellent treks in the area, but solo trekking is not recommended – see the boxed text, p303.

Jari

About halfway along the Parvati Valley, Jari is the quietest of the traveller hangouts in the valley. There are some friendly guesthouses and the village is the starting point for treks to **Malana** – a sprawl of wood and stone houses with its own unique caste system and parliament. Visitors must wait on the outskirts of



the village to be invited in and it is forbidden to touch any of the villagers or their belongings (there's a Rs 1000 fine if you break this rule). The walk is about 17km in each direction and the village has a few basic guesthouses for overnight stays.

Negi's Himalayan Adventure (☎ 276119) in Jari can organise local treks, including the trip to Malana.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most guesthouses are a steep 1km walk above Jari in the peaceful hamlet of Mateura Jari (follow the guesthouse signs).

Village Guest House (☎ 276070; r with shared bathroom Rs 50-100; 🍽️) The largest place in the village, with a big walled garden and rooms in several old village houses. There's internet access (per hour Rs 70) and the owners can book bus tickets.

Om Shiva Guest House (☎ 276202; r Rs 100) A decent modern place on the main road through Jari, with simple rooms, hot water in the shared bathroom and a sunny rooftop terrace.

Just uphill from the Village Guest House are the smaller and simpler **Chandra Place Guesthouse** (☎ 276049; dm/r Rs 50/80) and **Rooftop Guesthouse** (☎ 275434; r Rs 100) offering a pleasant, villagey vibe.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Bhuntar to Manikaran stop in Jari (Rs 15, one hour). A one-way taxi between Bhuntar and Jari is around Rs 400.

Kasol

☎ 01902

Kasol is the main traveller HQ in the Parvati Valley. It's like Vashisht or Old Manali but more so, with dozens of reggae bars, traveller restaurants, internet cafés, body-piercing studios and cheap guesthouses. You'll either love it or loathe it. The nicest places to stay are in Old Kasol on the Bhuntar side of the bridge; most of the amenities are in New Kasol on the Manikaran side.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most guesthouses close down for winter from mid-October to mid-April.

Yerpa's Guest House (☎ 273763; r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 100/350; 🍽️) A large, hotel-style place on the main road, with neat rooms and a slightly more sophisticated mood.

Alpine Guest House (☎ 273710; r with geyser Rs 300-350) Probably the best choice in town, set amongst pine trees next to the river. Lawns and terraces provide space for swapping traveller stories and the rooms bask in the natural sounds of river and forest.

Panchali Holiday Home (☎ 273095; r from Rs 300) Situated back from the road, this modern hotel has presentable rooms with TVs, phones and geysers. Front rooms have nice balconies.

There are several more guesthouses in the maize fields above Kasol, reached by the track beside Panchali Holiday Home.

White House (☎ 273794; r Rs 60-80) The best of several similar village guesthouses, run by a friendly farmer. The cheerful wood-floored rooms have shared bathrooms and there's a tiny café.

Old and New Kasol have loads of traveller restaurants serving cakes and identical menus of traveller fare – Moon Dance Café, Sasi Place Restaurant and Evergreen Restaurant are good choices.

Little Italy (mains from Rs 60) Pizzas here are better than average and you can play pool while you wait for dinner.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Bhuntar to Manikaran pass through Kasol (Rs 23, 2½ hours). Fares at the taxi stand near the bridge in Kasol include Bhuntar (Rs 550), Kullu (Rs 700) and Manali (Rs 1500).

Manikaran

☎ 01902 / elev 1737m

Manikaran means 'Jewel from the Ear', and according to local legend, a giant snake stole earrings from Parvati while she was bathing, then snorted them out into the ground releasing the hot springs bubbling beneath. The water emerging from the ground is hot enough to boil rice and it has to be cooled with river water for bathing. Locals claim it can cure everything from rheumatism to bronchitis.

The town is centred on the huge **Sri Guru Nanak Ji Gurdwara**, lurking behind a veil of steam on the far side of the river. The shrine inside is revered by both Hindus and Sikhs, and the road through the village is chock-a-block with pilgrims and shops selling *prasad* (food offering used in religious ceremonies) and Guru Nanak souvenirs.

There are baths with separate facilities for men and women in the gurdwara and the village, with water diluted to a bearable temperature. The village also has several temples, including the stone hut-style **Raghunath Mandir**. Keep an eye out for bags of rice, boiling in the vents and fumaroles around the village.

Amar Money Changer (☎ 8am-8pm) in the bazaar can change major currencies.

SLEEPING

Most hotels are in the main village, reached by a suspension bridge from the bus stand. Unless otherwise mentioned, all rooms have private bathroom.

Padha Family Guest House (☎ 273728; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 75/150) Nearby, this recommended place has a range of simple rooms, a good restaurant and a square plunge pool full of spring water at ground level.

Fateh Paying Guesthouse (☎ 273767; r Rs 100) Signposted down an alley in the old part of the village, this big green house has nice rooms, nice owners and a nice vibe.

Moon Guesthouse (☎ 273002; r Rs 100-150) Over the road, Moon offers a bright, inviting bathing pool and carpeted rooms with good feng shui. The best rooms face the river.

Country Charm (☎ 273703; r from Rs 450) Below the bus stand, Country Charm promises 'fascinating river views' from its rooms. Rooms have polish and the upstairs balconies practically hang out over the river.

Close to the gurdwara are **Kailash Guest House** (☎ 273717; r Rs 50-100) and **Sharma Guest House** (☎ 273742; r Rs 50-100), simple places with naturally hot water in the showers.

EATING

There are several restaurants in the bazaar, but alcohol is banned on the gurdwara side of the river.

Shiva Food Corner (dishes from Rs 40) A simple place on the main bazaar, serving up Indian and Chinese snacks at double-quick speed.

Holy Palace Restaurant (dishes Rs 30-130) Travelers and pilgrims are lured here by the cosy surroundings, pop soundtrack, and a broad menu of Indian, Chinese and continental food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run regularly between Manikaran and Bhuntar (Rs 25, 2½ hours), continuing north

to Kullu (Rs 38, three hours). For Manali, change in Kullu or Bhuntar. Day trips by taxi can be arranged in Manali, Kullu or Bhuntar.

From Manikaran, taxis charge Rs 100 to Kasol, Rs 600 to Bhuntar, Rs 800 to Kullu and Rs 1300 to Manali.

Pin-Parvati Valley Trek

Best attempted from mid-September to mid-October, this strenuous but rewarding nine-day trek crosses the snow-bound Pin-Parvati Pass (5319m) to the Pin Valley in Spiti. There's no accommodation en route so you'll have to make arrangements through a trekking agency in Kasol or Manali (p310). The trail-head at Pulga is easily accessible by bus or taxi from Manikaran.

From Pulga, the route ascends for two days through forest and pasture to Thakur Khan. Two more days through arid mountain country takes you to High Camp, for an overnight stop before attempting the pass. A challenging tramp over snow and scree will take you into the Pin Valley. The final stage follows the river for two days through the Pin Valley National Park to the village of Mud, which has a daily bus connection to Kaza.

STAGES OF THE PIN-PARVATI VALLEY TREK

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)	Distance (km)
1	Pulga to Khir Ganga	4-5	10
2	Khir Ganga to Bhojtunda	7-8	18
3	Bhojtunda to Thakur Khan	5-6	16
4	Thakur Khan to Pandu Bridge	6-7	12
5	Pandu Bridge to Mantalai	6-7	15
6	Mantalai to High Camp	7-8	12
7	High Camp to Pin Valley via Pin-Parvati Pass	5-6	12
8	Pin Valley to Chinpatta Maidan	6-7	14
9	Chinpatta Maidan to Mud	6-7	15

KULLU

☎ 01902 / pop 18,300 / elev 1220m

Kullu is the local administrative centre and makes a pleasant change from the hippie holiday resorts elsewhere in the valley. Most of the year the town goes quietly about its business, but every October some 30,000 devotees descend on it for one of the largest and loudest **Dussehra** festivals in India (p283). Over 200 idols are paraded into town from surrounding temples, led by a huge rath (chariot) holding the statue of Lord Raghunath from the Raghunath Temple in Sultanpur. Simultaneously, a week-long carnival and market is held on the maidan (parade ground), with entertainment such as acrobats, musicians and a motorcycle Wall of Death. Predictably, accommodation is scarce.

Orientation & Information

Kullu is divided in two by the Sarvati River. The southern part of town has the taxi stand, tourist office and most restaurants and hotels. The bus station and Raghunath Temple are north of the river – take the short cut down through the bazaar below the Hotel Shobla International.

The **HPTDC tourist office** (☎ 224605/222349; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) is behind the taxi stand at Dhalpur. It's useful for booking deluxe HPTDC buses, which leave from outside.

The main post office is uphill from the taxi stand. There are internet cafés on the main road in Dhalpur charging Rs 40 per hour.

Close to the bus station on the main road, **State Bank of Patiala** (☎ 11am–2pm Mon–Fri) accepts travellers cheques only in US dollars, British pounds and euros. There's an international ATM at the State Bank of India on the maidan.

Sights & Activities

The pre-eminent temple in Kullu is the **Raghunath Temple** just north of the centre in

Sultanpur. There are several shrines devoted to Raghunath (Rama) and the revered idol is paraded through town during Dussehra. To get here, take either of the two tracks leading uphill opposite the bus station and look for the gateway near the imposing **Raja Rupi**, the former palace of the rajas of Kullu.

There are several important temples in the surrounding hills, accessible by taxi or local bus (ask for times at the bus stand). About 3km from Kullu, in the village of Bhekhli, the **Bhekhli Temple** (Jagannathi Devi Temple) offers an impressive vista over Kullu and the valley.

Reached via a 3km trek from Chansari, 11km southeast of Kullu on the east bank of the Beas, the hilltop temple of **Bijleshwar Mahadev** (Bijli Mahadev) is surmounted by a 20m wooden pole that attracts divine blessings in the form of lightning. The surge of power shatters the stone Shiva lingam inside the temple, which is then glued back together with butter.

From April to June or July, **rafting** trips are possible on the Beas River – see p310.

Tours

The **Kullu Taxi Operators' Union** (☎ 222332) offers sightseeing tours from the taxi stand, including trips to Bhekhli Temple (Rs 300) and Bijleshwar Mahadev (Rs 750), the Parvati Valley (Rs 900) and Prashar Lake (Rs 1800).

Sleeping

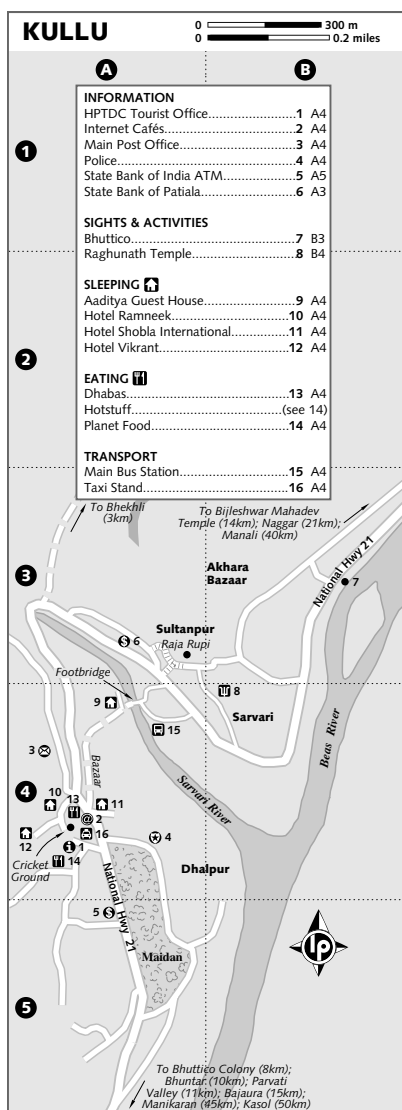
Hotel Vikrant (☎ 222756; r Rs 275–450) Down a small alley behind the cricket ground at the taxi stand, this place is cracking value. Rooms have TVs, hot showers and cosy warm blankets.

Aaditya Guest House (☎ 224263; d Rs 385–770) Just across the footbridge from the bus station, to the right of the bazaar, this smart,

WARNING – FATAL VACATIONS

Since the mid-1990s around two-dozen foreign tourists have 'disappeared' from the Kullu and Parvati Valleys – killed in accidents while trekking alone or murdered by local drug gangs. With this in mind, it makes sense to be very careful around the local drug scene. Manali *charas* (marijuana) has an international reputation, but dealing is a high-stakes game and there are at least a dozen bodies out there somewhere belonging to travellers who have fallen foul of the criminal underworld.

If you plan to head into the hills, especially around the Parvati Valley, we recommend joining an organised trek. As well as providing safety in numbers, guides can steer you around dangerous terrain and communicate with locals if you get into trouble. Avoid walking alone and always let your hotel know where you are going and when you plan to be back. Be extremely cautious about befriending sadhus and others wandering in the hills. Better safe than sorry is the motto to live by!



small hotel has a good selection of rooms with tiny TVs and balconies, some facing the river.

Hotel Ramneek (☎ 222558; hotel_ramneek@yahoo.co.in; r Rs 500-800) A large place overlooking the cricket ground, the Ramneek has roomy, musty rooms with TV and geyser, and there's a restaurant and net café.

Hotel Shobla International (☎ 222800; www.shoblainternational.com; r Rs 1320-2750; 🏠) A glitzy business-class hotel, catering mainly to roaming traders and Indian holidaymakers on jeep safaris.

Eating

There are numerous *dhabas* clustered around the taxi stand and bus station, plus a few proper restaurants behind the maidan.

Hotstuff (dishes Rs 30-200; 🕒 8am-10pm) A brightly lit fast-food place near the tourist office, with a good cheap menu of Indian, Chinese and international favourites.

Planet Food (dishes from Rs 75; 🕒 8am-10pm) A curious chalet-style building next door, this place has tasty Indian food (veg and nonveg) and a rather stark bar on the top floor.

Shopping

Kullu has several outlets selling the valley's famous shawls, or you can buy at the source at the huge Bhuttico handloom centre just south of Kullu – see the boxed text, opposite.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport for Kullu is 10km south at Bhuntar – see p299.

BUS

On the north side of the Sarvari River, the bus station has frequent services around the valley. Buses from Manali to destinations outside the Kullu Valley arrive in Kullu about 1½ hours after departure – see p314 for more details.

See the table, below, for useful buses around the valley.

BUSES FROM KULLU

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration	Departures
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Aut	24	1½hr	every 15min
Banjar	40	2hr	5 daily
Bhuntar Airport	9	30min	every 15min
Kandi	31	1½hr	3 daily
Manali	30	1½hr	every 15min
Mandi	55	2½hr	every 15min
Manikaran	38	3hr	hourly

SHOPPING FOR SHAWLS

The Kullu Valley is known as the Valley of Apples but it might be better described as the Valley of Shawls. From Bhuntar to Manali the highway is lined with scores of shops selling traditional Kullu shawls, woven on wooden handlooms using wool from sheep, pashmina goats or angora rabbits. This is one of the main industries in the Kullu Valley and it provides an income for thousands of local women, many of whom have organised themselves into shawl-weaving cooperatives. You can tour several of these around Kullu and buy shawls directly from the women who make them.

With so much competition, the sales pressure in touristy places can be fairly overbearing and you'll have to haggle hard for a bargain. For high quality without the hard sell, head to the nearest branch of **Bhuttico** (www.bhutticoshawls.com), the Bhutti Weavers' Cooperative. Established in 1944 by a group of village women, Bhuttico charges fixed prices and has outlets in most major towns. Expect to pay upwards of Rs 300 for lambswool, from Rs 1000 for angora, from Rs 3000 for pashmina and Rs 6500 for the exquisitely embroidered shawls worn by village women.

TAXI

The taxi stand on the maidan books tours and charter trips. Destinations include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)
Bhuntar	200
Jari	550
Kasol	700
Manali	700 (1100 via Naggar)
Mandi	900
Manikaran	800
Naggar	650

Getting Around

Autorickshaws provide services around Kullu; trips in town should cost around Rs 30.

NAGGAR

☎ 01902 / elev 1760m

Centred on imposing Naggar Castle, the slumbering village of Naggar was the capital of Kullu for 1500 years. The Russian painter Nikolai Roerich set up home here in the early 20th century, ensuring a steady stream of Russian tourists. The village lies on the back road between Kullu and Manali but everything of interest is around the castle, 2km uphill. You can check your email at several small net-cafés for Rs 60 per hour. The owners of the Poonam Mountain Lodge can arrange treks into the hills.

Sights & Activities

NAGGAR CASTLE

Built by the Sikh rajahs of Kullu in 1460, this dramatic **fort** (foreigner Rs 15; ☎ 7am-10pm) is a fine example of the alternating stone and timber

style of Himachali architecture. It was converted into a hotel in 1978 when the last raja fell on hard times. There's a tiny one-room **museum** downstairs and the **Jagtipath Temple** in the courtyard houses a slab of stone said to have been carried here by wild bees. The best way to experience the castle is to stay here – see p306.

ROERICH GALLERY

The main road through the village continues for 2km to the **Roerich Gallery** (☎ 248290; www.roerichtrust.org; admission Rs 30, camera Rs 25; ☎ 10am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun, till 5pm Nov-Mar), the former home of the eccentric Russian painter Nikolai Roerich, who died in Naggar in 1947. The lower floors display some of Roerich's surreally colourful paintings of Kullu, Spiti and Lahaul, while the upper floors preserve the artist's private rooms. Roerich was also the brains behind the Roerich Pact, a treaty signed by more than 60 countries guaranteeing the preservation of cultural monuments around the world.

A five-minute walk uphill from the gallery is the **Urusvati Himalayan Folk & Art Museum** (admission with the same ticket), which houses the painter's personal collection of ethnological artefacts and photos of the Roerich family. There's a painting school here for children and regularly changing exhibitions of modern art.

TEMPLES

Heading down the track beside the castle, you'll pass the handsome 11th-century **Vishnu Mandir**, covered in ornate carvings. Downhill past the tiny post office is the **Gauri Shankar Temple**, dedicated to Shiva and surrounded by smaller temples devoted to Vishnu Narayan.

Just below the Roerich Gallery is the pagoda-like **Tripura Sundari Devi Temple**, surrounded by carved wooden outbuildings. High up on the ridge above Naggar, the **Murliidhar Krishna Temple** is reached by a woodland path beyond the Roerich Gallery.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotels are clustered around the castle or there's a village-style guesthouse downhill in the small hamlet of Chanalti Naggar.

Chanderlok Guesthouse (☎ 248213; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/250) About five minutes' downhill on the path below the castle is this peaceful village guesthouse with neat, sun-filled rooms and a garden full of old Hindu shrines.

Poonam Mountain Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 248248; ravinder7@sancharnet.in; r from Rs 250) Just below the castle, this place feels a bit like a ski chalet. Rooms are wood-panelled and warm, and there's a communal lounge with a wood-burning stove. The owners organise treks, tours and fishing trips.

Hotel Ragini (☎ 248185; raginihotel@hotmail.com; r Rs 600-1000; ☎) The best of the hotels around the castle, Ragini has lovely bright rooms with parquet floors and balconies and a garden used by tour groups for yoga and other holistic activities. The rooftop restaurant serves great food.

Nearby are the similar but less exciting **Purmina Guesthouse & Restaurant** (☎ 248219; r Rs 500-600) and the **Sheetal Hotel** (☎ 248250; r Rs 400-1000), which benefits from a cosy restaurant and roof terrace.

Alliance Guest House (☎ 247763; gilloualliance@yahoo.com; r Rs 150-400) On the road up to the Roerich Gallery you'll find this cheerfully chilled-out, French-run guesthouse. Bright colours add warmth to the rooms and you can eat on the veranda. Cheaper rooms share facilities.

HPTDC Hotel Naggar Castle (☎ 248316; dm Rs 75, d with shared bathroom Rs 300, with private bathroom Rs 1000-2500) Obviously, the best place to stay is the castle. Wood and stone corridors open onto a wide variety of rooms, from modest dormitories to palatial suites decked out in colonial finery. The views are breathtaking, but the restaurant is only mediocre.

All the hotels have restaurants; Kailash Restaurant atop the Hotel Ragini is probably the best.

La Purezza (dishes from Rs 50; ☎ 11am-10pm, closed winter) On the road to the Roerich Gallery, this garden café serves decent pizzas and pastas.

Getting There & Away

Local buses run regularly between Manali and Naggar from 6am to 6pm (Rs 15, one hour). A return taxi from Manali to Naggar costs Rs 550 and from Kullu Rs 650, or you can stop off on the way to Manali for Rs 1100.

MANALI

☎ 01902 / pop 4400 / elev 2050m

The surrounding mountain scenery lures tourists to Manali year-round. Domestic tourists come here for honeymoons and mountain views, while foreigners come for adventure sports or, more commonly, to hang out in the hippie villages around the main town. Until the 1960s there was nothing here but a few old stone houses and temples, but modern Manali is crammed with concrete hotels and the town is in severe need of some town planning – stay in the villages of Vashisht or Old Manali for a more peaceful mood.

This is also the main jumping-off point for Ladakh, Spiti and Lahaul, with daily buses to Leh, Keylong and Kaza from approximately June to October. Many tourists are also lured here by the famous Manali *charas* but be warned – local police are more than happy to arrest people for possession or sting them for bribes (see p1140).

