



Himachal Pradesh

Includes »

Shimla	282
Kinnaur Valley	290
Mandi	294
Great Himalayan National Park	296
Parvati Valley	297
Kullu	300
Naggar	302
Manali	304
Dharamsala	315
McLeod Ganj	316
Chamba Valley	330
Lahaul	337
Spiti	339

Best Places to Eat

- » Moonpeak Thali (p324)
- » Lazy Dog Lounge (p309)
- » Indian Coffee House (p286)
- » Jakhu Temple (p283)

Best Places to Stay

- » Chonor House Hotel (p322)
- » Chapslee (p284)
- » Norling Guest House (p328)
- » Veer Guest House (p307)

Why Go?

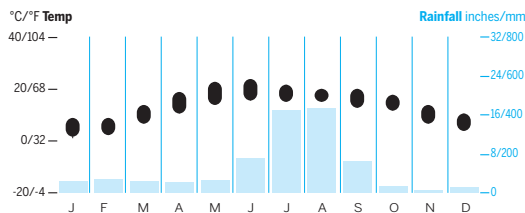
With spectacular peaks and gorgeous river valleys, Himachal is India's outdoor adventure playground. From trekking and climbing to rafting, paragliding and skiing, if it can be done in the mountains, it can be done here. Yet Himachal offers much more than just a shot of alpine adrenaline.

Across the state, traditional Himachali culture flourishes amid Himalayan landscapes. Villages perched on staggering slopes enchant with fairy tale wood-and-stone architecture and the easygoing grace of the people who live there. Elsewhere, hill stations appeal with colonial-era charm, while groovy backpacker magnets lure with their legendary local charas.

In many places, you might think you've stumbled into Tibet. But the ancient Buddhist monasteries, troves of Buddhist arts, and the home-away-from-home of the Dalai Lama are just another part of the essence of Himachal.

When to Go

Manali



Jan/Feb Tibetan New Year is celebrated across Himachal.

May-Jun & Mid-Sep-Oct Outside the monsoon season is perfect for trekking.

Nov-Apr Great for skiers, but snow blocks the high passes to the Lahaul and Spiti Valleys.

Food

Himachal is the best place in India to get a taste of authentic Tibetan cuisine. *Momos* (steamed or fried dumplings), *thuk-pas* (noodle soups) and breads made from *tsampa* (barley flour) are found virtually everywhere. Tasty and cheap, these dishes hit the spot when you're not in the mood for curry.

Carnivores enjoy traditional Himachali food, which frequently features chicken or fresh trout from the region's streams. Most vegetarian specialities are flavourful dhal-based concoctions, often mixed with yoghurt, paneer or potatoes. Himachal is also known for producing India's finest apples, harvested in autumn.

DON'T MISS

McLeod Ganj isn't called 'Little Lhasa' just because it's the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile; it's infused with a living blend of ancient and contemporary Tibetan culture, from arts to religion to food. The nearby **Norbulingka Institute** is among the best places in the world to see exquisite Tibetan crafts being handmade by masters and their apprentices.

Further east, Himachal's stretch of the **Great Himalayan Circuit** – a demanding and sometimes terrifying road – crosses towering mountain passes as it traverses the **Lahaul and Spiti Valleys**. A remote land of rugged, elemental beauty, you'll find countless trekking opportunities near some of the highest villages and Buddhist monasteries on earth. A favourite gateway to this region is **Manali**, Himachal's outdoor adventure capital, with activities from the relaxed (walking) to the intense (mountaineering or heli-skiing) to the absurd (zorbng).