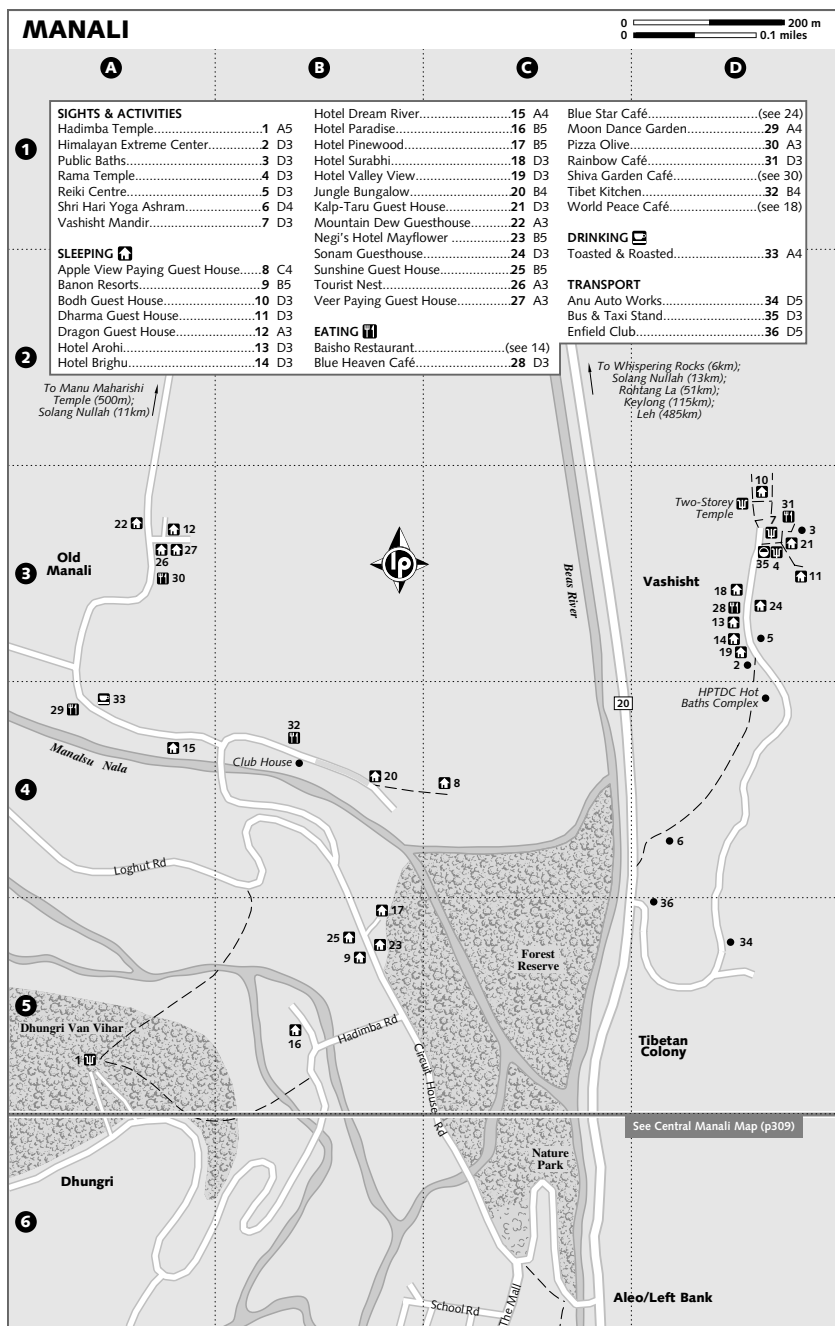
According to legend, Manu, the Hindu equivalent of Noah, alighted his boat here to re-create human life after floods destroyed the world. Indeed, from April to June and September to late October it can feel as if all of humanity has returned to Manali. There's another surge in visitors for Christmas and New Year. Prices for rooms can more than triple at these times. Old Manali and Vashisht close for winter from around October to May.

Orientation

Manali is based around one street, the Mall, a continuation of the highway that runs into town. The bus and taxi stands are on the Mall and most hotels and restaurants are on the alleys branching west. Two roads run north from Manali along the Beas River – one to Old Manali on the west bank and one to Vashisht and the Rohtang La on the east bank.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Bookworm (Map p309; 252920; ☎ 10am-6pm) For novels, picture books and Nest & Wings guides. There's a branch in the NAC Market.



EMERGENCY**Manali Civil Hospital** (☎ 253385) Just south of town.**Police assistance booth** (Map p309; ☎ 252326)**INTERNET ACCESS**

Most internet cafés will burn photo CDs for around Rs 90. The following places have fast connections.

Café Digital (Map p309; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 8am-10pm)**Email Café** (Map p309; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 10am-8pm)**MONEY**

Banks in Manali no longer offer foreign exchange, but the State Bank of India and Punjab National Bank have ATMs that accept some – but not all! – foreign cards. If you are heading north to Ladakh, Lahaul or Spiti, change some extra money here.

Bank of Punjab Forex (Map p309; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm)

Changes cash and cheques.

POST & FAX**BSNL Customer Service Centre** (Map p309; fax 252404;

☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Can send and receive faxes.

Manali sub-post office (Map p309; Model Town;

☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) For poste restante and parcels.

TOURIST INFORMATION

HPTDC booking office (Map p309; ☎ 252116; The Mall; ☎ 7am-8pm, 9am-5pm in winter) Can book seats on HPTDC buses and rooms in HPTDC hotels.

Tourist office (Map p309; ☎ 252175; The Mall;

☎ 8am-9pm, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat in winter) Helpful for brochures and local information. Book train tickets at the railway booking window (☎ 521925; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Mon-Sat).

Dangers & Annoyances

Over the last decade over 160 foreigners have been arrested for drug-related offences in Manali and drugs are behind many of the disappearances and murders of foreigners in the Kullu Valley. See the boxed text, p303.

Sights & Activities**HADIMBA TEMPLE**

Also known as the Dhungri Temple, this ancient wood and stone mandir (Map p307) was erected in 1553. Pilgrims come here from across India to honour Hadimba, the wife of Bhima from the Mahabharata. The walls of the temple are covered in woodcarvings of dancers, and horns of bulls and ibex adorn the walls. Grisly animal sacrifices are carried out in May for the three-day **Dhungri**

Mela (p283). Photo-wallahs loiter around the temple offering souvenir photos in traditional costume with your arm around a yak or angora rabbit.

Ghatotkach, the son of Hadimba and Bhima, is worshipped in the form of a **sacred tree** near the temple. Villagers make offerings of knives, goat horns, and tin effigies of animals, people and houses.

It's a 20-minute walk from Manali or you can take an autorickshaw (Rs 30).

MANALI MUSEUM

Opposite the Hadimba Temple, the interesting **Museum of Himachal Culture & Folk Art** (Map p309; ☎ 253846; entry Rs 10; ☎ 8am-8pm) has religious relics, household objects, instruments, weapons, architectural woodcarvings and scale models of Himachal temples.

BUDDHIST MONASTERIES

Set back from the main road in the south of Manali, the **Himalayan Nyinmapa Buddhist Temple** (Map p309; ☎ 6am-6pm) contains a two-storey statue of Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha.

Further along the same lane is the more traditional **Gelukpa Cultural Society Gompa** (Map p309; ☎ 6am-6pm), with an atmospheric prayer room crammed with statues of bodhisattvas, revered lamas and Buddhist deities. There's also a small workshop producing Tibetan carpets.

NATURE PARK

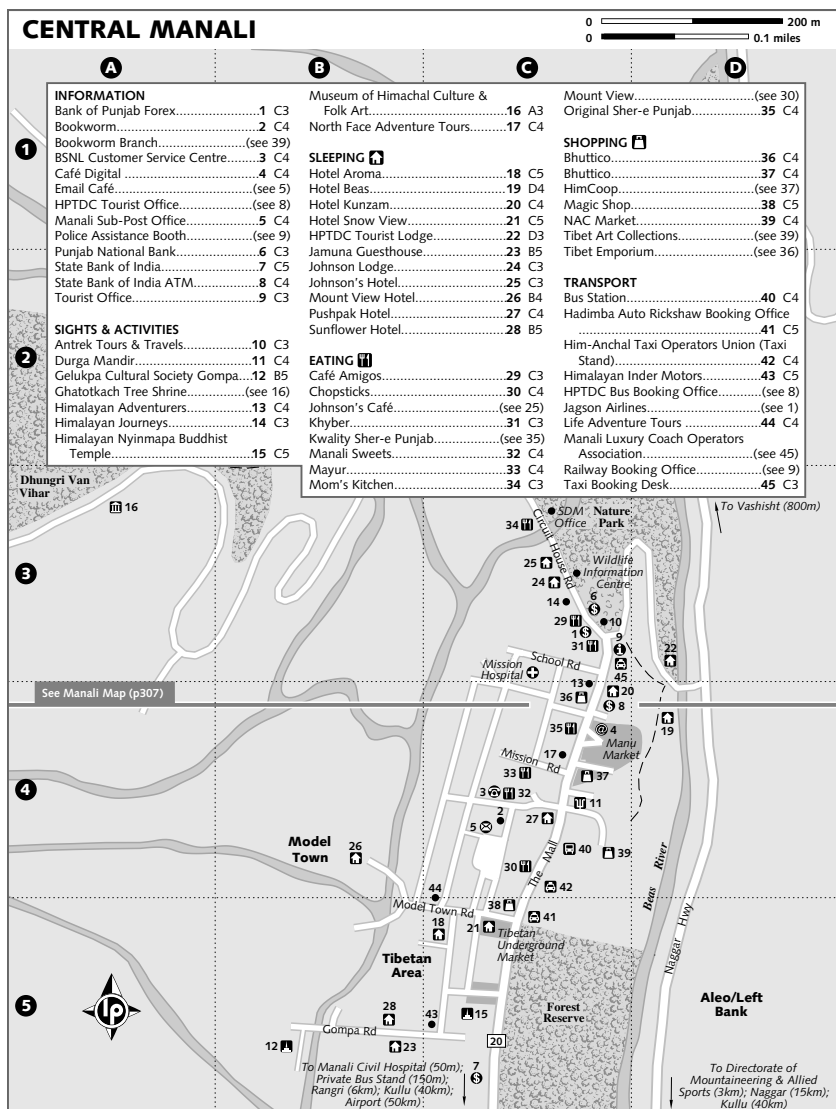
A large grove of deodars (cedars) on the banks of the Beas has been set aside as a **nature reserve** (entry Rs 5; ☎ 9am-7pm), with a small aviary of Himalayan birds, including the monal pheasant, Himachal's state bird.

OLD MANALI

About 2.5km above the Mall on the far side of the Manalsu Nala, Old Manali still has some of the feel of an Indian mountain village. There are some beautiful old houses and the wood and stone **Manu Maharishi Temple** is built on the site where Manu is said to have meditated after landing the boat that saved humanity. A trail to Solang Nullah runs north from here through the village of Goshal.

DIRECTORATE OF MOUNTAINEERING & ALLIED SPORTS

This **adventure sports centre** (☎ 250337/253789; www.dmas.gov.in; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat each month) has its headquarters at Aleo, about 3km



south of Manali on the east bank of the Beas. A huge range of activities can be arranged, from rafting and treks to skiing and mountaineering courses – see the website for details.

Tours

In season, the HPTDC offers day tours by bus to Naggar (Rs 170), Rohtang La (Rs 220)

and Manikaran and the Parvati Valley (Rs 250), but only if there are enough people. Private travel agencies offer similar bus tours.

The **Him-Anchal Taxi Operators Union** (Map p309; ☎ 252120; The Mall) has fixed-price tours, including Rohtang La (Rs 1200), Solang Nullah (Rs 500) and Naggar (Rs 550).

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN MANALI

To get the most out of Manali, get up into the mountains. All sorts of adventure activities can be arranged in Manali through the tour operators listed on below; also see p92.

Ballooning

Tethered hot-air balloons offer impressive views of the valley, but don't quite achieve the full sense of weightless freedom. Travel agents arrange rides for Rs 500 per person.

Fishing

The rivers of the Kullu and Parvati Valleys are rich in trout and mahseer. The season runs from March to June and July to November and rods and tackle can be hired from agencies in Manali; daily fishing licences from HPTDC cost Rs 100. Top spots include the upper tributaries of the Beas and the Parvati Rivers at Kasol.

Jeep Safaris

Jeep safaris can be arranged to Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti for around Rs 2000 per day, visiting monasteries, mountain passes and glacial lakes, with accommodation in tents or village guest-houses.

Mountain Biking

The steep slopes around Manali offer some prime country for mountain biking. Agencies offer bike hire for Rs 100/500 per hour/day, or you can organise tours to Ladakh, Spiti and Lahaul. One audacious day trip is the descent from the Rohtang La – buses and taxis can transport you and your bike to the pass, then you can freewheel down. On all high-altitude routes, take time to acclimatise.

Mountaineering

Mountaineering training can be arranged through the **Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports** (☎ 250337; www.dmas.gov.in). Basic 26-day mountaineering courses run on fixed dates from May to October for Rs 3600/US\$365 (Indian/foreigner), including food, accommodation, guides and training (minimum age 17 years). The courses cover essential mountain techniques and a series of local ascents. Local agencies can arrange expeditions to Hanuman Tibba (5930m) and Deo Tibba (6001m). See p95 for more on mountaineering in India.

Paragliding

Paragliding at Manali was suspended for several years following a series of accidents, but the industry seems to have cleaned up its act. Summertime tandem flights at Solang Nullah start from Rs 1200 for 15 minutes, but always check your gear.

ADVENTURE TOUR OPERATORS

The following places are reliable and well established and can arrange treks, tours and adventure activities – see the boxed text, above for popular options.

Antrek Tours & Travel (Map p309; ☎ 252292; www.antrektours.com; 1 Rambagh, The Mall)

Himalayan Adventurers (Map p309; ☎ 253050; www.himalayanadventurersindia.com; The Mall)

Himalayan Extreme Center (Map p307; ☎ 9816174164; www.himalayan-extreme-center.com; Vashisht)

Himalayan Journeys (Map p309; ☎ 252365; www.himalayanjourneysindia.com; The Mall) Opposite Nehru Park.

North Face Adventure Tours (Map p309; ☎ 254041; www.northfaceindia.com; The Mall)

Sleeping

The peak seasons for tourism are April to June, September to November, and Christmas. At all these times, prices at budget and midrange hotels can increase by more than double. At other times, ask about discounts.

Rafting

White-water rafting trips on the Beas River can be arranged at the small village of Pirdi, 3km downriver from Kullu. There is 14km of Grade II and III white water between Pirdi and the take-out point at Jhiri; trips costs Rs 450 to Rs 650 depending on the number of passengers. Book through travel agents or directly at Pirdi.

Rock Climbing

The cliffs at Solang, Aleo and Vashisht have a good range of bolted and traditional routes ranging from French 6a to 6c (British 5a to 6a). Himalayan Extreme Center (opposite) in Vashisht offers day trips for Rs 800 per day including all equipment. Independent climbers should bring a selection of slings, nuts and cams (particularly in the smaller sizes) and a 30m or 60m rope.

Skiing & Snowboarding

From January to March, the village of Solang Nullah transforms into Himachal's main ski and snowboarding resort – see p317 for details. Year-round skiing expeditions can be arranged on virgin powder (experienced skiers only) through Himalayan Extreme Center (opposite) for around Rs 2000 per day (trips last three to five days). Costly heli-skiing trips to high-altitude powder can be arranged through **Himachal Helicopter Skiing** (www.himachal.com).

Walking & Trekking

Manali is a popular starting point for organised mountain treks. Most agencies offer multiday treks for around US\$60 per day, all inclusive. Popular options include Beas Kund (three days), the Pin Parvati Trek from the Parvati Valley to Spiti (eight days) and the Hamta Pass (4270m) to Lahaul (five days). For more information on trekking, see p282.

Plenty of shorter walks are possible from Manali, though the usual rules on safe trekking apply – ie tell someone where you are going and never walk alone. The 12km hike up the western side of the Beas River to Solang Nullah is a pleasing alternative to the bus, or you can trek 6km to the snowline above Lama Dugh meadow along the Manalsu Nala stream.

Zorbing

During summer, the ski slope at Solang Nullah is a popular place for zorbing – basically, rolling downhill inside a giant inflatable ball (see the boxed text, p335). You can make arrangements in Manali or in Solang Nullah – expect to pay Rs 200 for about 20 minutes.

Other Activities

Other activities available in the area include horse riding (Rs 900 per day), canyoning (Rs 800 per day) and sightseeing helicopter flights (Rs 1500 per person for 10 minutes).

Heating is rare in Manali so be prepared to dive under a blanket to stay warm.

BUDGET

Central Manali has plenty of budget places; more laid-back backpacker spots are in the villages of Old Manali and Vashisht (see p316).

Manali

HPTDC Tourist Lodge (Map p309; ☎ 253656; dm Rs 75, d Rs 300) Rooms here are nothing to write home

about, but the riverside location is pleasant enough and the dorms are a bargain.

Jamuna Guesthouse (Map p309; ☎ 252506; r Rs 150-300) Near the Nyinmapa gumpa, this neat, wood-balconied place has a laid-back mood and a peaceful rear terrace and garden. The price makes up for the eccentric interior design.

Mount View Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 252465; r from Rs 250) A short walk from the Mall on the edge of Model Town, this place has questionable décor but warm carpets underfoot.

Facilities are good for the price, but it's debatable whether there is a mountain view.

Pushpak Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 253656; r Rs 250-300) If you don't mind a bit of noise and bustle, this reliable cheapie is squeezed into an alley opposite the bus station. Rooms at the back are quieter and larger.

Sunflower Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 252419; www.paulbaushotel.com; d from Rs 300) Handy for the Tibetan monasteries, this is a quaint choice. Old but comfy rooms come with TVs, geysers, and clean sheets and blankets.

Hotel Aroma (Map p309; ☎ 253159; r Rs 350-550) Huge shared balconies where you can sit out in the evening are the main attraction at this big lime-green hotel just north of the Gelukpa gumpa. Rooms are chintzy, but fairly priced.

Old Manali

Uphill from Manali on the far side of the Manaslu Nala stream, Old Manali is a well-established traveller centre. Most hotels and restaurants close down for winter in late October.

Jungle Bungalow (Map p307; ☎ 252278; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 100/150) Firmly targeting the backpacker market, this faded but inexpensive guesthouse has sparsely furnished rooms and big communal balconies. It's on the path above the Club House.

Veer Paying Guest House (Map p307; ☎ 252710; veer-guesthouse@rediffmail.com; r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 100/200) There's a tangible buzz about this cheap and friendly place downhill from the temple. There's a great garden, a cosy café, a laundry and a travel agency.

Mountain Dew Guesthouse (Map p307; ☎ 9816446366; r Rs 150) A solid-looking three-storey house with nice balconies and a garden full of fruit trees, vines and roses. Get a room up top for the best views.

Apple View Paying Guest House (Map p307; ☎ 253899; r with shared bathroom Rs 150) A delightful village guesthouse in the peaceful orchards above the Club House, run by a friendly family who take pride in their neat and tidy rooms. Take the path uphill above the Club House.

Tourist Nest (Map p307; ☎ 252383; kdthakur@yahoo.com; r Rs 200-250) Near the Dragon Guest House, this place has the classic Himachal 'wood 'n' stone' look. There's a neat garden and rooms have private balconies and signs of loving care.

Hotel Dream River (Map p307; ☎ 253501; r Rs 300-450) Soothed by the sound of the river, this place has worn but spacious rooms, some

with an extra single bed. The location is handy for the main cluster of restaurants in Old Manali.

MIDRANGE

Dragon Guest House (Map p307; ☎ 252290; www.dragontreks.com; r Rs 250-600; ☎ ☎) A backpackers place on the way to upmarket. Snug rooms are better than most in Old Manali with views over orchards and windows on two sides. There's a restaurant, an internet café, and a reliable travel agency for treks and tours.

Hotel Paradise (Map p307; ☎ 252265; r from Rs 300-600; ☎ ☎) An older place that benefits from a quiet location on the way to the Hadimba Temple. Although worn, rooms are comfortable and there are mountain views in two directions.

our pick **Sunshine Guest House** (Map p307; ☎ 25232; r Rs 350, plus Rs 250 for firewood) A real delight. This rambling Raj-era property has huge rooms with fireplaces and oodles of colonial charm, and balconies offer splendid views of gardens, orchards and mountains.

Hotel Beas (Map p309; ☎ 252832; r Rs 400-900; ☎ ☎) A massive HPTDC-run hotel on the riverbank below the main town. Rooms are comfortable and clean, though they won't win any prizes for character. It's popular with coach tours so book in advance in season.

Hotel Pinewood (Map p307; ☎ 250118; s/d Rs 750/990) Set in immaculate lawns with hammocks under the trees, this handsome wood and stone house has large rooms with fireplaces and a satisfyingly colonial mood.

Hotel Snow View (Map p309; ☎ 252684; www.snowviewhotelmanali.com; r Rs 1100-1800; ☎ ☎) A calm, sophisticated midrange place in the centre of Manali, offering comfortable, carpeted rooms you can really spread out in, with all the mod cons you would expect for the price.

Hotel Kunzam (Map p309; ☎ 253197; r from Rs 1400; ☎ ☎) A huge, well-run HPTDC property in the middle of town, with spacious and well-styled rooms, and an inviting restaurant and bar. Ask for one of the quieter rooms at the back.

TOP END

The best options are all found along Circuit House Rd heading uphill to Old Manali.

Negi's Hotel Mayflower (Map p307; ☎ 252104; r from Rs 1800, ste Rs 2000; ☎ ☎) A stately wooden lodge, with a cascade of wooden balconies. The Mayflower promises 'Exotic Wooden Beauty' and does a great job of delivering it, with large

wood-panelled rooms and lovely lawns and gardens.

Johnson's Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 253764; johnsonshotel@gmail.com; d Rs 1800-4500; 🏠) One of several places named in honour of the Raj-era landowner Jimmy Johnson, this is a classy wood and stone place, with large, lovely gardens, cossetting wood-floored rooms and an excellent restaurant.

Johnson Lodge (Map p309; ☎ 251523; www.johnsonlodge.com; d Rs 2650; 🏠) Built in wood and timber in the traditional Himachal style, this place has a pop at designer chic in its large, bright rooms.

Banon Resorts (Map p307; ☎ 253026; www.banonresortsmanali.com; r from Rs 3100, cottages from Rs 7900; 🏠) The Banon family opened the first guesthouse in Manali and their hotel is huge and luxurious. Rooms are a bit too large to feel cosy, but the cottages are the last word in peace and privacy.

Eating

There are restaurants and cafés all over Manali offering the usual range of domestic and international fare. The follow places are open between 8am and 10pm daily, unless otherwise stated.

MANALI

Manali Sweets (Map p309; snacks from Rs 8; ☎ from 7am) Manali's favourite *dhaba*, serving Indian sweets, hot chai, samosas and hot veg snacks from early each morning to late at night.

Café Amigos (Map p309; Circuit House Rd; dishes Rs 20-120) An old-fashioned traveller café with cakes, pizzas, Tex-Mex, Tibetan, Chinese and hot apple crumble, plus decent coffee.

our pick **Chopsticks** (Map p309; The Mall; dishes Rs 20-120) Facing the bus station, this is the most popular traveller choice in Manali town, with Buddhist chanting on the stereo and good Tibetan and Chinese food, cold beers, and fruit wines and tea in metal teapots. Come early to nab a table in the evening.

Mount View (Map p309; The Mall; dishes Rs 30-160) Next door to Chopsticks, the Mount View is very similar.

Mayur (Map p309; Mission Rd; dishes Rs 30-150) A popular Indian restaurant catering to a mixture of locals and holidaymakers – always a good sign. The menu runs from veg curries to continental sizzlers.

Mom's Kitchen (Map p309; Circuit House Rd; dishes Rs 40-100) The name says it all – this place serves

wholesome Indian and continental food with the taste of home.

Kwality Sher-e-Punjab (Map p309; The Mall; dishes Rs 20-70) A bright, fast food-style cafeteria serving pure-veg Punjabi and South Indian food.

Original Sher-e-Punjab (Map p309; The Mall; dishes from Rs 30) A few doors down from its Kwality relative, this place fills the gap with meaty dishes from the Punjab. It's a bit less fast foody and everything is freshly made.

Khyber (Map p307; dishes Rs 100-300; ☎ 11am-11pm) Upstairs by the main junction, this upmarket bar and restaurant feels a bit like an Indian version of TGI Friday. It serves good meaty mains and the drinks menu runs to cold beers, local cider and Himachal fruit wines.

Johnson's Café (Map p309; Circuit House Rd; dishes Rs 140-300) The restaurant at Johnson's Hotel serves excellent Indian and modern European cuisine, including roast lamb with mint sauce and Himachal trout with almonds. There's an outdoor terrace for warm summer evenings.

OLD MANALI

There are numerous garden restaurants serving all the usual suspects – pizzas, pitta-bread wraps, *momos*, banana pancakes, apple pie – from early morning to late evening. All these places close by the start of November.

Pizza Olive (Map p307; mains Rs 60-150) A surprisingly modern place for Old Manali, this pleasingly international restaurant serves convincingly done pizzas and pastas and you can eat indoors or out in the garden.

Tibet Kitchen (Map p307; dishes Rs 40-90; ☎ 10.30am-10pm) On the road to the Club House, this is a decent Tibetan and Chinese place with the feel of a real restaurant.

Popular backpacker restaurants include Shiva Garden Café (Map p307) and Moon Dance Garden (Map p307), both serving decent traveller fare for Rs 30 to Rs 100.

Drinking

Toasted & Roasted (Map p307; drinks & snacks from Rs 20; ☎ from 8am) A log cabin-style coffeeshop in Old Manali, serving the best coffee in town. DVD movies are shown three times a day.

Several places in town serve half-decent coffee and English-style tea, including Café Amigos, Chopsticks and Johnson's Café.

Restaurants form the centre of nightlife in Manali and most serve alcohol. The most atmospheric places for an evening beer are Chopsticks and Khyber.

Shopping

Manali is crammed with souvenir shops selling souvenirs from Himachal, Tibet and Ladakh – most are open from 10am to 7pm. **Tibet Art Collections** (Map p309; ☎ 252974; NAC Market) probably has the best choice. Across the road, **Tibet Emporium** (Map p309; ☎ 252431; The Mall) has Tibetan knick-knacks and funky T-shirts with Tibetan messages.

Shawls are sold all over Manali. A good place to start is the cooperative **Bhuttico** (Map p309; ☎ 260079; The Mall), which charges fair, fixed prices – see the boxed text, p305. Several other cooperatives have shops around the Mall.

Street vendors sell fake brand-name sunglasses as well as winter clothing, nuts and dried apples, raisins and apricots. **HimCoop** (Map p309; The Mall) sells a wide range of locally produced organic juices, jams, dried fruit and pickles. In the basement of the Modern City Heart Complex, the **Magic Shop** (Map p309; The Mall) sells all sorts of magic tricks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Manali's closest airport is 50km south at Bhuntar – see p299. You can book seats at local travel agents or **Jagson Airlines** (Map p309; ☎ 252843; www.jagsonairlines.com; The Mall).

BUS

The bus station has a **booth** (Map p309; ☎ 252323; ☽ 5am-7pm) for advance bookings.

Luxury buses are run by the **HPTDC** (Map p309; ☎ 252116; The Mall) and the **Manali Luxury Coach Owners Association** (Map p309; ☎ 253816; The Mall). Tickets can be bought from their offices or the travel agents thronging the Mall.

Kullu & Parvati Valleys

Buses go to Kullu every 30 minutes (Rs 30, 1½ hours), continuing to Mandi (Rs 87, four hours) via the airport at Bhuntar (Rs 40, two hours). Regular local services run to Naggar (Rs 15, one hour) from 6am to 6pm. For the Parvati Valley change at Bhuntar.

Leh

From 15 July to 15 September, buses make the bone-shaking ascent to Leh in two exhausting but spectacular days, with a stopover en route at Keylong or Sarchu. Bring a shawl or warm clothing and be alert to the symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS; see p1188).

FRUITS OF HIMACHAL

Himachal's bounteous orchards produce huge quantities of apples, pears, plums and apricots, but not all the fruit makes it to market on time. The rest is fermented locally and made into alcoholic cider and perry (pear cider) and a wide range of strong fruit wines, from apple to plum. Take a break from the fizzy chemical lager and order a bottle next time you eat out in Manali.

In season, HPTDC runs a daily bus (Rs 1600 with tented accommodation and food in Keylong) to Leh at 11am. Ordinary government buses (Rs 525) also leave at 11am, but you arrange your own accommodation in Keylong. Private buses run till around mid-October, charging around Rs 1000, stopping at Keylong or Sarchu.

For details about the route, see p338.

Lahaul & Spiti

The Rohtang La to Keylong in Lahaul is normally open from June to late October and the Kunzum La to Kaza in Spiti is open from July to mid-October (exact dates depend on snow conditions).

In season, there are regular buses to Keylong between 4am and 1pm (Rs 87, six hours). For Spiti, buses leave for Kaza (Rs 152, 10 hours) at 5.30am and 6am; the 5.30am service continues to Tabo (Rs 187, 15 hours). The daily bus to Udaipur (Rs 121, nine hours) leaves between 4am and 5am.

PUBLIC BUSES FROM MANALI

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Amritsar	295	15	2pm & 3.30pm
Chamba	315	16	7pm (change at Banikhet for Dalhousie)
Dehra Dun	345	16	6.30pm
Dharamsala	205	10	8am, 6pm & 7pm
Haridwar	350	15	10am & 12.40pm
Jaipur	500	20	2.20pm
Jammu	295	12	2.45pm & 4pm
Shimla	200/300 (ord/dlx)	10	5 daily

Delhi & Chandigarh

The most comfortable options for Delhi are the daily HPTDC buses to the Himachal Tourism office on Janpath in Delhi. The deluxe bus leaves at 5pm (Rs 615, 12 hours), the AC bus leaves at 4.30pm (Rs 815) and the special AC sleeper service leaves at 5.30pm (Rs 1100). All buses run via Chandigarh (Rs 385, 10 hours). Book at the HPTDC booking office.

Private travel agencies run similar deluxe services to Paharganj, but we've heard reports of people booking deluxe buses and getting ordinary buses at the Delhi end.

Government buses run regularly from the bus stand till mid-afternoon; the fare is Rs 360/625/885 (ordinary/deluxe/AC). To Chandigarh, the fare is Rs 225/375 (ordinary/deluxe).

Other Destinations

In season, HPTDC and private companies run buses to Shimla (Rs 350 to Rs 415), Jammu (Rs 350) and Dharamsala/McLeod Ganj (Rs 400).

For details of public buses see the table, opposite.

TAXI

The **Him-Anchal Taxi Operators Union** (Map p309; ☎ 252120; The Mall) has share jeeps to Leh (Rs 1000 to Rs 1500, 14 hours) at 2am from July to mid-October; book a day in advance. Seats cost the same if you disembark at Keylong. Sightseeing trips to the Rohtang La cost around Rs 1200.

Other one-way fares include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)
Bhuntar airport	900
Dharamsala	3500
Kaza	5500
Keylong	4000
Kullu	600 (900 via Naggar)
Leh	9000
Manikaran	1300
Naggar	300
Solang Nullah	300

Getting Around

AUTORICKSHAW

Autos run to Old Manali and Vashisht for around Rs 50. If you can't find an auto in the street, head to the **Hadimba Auto Rickshaw Booking Office** (Map p309; ☎ 253366; The Mall).

MOTORCYCLE

Many people tackle the mountain passes to Ladakh or Spiti on bought or rented bikes. The **Enfield Club** (Map p307; ☎ 251094), by the turn-off to Vashisht, does Enfield repairs and sells second-hand machines.

Lots of places rent out motorbikes, but make sure the price includes third-party insurance. The going rate per day is Rs 450 for a 500cc Enfield and Rs 300 to Rs 350 for a 100cc to 150cc Yamaha, Honda or Bajaj. Reliable rental places:

Anu Auto Works (Map p307; ☎ 9816163378;

Vashisht Rd)

Himalayan Inder Motors (Map p309; ☎ 9816113973;

Gompa Rd)

Life Adventure Tours (Map p309; ☎ 253825;

Diamond Hotel, Model Town Rd)

AROUND MANALI

Hamta Pass Trek

Easily accessible from Manali, this four- or five-day trek crosses the 4270m Hamta Pass over the Pir Panjal. The trailhead is the village of Prini, accessible by bus on the Manali-Naggar road, but it's camping all the way so organised treks are the way to go – see p310 for recommendations.

From Prini, the route climbs through pine forests to Sethan, then open meadows to Chikha. A waterfall campsite gives time to acclimatise before reaching the foot of the pass at Juara. The climb to the pass is steep and tiring but there are sublime snow-peak views from the top. On the descent, you can possibly push on to Chatru or break the journey with a riverside camp at Shiagouru. From Chatru, road transport runs north to Ladakh, east to Spiti and south to Manali.

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)	Distance (km)
1	Prini to Sethan/ Pandu Ropa	5-6	8
2	Sethan/Pandu Ropa to Juara	4-5	10
3	Juara to Shiagouru via Hamta Pass	7-8	10
4	Shiagouru to Chatru	3-4	8

Vashisht

☎ 01902

About 3km north of Manali on the slopes east of the Beas, Vashisht (Map p307) is the

best and brightest of the traveller centres in the Kullu Valley. Indian tourists come here to bathe in the hot springs and tour the temples, while foreign tourists come here for the cheap accommodation and *charas*. Be aware of the risks – see p1140. Most guesthouses close down for the winter from late October.

There are some interesting old wood and stone houses with ornate carving beyond the public baths, and a number of typically Himachali temples in the middle of the village. Travel agencies, moneychangers, laundry services and German bakeries abound and several net cafés offer international calls, and internet access costs Rs 50 per hour.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Dedicated to the sage Vashisht, the ancient stone **Vashisht Mandir** has **public baths** (admission free; ☎ 5am–9pm) with separate areas for men and women, or there are open-air baths just uphill. Nearby are similar temples to Shiva and Rama, and there's a second Vashisht mandir at the back of the village, built in the two-storey Kinnauri style.

Travel agents can arrange treks and other adventure activities around the valley (see p310). **Himalayan Extreme Center** (☎ 9816174164; www.himalayan-extreme-center.com) offers rock climbing at Vashisht, Solang and Aleo (Rs 800 per day, with all equipment) and three- to five-day high-altitude skiing and snowboarding tours (from Rs 2000 per day).

All sorts of holistic activities are available in Vashisht, but there are also plenty of quack practitioners. Along the walking track down to the Beas, the orange-roofed **Shri Hari Yoga Ashram** (☎ 250493; ☎ closed winter) offers daily yoga classes for beginners at 10am and advanced classes at 8am and 4.30pm (Rs 100 to Rs 150). We've heard good things about the massage and Reiki sessions at the **Reiki Centre** (☎ 250195; www.reiki-world.com) on the main road.

SLEEPING

Most places close from October to April. The prices listed below can double in the peak season (April to June and September to October).

Sonam Guest House (☎ 251783; s with shared bathroom Rs 70, d Rs 200) This place has a certain crooked wooden charm, and the walls are decorated with paintings by the owner. Shoes should be left outside the simple but clean rooms. Every evening, interesting world movies are shown in the lounge.

Kalp-Taru Guest House (☎ 253433; r Rs 100–150) A large old-fashioned village house, attracting a hippie crowd. Upstairs rooms have views over the village and hot water comes straight from the springs.

Hotel Valley View (☎ 9218944531; r Rs 100–150) A decent cheapie that takes advantage of the valley views. Rooms have an odd mix of furniture but they're good value and some have fine views.

Bodh Guest House (☎ 254165; r Rs 120–150) A clean and tidy three-storey place near the two-storey Vashisht Mandir. Rooms are spartan but well kept and the quiet location is a plus.

Dharma Guest House (☎ 252354; basic r Rs 150–450, deluxe r Rs 500; ☎ ☎) Up the right-hand path above the Rama Temple, this huge and expanding place is fast turning into a midrange hotel. Choose from basic backpacker quarters, decent hotel rooms and deluxe rooms, with TVs, carpets and views. The tiny swimming pool is only filled intermittently.

Hotel Surabhi (☎ 252796; surabhi77@hotmail.com; r with TV & geyser Rs 300–500) A big, modern place that will appeal to older travellers who value creature comforts. The rooftop café is popular and more expensive rooms have balconies with uninterrupted valley views.

Hotel Brighu (☎ 253414; r with TV & geyser from Rs 300) The 'view side' rooms at this modern hotel have the biggest balconies in town, looking out over the Beas Valley. Inside, rooms

YAK SKIING

You love skiing. You love yaks. Why not combine the two? According to *Time* magazine, the sport of yak-skiing was invented by a Tibetan yak herder in Manali. It involves a pair of skis, a willing skier, a rope, a yak and a bucket of nuts. One end of the rope is carried uphill and fed through a pulley attached to a tree, then tied to a hungry yak. The skier at the bottom then shakes the bucket of nuts to attract the yak, and grabs onto the rope to be whisked up the hillside at death-defying speed. There is a growing body of opinion that yak-skiing doesn't really exist, but ask around locally in Manali and you may be able to prove the sceptics wrong.

are carpeted and clean, with geysers in the bathroom.

Hotel Arohi (☎ 254421; mcthakur@yahoo.com; r Rs 500-900; 🍷) A genuinely midrange hotel at the start of the village, offering good rooms with TVs and geysers and views from everywhere, including the restaurant.

If these places are full, there are several more guesthouses on the track behind the Rainbow Café.

EATING

Beer is widely available and standard opening hours are 7.30am to 11pm. There are several German bakeries for takeaway snacks.

Rainbow Café (dishes Rs 20-80) Most people end up at this rooftop place at the end of an evening; come here for decent traveller fare, cold beers and a ceaseless reggae soundtrack.

World Peace Café (dishes Rs 30-100) Upstairs at the Hotel Surabhi, this is a popular choice for traveller food and rooftop views. The menu runs to Italian, Mexican and Israeli food.

Baisho Restaurant (dishes Rs 40-100) A chilled-out restaurant above the Hotel Brighu, with mood lighting, a huge menu and comfy cushions to sit back on in front of nightly DVD movies.

Other good traveller restaurants include the Blue Heaven Café and Blue Star Café, both with old Indian and continental favourites from Rs 30.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Autorickshaws charge about Rs 40 to Rs 50 for the journey between Vashisht and Manali; don't rely on being able to get a lift back to Manali later than 7pm. On foot, take the trail near the Himalayan Extreme Center past the ruined HPTDC baths and down to the banks of the Beas River. Coming uphill, the trail begins about 200m north of the Vashisht turn-off.

Solang Nullah

☎ 01902

The best of the modest ski resorts in Himachal Pradesh, Solang Nullah sits at the bottom of a long, green meadow about 13km north of Manali. In summer the meadow is used for paragliding, walking and zorbing. From January to March, skiers and snowboarders can enjoy 1.5km of alpine-style runs. A new ropeway is under construction that will raise Solang to the level of the more established ski resorts at Auli and Gulmarg. A small drag-lift

is already in operation on the beginners slopes above the village.

The **Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports** (☎ 250337/252342; www.dmas.gov.in) based in southern Manali runs all-inclusive 14-day courses for basic, intermediate and advanced skiers on set dates between January and March. The fee of Rs 3100/US\$240 (Indian/foreigner) includes equipment, food and dorm accommodation at the slopes.

Private companies run similar courses and offer ski and boot rental – expect to pay Rs 350 to Rs 500 per day, plus Rs 300 for use of the ski lifts. Winter clothing, and slightly tired ski gear, can be rented at dozens of wooden huts on the road between Solang Nullah and Manali. Advanced skiers can join expeditions to high-altitude slopes in Manali and Vashisht.

In summer, pony rides cost Rs 100, quad-bike rides cost Rs 300, zorbing starts at Rs 200 and paragliding flights start at Rs 1200. The slopes are also good for walking – the **Shiva temple** 3km above the village is a popular destination. See p310 for more on all these activities.

SLEEPING & EATING

All hotels in Solang Nullah offer gas heaters or wood-burning stoves. Unless otherwise stated, rooms have bathrooms with hot showers.

Friendship Hotel (☎ 256010; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/350) Downhill from the ski slope, this cheerful cheapie has carpeted rooms with geysers and a stove-warmed lounge downstairs.

Snow View Hotel (☎ 256181; r Rs 300) Further downhill, the Snow View is similar to the Friendship Hotel.

Raju Paying Guest House (☎ 98161066045; s/d Rs 400/600) Above the village liquor store, this is a simple, low-key place with pleasant, wood-panelled rooms.

POMA/Hotel Patalsu Regency (☎ 256009; r Rs 300-600) A big grey-stone place just downhill from the slopes (look for the Ropeway Ski Centre sign). Rooms are snug and warm, the communal lounge has a giant TV and guests get a 50% discount on the lift pass.

Iceland Hotel (☎ 256008; skihimalaya@yahoo.com; r Rs 550) Down by the village stream, this is another proper ski lodge, with suitably 'Alpine' rooms and a cosy, chalet mood. Heaters are provided as standard, and ski and snowboard rental costs just Rs 350 per day for guests.

Whispering Rocks (☎ 256092; whisper@bol.net.in; r from Rs 2000, ste from Rs 2800) About 4km downhill from Solang Nullah, this eye-catching wooden resort has a peaceful valley setting and a kiddies' play park. Wood-lined suites in the stone cottage in the garden steal the show.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave Manali at 8am, 2pm and 4pm for Solang Nullah (Rs 9, one hour), returning on arrival. A taxi from Manali is Rs 300; it's a two-hour walk from Old Manali. Snow may make the road impassable in January and February.

WESTERN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Western Himachal Pradesh is famous as the home of the Tibetan government in exile, close to Dharamsala. The official website for Kangra district is <http://hpkangra.nic.in>.

DHARAMSALA

☎ 01892 / pop 19,800 / elev 1219m

Dharamsala (pronounced Dharamsala) is best known as the home of the Dalai Lama. In fact, the Tibetan government in exile is based just uphill in Gangchen Kyishong, and most travellers stay uphill in the busy little traveller town of McLeod Ganj. Dharamsala itself has a good museum and a busy bazaar, but most people only come here to catch a bus.

The **State Bank of India** (☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) accepts travellers cheques and changes cash and there's an ATM in the main bazaar. The **Himachal Emporium** (☎ 224185; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) on the main road sells Kullu shawls and Tibetan carpets for Rs 3500 upwards.

Sights

The **Museum of Kangra Art** (☎ 224214; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) near the bus stand displays some fine miniature paintings from the Kangra school, along with temple carvings, fabrics and embroidery, weapons and palanquins belonging to local rajahs.

There's also a **War Memorial**, 1km south of town, commemorating local war heroes in battles since Independence.

Sleeping

There are a few good options if you have an early bus in the morning.

Surbhi Guesthouse (☎ 224677; r Rs 250-350) The price is right at this generic hotel, uphill on the road to Gangchen Kyishong. It's a bit less noisy than other places in town and the showers are hot.

Kashmir House (☎ 222977; d Rs 800-1500) A slightly classier HPTDC property than the Hotel Dhauladhar, this refurbished folly once belonged to the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The huge rooms have all mod cons, in a quiet location below the road to Gangchen Kyishong.

HPTDC Hotel Dhauladhar (☎ 224926; r Rs 1200-2000) Although comfortable, rooms here are expensive for what you get. Nevertheless, its handy for the bus stand and there are good views from some rooms.

Eating

Monal Restaurant (dishes Rs 20-70; ☎ 10am-10pm) A dingy but hygienic fast-food house with tasty and inexpensive South Indian and Gujarati food.