Top State Festivals

- » Losar (Jan/Feb, McLeod Ganj, p316, Lahaul, p337, Spiti p339) Tibetan New Year is celebrated with processions, music and dancing, and masked performances by monks in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.
- » Ladarcha Fair (Aug, Kaza, p340) An ancient trade fair celebrated in Spiti, with Buddhist dances, mountain sports and bustling rural markets.
- » Phulech Festival (Sep/Oct, Kalpa, p293, Sangla p292) Villagers throughout Kinnaur fill temple courtyards with flowers of intoxicating fragrance; oracles perform sacrifices and make predictions for the coming year.
- » Dussehra (Oct, Kullu, p300) An intense celebration of the defeat of the demon Ravana, with a huge parade led by the chariot of Raghunath (Rama).
- » International Himalayan Festival (10-12 Dec, McLeod Ganj, p316) Celebrating the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize, this festival promotes peace and cultural understanding with Buddhist dances and music.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Shimla, Dharamsala and towns in the Kullu Valley are connected to Delhi by direct buses and air services. A long and wild road connects Manali to Leh, in Ladakh.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 6.9 million
- » Area: 55,673 sq km
- » Capital: Shimla
- » Main languages: Hindi, Pahari, Punjabi
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹800, \$\$ ₹801 to ₹2000, \$\$\$ above ₹2000

Top Tip

If travelling between the Spiti and Kinnaur Valleys, foreigners must obtain an easy-to-get Inner Line Permit in Kaza (see the boxed text p340), Rekong Peo (p293) or Shimla (see the boxed text p287). Permits are also required for some Tibetan-border-area treks.

Resources

- » Himachal Tourism (www.hptdc.gov.in)
- » US Military maps (www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/india/), useful for trekking
- » Online bus info and booking (www.hrtc.gov.in), (www.hptdc.nic.in/bus.htm)

Himachal Pradesh Highlights

1 Take the toy train up to **Shimla** (p289), one of India's favourite hill stations

2 Earn karma credits by volunteering with the Tibetan refugees of **McLeod Ganj** (p323)

3 Ski, trek, climb, paraglide or raft in the backpacker playground of **Manali** (p304)

4 Chill out in the **Parvati Valley** (p297) and trek to the mountain village of **Malana** (p297)

5 Get off the tourist trail and visit centuries-old temples in **Chamba** (p333) and **Bharmour** (p336)

6 Cross the spectacular mountain passes of Rohtang La and Kunzum La to the incredibly remote **Spiti Valley** (p339)

7 Visit charming villages with awesome Himalayan views in the upper **Kinnaur Valley** (p290)



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* (noblemen), creating a patchwork of tiny states, with Kangra, Kullu and Chamba at the top. Sikh rajas came to dominate the region by the early 19th century, signing treaties with the British to consolidate their power.

During the 19th century the British started creating little bits of England in the hills of 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 Shimla's thrall.

The state of Himachal Pradesh was formed after Independence in 1948, liberating many villages from the feudal system. In 1966 the districts administered from Punjab – 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.

Climate

Himachal is a land of extremes, with some of the rainiest spots in India (around McLeod Ganj) as well as some of the driest (the Spiti Valley). When monsoons drench much of the state from mid-July to mid-September, landslides can block roads for hours or days, so plan on facing delays. From November to April, many mountainous areas – including the Manali-Leh road – are closed by snow, while others are just very cold! The best-weather seasons statewide are May to mid-July and mid-September to early November.

i Getting There & Away

Along with the main points of entry, you can reach Shimla by toy train from Kalka and ride the old metre-gauge rail lines from Pathankot to Jogindarnagar.

i Getting Around

Steel your nerves – and your stomach – as rattletrap buses captained by drivers with Indy 500 fantasies hurtle over the narrow, twisting

mountain roads that connect towns throughout the state. For local sightseeing it often makes sense to hire a car and driver. For a price, any taxi will take you on a full-day journey to your next destination.

EASTERN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Eastern Himachal Pradesh is dominated by Shimla, the state capital, and the mountainous district of Kinnaur, which spreads east to the Tibetan border then loops north to Spiti. The official district website is <http://hpshimla.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 – the Hindu goddess who is the destroyer of evil). 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, and a number of prestigious schools are now based here. The city was even briefly the capital of Punjab until the map was redrawn in 1966.

Strung out along a 12km ridge, Shimla is an engaging blend of holiday town and Indian city. Along the Mall and the Ridge, vacationers stroll around licking ice-cream cones, gazing at the views or into store windows. Cascading down the hillsides, bazaars flowing with local life are packed with shops selling hardware, stationery, fabric and spices. Many of the handpainted signs in the market are so retro they look like they haven't been changed since the British left. With cars banned from the main part of town, walking anywhere is truly pleasant – even when huffing and puffing uphill.