Andey's Midtown Restaurant (mains Rs 40-120; ☎ 9am-10.30pm) The best food in town is served at this upmarket Indian restaurant in the centre. Come for kebabs, rich curries, burgers and continental snacks, and a beer on the side.

Getting There & Away

AIR

See p328 for details of air services to the area.

BUS

Minibuses run a regular shuttle service from Dharamsala bus station to McLeod Ganj (Rs 7) till about 7pm. See the table, opposite, for other services.

TAXI

The **taxi stand** (☎ 222105) is up the steps from the bus stand. Shared taxis to McLeod Ganj leave when full for Rs 7. Day tours can be arranged for Rs 800 per day covering less than 80km, or Rs 1500 roaming further afield.

One-way fares include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)
Gaggal airport	250
Jawalamukhi	700
Kangra	350
Masrur	900
McLeod Ganj	120-150
Palampur	550

BUSES FROM DHARAMSALA

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Amritsar	125	7	5pm
Chamba	140	8	7.40am & 8.15pm
Dalhousie	100	6	7.40am & 12.30pm
Dehra Dun	290	13	9pm
Delhi	294-430	12	8 daily
Gaggal	9	30min	frequent
Haridwar	285	13	3pm
Jammu	115	5	1 daily (check time locally)
Jawalamukhi	40	1½	hourly
Kangra	14	1	frequent
Kullu	170	9	4am & 6pm
Manali	205	10	4am & 6pm
Mandi	102	6	5 daily
Palampur	20	2	frequent
Pathankot	68	3½	hourly
Shimla	190	10	5 daily

TRAIN

The nearest train station is Kangra Mandir, on the slow narrow-gauge line from Pathankot to Jogindernagar – see p331 and the boxed text, below. Reservations for other services from Pathankot can be made at the **Rail Reservation Centre** (☎ 226711; HPTDC Hotel Dhauladhar; 🕒 8am-noon Mon-Sat).

MCLEOD GANJ

☎ 01892 / elev 1770m

Around 4km above Dharamsala, or 10km via the main road, McLeod Ganj is the headquarters of the Tibetan government in exile and the residence of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. It's also the main traveller hangout in Himachal Pradesh, with dozens of budget

hotels, trekking companies, net cafés, traveller restaurants, video movie parlours and wall-to-wall shops selling Tibetan souvenirs.

McLeod was established in the mid-1850s as a British garrison and it briefly served as an administration centre for the colonial government until the devastating earthquake of 1905. It remained a backwater until 1960, when the Dalai Lama and his entourage claimed asylum here following the Chinese invasion of Tibet (see the boxed text, p323).

Since this time, McLeod has become a major centre for the study of Buddhism and Tibetan culture. There are all sorts of holistic activities and courses on offer, and lots of travellers come here to volunteer on community projects that focus on the refugee community.

Waterproofs are essential for McLeod Ganj: it rains a lot here. Many shops and businesses are closed on Monday.

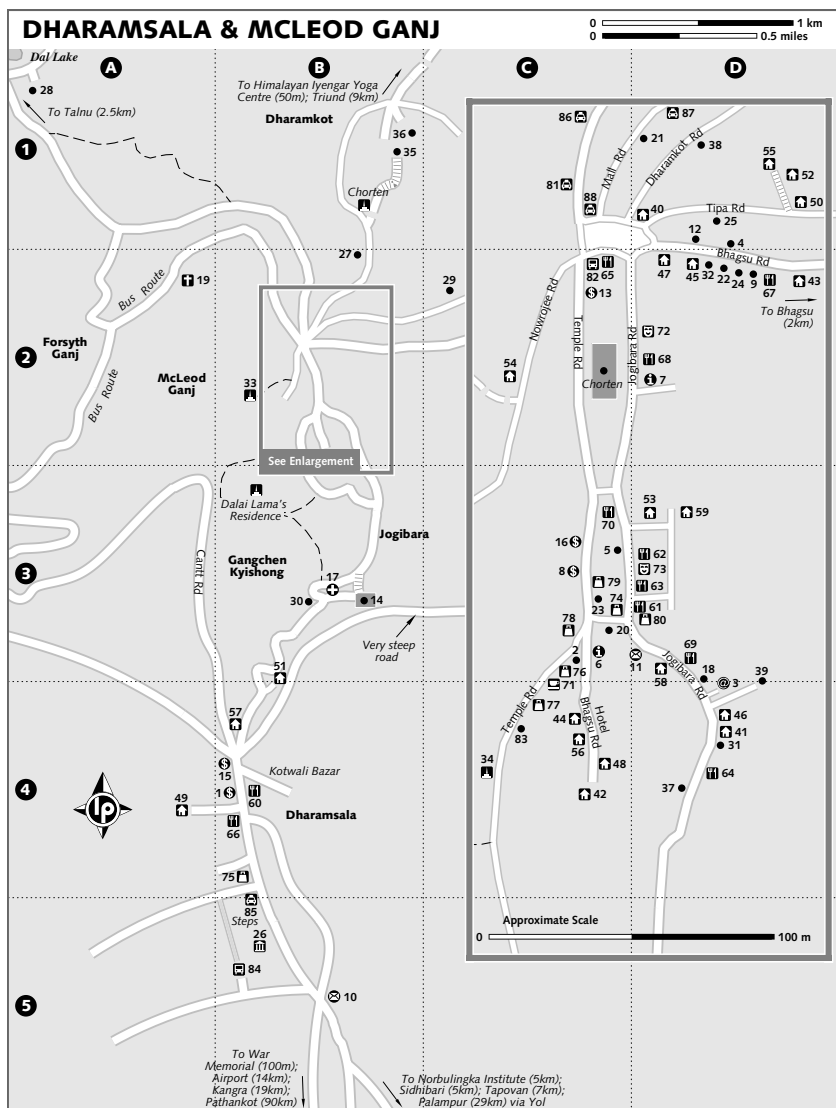
Orientation

From the central bus stand, Jogibara Rd runs south to Gangchen Kyishong and Dharamsala, Temple Rd runs south to the Tsuglagkhang Complex, Bhagsu Rd runs east to Bhagsu, Tipa Rd runs northeast to the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts and Dharamkot Rd runs north to Dharamkot.

The taxi stand is on Mall Rd and autorickshaws and share jeeps stop on the lower northern road to the Church of St John in the Wilderness and Dal Lake.

THE KANGRA TOY TRAIN

A lumbering narrow-gauge train runs east from Pathankot, providing a scenic, if slow, back route to Kangra (2½ hours), Palampur (four hours), Baijnath (6½ hours) and Jogindernagar (nine hours). There are seven trains a day – two as far as Jogindernagar and five as far as Baijnath. Ordinary trains cost Rs 27 or less to any destination on the route, but carriages are crammed with passengers and seats cannot be booked in advance. Board early to grab a window seat and enjoy the views en route.



Information

BOOKSHOPS

Bookworm (Hotel Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm) The best all-round bookshop.

Hills Bookshop (Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm) Well stocked with novels and guidebooks.

Namgyal Bookshop (Tsonglakhang Complex; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1-6pm Tue-Sun) Specialises in Buddhist texts.

CUSTOMS

Customs forms must sometimes be obtained from the Tibetan Handicrafts Cooperative Centre (p328).

INTERNET ACCESS

McLeod Ganj has loads of internet cafés, all charging Rs 30 an hour.

INFORMATION		Nechung Gompa.....(see 14)	EATING 🍴	
ATM.....	1 B4	Regional Mountaineering Centre.....	27 B2	Andey's Midtown Restaurant...60 B4
Bookworm.....	2 C3	Sangye's Kitchen.....(see 11)	61 D3	Ashoka Restaurant.....
Branch Security Office.....(see 32)		Taste of India Cooking Courses.....(see 69)	62 D3	Gakyi Restaurant.....
Dhauladhar Colour Lab.....(see 71)		Tibetan Children's Village.....	28 A1	Green Hotel.....(see 43)
Dogga Centre.....	3 D4	Tibetan Cultural Museum.....(see 14)		Jimmy's Italian Kitchen.....
Green Cyber Café.....(see 43)		Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts.....	29 C2	Lung Ta.....
Hills Bookshop.....	4 D1	Tibetan Medical & Astrological Institute.....	30 B3	McLo Restaurant.....
Himachal Travels.....	5 C3	Tibetan Universal Massage.....	31 D4	Monal Restaurant.....
HPTDC Tourist Office.....	6 C3	Tibetan Welfare Office.....	32 D2	Namgyal Café.....(see 34)
Information Office of Central Tibetan Administration.....	7 D2	Tsechokling Gompa.....	33 B2	Nick's Italian Kitchen.....
LKP Forex.....	8 C3	Tsuglagkhang Complex.....	34 C4	Pema Thang Pizzeria.....(see 56)
Manaav Medical.....(see 40)		Tushita Meditation Centre.....	35 B1	Snow Lion Restaurant.....
Namgyal Bookshop.....(see 34)		Vipassana Meditation Centre.....	36 B1	Taste of India.....
Nehria Travels & Tours.....	9 D2	VolunteerTibet.....	37 D4	Liquor Store.....(see 60)
Paul Merchant.....(see 40)		Yeti Trekking.....	38 D1	Moonpeak Espresso.....
Post Office.....	10 B5	Z Meditation.....	39 D3	
Post Office.....	11 D3			
Potala Tours & Travels.....	12 D1	SLEEPING 🛏		DRINKING 🍷
Punjab National Bank.....	13 C2	Asian Plaza Hotel.....	40 D1	Chocolate Log.....(see 41)
Secretariat of the Tibetan Government in Exile.....	14 B3	Cheryton Cottage Guest House.....	41 D4	French Café.....(see 69)
State Bank of India.....	15 B4	Chonor House Hotel.....	42 C4	Liquor Store.....(see 40)
State Bank of India & ATM.....	16 C3	Green Hotel.....	43 D2	Moonpeak Espresso.....
Summit Adventures.....(see 63)		Him Queen Annexe.....(see 44)		
Tibetan Delek Hospital.....	17 B3	Hotel Him Queen.....	44 C4	ENTERTAINMENT 🎬
		Hotel India House.....	45 D2	Pool Halls.....(see 69)
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Hotel Mount View.....	46 D4	Video Hall.....
Bhimsen's Cooking Class.....	18 D3	Hotel Tibet.....	47 D2	Video Hall.....
Church of St John in the Wilderness.....	19 A2	HPTDC Hotel Bhagsu.....	48 C4	
Dr Lobsang Khangkar Memorial Clinic.....	20 C3	HPTDC Hotel Dhauladhar.....	49 A4	
Eagle's Height Trekkers.....	21 D1	Kalsang Guest House.....	50 D1	SHOPPING 🛍
Environmental Education Centre.....	22 D2	Kareri Lodge.....(see 56)		Green Shop.....(see 22)
Gu Chu Sum Movement Gallery.....(see 64)		Kashmir House.....	51 B3	Handicrafts Cooperative Tailoring Section.....
Kalachakra Temple.....(see 34)		Kunga Guesthouse.....(see 67)		74 C3
LHA.....	23 C3	Loling Guest House.....	52 D1	Himachal Emporium.....
Lhamo's Kitchen.....	24 D2	Loseling Guest House.....	53 D3	75 B4
Library of Tibetan Works & Archives.....(see 14)		Om Guest House.....	54 C2	Norling Designs.....
Men-Tsee-Khang Clinic.....	25 D1	Palor Guest House.....	55 D1	76 C3
Men-Tsee-Khang Museum.....(see 30)		Pema Thang Guest House.....	56 C4	Stitches of Tibet.....
Museum of Kangra Art.....	26 B5	Surbhi Guest House.....	57 B4	77 C4
Namgyal Gompa.....(see 34)		Takhyil Hotel.....	58 D3	TCV Handicraft Centre.....
		Tibet Museum.....(see 34)		78 C3
		Tibetan Ashoka Guest House.....	59 D3	TCV Handicraft Centre 2.....
				79 C3
				Tibetan Handicrafts Cooperative Centre.....
				80 D3
				TRANSPORT
				Authorickshaw Stand.....
				81 C1
				Bus Stand & Ticket Office.....
				82 C2
				Destinations Travels.....
				83 C4
				Dharamsala Bus Station.....
				84 B5
				Dharamsala Taxi Stand.....
				85 B5
				Rail Reservation Centre.....(see 49)
				Share Jeeps to Dharamsala.....
				86 C1
				Taxi Stand.....
				87 D1
				Taxi Stand.....
				88 C1

Dogga Centre (Jogibara Rd; ☎ 8am-10pm Tue-Sun)

The Dogga Centre is run for the benefit of the Dogga Adult Education Centre. It offers a water-bottle refill service.

Green Cyber Café (Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 8am-10pm) Lots of terminals and fast connections.

MEDIA

Contact is an informative, free local magazine that contains some useful listings, as well as details regarding courses and volunteer work.

Tibetan Review provides coverage of Tibetan issues, as does the *Tibetan Bulletin*, the official journal of the government in exile.

MEDICAL SERVICES

For minor ailments and treatment for stomach bugs, try **Manaav Medical** (☎ 9am-9pm), under the Asian Plaza Hotel. You might also give *amchi*, traditional Tibetan medicine, a chance – see p324.

Tibetan Delek Hospital (☎ 222053; Gangchen Kyishong; ☎ outpatient clinic 9am-1pm & 2-5pm) Consultations Rs 10.

MONEY

LKP Forex (Temple Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm)

Paul Merchant (Bus Stand; ☎ 8am-9pm) Also offers Western Union transfers.

Punjab National Bank (Temple Rd; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

State Bank of India (Temple Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Also has an international ATM.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Most internet cafés will download digital photos to CD for around Rs 70.

Dhauladhar Colour Lab (Temple Rd) Sells print film and offers processing and printing.

POST

Post office (Jogibara Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri & 9.30am-noon Sat, parcel post to 1pm weekdays) Poste restante and parcels.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Most travel agencies have Public Call Office (PCO) facilities, some with internet phone calls for around Rs 6 per minute to any destination.

Nehria Travels & Tours (☎ 221964; Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 8.30am-11.30pm) Good for faxing and internet calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

HPTDC tourist office (☎ 221205; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Offers maps and guides, and can also make bookings for HPTDC hotels and buses around Himachal.

Information Office of Central Tibetan Administration (☎ 221502; Jogibara Rd; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) For info on Tibetan issues.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Numerous travel agencies can book train and bus tickets, as well as arranging tours and treks. Try the following:

Himachal Travels (☎ 221428; Jogibara Rd)

Potala Tours & Travels (☎ 221378; Bhagsu Rd)

Summit Adventures (☎ 221679; Jogibara Rd)

Dangers & Annoyances

There have been reports of assaults against women by 'alternative therapists'. We advise against joining one-on-one classes with

strangers. Avoid walking alone at night between McLeod Ganj and the surrounding villages.

Sights

TSUGLAKGHANG COMPLEX

Downhill from McLeod on Temple Rd, the **Tsuglagkhang** (Central Chapel; ☎ 10am-6pm for nonresidents) comprises the *photang* (official residence) of the Dalai Lama, as well as the Namgyal Gompa, Tibet Museum and the Tsuglagkhang itself.

The revered Tsuglagkhang is the exiles' equivalent of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. Sacred to Avalokitesvara (Chenrezi in Tibet), the Tibetan deity of compassion, it enshrines a 3m-high gilded statue of the Sakyamuni Buddha, flanked by Avalokitesvara and Padmasambhava, the Indian scholar who introduced Buddhism to Tibet. The Avalokitesvara statue contains several relics rescued from the Jokhang Temple during the Cultural Revolution.

Next to the Tsuglagkhang is the **Kalachakra Temple**, built in 1992, which contains mesmerising murals of the Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) mandala, specifically linked to Avalokitesvara, currently represented on earth by the Dalai Lama. Sand mandalas are created here annually on the fifth day of the third Tibetan month. Photography is allowed in the Tsuglagkhang, but not in the Kalachakra Temple.

The remaining buildings form the **Namgyal Gompa**, where it is possible to watch monks debate most afternoons, sealing points of argument with great flourish, a foot stamp and theatrical clap of the hands. The monastery bookshop has a good selection of Buddhist texts, and you can enjoy cakes and vegetarian food at the **Namgyal Café** (snacks Rs 30-70; ☎ 10am-10pm Tue-Sun), which provides vocational training for refugees.

MEETING THE DALAI LAMA

Meeting face to face with the Dalai Lama is a lifelong dream for many travellers, but private audiences are almost never granted. Put simply, the Dalai Lama is too busy with spiritual duties and running the government in exile to meet everyone who comes to Dharamsala. Tibetan refugees are automatically guaranteed an audience, but travellers must make do with the occasional public meetings held at Gangchen Kyishong during the monsoon (July/August) and after Losar (Tibetan New Year) in February/March. Details of meetings are posted around McLeod Ganj. To attend you have to register, with your passport, at the **Branch Security Office** (☎ 221560; www.tibet.com; Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat each month).

EXILES

Until May 1949, Tibet was an autonomous kingdom, ruled by the spiritual dynasty of the Dalai Lama, the living incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the Buddhist deity of compassion. Then the Chinese People's Liberation Army marched into Lhasa to liberate the Tibetan people of their land and their culture. Since then, some 1.2 million Tibetans have been killed and 90% of Tibet's cultural heritage has been destroyed.

Facing unimaginable persecution, more than 250,000 Tibetan refugees have made the decision to flee their homeland, on foot over the Himalaya to seek sanctuary in India, led by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who was granted asylum in Dharamsala in 1959. The village of Gangchen Kyishong below McLeod Ganj is now the headquarters for the official Tibetan government in exile, with a dedicated team of politicians and legal experts fighting for liberation and the rights of those still oppressed in Tibet.

Sadly, the cause of India's Tibetan refugees has fallen out of favour with Western protesters. 'Free Tibet' marches struggle to find a hundred people who are prepared to protest about the death of a million Tibetans. With China becoming increasingly powerful on the world stage, hopes for justice for Tibet are fading fast.

Meanwhile, India's Tibetan refugees continue to eke out a living from farming, manufacturing, and selling carpets and other traditional crafts. Tibetan refugee schools and other charitable projects are in desperate need of long-term volunteers across the region – see p325 and p1155 for more information.

Also here is the moving **Tibet Museum** (www.tibetmuseum.org; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), telling the tragic story of the Chinese occupation and the subsequent Tibetan exodus through photographs, interviews and video clips. A visit here is a must for anyone staying in McLeod Ganj.

Most Tibetan pilgrims make a *kora* (ritual circuit) of the Tsuglagkhang Complex, which must be carried out in a clockwise direction. Take the road to the left at the entrance to the temple and follow the winding path leading off to the right.

SECRETARIAT OF THE TIBETAN GOVERNMENT IN EXILE

Inside the government compound at Gangchen Kyishong, the **Library Of Tibetan Works & Archives** (Secretariat Complex; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) preserves the Tibetan texts saved from the Cultural Revolution. Many have since been translated into English and other European languages, but you must become a temporary member (Rs 50 per month; passport needed for ID) to access the collection.

Upstairs is a fascinating **cultural museum** (admission Rs 10; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat each month) with statues, old Tibetan artefacts and books, and some astonishing three-dimensional mandalas in wood and sand. Also worth a visit is the **Nechung Gompa**, home to the Tibetan state oracle.

TIBETAN MEDICAL & ASTROLOGICAL INSTITUTE (MEN-TSEE-KHANG)

Established to preserve the ancient arts of *amchi* (traditional Tibetan medicine) and astrology, the **Men-Tsee Khang** (☎ 222618; Gangchen Kyishong) is a five-minute walk below the Secretariat. There's a library and training college, and if you know the exact time you were born, you can have a whole life horoscope prepared in English for US\$45.

The **Men-Tsee-Khang Museum** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) has fascinating displays on traditional Tibetan medicine, told via preserved specimens and illustrative *thangkas* (rectangular Tibetan painting on cloth).

TSECHOKLING GOMPA

At the base of a long flight of steps below the bus stand, this peaceful gompa was built in 1987 to replace the original Dip Tse Chokling Gompa in Tibet, destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. Home to a small order of Gelukpa monks, the prayer hall enshrines a statue of Sakyamuni in a magnificent jewelled headdress.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Run by a local charity that works with former political prisoners, the **Gu Chu Sum Movement Gallery** (Jogibara Rd; admission free; ☎ 2-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri) has an exhibition of photos telling the story of political oppression in Chinese-occupied Tibet.

Established by the Tibetan Welfare Office, the **Environmental Educational Centre** (Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) provides education on environmental issues. You can refill your water bottle and the adjacent Green Shop (see Shopping, p328) sells handmade paper and other organic products.

Just off the main road into McLeod, the **Church of St John in the Wilderness** has handsome stained-glass windows dating from the British era. It's open on Sunday mornings for the weekly service. The cemetery contains the graves of many victims of the 1905 earthquake.

Activities

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES & MASSAGE

McLeod Ganj has dozens of practitioners of holistic and alternative therapies, some legitimate and some making a fast buck at the expense of gullible travellers. Adverts for courses and sessions are posted on noticeboards all over McLeod Ganj and in *Contact* magazine, but talking to other travellers is a better way to find the good practitioners. Be warned that some women travellers have been molested by so-called 'therapists'; see Dangers & Annoyances, p322.

Readers have recommended the **Himalayan Iyengar Yoga Centre** (☎ 221312; www.hiyogacentre.com; Dharamkot Rd; ☎ Apr-Oct) and **Z Meditation** (☎ 220621; www.zmeditation.com; Jogibara Rd) for yoga and meditation sessions.

AMCHI

Amchi (traditional Tibetan medicine) is a popular treatment for minor and persistent ailments. There are several clinics around town, including the **Men-Tsee-Khang Clinic** (☎ 221484; Tipa Rd; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat each month) and **Dr Lobsang Khangkar Memorial Clinic** (☎ 220811; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) near the post office.