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. There

are some good forest walks nearby, and a jagged line of snow-covered peaks is clearly visible from April to June, and in October and November.

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 (ISBT) 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 ₹50 to ₹80. Most double as touts, and hotels will increase your room tariff to cover their commission.

Sights & Activities

Jakhu Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

Shimla's most famous temple is dedicated to the Hindu monkey god Hanuman; it's therefore appropriate that hundreds of rhesus macaques loiter around harassing devotees for *prasad* (temple-blessed food offerings). Set atop a hill awash in devotional music, the temple houses a small shrine surrounded by funky relief murals of Hanuman performing feats from the Ramayana. The dining hall serves delicious all-you-can-eat plates of dhal, rice and *sabzi* (vegetables) from 10am to 4pm (donations appreciated), so coordinate your visit with your hunger! Getting here involves a steep 30-minute hike to the top of a hill, starting at the east end of the Ridge. Primate alert: the monkeys on this route can be a menace! Consider renting a walking stick at the start of the walk (from ₹10) to discourage them. Taxis from either stand charge around ₹300 return.

Himachal State Museum & Library

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹10/50, camera/video ₹100/1500; ☉10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, Sun & 2nd Sat each month) About 2.5km west of Scandal Point and a stiff walk up to the telecommunications mast, the state museum is home to an impressive collection of miniatures from Kangra and Rajasthan, as well as Chamba embroidery, coins and jewellery, temple carvings, paintings of Shimla, and various weapons.

Viceregal Lodge & Botanical Gardens

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Indian/foreigner ₹20/50; ☉9.15am-1pm & 2-5pm, to 7pm May-Jul, tours every 30min) Built as an official residence for the British viceroys, the

Viceregal Lodge looks like a cross between Harry 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 you can take a guided tour of the buildings. Tickets cost ₹20 if you just want to look around the gardens.

Opposite the lodge entrance is the **Himalayan Bird Park** (admission ₹5; ☉10am-5pm), where you can see the iridescent monal pheasant, Himachal's state bird, among others.

The lodge is a 4.5km walk west from Scandal Point along the Mall, but it is poorly signposted, so you should try to aim for the telecommunications mast, then stick to the largest road.

Christ Church

CHURCH

(☎2652953; the Ridge; ☉services in English 9am Sun) This very English church dominates the top of the ridge and is the second-oldest church in northern India (the oldest is in Ambala in Haryana). Built between 1846 and 1857, it contains Raj-era memorials and fine stained glass. There's still a small Sunday service held here.

Other Temples

HINDU/SIKH TEMPLES

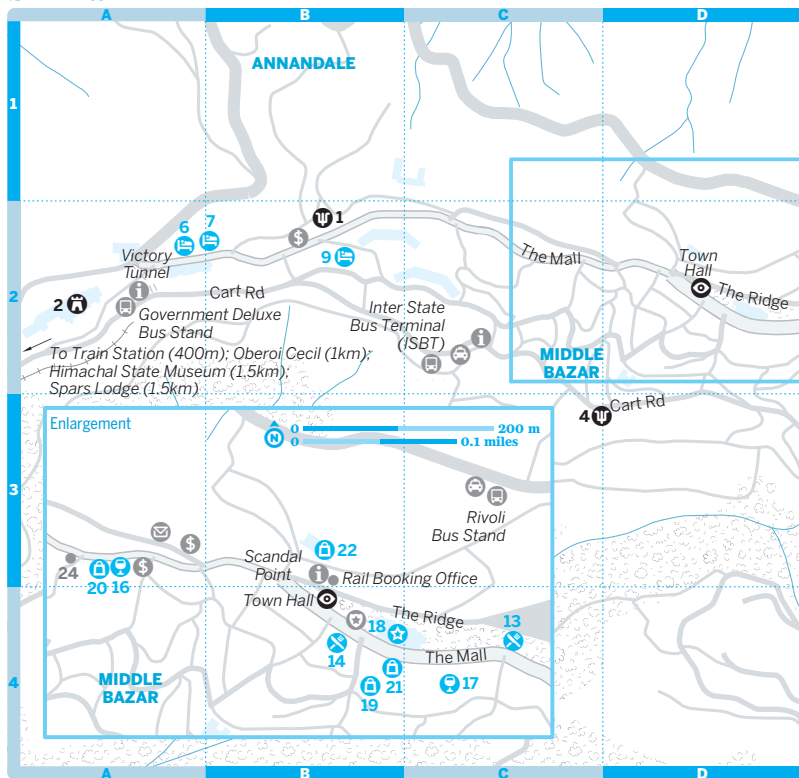
The most popular temple for locals is the small **Shiv Mandir**, just below the Ridge – crowds of school children drop in before and after school, and sadhus wait on the steps, soliciting donations.