WALKS

Interesting short walks around McLeod include the 2km stroll to **Bhagsu** (p329) and the 3km walk northeast to **Dharamkot** for uplifting views south over the valley and north towards the Dhauladhar Ridge.

About 4km northwest of McLeod Ganj on Mall Rd, peaceful **Dal Lake** is home to the **Tibetan Children's Village** (☎ 221248; www.tcv.org.in; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri), which provides free education for refugee children. Visitors are

CAMPAIGN FOR A PLASTIC-FREE PLANET!

The hills around McLeod Ganj are scarred by piles of abandoned plastic bottles that will persist in the environment for hundreds of years before breaking down into a polluting chemical dust. Give the countryside a chance and refill your drinking water bottle for Rs 5 to Rs 10 at one of the filtered-water stations around McLeod Ganj. There's one at LHA, one at the Environmental Education Centre and one at the Dogga Centre.

welcome and there may be opportunities for volunteers. The lake itself has a small Hindu temple and there are great views from **Naddi** just uphill.

A popular longer walk is the two-day return trip through boulder fields and rhododendron forests to **Triund** (2900m), a 9km walk past Dharamkot. Triund has a simple rest house and you can stop overnight and stroll up to the glacier at Laka Got (3350m) before turning back to McLeod Ganj. There's a scenic route along the gorge from the waterfall at Bhagsu. From Triund, you can trek to **Indrahra La** (4300m) and the Chamba Valley – (p328).

TREKKING

It's possible to trek from McLeod Ganj to the Kullu, Chamba, Lahaul and Spiti Valleys, and there are several agencies in town who can make the necessary arrangements. Probably the most popular route crosses the 4300m Indrahra Pass over the Dhaula Dhar to Bharmour (p328).

Uphill from the bus stand on the road to Dharamkot, the **Regional Mountaineering Centre** (☎ 221787; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) can arrange treks and adventure activities and offers courses and expeditions on set dates. It can also provide a list of registered guides and porters.

Other reliable trekking operators: **Eagle's Height Trekkers** (☎ 221097; www.trekking.123himachal.com; Mall Rd) **Yeti Trekking** (☎ 221060; Dharamkot Rd)

Courses

MEDITATION & PHILOSOPHY

Several organisations offer long-term courses in Buddhist philosophy and meditation. How-

ever, they have strict rules on silence, alcohol and smoking.

Near Dharamkot, the **Tushita Meditation Centre** (☎ 221866; www.tushita.info; 📧 registration 9.30-11.30am & 12.30-4pm Mon-Sat) offers eight-day nonresidential courses and 10-day residential retreats in Buddhist philosophy, plus courses for advanced students – see the website for current prices.

Behind Tushita is the **Vipassana Meditation Centre** (☎ 221309; www.sikhara.dhamma.org; 📧 registration 4-5pm Mon-Sat), which offers 10-day retreats on *vipassana*, or mindfulness, meditation from April to November.

There are Buddhist philosophy courses at the **Library of Tibetan Works & Archives** (☎ 222467; itwa@gov.tibet.net) at the Gangchen Kyishong complex for Rs 200 per month, plus Rs 50 registration.

COOKING

Cooking courses in McLeod Ganj cover everything from South Indian dosas (lentil-flour pancakes) to chocolate *momos*. Book the following courses one day in advance:

Bhimsen's Cooking Class (Jogibara Rd; classes Rs 200; 📧 11am-1pm & 4-6pm) Courses in North and South Indian cooking.

Lhamo's Kitchen (☎ 9816468719; Bhagsu Rd; classes Rs 250, 3-day courses Rs 550; 📧 10am-noon & 5-7pm) Recommended courses in vegetarian Tibetan cooking.

Sangye's Kitchen (☎ 9418187240; Jogibara Rd; classes Rs 260; 📧 11am-noon & 5-7pm Sun-Fri) Tibetan treats, with a different menu daily.

Taste of India (☎ 220833; Jogibara Rd; courses Rs 600; 📧 three afternoons weekly) Veg and nonveg North Indian food.

LANGUAGE

Inside the Gangchen Kyishong complex, the **Library of Tibetan Works & Archives** (☎ 222467; itwa@gov.tibet.net; 📧 classes Mon-Sat) runs long-term Tibetan-language courses for beginners and experienced students for Rs 250 per month, plus a Rs 50 registration fee.

LHA (☎ 220992; Temple Rd; 📧 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) offers private tuition for Rs 100 per hour, or there are several independent Tibetan teachers – check *Contact* magazine for details. Classes run by **Pema Youton** (☎ 9418603523) get good reports.

MASSAGE & YOGA

The well-recommended **Tibetan Universal Massage** (☎ 9816378307; Jogibara Rd) offers training in traditional Tibetan massage. Courses run for five afternoons on set dates and cost Rs 1500.

LHA (☎ 220992; Temple Rd; 📧 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) runs yoga classes at 7.30am and 5.30pm (Rs 100 per session).

Festivals & Events

Performances of traditional *lhamo* (Tibetan opera) and musical theatre are held on special occasions at the **Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts** (TIPA; ☎ 221478; www.tibetanarts.org). The annual **Opera Festival** runs from 27 March to 4 April and the **TIPA Anniversary Festival** runs from 27 May to 30 May.

VOLUNTEERING IN MCLEOD GANJ

There are numerous opportunities for volunteers to help newly arrived Tibetan refugees, from cleaning up litter to skilled placements in teaching and training. To maximise the benefits for local people, always look for a position that matches your existing skills. The following places can match you to a suitable placement. Volunteers generally make their own arrangements for accommodation and meals.

One of the best places to start is **VolunteerTibet** (☎ 220894; www.volunteertibet.org; Jogibara Rd; 📧 3-5pm Mon-Fri), a community organisation that arranges placements in areas of need – eg teaching, providing computer training and social services. Volunteers with two months or more to spare are preferred.

LHA (☎ 220992; www.lhaindia.org; Temple Rd; 📧 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) also arranges placements at a variety of local community projects. You need a minimum of two weeks for teaching placements and one month or more for serious vocational programmes.

The **Tibetan Welfare Office** (☎ 221059; Bhagsu Rd; 📧 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat each month) can provide advice on other opportunities for volunteers around McLeod Ganj. Many organisations seeking volunteers also advertise in the free magazine *Contact*. See p1155 for other projects working with Tibetan refugees in India.

In December/January, McLeod celebrates **Losar** (Tibetan New Year, p283) with processions and masked dances at local monasteries. The Dalai Lama often gives public teachings at this time. The Dalai Lama's birthday on 6 July is also celebrated with aplomb.

From 10 to 12 December, McLeod Ganj hosts the **International Himalayan Festival** (p283) to commemorate the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize, featuring cultural troupes from all the Himalayan nations.

Sleeping

Popular places fill up quickly; advance bookings are strongly advised from April to June and October to November.

BUDGET

Tibetan Ashoka Guest House (☎ 221763; off Jogibara Rd; d with shared bathroom Rs 90, with private bathroom Rs 275-350) Down an alley near the chorten, this place consists of two interlocked buildings full of clean, simple rooms, some sneaking a view of the valley or mountains.

Green Hotel (☎ 221200; Bhagsu Rd; r with shared bathroom Rs 100, with private bathroom Rs 250-350; 📺) A stalwart of the traveller scene, this popular choice has a good selection of rooms and a café that does great breakfasts.

Om Guest House (☎ 221313; omhotel@hotmail.com; Nowrojee Rd; r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 100/250) A short walk down a lane below the bus stand, the friendly Om has a range of pleasing rooms and a great little terrace restaurant that catches the sunset over the valley.

Kunga Guesthouse (☎ 221180; Bhagsu Rd; r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 150/250) Above Nick's Italian Kitchen, this is another place that pulls in the crowds. The clean rooms are a snip at the price, with views increasing as you move higher up the building.

Loseling Guest House (☎ 221087; r with squat/sit-down flush toilet Rs 190/200) Down the same alley as the Tibetan Ashoka, Loseling is run by a Tibetan monastery based in Karnataka. It's a good cheapie and all rooms have a hot shower. Take your pick from sit-down flush or squat toilets.

Hotel Mount View (☎ 221382; Rs 300-500) A tidy Kashmiri-run hotel offering a range of good rooms, some with balconies facing the town or ridge. The owners run tours to Pahalgam in Kashmir, but check things are safe before signing up.

Takhyil Hotel (☎ 221152; Jogibara Rd; r Rs 350-450) A calm vibe and tidy rooms with TVs and

hot showers add up to a good package at this Tibetan-style hotel just downhill from the chorten.

Cheryton Cottage Guest House (☎ 221993; r Rs 450) A curious octagonal building in the garden behind Chocolate Log. Good rooms come with the all the essential conveniences, and the outdoor space creates a welcome buffer shield between you and the outside world.

Up some steps off Tipa Rd, **Kalsang Guest House** (☎ 221709; Tipa Rd; s with shared bathroom Rs 80, d with cold/hot shower Rs 130/275) has a large front terrace perfect for reading and relaxing. The rooms are spartan but clean and the place is often full. The same steps lead to the very similar **Loling Guest House** (☎ 221072; Tipa Rd; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 75/150) and **Paljor Gakyil Guest House** (☎ 221443; r with cold/hot shower from Rs 110/250).

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Most midrange hotels sit along Hotel Bhagsu Rd, offering sweeping views over the valley.

Kareri Lodge (☎ 221132; karerihl@hotmail.com; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; r Rs 550-990; 📺) Just uphill from the chorten, with a nice atmosphere and well-cared-for rooms. Management is friendly and there are good views from the upper floor.

Pema Thang Guest House (☎ 221871; www.pema-thang.net; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; r Rs 660-990; 📺) A tasteful Tibetan-style guesthouse, with a great restaurant and spacious, well-lit rooms with comforting, homy furnishings. Advance booking is recommended.

Hotel Tibet (☎ 221587; htdshala@sancharnet.in; Bhagsu Rd; r Rs 500-900; 📺) A short walk from the bus stand, this place has the feel of an upmarket hotel at a budget price. It's run by the Tibetan government, and there's an excellent restaurant and bar. Rooms are comfortable and well appointed, if a tad musty.

HPTDC Hotel Bhagsu (☎ 221091; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; d Rs 800-1600; 📺) On the road above the Tsuglagkhang, this well-run and popular HPTDC hotel offers attractively decorated rooms, some with valley views. Again, book ahead in season.

Rooms with views are also available at **Hotel Him Queen** (☎ 221184; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; d Rs 800-2000; 📺) and **Him Queen Annexe** (☎ 221002; r Rs 500-1200; 📺). The owners of the Annexe can arrange tours to Kashmir, but check things are safe before you travel.

Hotel India House (☎ 221457; Bhagsu Rd; r Rs 1320-2200; 📺) A bright, modern hotel near the

bus stand. Rooms have all mod cons and if you upgrade to a deluxe, you get a tub and balcony.

ourpick **Chonor House Hotel** (☎ 221006; www.norbulingka.org; off Hotel Bhagsu Rd; s/d from Rs 1500/1900, ste Rs 2300/2800; 📺) Down an anonymous track off Hotel Bhagsu Rd, Chonor House is a veritable gem. It's run by the Norbulingka Institute, and rooms are decked out with its wonderful handicrafts and fabrics. Each has a Tibetan theme that runs from the bedspreads to the murals on the walls. There's also a shop, restaurant and net café. Advance booking is essential.

Asian Plaza Hotel (☎ 220655; www.asianplazahotel.com; Bus Stand; r Rs 1600-3200) The only deluxe hotel in McLeod Ganj, with a suitably ostentatious mood and all the conveniences you would expect for the price. Upgrade to a roomy super-deluxe room with a view then sup at the rooftop bar and restaurant.

Eating

McLeod Ganj is crammed with backpacker restaurants serving identical traveller menus – pizzas, pasta, omelettes, Indian and Chinese staples, and commendable attempts at European and Mexican food. For a quick snack, local women sell *momos* and *tingmo* (steamed Tibetan bread) around the chorten.

Tsongkha (dishes Rs 20-80; 🍷 from 8am) A simple but popular Tibetan restaurant with a great rooftop terrace looking out over the chorten and valley, plus an indoor dining room for chilly days.

Snow Lion Restaurant (Jogibara Rd; dishes Rs 20-80; 🍷 7.30am-9.30pm) Behind the Snow Lion guesthouse, this is the place to come for *momos*, *thukpa* and *tingmo*.

Gakyi Restaurant (Jogibara Rd; dishes Rs 20-100) A well-established traveller hangout, with good breakfasts and a familiar Tibetan-meets-European menu.

Green Hotel (dishes from Rs 30; 🍷 from 6am) This traveller-oriented hotel-restaurant serves good vegetarian food and the earliest breakfasts in town. If you come in for dawn chai and *tingmo*, you can check your email, too.

Lung Ta (Jogibara Rd; dishes from Rs 30; 🍷 noon-8.30pm Mon-Sat) The set menu changes daily at this popular vegetarian Japanese restaurant downhill from the centre. Food is authentic and many Japanese travellers come here for a taste of home.

Ashoka Restaurant (Jogibara Rd; dishes Rs 35-120) A reliable Indian restaurant catering to the veg and nonveg crowds. Diners can choose from an indoor dining room or a rather cramped roof terrace.

Taste of India (Jogibara Rd; dishes Rs 40-100) A solid choice for North Indian food, with a decent spread of meat and vegetarian dishes. Come early to nab a table.

Nick's Italian Kitchen (Bhagsu Rd; meals Rs 50-100; 🍷 6am-9pm) A bona fide traveller institution, serving tasty vegetarian pasta and pizzas, and heavenly chocolate brownies with hot chocolate sauce. We can still taste them now! Eat inside or out on the terrace.

Jimmy's Italian Kitchen (Jogibara Rd; dishes from Rs 60) A well-run Italian place near the chorten, serving pizzas with real pepperoni, and a good range of pasta dishes.

ourpick **McLlo Restaurant** (dishes Rs 60-100, drinks from Rs 65; 🍷 10am-10pm) Crowded nightly and justifiably popular, this big, bright place above the bus stand serves good Indian, Chinese and international fare, and icy cold beers on the side.

Pema Thang Pizzeria (Hotel Bhagsu Rd; pizzas Rs 60-150; 🍷 11am-3pm & 5-9pm) Inside the Pema Thang Guest House, this vegetarian Italian place does good pizzas cooked in a real wood-fired oven. Drop by to book a table in advance for the evening.

Drinking

Proper coffee shops are starting to appear around McLeod, serving decent cappuccino and English-style tea.

Moonpeak Espresso (Temple Rd; coffees & snacks from Rs 30; 🍷 7am-8pm) A little bit of Seattle, transported to India. Come for excellent coffee, cakes and imaginative sandwiches.

Chocolate Log (dishes from Rs 30; 🍷 Tue-Sun) Hot coffee and freshly baked cakes are the prime attractions here.

French Café (Jogibara Rd; snacks from Rs 30) For crepes and coffee made the French way, try this small café near Taste of India. The owner does magic shows some evenings.

Only a few places serve alcohol and charge a steep Rs 150 for a big bottle of beer. If you fancy a tittle, head to Hotel Tibet (opposite) or McLlo Restaurant (left), where you'll find dozens of travellers of a similar inclination.

Take-away beer and spirits are available at a small liquor store below the Asian Plaza Hotel.

Entertainment

Half a dozen video halls along Jogibara Rd screen DVDs of Hollywood blockbusters and documentaries on Tibet all day and evening for Rs 40.

Jogibara Rd has several pool halls where you can rack up a table for Rs 60 per hour, open from 10am till late.

See Festivals & Events (p325) for details of performances of traditional *lhamo* (Tibetan opera) and musical theatre.

Shopping

Dozens of shops and stalls sell Tibetan artefacts, including *thangkas* (Buddhist cloth paintings), bronze statues, metal prayer wheels, bundles of prayer flags, Tibetan horns and gemstone rosary beads. Some are Tibetan-run, but many are run by Kashmiri traders who apply a fair amount of sales pressure. Several local cooperatives offer the same goods without the hassle.

Tibetan Handicrafts Cooperative Centre (☎ 221415; Jogibara Rd; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) employs newly arrived refugees in the weaving of Tibetan carpets. You'll pay around Rs 6000 for a 0.9m by 1.8m wool carpet in traditional Tibetan colours and you can watch the weavers in action. For made-to-order clothing, head over the road to the Tailoring Section.

A similar tailoring service is offered by **Stitches of Tibet** (☎ 221527; www.tibetanwomen.org; Temple Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), which provides work for newly arrived women refugees.

Closer to the chorten is the **TCV Handicraft Centre** (☎ 221592; www.tvcraft.com; Temple Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), with a huge range of Tibetan souvenirs at fixed prices. Sales benefit the Tibetan Children's Village.

Other interesting souvenir outlets include the **Green Shop** (Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), selling products made from handmade Tibetan paper, and **Norling Designs** (Bhagsu Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), selling products from the Norbulingka Institute.

Getting There & Away

Many travel agencies in McLeod Ganj will book train tickets for services out of Pathankot (p275) for a fee. See p319 for train services in the Kangra Valley.

AIR

McLeod Ganj's nearest airport is at Gaggal, 15km southwest of Dharamsala. **Jagson Airlines**

(www.jagsonairlines.com) flies to Delhi (US\$218, 2½ hours) via Kullu (Bhuntar; US\$122, 30 minutes) every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, with a 10kg baggage limit. Book at **Destination Travels** (☎ 220399; www.destinationtravels.co.in; Temple Rd). A taxi to Gaggal costs Rs 350.

AUTORICKSHAW

The autorickshaw stand is just north of the bus stand – sample fares include Bhagsu (Rs 20), Tsuglagkhang (Rs 20), Tibetan Children's Village (Rs 40) and Gangchen Kyishong (Rs 80).

BUS

All roads radiate from the bus stand, where you can book Himachal Roadways Transport Corporation (HRTC) buses up to a month in advance. Travel agents can book seats on deluxe private buses to Delhi (Rs 400 to Rs 650), Dehra Dun (Rs 480), Manali (Rs 400) and other destinations, and there are regular long-haul buses from Dharamsala. For more details on buses from McLeod Ganj see the table, below.

TAXI

McLeod's **taxi stand** (☎ 221034) is on Mall Rd, north of the bus station. To hire a taxi for the day, for journeys covering less than 80km, costs Rs 1000.

Fares for short hops include Gangchen Kyishong (Rs 60), Dharamsala's Kotwali Bazaar (Rs 120), Dharamsala bus station (Rs 140) and the airport (Rs 350). Other fares are similar to the taxi stand in Dharamsala – see p318.

MCLEOD GANJ TO BHARMOUR TREK

This popular six- to seven-day route crosses over the Indrhar La (4300m) to the ancient village of Bharmour in the Chamba Valley. The pass is open from September to early

BUSES FROM MCLEOD GANJ

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Dehra Dun	290	13	8pm
Delhi	300/440/800	12	6pm, 7pm (ord); 4.30pm, 7.45pm (dlx); 7.30pm (AC)
Gaggal	7	30min	5 daily
Manali	210	11	5pm
Pathankot	75	4	5 daily

BUSES ALONG MCLEOD GANJ– BHARMOUR ROUTE

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)	Distance (km)
1	McLeod Ganj to Triund	4-5	9
2	Triund to Lahes Cave	4-5	6
3	Lahes Cave to Chata Parao over Indrahara La	6-7	11
4	Chata Parao to Kuarsi	5-6	14
5	Kuarsi to Chanauta	6-7	16
6	Chanauta to Garola	5-6	12
7	Garola to Bharmour	5-6	14

November and you can start this trek, and make all arrangements, in Dharamsala or Bharmour.

From McLeod, take an autorickshaw along the Dharamkot road then walk on through pine and rhododendron forests to Triund, where there's a simple rest house. The next stage climbs to the glacier at Laka Got (3350m) and continues to the rocky shelter known as Lahes Cave. With an early start the next day, you can cross the Indrahara La – and be rewarded with astounding views – before descending to the meadow campground at Chata Parao.

The stages on to Bharmour can be tricky without a local guide. From Chata Parao, the path moves back into the forest, descending over three days to Kuarsi, Garola and finally to Bharmour, where you can catch buses on to Chamba. Alternatively, you can bail out and catch a bus at several places along the route, see above.

AROUND MCLEOD GANJ

Bhagsu

☎ 01892

About 2km east of McLeod Ganj, Bhagsu (Bhagsunag) is developing into a busy summer resort. There's a popular traveller centre at the back of the village, but things are definitely moving upmarket. The village has a cold spring with **baths**, a small **Shiva temple**

built by the raja of Kangra in the 16th century, and a gaudy **new temple** with stairways passing through the open mouths of a cement crocodile and lion. You can walk on to Dharamkot or Triund via a gushing **waterfall**.

Various alternative therapies are available in the backpacker enclave, though there are plenty of quack practitioners around. The **Buddha Hall** (☎ 221171; www.buddhahall.com) offers courses in Reiki, yoga and Indian classical music. Bhagsu has half a dozen internet cafés and travel agents.

SLEEPING

There are numerous backpacker hotels and a number of posher hotels targeting domestic tourists.

Omni Guest House (☎ 221604; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 120/200) Uphill from the main road is this slate-roofed block of spartan but cheap backpacker rooms and a hippie café full of murals. Classier hotel-style rooms should be available by the time you read this.

Pink White Hotel (☎ 221209; r Rs 150-500) Up the main road in the traveller enclave, this place looks a little tired, but rooms are cheap and you get a TV, carpet and balcony.

Oak View Guesthouse (r from Rs 200) A tidy new guesthouse near Hotel Highland, with a traveller café out the front and decent rooms with TV and geysers. Most rooms have views but some are better than others.

Sangam Guesthouse (☎ 221013; r from Rs 300) Right at the entrance to Bhagsu, offering spic-and-span rooms, some with balconies. A new level of smarter rooms was added recently.

Hotel Highland (☎ 220501; r Rs 350-700) Opposite Pink White Hotel, this cavernous place is clean and tidy and decent value. Rooms come with geysers, TVs, phones and balconies.

Meghavan Holiday Resort (☎ 221935; www.meghavanholidayresort.com; r from Rs 800, ste from Rs 1200) Just up from the main road, this huge, cream-coloured hotel targets Indian holidaymakers with comfy rooms full of soft upholstery. The front rooms with bay windows are better than the dark back-facing rooms.

EATING & DRINKING

Bhagsu is full of German bakeries and backpacker cafés. Alcohol is usually available on an 'under the table' basis.

Ashoka International Restaurant (dishes Rs 50-170) Bhagsu's poshest dining option serves good Indian and Chinese food in a smart dining

room with a choice of floor cushions or normal tables.

Sidhibari & Tapovan

About 6km from Dharamsala, the little village of Sidhibari is the adopted home of Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa of Tibetan Buddhism, who fled to India in 2000. Although his official seat is Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, the teenaged leader of the Kagyu (Black Hat) sect has been banned from taking up his seat for fear this would upset the Chinese government.

The temporary seat of the Karmapa is the large **Gyuto Tantric Gompa** (☎ 01892-236637) in Sidhibari. Public audiences take place here on Wednesday and Saturday at 2pm; foreign visitors are welcome but security is tight and bags, phones and cameras are not allowed inside the auditorium.

Nearby is the **Tapovan Ashram**, a popular spiritual retreat for devotees of Rama, with a colourful Ram Mandir, a giant black Shiva lingam and a 6m-high statue of Hanuman.

Regular local buses run from Dharamsala to Sidhibari (Rs 5, 15 minutes) or you can take a taxi for Rs 250 return. Tapovan is a 2km walk south along a quiet country road.

Norbulingka Institute

☎ 01892

About 6km from Dharamsala, the wonderful **Norbulingka Institute** (☎ 246402; www.norbulingka.org; ☎ 8am-6pm) was established in 1988 to teach and preserve traditional Tibetan art forms, including woodcarving, statue-making, *thangka* painting and embroidery. The centre produces expensive but exquisite souvenirs, including embroidered clothes, cushions and wall hangings, and sales benefit refugee artists. Also here are delightful Japanese-influenced **gardens** and a central **Buddhist temple** with a 4m-high gilded statue of Sakyamuni. Next to the shop is the **Losel Doll Museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/20; ☎ 9am-5.30pm), with quaint puppet dioramas of Tibetan life. A short walk behind the complex is the large **Dolma Ling** Buddhist nunnery.

Set in the gorgeous Norbulingka gardens, the characterful **Norling Guest House** (☎ 246406; nor-mail@norbulingka.org; s/d from Rs 1000/1150) offers fairy-tale rooms decked out with Buddhist murals and handicrafts from the institute. Meals are available at the institute's Norling Café.

To get here, catch a Yol-bound bus from Dharamsala and ask to be let off at Sidhpur (Rs

5, 15 minutes), near the Sacred Heart School, from where it's a 15-minute walk. A taxi from Dharamsala will cost Rs 250 return.

EAST OF DHARAMSALA

Palampur

☎ 01894 / elev 1249m

About 30km southeast of Dharamsala, Palampur is a small junction town surrounded by tea plantations and rice fields. A short trek from town takes you to the pretty waterfall in **Bundla Chasm**, or you can pass a pleasant few hours observing the tea-making process at the **Palampur Tea Cooperative** (☎ 230220; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Fri), on the Mandi side of town.

Pine's Hotel (☎ 232633; r Rs 150-350) wins no prizes for interior decoration, but the price is right. Cheaper rooms share facilities.

HPTDC Hotel T-Bud (☎ 231298; d Rs 700-1300), 1km north of Main Bazaar on the edge of town, has large grounds and a good restaurant; rooms are spacious and well kept.

The new bus station is 1km south of Main Bazar; an autorickshaw from the centre costs Rs 20. Buses leave all day for Dharamsala (Rs 20, two hours) and Kangra (Rs 29, 1½ hours). A taxi from Dharamsala costs Rs 550. Palampur is a stop on the Pathankot-Jogindernagar rail line.

Bajjnath

☎ 01894 / elev 1010m

The small town of Bajjnath, set on a mountain-facing ridge 46km southeast of Dharamsala, is an important pilgrimage destination. In the middle of the village is the exquisitely carved **Baidyanath Temple**, sacred to Shiva in his incarnation as Vaidyanath, Lord of the Physicians, dating from the 8th century. Thousands of pilgrims make their way here for the **Shivaratri Festival** (p283) in late February and early March.

Most people visit on a day trip, or a stop on the journey from Mandi to Dharamsala. Buses from Dharamsala pass through several times a day (Rs 35, two hours). The Pathankot-Jogindernagar rail line passes through Paprola, about 1km west of the main bus stand. A return taxi from Dharamsala costs Rs 1000.

Tashijong & Taragarh

About 5km west of Bajjnath, and 2km north from the Palampur road, the village of Tashi-

jong is home to a small community of Drukpa Kagyud monks and refugees. The centre of life here is the **Tashijong Gompa**, with several mural-filled prayer halls and a carpet-making, *thangka*-painting and woodcarving cooperative.

About 2km south of Tashijong, at Taragarh, is the extraordinary **Taragarh Palace** (☎ in Delhi 011-24643046; www.taragarh.com; r from Rs 3500-5000; ♿ ♿), the summer palace of the last maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Now a luxury hotel, this elegant country seat is full of portraits of the Dogra royal family, Italian marble, crystal chandeliers, tiger skins and other ostentatious furnishings. There's a restaurant, a fully equipped gym and gorgeous grounds with a pool.

Both villages can be reached on the buses that run along the Mandi–Palampur highway – just tell the bus driver where you want to get off. A taxi from McLeod Ganj is Rs 600/800 one way/return.

Bir & Billing

About 9km east of Baijnath, a road winds uphill to the village of Bir (1300m), a small Tibetan colony with three peaceful **gompas** that welcome passing visitors, and Billing (2600m), a famous launch pad for paragliding and hang-gliding. In 1992 the world record of 135km for an out-and-return flight was set here. International teams come to challenge the record every May for the **Himalayan Hang-Gliding Rally** (p283). You need your own gear to enjoy the thermals, but inquire locally about tandem flights.

A taxi from McLeod Ganj to Billing will cost Rs 700. Alternatively, travel by bus or train to Jogindernagar (on the route to Mandi) and take a taxi there for Rs 300 return.

SOUTHWEST OF DHARAMSALA

Kangra

☎ 01892 / elev 734m

The former capital of the princely state of Kangra, this bustling pilgrim town is an easy day trip from McLeod Ganj. Hindus visit to pay homage at the **Brajeshwari Devi Temple**, one of the 51 *Shakti peeths*, the famous temples marking the sites where body parts from Shiva's first wife, Sati, fell after the goddess was consumed by flames – the Brajeshwari temple marks the final resting place of Sati's left breast (see p486 for more on the legend).

Famous for its wealth, the temple was looted by a string of invaders, from Mahmud

of Ghazni to Jehangir, before collapsing in the 1905 earthquake. Rebuilt in the original style, the temple is reached through an atmospheric bazaar winding uphill from the main road, lined with shops selling *prasad* and religious trinkets.

On the far side of town, a Rs 80 autorickshaw ride from the bus stand, the impregnable-looking **Kangra Fort** (Nagar Kot; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☼ dawn-dusk) soars above the confluence of the Manjhi and Banganga Rivers. The fort was used by Hindu rajahs, Mughal warlords and even the British before it was finally toppled by the earthquake of 1905. On clear days, head to the battlements for views north to the mountains and south to the plains. A small **museum** at the fort has stone carvings from temples inside the compound and miniature paintings from the Kangra School.

SLEEPING & EATING

Royal Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 265013; royalhotel@rediffmail.com; r Rs 400-450) Located on the main road between the steps of the main temple and the bus stand, the Royal has neat, tiled rooms with hot showers, plus a decent restaurant.

Hotel Maurya (☎ 265875; r Rs 350-550, with AC Rs 850) A little closer to the bus stand, Hotel Maurya benefits from regular licks of paint and rooms are good for the price.

For meals, eat at your hotel or try one of the many *dhabas* in the centre of town and along the bazaar that runs up to Brajeshwari Devi.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kangra's bus stand is 1.5km north of the temple bazaar, a Rs 20 autorickshaw ride from the centre. There are frequent buses to Dharamsala (Rs 14, one hour), Palampur (Rs 29, 1½ hours), Pathankot (Rs 65, three hours) and Jawalamukhi (Rs 25, 1½ hours).

Trains pull into Kangra Mandir station, 3km east of town, and Kangra station, 5km south, accessible by autorickshaw for Rs 50 and Rs 100 respectively. Travellers have reported problems getting an auto from the stations into town.

Taxis in Kangra charge Rs 200 to Gaggal airport, Rs 350 to Dharamsala, and Rs 500 to McLeod Ganj, Jawalamukhi or Masur.

Masur

A winding road runs southwest from Gaggal through pleasant green hills to the 10th century **temples** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☼ dawn-dusk)

at Masrur. Although badly damaged by the 1905 earthquake, the *sikharas* owe more than a passing resemblance to the Hindu temples at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. You can climb to the upper level for mountain views.

The easiest way to get here is by taxi from McLeod Ganj (Rs 900 return), or you can get as far as Lunj (Rs 15, 1½ hours) from Dharamsala by public bus and take a local taxi for the last few kilometres.

Jawalamukhi

☎ 01970

About 34km south of Kangra is the **temple** of Jawalamukhi, the goddess of light, worshipped in the form of a natural gas eternal flame, issuing from the rocks. The temple is one of the 51 *Shakti peeths*, marking the spot where the tongue of Shiva's first wife Sati fell after her body was consumed by flames (see p486 for more on the legend). The gold dome and spire was installed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the 'Lion of Punjab', who never went into battle without seeking a blessing from the temple.

HPTDC Hotel Jawalaji (☎ 222280; r from Rs 500, with AC from Rs 1100; ♿) is a superior HTPDC property, with well-loved rooms, conveniently located for walks to the temple and outlying countryside.

Buses to Dharamsala (Rs 40, 1½ hours) and Kangra (Rs 25, 1½ hours) leave all day from the stand below the road leading up to the temple. Taxis charge Rs 700/1000 one way/return from McLeod Ganj.

CHAMBA VALLEY

The Chamba Valley is another splendidly isolated valley system, cut off from the Kangra Valley by the Dhauladhar Range and from Kashmir by the Pir Panjal. This area was ruled for centuries as the princely state of Chamba, the most ancient state in North India. Even though good roads connect Chamba with Pathankot and Kangra, surprisingly few foreign visitors make it out here, with even fewer continuing down the valley beyond the old hill station of Dalhousie.

The official website for Chamba is <http://hpchamba.nic.in>.

Dalhousie

☎ 01899 / pop 10,500 / elev 2036m

Dalhousie is another of those 'little pieces of England' that the British left behind after Independence. Since Independence, the colonial

mansions have been joined by the posh Dalhousie Public School and numerous modern hotels catering to honeymooners from the plains. There isn't much to do but stroll and admire the views, which is rather the point of coming here.

Quite a few Tibetan refugees have made a home in Dalhousie and there are painted **rock carvings** of Buddhist deities along the south side of the ridge. You can also visit the British-era churches of **St John** and **St Francis**, set amongst the pines at opposite ends of the ridge. Pony rides can be arranged for about Rs 100 per hour.

ORIENTATION

Unusually for a hill station, there are few steep roads. The built-up areas at Subhash Chowk and Gandhi Chowk are linked by two level alleys – Thandi Sarak (Cold Rd), and Garam Sarak (Hot Rd), which gets more sunshine. The bus stand is about 1km downhill.

The high season – when room prices double and availability dwindles – runs from April to July, September to late October, and Christmas to New Year.

Street lighting is limited so bring a torch.

INFORMATION

HPTDC tourist office (☎ 242225; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, open Sun Apr–Jul) Opposite the bus stand; can advise on bus times.

Punjab National Bank (Hospital Rd; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm Sat) About 300m south of Subhash Chowk; travellers cheques preferred to cash.

Trek-n-Travellers (☎ 205860; Tibetan Market) Near the bus stand; can arrange treks around Chamba.

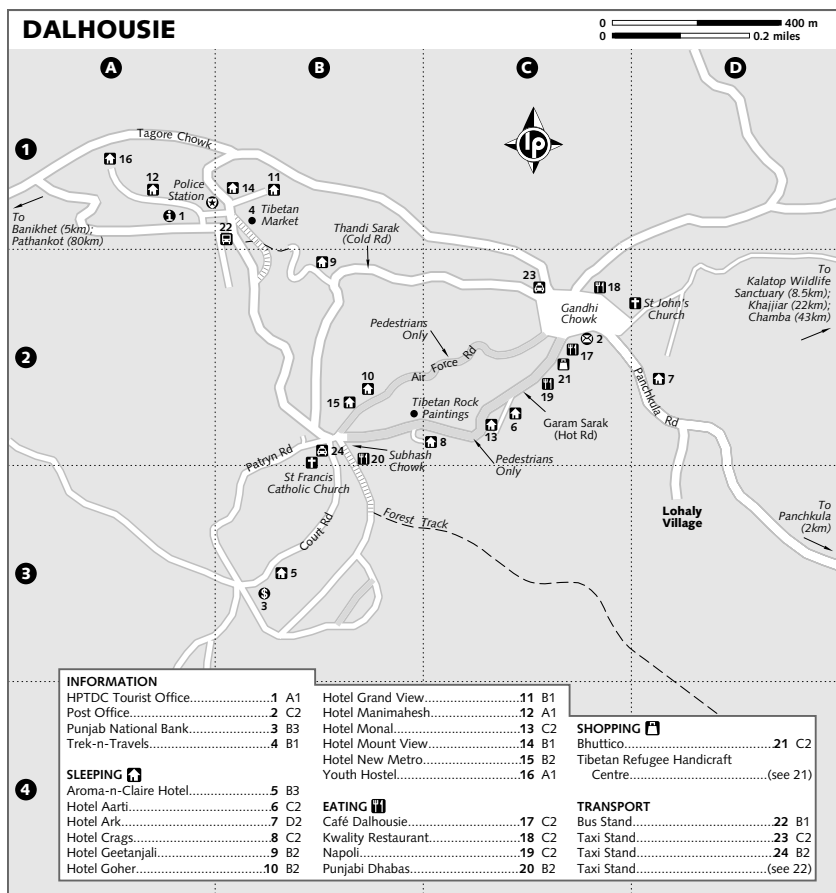
SLEEPING

In the off season, expect discounts of at least 50%. Unless stated, the following offer rooms with TV and bathrooms with hot showers.

Budget

Youth Hostel (☎ 242189; yh_dalhousie@rediffmail.com; dm with private bathroom Rs 60, r Rs 200; ♿) A 200m walk down a back lane opposite the bus stand, Dalhousie's hostel is as clean as a new pin. Dorms are single sex, showers are hot, and facilities include a net café and dining hall. Rooms must be vacated from 10am to 12.30pm for cleaning, but you're welcome to pass the time downstairs.

Hotel Craggs (☎ 242124; Garam Sarak; r Rs 350–500, cottage Rs 650) A steep climb below the Subhash



Chowk end of Garam Sarak, this big old colonial house has huge faded rooms and a large front terrace offering spectacular views of the valley.

Sharing a lane below Garam Sarak, **Hotel Monal** (☎ 242362; r from Rs 500) and **Hotel Aarti** (☎ 242433; r Rs 350) offer almost identical facilities: simple but clean rooms with TVs and tiled bathrooms. Hotel Aarti has the better views.

Midrange & Top End

The HPTDC runs two decent hotels in Dalhousie – **Hotel Geetanjali** (☎ 242155; r Rs 550-800) offers worn colonial charm in an old house just off Thandi Sarak, while **Hotel Manimahesh** (☎ 242793; Bus Stand; r Rs 1100-2000) offers large,

modern rooms with sublime Pir Panjal views.

Hotel Ark (☎ 240605; Panchkula Rd; r Rs 700-1400) A wonderful colonial folly, built in 1941 in the style of a Mughal mausoleum. Spiral staircases wind up the mock minarets to large, modern rooms. Book a deluxe room for a front lounge with valley views.

Aroma-n-Claire Hotel (☎ 242199; Court Rd; r from Rs 1000) Sadly closed for renovation when we visited, this hotel is owned by a family of collectors who have filled the place with bizarre bric-a-brac and intriguing found objects. It should have reopened by the time you read this.

Hotel Mount View (☎ 242120; www.hotelmountview.com; Bus Stand; r from Rs 1600, ste from Rs 2400) Dark wood and period knick-knacks lend a pukka

feel to the Mount View, built as the British departed in 1947. Rooms fall somewhere between chintzy and charming.

Hotel Grand View (☎ 240760; www.grandviewdalhousie.in; s/d Rs 1600/1900, ste Rs 2900) More than living up to its name, this stately 1920s hotel has oodles of colonial charm. The rooms, restaurant and bar are a flashback to the Raj and the fabulous gardens gaze across to the ice-capped peaks of the Pir Panjal.

Several modern concrete hotels are clustered together on Air Force Rd, just above Subhash Chowk, offering comfortable but bland accommodation. **Hotel Goher** (☎ 242253; goherdeepak@yahoo.com; r from Rs 700) and **Hotel New Metro** (☎ 242775; r from Rs 770) are decent choices.

EATING

Both Subhash Chowk and Gandhi Chowk have places to eat. Most restaurants are open from 9am to 10pm, but alcohol is only served at the big hotels.

For a cheap treat, there are several Punjabi *dhabas* on the south side of Subhash Chowk. All are called *Sher-E-something* and all serve good food for Rs 70 or less.

Café Dalhousie (snacks Rs 20-50; ☎ from 8am) A huge wood-floored place serving excellent and cheap dosas and other South Indian snacks, with hot chai to wash it down.

Kwality Restaurant (Gandhi Chowk; dishes Rs 40-120) With an extensive menu, this restaurant is popular with Indian families and specialises in burgers, pizza and sizzlers.

Napoli (Garam Sarak; dishes Rs 45-200) A short walk down from Gandhi Chowk, Napoli skips Italian food in favour of familiar but well-prepared Indian and Chinese favourites.

SHOPPING

Close to Gandhi Chowk on Garam Sarak, you'll find fair-priced shawls and hats at **Bhut-tico** (☎ 240440; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) and a good selection of Tibetan carpets and handicrafts at the **Tibetan Refugee Handicraft Centre** (☎ 240607; ☎ 10am-7pm Wed-Mon).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus

The booking office at the bus stand is invariably closed; for long-distance services, take any south-bound bus to the larger bus station in Banikhet (Rs 5, 10 minutes). Buses run throughout the day to Chamba (Rs 45, 2½

hours); around half the buses go via Khajjiar (Rs 16, one hour). In season, there's a special sightseeing bus (Rs 200) at 10am that does a circuit of Khajjiar and Chamba, with two hours at each stop. If there's no direct bus to Chamba, change in Banikhet.

Other services include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Amritsar	110	7	9.50am
Delhi	350	12	3pm
Dharamsala	100	6	7am, 11.50am & 2pm
Jammu	145	6	10am
Pathankot	54	3	10 daily
Shimla	270	12	12.30pm

Taxi

There are unionised taxi stands at Subhash Chowk, Gandhi Chowk and the bus stand. From the bus stand, you'll pay Rs 50 to Subhash Chowk and Rs 80 to Gandhi Chowk. Other one-way fares:

Destination	Fare (Rs)
Bharmour	1850
Chamba	900
Dharamsala	1950
Kalatop	510
Khajjiar	560
Pathankot	1150

Around Dalhousie

KALATOP WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Midway between Dalhousie and Chamba, accessible by taxi or public bus, the forested hills around Khajjiar are preserved as the **Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary**. The pine forests provide excellent walking country and you have a chance of spotting langur monkeys, barking deer and black bears. Buses between Dalhousie and Khajjiar pass the park entrance at **Lakkar Mandi**.

KHAJJJIAR

About 22km from Dalhousie, this grassy *marg* (meadow) is ringed by pines and thronged by holidaymakers from the plains. On the shore of the central pond is the slate hut-style **Khajjinag Temple**, with fine woodcarvings and crude effigies of the five Pandavas, installed here in the 16th century.

ZORBING

Many of Himachal's winter resorts have found a new lease of life in summer through the sport of zorb. One of the goofier pieces of sports equipment, the *zorb* is a human-sized hamster ball made from clear inflatable plastic. Passengers climb in through a tiny porthole and the zorb is pushed to the edge of the slope where gravity takes its inevitable course. The 'zorbonaut' has no way of controlling the ball but being out of control is part of the thrill. Staff are on hand to catch you at the bottom, so you won't roll all the way down to the Punjab. Popular spots for a roll include Solang Nullah (p317) near Manali and Khajjiar (opposite) near Dalhousie.

In season, **pony rides** around the lake cost Rs 110 and **zorb**ing on the meadow costs Rs 150 – see the boxed text, above. About 1km from Khajjiar towards Chamba is a gaudy modern **temple** with a monumental statue of Shiva.

There are plenty of fast-food restaurants and several hotels, but most foreigners make a day trip here by bus from Chamba (19, 1½ hours) or Dalhousie (Rs 16, one hour). Buses run on this route five times a day.

Chamba

☎ 01899 / pop 20,700 / elev 996m

Well off the tourist circuit, the charming capital of Chamba district is dominated by the former palaces of the local maharajas. The princely state of Chamba was founded in AD 920 by Raja Sahil Varman and it survived for 1000 years until finally falling to the British in 1845. Every year since 935, Chamba has celebrated the annual harvest with the **Minjar Festival** (p283) in July/August in honour of Raghuvira (an incarnation of Rama).

Chamba sits on a ledge above the Ravi River. The de facto centre of town is the open grassy sports field known as the Chowgan, the focus for festivals, impromptu cricket matches, picnics and promenades. Most places of interest are tucked away in the alleyways of Dogra Bazar, which runs uphill past the maharaja's palace.

INFORMATION

There's an international ATM at the State Bank of India, near the court house.

Cyberia (per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Near Hotel Aroma Palace, with decent connections.

Himachal Tourist Office (☎ 224002; Court Rd;

☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) In the courtyard of Hotel Iravati, has limited local information.

Post office (Museum Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Handles parcels till 3.30pm.

Punjab National Bank (Hospital Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Only changes travellers cheques.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Lakshmi Narayan Temple Complex

Opposite the Akhand Chandi Palace are six *sikhara* **temples** dating from the 10th to 19th centuries, built in the Himachal stone-hut style and covered in carvings. The largest (and oldest) is dedicated to Lakshmi Narayan (Vishnu). In front is a distinctive Nepali-style pillar topped by a statue of Vishnu's faithful servant, the man-bird Garuda. The remaining temples are sacred to Radha Krishna, Shiva, Gauri Shankar, Triambkeshwar Mahdev and Lakshmi Damodar. The compound has a small **museum** (admission free; ☎ 11am-3pm Mon-Sat) displaying religious artefacts.

Other Temples

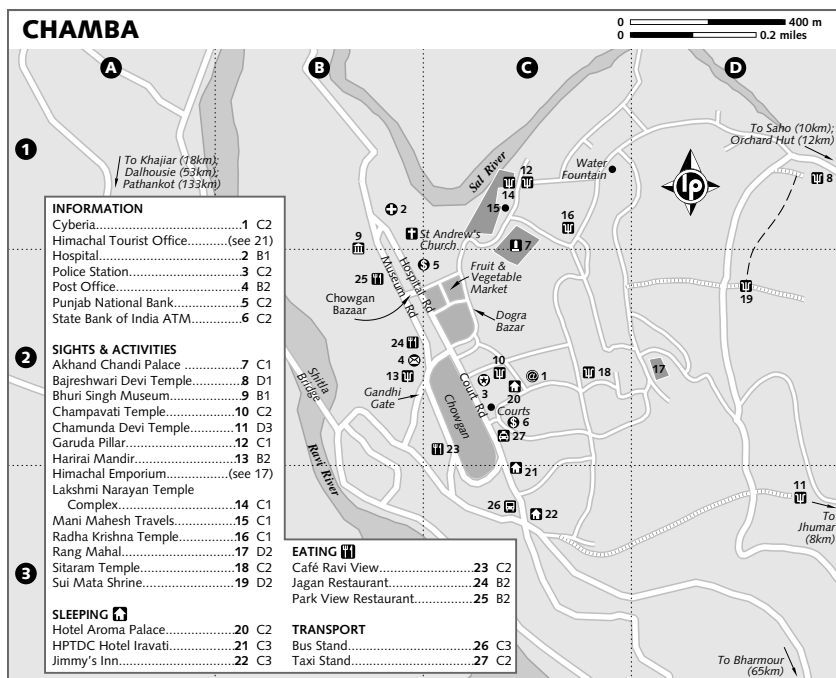
On the hilltop above the Rang Mahal, reached via a set of steps near the bus stand, or by taxi along the road to Jhumar, the stone **Chamunda Devi Temple** features impressive carvings of Chamunda Devi (Durga in her wrathful aspect) and superior views of Chamba and the Dhauladhar. About 500m north along the road to Saho, the **Bajreshwari Devi Temple** is a handsome hut-style mandir with exquisite e-figies of Bajreshwari (an incarnation of Durga) set into plinths around the walls.

Between the two is a small shrine to **Sui Mata**, a local princess who gave her life to appease a water spirit that was causing a terrible drought in Chamba. The goddess is highly venerated by local women and the four-day **Sui Mata Mela** (p283) is celebrated each April on the Chowgan in her honour.

By the Chowgan is 11th century **Harirai Mandir**, sacred to Vishnu. Dotted nearby Akhand Chandi Palace are similar stone temples to **Radha Krishna**, **Sitaram** (Rama) and **Champavati** – daughter of Raja Sahil Varman, worshipped locally as an incarnation of Durga.

Historic Buildings

Uphill from Chowgan in Dogra Bazar is the stately white **Akhand Chandi Palace**, the former



home of the Chamba raja. Built in 1764, the central Darbar Hall is reminiscent of many civic buildings in Kathmandu. It now houses a postgraduate college; you can peek inside during school hours.

A few blocks southeast is the fortress-like **Rang Mahal** (Old Palace), which once housed the royal granary and treasury. It now houses the **Himachal Emporium** (☎ 222333; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), which sells Chamba's famous *rumals* – pieces of cloth finely embroidered in silk, with a perfect mirror image of the same pattern on the reverse side and no evidence of knots or loose threads. Prices start at Rs 300.

Bhuri Singh Museum

Founded in 1908, the town **museum** (☎ 222590; Museum Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, camera Rs 50/100; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun, closed 2nd Sat each month) has a fabulous collection of miniature paintings from the Chamba, Kangra and Basohli schools, plus woodcarvings, weapons, *rumals* (local embroidery), relics from the rajas and ornately carved fountain slabs from around the Chamba Valley.

TOURS

Near the Lakshmi Narayan complex, **Mani Mahesh Travels** (☎ 222507, mobile 9816620401; manimahestravels@yahoo.com) can arrange treks with guides and porters in the foothills of the Pir Panjal and Dhuala Dhar (Rs 900 to Rs 1650 per person per day, depending on altitude), as well as informative tours of Chamba's temples (from Rs 450).

SLEEPING

All the following places offer rooms with TVs and geysers.

Jimmy's Inn (☎ 224748; dm Rs 50, r Rs 200-300) A run-of-the-mill cheapie near the bus stand. Rooms don't get much light, but a TV and hot shower are welcome additions at this price.

Orchard Hut (☎ 222607; orchardhut@hotmail.com; r Rs 200-400) About 12km from Chamba in the tranquil Saal Valley, this friendly village guesthouse is a peaceful place to commune with nature. Meals are available and there are some delightful walks in the area. Go to Mani Mahesh Travels in Chamba first (above) and staff will arrange transfers.

Hotel Aroma Palace (☎ 225577; hotelaromapalace@yahoo.com; dm Rs 100, s/d from Rs 400/500; 📺) Up an alley near the taxi stand, this big, modern place has a range of tidy rooms, a net café, restaurant and a sunny terrace. Cheaper rooms have their own bathroom outside off the hall.

HPTDC Hotel Iravati (☎ 222671; Court Rd; d Rs 600-1400) Conveniently located at the south end of Chowgan, the Iravati offers large, well-equipped rooms and a better-than-average in-house restaurant.

EATING & DRINKING

Chamba is known for its *chukh* – a chilli sauce consisting of red and green peppers, lemon juice and mustard oil, served as a condiment in most restaurants. Most places are open from 8am to 10pm.

Café Ravi View (Chowgan; snacks Rs 20-40; 🕒 9am-9pm) A modern HPTDC-run snack house, on the river side of Chowgan, serving Indian and Chinese fast food – including a bargain veg thalis (Rs 35) – plus icy cold beers.

Jagan Restaurant (Museum Rd; dishes Rs 25-100) Opposite the Dogra Bazar, this place offers the tasty Chamba speciality *chamba madhra* (kidney beans with curd and ghee) for Rs 65, plus a good selection of veg curries.

Park View Restaurant (Museum Rd; dishes Rs 30-70) A great little restaurant serving tasty veg and nonveg food – order some *jheera* rice and curd and a copper pail of dhal on the side. Beer and spirits are served surreptitiously under the table.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Six daily buses make the hair-raising run to Bharmour (Rs 49, 3½ hours), though the road can be temporarily blocked by rockfalls. Buses for Dalhousie run every two hours (Rs 45, 2½ hours), some going via Khajjiar (Rs 19, 1½

hours). For information on other bus services, see the table, left.

Taxis charge Rs 400 to Khajjiar, Rs 800 to Bharmour and Rs 900 to Dalhousie.

Bharmour

☎ 01895 / elev 2195m

From Chamba, a perilous mountain road winds 65km east to the ancient slate-roofed village of Bharmour, hovering on the edge of a seemingly bottomless valley. Bharmour was the capital of the princely state of Chamba until AD 920, and there are fascinating temples and treks to surrounding mountain passes. The villages around Bharmour are home to the semi-nomadic Gaddis, pastoralists who move their flocks up to alpine pastures during the summer, and descend to Kangra, Mandi and Bilaspur in winter.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Reached through the bazaar leading uphill from the jeep stand, the **Chaurasi temples** are some of Himachal's finest. Built in the classic stone-*sikhara* style, with wide slate canopies, the Shaivite temples are spread over a flagstone courtyard that doubles as an outdoor classroom for local schools. Highlights of the compound are the towering **Manimahesh Temple**, built in the 6th century AD, and the squat **Lakshna Devi Temple**, featuring an eroded but wildly carved wooden doorway.

Treks from Bharmour can be arranged through **Himalayan Travelling Agency** (☎ 225059), by the HP State Coop Bank, and the **Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports** (☎ 225036), on the track above the jeep stand. Expect to pay around Rs 1000 per day, including food, tents, guides and porters. The trekking season lasts from May to late October.

Possible destinations include Keylong and Udaipur in Lahaul, Baijnath and Dharamsala in the Kangra Valley, and the sacred lake at **Manimahesh**, a three-day, 35km hike above Bharmour. In August/September, pilgrims take a freezing dip in Manimahesh Lake as part of the **Manimahesh Yatra** (p283) in honour of Lord Shiva.

SLEEPING & EATING

Chamunda Guest House (☎ 225056; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 100/150) On the lower road through Bharmour, past the PWD Rest House, this lemon-yellow village house has a range of simple, cement-floored rooms with bucket

BUSES FROM CHAMBA

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Dehra Dun	230	10	7pm
Delhi	370-390	17	12.40pm & 3pm
Dharamsala	140	8	4 daily
Jammu	160	7	7.30am
Pathankot	85	5	frequent
Shimla	300	14	4 daily

hot water. The owners are friendly, but limited English is spoken.

Soma Sapan Guesthouse (☎ 225337; r from Rs 300) On the track running away from the temples behind the jeep stand, this small guesthouse has a range of decent rooms, soothed by the sound of a rushing stream. Call ahead to check it's open before walking up here.

Chaurasi Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 225615; r Rs 300-500; dishes Rs 35-80) Set to reopen by the time you read this, after a big refurb, this tall wood-and-brick hotel on the temple road has generous-sized rooms with soaring views over the valley. The restaurant here is probably Bharmour's best.

As well as hotel restaurants, there are several *dhabas* on the path to the Chaurasi temples.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave every few hours for the thrilling trip to Chamba (Rs 49, 3½ hours), but expect delays due to landslides. Taxis charge Rs 800/1000 one way/return.

LAHAUL & SPITI

The largest district in Himachal Pradesh, Lahaul and Spiti is also one of the most sparsely populated regions on earth. This rugged network of interlocking river valleys lies in the rain shadow of the Himalaya – 12,000 sq km of snow-topped mountains and high-altitude desert, punctuated by tiny patches of greenery and villages of whitewashed mud-brick houses clinging to the sides of rivers and meltwater streams.

As in Zaskar and Ladakh, Buddhism is the dominant religion, though there are small pockets of Hinduism in Lahaul, where many temples are sacred to Buddhist and Hindu deities. According to legend, some monasteries in Lahaul were founded personally by Padmasambhava, the Indian monk who converted Tibet to Buddhism in the 8th century AD.

Manali is the main gateway to Lahaul and Spiti. A seasonal highway runs north over the Rohtang La (3978m) to Keylong, the capital of Lahaul, continuing to Ladakh over the mighty Baralacha La (4950m) and Tanglang La (5328m). Side roads branch west to the little-visited Pattan Valley and east to Spiti over the 4551m Kunzum La. Growing numbers of travellers are visiting Lahaul and Spiti as part of the Great Himalayan Circuit from Kashmir to Kinnaur (p33).

Snow closes all the mountain passes in winter. The Rohtang La, Baralacha La and Tanglang La are normally open from June to late October, while the Kunzum La to Spiti is accessible from July to October. Exact dates depend on snow conditions at the passes. At other times, the only way into the area is the rugged Hindustan–Tibet Hwy from Rekong Peo in Kinnaur. Whichever way you come, the rapid climbs in altitude bring a risk of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS; see p1188).

For more information on Lahaul and Spiti, visit the local government website at <http://hplahaulspiti.gov.in>.

History

Buddhism arrived in Lahaul and Spiti during the 8th century AD with the Indian missionary Padmasambhava. By the 10th century, upper Lahaul, Spiti and Zaskar had been incorporated into the vast Guge kingdom of western Tibet. The Great Translator, Ringchen Zangpo, founded a series of centres of Buddhist learning along the Spiti Valley, including Tabo, one of the most remarkable Buddhist monasteries in North India.

After the kings of Ladakh were defeated by Mongol-Tibetan armies in the 18th century, the region was divided up by the surrounding powers. Lower Lahaul fell to the rajahs of Chamba, Upper Lahaul came under the sway of the rajahs of Kullu and geographically isolated Spiti became part of Ladakh.

In 1847 Ladakh and Spiti were conquered by the Dogra Rajahs of Kashmir, and Kullu and Lahaul came under British administration as a subdivision of the kingdom of Kangra; Spiti was added two years later. Despite the change of regimes, the region maintained strong links with Tibet right up until the Chinese occupation in 1949.

Since then, there has been a major resurgence in the cultural and religious life of Spiti, aided by the work of the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala. The gompas of Lahaul and Spiti are being restored and money from tourism and hydroelectricity is improving living conditions for the farming communities who get snowed in here each winter.

Climate

Lahaul and Spiti have a markedly different climate to the rest of Himachal Pradesh. The limited rainfall and high altitude – mostly above 3000m – ensures desperately cold

conditions in winter. Even in summer, temperatures rarely rise above 15°C, and winter temperatures can plummet below -30°C!

Realistically, the region is only open to travellers when the mountain passes are open, from early June/July to late October. Whenever you travel, bring plenty of clothing for cold weather. See the boxed text, p367, for more tips on high-altitude travel.

LAHAUL

Separated from the Kullu Valley by the 4551m Kunzum La, Lahaul is greener and more developed than Ladakh and Spiti, but most travellers whistle straight through on the way to Manali or Leh, missing most of what Lahaul has to offer. The capital, Keylong, is an easy stop on the popular Leh–Manali bus trip and you can detour to a number of mountain villages and medieval monasteries that are blissfully untouched by mass tourism.

Government buses between Manali and Leh run from mid-July to mid-September and private buses and share jeeps run till mid-October. Services as far as Keylong continue until the Rohtang La closes in November, and buses east to Kaza stop when the Kunzum La closes in October. Check the status of the passes before visiting late in the season – once the snows arrive, you might be stuck for the winter.

Manali to Keylong

From Manali the road to Leh strikes north along the Beas River Valley and climbs slowly through pine forests to the bare rocky slopes below **Rohtang La** (3978m). The name literally translates as ‘pile of dead bodies’ – a reference to the hundreds of travellers who have frozen to death here over the centuries. Many Indian tourists make a day trip to Rohtang La from Manali for their first taste of snow, stopping at the *dhabas* in **Mirhi** to warm up with hot chai and *aloo paratha* (potato flat-bread).

On the far side of the pass, the road plunges down into the green Lahaul Valley, a soothing landscape of rocky buttresses and green alpine meadows. About 66km northwest of Manali, the tiny hamlet of **Gramphu** marks the turn-off to Spiti. There is only one building in Gramphu – a rustic stone *dhaba* beside a stream where you’ll have to wait for the bus if you’re heading to Kaza from Keylong.

Khoksar, 5km northwest of Gramphu, has several *dhabas* and a police checkpoint where

INNER LINE PERMITS

To travel between Tabo in Spiti and Rekgong Peo in Kinnaur, travellers need an inner line permit. This is easily arranged in Kaza – free permits are issued in around two hours by the **Assistant District Commissioner’s Office** (☎ 222002; ✉ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, closed 2nd Sat each month) in New Kaza – look for the grey-roofed building behind the hospital. There are several forms to fill out and you need two passport photos and photocopies of the identity and visa pages from your passport – both can be arranged in the old village bazaar. Officially, travellers should be in a group of four, but this office routinely issues permits for individual travellers as well as groups. Permits can also be obtained in Rekgong Peo and Shimla.

foreigners must show passports. The road passes through a sheer-sided valley, hemmed in by rock walls and the white tips of mountain glaciers. There’s a spectacular hanging waterfall opposite the tiny village of **Sissu**, and you may be able to stay at the **PWD Rest House** (r Rs 350).

About 18km before Keylong, **Gondla** is famous for its eight-storey tower fort, built from alternating layers of stone and timber. Once the home of the local *thakur* (king), the fort is no longer occupied, but it’s still an impressive sight. Try to visit during the lively **Gondla Fair** in July. From Gondla, you can hike 4km to the village of **Tupchiling** to visit historic **Guru Ghantal Gompa**, allegedly founded by Padmasambhava. Although crumbling, the gompa contains ancient murals and wooden statues of bodhisattvas (Buddhist saints). Gondla has a basic hotel and a **PWD Rest House** (r Rs 350) that may accept travellers.

Pattan Valley

About 8km south of Keylong at Tandi, a side road branches northwest along the Pattan Valley towards **Udaipur**. Overlooking the Chenab River, it’s a peaceful spot with a few basic hotels and the plain-looking **Markula Devi Temple**, which hides fabulous wooden panels depicting scenes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, carved in the 12th century.

From Udaipur, you can backtrack 9km along the valley to the squat stone temple at **Triloknath**, founded as a Shiva temple but

converted into a Buddhist shrine by the sage Padmasambhava. Hindus worship the idol inside as Shiva while Buddhists venerate it as Avalokitesvara. Triloknath is a major pilgrimage site for both religions during the **Pauri Festival** (p283) in August.

Buses run here daily from Keylong (Rs 40, two hours) and Manali (Rs 121, nine hours).

Keylong

☎ 01900 / elev 3350m

The capital of Lahaul sprawls along one side of the green Bhaga Valley, spread out below the Manali–Leh highway. It's a friendly little town that has experienced a major economic boom since it became the main overnight stop for buses travelling between Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh. Many travellers stop just for the night and leave early the next morning, but there are interesting walks in the surrounding hills and the pace of life is easy and unhurried.

By the time you read this, the bus stand should have moved from the highway to the shiny new bus stand down in the valley, where you'll find most of the hotels. At the south end of town is the moderately interesting **Lahaul & Spiti Tribal Museum** (admission fee to be decided; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), with traditional costumes, old dance masks and treasures from local gompas.

Keylong celebrates the annual **Lahaul Festival** (p283) in July with a big, bustling market and various cultural activities.

SLEEPING & EATING

All the following places offer rooms with bathrooms and geysers. Ask about discounts outside of the main tourist season (July to September).

Nalwa Paying Guest (☎ 222612; dm Rs 50, r from Rs 300) Above some shops on the highway, this place offers decent rooms with geysers; some rooms have valley views.

Hotel Dupchen (☎ 222205; s/d Rs 200/250) A popular local restaurant, serving Indian and Tibetan staples, with a few spic-and-span rooms upstairs.

Hotel Tashi Deleg (☎ 222343; r Rs 300/1500) Next to the main bazaar, this smart-looking place has a cosy restaurant serving cold beers and good Indian-Chinese food. The luxury rooms are slightly overpriced, but cheaper rooms are just right and many have good valley views. If the manager is around, you can change US dollars at reception.

Hotel Snowland (☎ 222219; r Rs 550–1050) Snowland benefits from bright colours and a lawn offering gorgeous views across to Khardong. All rooms are cheerfully chintzy and the deluxe rooms sleep three.

HPTDC Hotel Chander Bhaga (☎ 222393; dm Rs 150, r Rs 1000–1600; ☎ Jun–Oct) North of Keylong on the highway, this huge hotel is styled after an alpine ski chalet. Although overpriced, rooms are spacious and well appointed and the dorm is a bargain.

Aside from the hotel restaurants, there are plenty of *dhabas* on the highway and along the bazaar.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Keylong is the official overnight stop for government buses travelling between Manali and, Leh so there are regular services in both directions when the mountain passes are open – typically June to October. However, bookings are only taken in Manali, so it can be hard to find a seat on to Ladakh. If you find yourself in this predicament, the only option may be backtracking all the way to Manali.

Assuming you get a seat, buses to Leh (Rs 440) leave at 5am, arriving at around 8pm the same evening. There around five daily buses to Manali (Rs 87, six hours). For Kaza take the 5.30am bus and change at Gramphu (Rs 38, two hours); the bus to Kaza (Rs 102, eight hours) pulls in around 8.30am.

For the Pattan Valley, there are two daily buses to Udaipur (Rs 40, two hours). Infrequent local buses run south to Gondla (Rs 18, 40 minutes) and north to Jispa (Rs 17, 40 minutes) and Darcha (Rs 22, one hour).

Around Keylong

SHASHUR GOMPA

About 3km above Keylong is Shashur Gompa, dedicated to the Zanskari lama Deva Gyatsho. The original 16th-century gompa is now enshrined inside a modern gompa with fine views over the valley. Frenetic masked *chaam* dances are held here every June or July (depending on the Tibetan calendar) – see the boxed text, p372. The path to the gompa cuts uphill behind the old bus stand – stick to the rough dirt path until you see the white chortens visible on the ridge.

KHARDONG GOMPA

Propped up on stilts on the far side of the valley, the 900-year-old gompa at Khardong

is a steep two-hour walk from Keylong. Maintained by an order of Drukpa Kagyud monks and nuns, the monastery enshrines a mighty prayer wheel said to contain a million strips of paper bearing the mantra 'om mani padme hum' (hail to the jewel in the lotus). The surrounding scenery is magnificent and there are excellent frescoes, but you'll have to track down a monk or nun to open the doors. To get to the monastery, head through the bazaar, follow the stepped path down to the hospital and take the bridge over the Bhaga River, from where it's a 4km slog uphill.

TAYUL GOMPA

Perched on the side of the valley above the village of Satingri, the ancient Tayul Gompa has more elegant mural work and a 4m-high statue of Padmasambhava, flanked by his two manifestations, Sighmukha and Vijravarashi. Tayul is about 6km from Keylong, reached by a fairly long day-hike.

JISPA

About 20km north of Keylong, the pretty village of Jispa is a popular overnight stop for mountain bikers and motorcyclists. There's a small and interesting **folk museum** (entry Rs 25; ☎ 9am-6pm) on the main road and a 2km walk south is the 16th-century **Ghemur Gompa**, where a famous masked 'devil dance' is held in July.

For accommodation, there's the extremely inviting **Hotel Ibex Jispa** (☎ 01900-233203; s/d Rs 1400/1800) on the main road.

Keylong to Ladakh

It's a long, bone-shaking ride from Keylong to Ladakh and the high passes are bitterly cold, even in summer, but the scenery is some of the most dramatic on earth. Wear your warmest clothes and make the most of the occasional *dhaba* stops.

Heading north from Keylong, the village of **Darcha** is the last permanent settlement before Rumtse in Ladakh and the end point of the seven-day trek from Padium in Zaskar (see p391). Passports are checked here and there are *dhabas* offering basic food.

There's another army checkpoint at **Patseo**, before the road climbs over the breathless 4950m **Baralacha La**. On the far side, the road descends to the improbably named **Bharatphur City** with its cluster of parachute-tent *dhabas*. From Bharatphur, it's a long, dusty drive to the next island of civilisation, **Sarchu**, an

occasional overnight stop for private buses between Leh and Manali. It's a bleak and bitterly cold spot, but the parachute-tent *dhabas* provide hot chai and camping beds to truckers and the handful of cyclists and motorcyclists who pass this way.

The scenery along the final run to Ladakh is some of the most spectacular along the route. Above Sarchu, the road winds through a series of dramatic switchbacks known as the **Gata Loops** as it climbs to an even higher pass, the 5060m **Lachlung La**. On the far side, the scenery is truly something from the Silk Road – endless ridges of sand and scree, divided by bizarrely eroded buttresses.

There's another bleak checkpoint and parachute-tent camp at **Pang** before the road struggles up the desperate slope of the 5328m **Taglang La**, the second-highest motorable pass in the world (the highest is the 5602m Khardung La, north of Leh). From here, buses speed downhill into the Indus Valley. You'll get your first taste of Ladakhi architecture in the form of whitewashed chortens in the villages of **Rumtse**, **Lato** and **Miru**. There's one more police checkpoint at **Upshi** before the road meets the wide, paved highway running north to Leh. Villages between Upshi and Leh are covered on p380.

SPITI

Divided from the fertile Lahaul Valley by the 4551m Kunzum La, the Spiti Valley is another piece of Tibet transported to India. Buddhist monasteries and tiny villages of whitewashed houses are dotted here and there along the arid valley floor, dwarfed by the sheer scale of the surrounding landscape. Local farmers eke out a living on the small strip of greenery that hugs the banks of the Spiti River.

In many ways Spiti is even more rugged and remote than Ladakh, but buses run over the Kunzum La from Manali from July to October, and the Hindustan-Tibet Hwy to Tabo is theoretically open all year. A steady stream of motorcyclists and mountain bikers pit their machines against some of the most challenging roads in India. Most people start in Manali or Keylong and exit the valley at Rekong Peo in Kinnaur, but a few travellers go against the flow and travel west to Keylong or Ladakh.

In either direction, an inner line permit is required for the stretch from Tabo to Rekong Peo – see the boxed text, p339.

Gramphu to Kaza

From the *dhaba* at **Gramphu**, the road to Spiti follows the gorge of the Chandra River, which was carved by glaciers as the Himalaya thrust upwards 50 million years ago. There are few permanent settlements, but buses stop for chai at **Chattru**, a small cluster of *dhabas* around the first bridge over the Chandra.

There's second bridge and a single stone-hut *dhaba* at **Battal**, where a rough track runs 14km north to lovely **Chandratal** (Moon Lake), a tranquil glacial pool set amongst snow peaks at 4270m. From June to September, you can stay in comfortable tents on the lakeshore at the **Dewachen EcoCamp** (☎ book through Ecosphere in Kaza 222724; per person Rs 500). This is also the starting point for treks to nearby **Bara Shigri** (Big Glacier), one of the longest glaciers in the Himalaya, but the route is treacherous and it's best to travel with an experienced guide.

From Battal, the road leaves the river and creeps up to **Kunzum La** (4551m), the watershed between the Spiti and Lahaul Valleys. Buses perform a respectful circuit of the stupas at the top before continuing down into the Spiti Valley. An alternative 10.5km trail to Chandratal starts at the pass, continuing to Baralacha La on the Manali–Leh road in three strenuous days.

The first village of any size is **Losar**, a cluster of concrete and mud-brick houses in scrubby vegetation on the valley floor. Buses stop for lunch at the *dhabas* on the highway and there's a passport check. You should have time for the ethnological displays at the **rural museum** (entry Rs 25, ☎ 9am–6pm) before the bus heads on to Gramphu or Kaza. You can break the journey here; **Samsong Café & Guesthouse** (r with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/300) has basic rooms and hot meals.

The final stretch to Kaza follows the edge of the Spiti River, passing the large **Yangchen Choling** nunnery at Pangmo, which provides an education for girls from around the valley. A few kilometres further along is the **Sherab Choling** monastery school at Morang. Experienced teachers may be able to arrange volunteer teaching placements at these schools through the US-based **Jamyang Foundation** (www.jamyang.org).

At **Rangrik**, just before the bridge across the river to Kaza, there's a Buddhist temple with a 5m-high sitting Buddha statue.

Kaza

☎ 01906 / elev 3640m

Sprawling over the eroded flood plain of the Spiti River, Kaza is the administrative and transport hub of Spiti subdistrict. The setting is wonderfully rugged – jagged mountains rise on either side and the river coils across the flat valley floor like a python with indigestion. The original, whitewashed village is separated from the modern administrative compound at New Kaza by a stream. The Dalai Lama is set to open the new **Sakya Gompa** in New Kaza in 2008.

Most people stay at least one night to arrange the inner line permit for travel beyond Tabo. Kaza is also the starting point for trips to Ki Gompa and Kibber and treks into the mountains. The well-organised bus and jeep stand is below the bazaar in the old village.

In August, villagers from across Spiti descend on Kaza for the **Ladarcha Fair** (p283). All sorts of goods are bought and sold and traders wear their finest clothes.

INFORMATION

There is nowhere to change money, but you can check emails at a small **net café** (per hr Rs 80; ☎ 9.30am–7pm) in the old bazaar. Inner line permits for travel to Kinnaur are easy to arrange – see the boxed text, p339.

Ecosphere (☎ 222724; www.spitiecosphere.com) Arranges village homestays, tours and accommodation at the Dewachen EcoCamp at Chandratal.

Spiti Holiday Adventures (☎ 222711) Organises all-inclusive mountain trips from Rs 2000 per person per day.

SLEEPING & EATING

Kaza is home to half-a-dozen guesthouses and hotels.

Hill View Guest House (☎ 222331; r Rs 150–200) Overlooking the army base on the New Kaza side of the stream, this old-school guesthouse has cosy rooms with thick rugs on the floor and hot showers in the communal bathrooms.

Mahabudha Guest House (☎ 222232; r with shared bathroom Rs 200–250) Just below the main road at the top of the old village, this bright and welcoming village home has big rooms with thick blankets. The shared bathroom has a geyser, meals are served in the traditional kitchen and there's an *amchi* clinic on site.

Snow Lion Hotel (☎ 222525; r Rs 500–600) Overlooking the stream at the top of the old village, this modern hotel has a decent restaurant and rooms on two floors with balconies overlooking the stream.

HPTDC Tourist Lodge (☎ 222566; tents Rs 350, r Rs 500) A slightly institutional HPTDC property with a choice of plain but comfortable hotel rooms, or permanent tents with shared facilities in the grounds.

Banjara Kunphen Retreat (☎ 222236; www.banjara.com; r with meals per person Rs 1500; ☞ May-Oct) Spread over two modern buildings in New Kaza, this place appeals to older travellers on group tours. Rooms are tastefully furnished and upstairs balconies have great views over the town and valley.

As well as the hotel restaurants, there are some traveller-friendly restaurants in the old bazaar.

Mahabudha Restaurant (dishes Rs 25-95) This traveller-oriented place serves a huge range of dishes from Europe, Asia and the subcontinent.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus

The bus station is at the bottom of the new town, just off the main road. There are buses to Manali (Rs 152, 10 hours) at 4.30am and 7am. For Keylong, change at Gramphu (Rs 102, eight hours). A bus leaves for Rekong Peo (Rs 165, 12 hours) at 9am, passing through Sichling (for Dhankar; Rs 20, one hour) and Tabo (Rs 35, two hours). There's a second Tabo bus at 2pm.

There's a single daily bus to Ki (Rs 10, 30 minutes) and Kibber (Rs 15, 40 minutes) at 5pm, returning at 7.30pm. This will give you time to visit Ki while the bus goes on to Kibber. To visit both places in one day, walk or hire a taxi.

For the Pin Valley, buses to Mud (Rs 40, two hours) leave at 4.30pm.

Taxi

The local taxi union is based at the bus stand, or you can make arrangements at your hotel. You'll pay Rs 1000 to Tabo and Rs 4000 to Rs 4500 to Keylong, Manali or Rekong Peo. Day trips include Ki and Kibber (Rs 600) and Dhankar and the Pin Valley (Rs 1500).

Ki

About 12km back down the valley from Kaza, the tiny village of Ki is dominated by the whitewashed buildings of **Ki Gompa** (admission by donation; ☞ 7am-7pm). Set atop a 4116m-high hill-ock, this is the largest gompa in Spiti and the views from the top are extremely photogenic.

An atmospheric *puja* (prayer ceremony) is held in the new prayer hall every morning at around 7am, but the original medieval prayer room is closed to visitors (peek through the door at the old statues and dance masks). The masks are put to use every June/July for the annual **chaam festival** (p283) and again in February/March for **Losar** (p283).

The monks offer some basic but comfortable **rooms** (☎ 01906-262201; dm with shared bathroom & cold water Rs 150); the price includes meals.

Kibber

☎ 01906

About 8km above Ki, this dusty village was once a stop on the overland salt trade. At 4205m, Kibber once claimed to be the highest village in the world, but now it only claims to be the highest village in the world with a motorable road and electricity. The surrounding landscape is satisfyingly desolate and you can walk to other, even remoter villages along the edge of the gorge. Kibber used to be the setting for the historic Ladarcha trade fair in July, but this was recently shifted to Kaza.

Passing tour groups have created a fair amount of child begging in the village. Resist the urge to hand out sweets, pens and cash; if you want to help, donate to the village school instead.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are several village guesthouses offering rooms and meals. Bucket hot water costs Rs 10 to Rs 15.

Dikitling Guesthouse (☎ 262223; r with shared bathroom Rs 100) A big blue house on the main village road, offering spartan but tidy rooms with a terrace and balcony that catches the morning sunshine.

Rainbow Guest House (☎ 226309; r with shared bathroom Rs 150) Close to the village school, Rainbow offers plain rooms and hearty village meals.

Serkong Guesthouse (☎ 226222; r Rs 150-200) On the far side of the village, this place gets the sun earlier than the competition. Rooms are neat and clean, and the pleasingly bohemian front terrace has easy chairs and old photos of Spiti.

Norling Guest House (☎ 226242; dm Rs 50, d with bathroom Rs 200-300), Tidy and well cared for, this friendly place has the best rooms and the best restaurant in town. Proper furniture and little murals make guests feel at home.

Dhankar

East of Kaza, the snaking Spiti River merges with the Pin River, creating a single braid of blue in the midst of dust-coloured badlands. Perched high above the confluence is the tiny village of Dhankar, the former capital of the Nono kings of Spiti.

The 1200-year-old **Dhankar Gompa** (admission Rs 25) is wedged between rocky spurs at the top of the village, with views that inspire euphoria. The lower monastery building has a silver statue of Vajradhara (the Diamond Being) and there's a second prayer hall on the hilltop, with exquisite medieval murals of Sakyamuni, Tsongkhapa and Lama Chodrag.

Just downhill is a small **museum** (entry Rs 25) with costumes, instruments, old saddles and Buddhist devotional objects. In November, Dhankar monks celebrate the **Guktor Festival** (p283) with energetic masked dances.

Above the gompa are the ruins of the mud-brick **fort** that sheltered the entire population of the Nono kingdom during times of war, and an hour's climb uphill is the scenic lake of **Dhankar Tso**, offering epic views towards the twin peaks of **Mane Rang** (6593m).

Dhankar is a steep 10km walk or drive from the village of Sichling on the Kaza–Tabo highway. You can stay at the monastery in simple **monks' rooms** (dm with shared bathroom Rs 100, r with bathroom Rs 300–400) or there's the modest **Dolma Guesthouse** (r with shared bathroom Rs 150) in Sichling.

Buses from Kaza to Tabo pass through Sichling (Rs 20, one hour) or you can do a day trip by taxi from Kaza for Rs 800.

Pin Valley National Park

Running south from the Spiti Valley, the wind-scoured Pin Valley National Park (1875 sq km) is famous as the 'land of ibex and snow leopards', though sightings of either species are rare. From July to October, a popular eight-day trek runs from here over the 5319m Pin-Parvati Pass to the Parvati Valley near Kullu (p302).

The road to the Pin Valley branches off the Kaza–Tabo highway about 10km before Sichling, climbing through winter meadows to the cluster of whitewashed farmhouses at **Gulling**. About 2km above Gulling at Kungri, the 600-year-old **Ugyen Sanag Choling Gompa** has old prayer rooms and a huge new monastery with vivid murals of protector deities, including the many-eyed archer Rahula and one-eyed

Ekajati, the Guardian of Mantras. There's also a small **museum** (Rs 25; ☎ 10am–6pm) with ethnological and religious displays.

You can stay at the monastery in plain, clean **rooms** (r with shared bathroom Rs 250) or there's the tiny **Hotel Himalaya** (☎ 01906-242314; r with shared bathroom Rs 150) in Gulling.

Southwest of Gulling, **Sagnam** marks the turn-off to the village of Mud, trailhead for the trek over the Pin-Parvati Pass. The wind moans between the whitewashed houses and there are some uplifting short walks around the valley. For accommodation, try the village-style **Snow Leopard Guesthouse** (r with shared bathroom from Rs 150) by the main road, or the modern **PWD Resthouse** (r with shared bathroom Rs 150–300), below the hospital.

Buses run daily from Kaza to Mud (Rs 40, two hours), stopping in Gulling (Rs 25, 1½ hours) and Sagnam (Rs 30, 1½ hours). Taxis in Kaza charge Rs 700 to Sagnam and Rs 1100 to Mud.

Tabo

☎ 01906

About 47km east of Kaza, Tabo is the only other town in the Spiti Valley. The setting, hemmed in by scree slopes, is wind-blown and dramatic, and the ridge above town is riddled with **caves** used as meditation cells by local lamas. The main reason to visit is **Tabo Gompa** (admission by donation), a World Heritage site preserving some of the finest Indo-Tibetan art in the world – see the boxed text, opposite.

You may be able to check your email and make calls at the **Tabo Cyber Café** (per hr Rs 60; ☎ 7am–9pm) near the bus stand.

SLEEPING

Guesthouses in Tabo are clustered around the gompa, or strung out along the main road.

Millennium Monastery Guesthouse (☎ 223315; dm Rs 70, r with shared/private bathroom from Rs 150/300; ☒) Run by the monastery, this popular place has decent rooms around a central courtyard. Rooms have piped hot water for washing, but guests are asked to refrain from smoking, drinking alcohol and other activities that might offend monastic sensibilities.

Maitreya Guesthouse (☎ 223329; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 200/450) On the north side of the gompa, this pleasant and well-run guesthouse is livened up by colourful bedding and carpets and a sunny front terrace.

Trojan Guesthouse (☎ 223384; r Rs 350-550) Run by a group of Spitian Rastafarians – yes, they do exist! – the Trojan has very welcoming carpeted rooms and plenty of reggae vibe. It's on the highway before the turn-off to the bus stand.

Banjara Tabo Retreat (☎ 233381; www.banjaracamps.com; r with meals per person Rs 1500; ☞ May-Oct) Also on the highway, this appealing midrange place rents its tasteful rooms to passing travellers when it isn't booked out by groups.

EATING

Half-a-dozen simple restaurants serve Tibetan, Indian and Chinese fare. Third Eye Café at the Maitreya Guesthouse and the reggae-themed Zion Café are reliable options. For an upmarket meal and cold beer, try the restaurant at the Banjara Tabo Retreat.

Café Kunzum Top (dishes from Rs 25) Run by the energetic and widely travelled Sonam, this cheerful Spitian café serves tasty *momos*, espresso coffee and compote made with local apples. Beers are available and Sonam can arrange *chang* (rice beer) on request.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Now that the road to Rekong Peo has been repaired, onward travel from Tabo is easy. There are morning and afternoon buses to Kaza (Rs 35, two hours), and buses leave for Rekong Peo (Rs 130, 10 hours) at 11am and for Manali (Rs

187, 15 hours) at 5am. Taxis charge Rs 1000 to Kaza and Rs 3500 to Rekong Peo.

Tabo to Rekong Peo

Theoretically, the highway road from Tabo to Rekong Peo in Kinnaur is open all year, providing the only winter access to the Spiti Valley. However, the highway has been washed away repeatedly by the Sutlej River. A number of hydroelectric projects are helping to tame the destructive power of the river, but it's worth checking the road is intact before heading east of Tabo. You will need to show your passport and inner line permit at Sumdo and Jangi. Some of the following places are technically in Kinnaur, but they are covered here since they form part of the Spiti circuit.

From Tabo, the road follows the narrowing Spiti Valley, before soaring over the ridge into the valley of the Sutlej River. This could well be the most dangerous and hair-raising road in India – even die-hard travellers have been known to finger their rosaries as the bus skids around hairpin bends with millimetres to spare. Nevertheless, the views of the Spiti River flashing 2000m below are mesmerising.

Overnight stops used to be forbidden, but travellers now have seven days to complete the trip. **Sumdo** has a permit checkpost and the road starts its ascent into the hills at **Chango**, which has several Buddhist temples.

TABO GOMPA

The *choskhor* (sacred compound) at Tabo was founded in AD 996 by the Great Translator, Ringchen Zangpo, who hired the best Buddhist mural painters from Kashmir to decorate the walls. Visitors must arrange a time to view the murals with the monks at the modern monastery new door.

The compound is centred on the huge **gTsong Lha-Khang** (Assembly Hall), a dark and atmospheric chamber ringed by exquisite murals and suspended life-sized stucco statues of 33 bodhisattvas. Together with the four-sided effigy of Vairocana at the rear of the chamber, the statues create a three-dimensional mandala.

To the left of the main temple is the **Large Brom-Ston Lha-Khang**, with more Kashmiri-style murals, reached through an intricately carved wooden doorway. Left again is the **gSer-Khang** (Golden Temple), with a large seated Buddha and detailed paintings of celestial deities on the roof and walls. Behind the gSer-Khang is the **dkYil-hKhar-Khang** (Mystic Mandala Temple) containing a giant frieze of Vairocana surrounded by giant mandalas.

To the right of the gTsong Lha-Khang are the smaller **Byams-pa Chenpo Lha-Khang**, containing a 6m-high Maitreya statue and murals of the Tashi-Chunpo Temple and Potala Palace in Tibet, and the **Brom-Ston Lha-Khang**, with murals of Sakyamuni and his disciples.

The modern gompa outside the compound has a well-attended morning *puja* (prayer ceremony) at 6.30am, and the monastery guesthouse contains a **Buddhist library** (admission free; ☞ 9.45-11.45am & 2-4pm Jun-Sep) and a small religious **museum** (admission Rs 10; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-5pm).

The first settlement with accommodation is **Nako**, a pretty village of white mud-brick houses about 1km off the main road. The landscape here is vaguely Central Asian and the village is centred on a small lake, surrounded by the 11th-century buildings of **Nako Gompa**, containing some fine Tabo-style murals and sculptures.

There are several simple guesthouses offering rooms with shared bathroom for around Rs 200, or the posher **Reo Purgil Hotel** (r Rs 400). Depending on the permit situation, you may be able to trek to the ancient gompas at **Tashigang** and **Somang**.

The final stage of the journey passes through greener country in the narrow gorge

of the Sulej River. The village of **Puh** marks the official crossing into Kinnaur and there are two colourful gompas belonging to the Drukpa sect. You may be able to stay at the **Monastic Retreat Guesthouse** (r Rs 350).

There are more monasteries and temples at **Khanum**, near Spillo, founded by Ringchen Zangpo in the 10th century. **Jangi** marks the end of the permit zone and the start point of the *parikrama* (ceremonial circumnavigation) around Kinner Kailash (6050m). The village has a number of Kinnauri-style temples and you can continue 14km uphill to visit the Buddhist monastery at **Lippa**. An inner line permit is required, even if you just do a day trip here from Rekong Peo.