About 1km west of the Ridge is the Bengali hut-style **Kali Bari Mandir** (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

HISTORIC BUILDING

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**. The **Gaiety Theatre** should house shows again after renovations are complete, but for now check out the fabulous auditorium. 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, which housed Asia's largest collection of stuffed birds during the 19th century.



Walking

About 4km northwest of Scandal Point is **The Glen**, a former playground of British colonialists, 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.

There's an interesting temple and excellent views at **Prospect Hill**, about 4km west of Shimla. 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. About 3km east of Lakkar Bazar, the village of **Sanjauli** has a Durga temple and a small Buddhist monastery run by Gelugpa monks.

Tours

The HPTDC tourist office organises daily sightseeing bus tours of villages around Shimla. The tours leave from the Rivoli bus stand

WALKING

at around 10.30am. Seats cost ₹160 to ₹250. Contact the office for current itineraries.

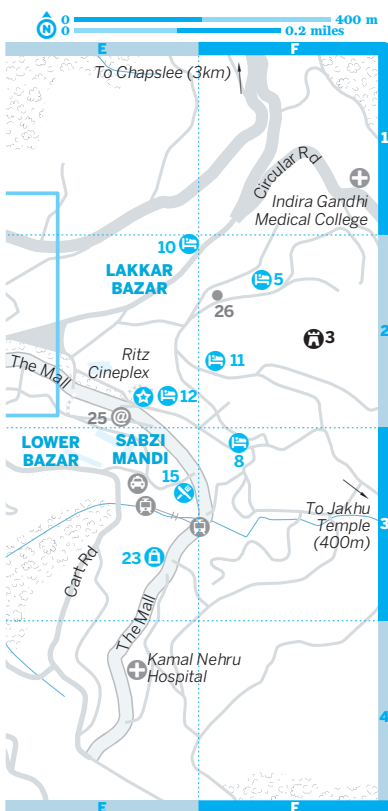
The taxi unions also offer one-day sightseeing tours to Kufri, Naldehra, Fagu and Mashobra (₹1000), and to Mashobra, Naldehra and Tattapani (₹1250).

Sleeping

Hotels in Shimla charge steep rates during the peak tourist season (April to June, October, 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 grain of salt.

Chapslee

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎2802542; www.chapslee.com; d with full board ₹12,500-20,000; ㊟) For the full Raj treatment, the outrageously ostentatious former home of Raja Charanjit Singh of Kapurthala is perched atop Elysium Hill, about 4km north



of Shimla. The exclusive 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.



Spars Lodge

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎2657908; Museum Rd; s/d ₹660/990; @) On the little road up to the museum, Spars is a real travellers' hotel with an inviting, homey feel. It's bright, clean and airy with a lovely sunny dining room upstairs. The owners are welcoming and the cafe serves great food, including local trout.

Hotel Doegar

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2811927; www.hoteldoegar.com; the Ridge; d ₹1000-2500) Many of Shimla's hotels turn on the chintzy honeymoon charm, but Doegar does it with aplomb. The disco decor fea-

tures mirrored ceilings, timber panelling and harem-style curtains, though all rooms look (and smell) different, so check out a few. The roof terrace has unbeatable views of Shimla, and prices halve in the off season.

YMCA

HOTEL \$

(☎2650021; ymcashimla@yahoo.co.in; s/d incl breakfast ₹750/1000, without bathroom ₹370/500; @) Up the steps beside the Ritz Cineplex, the expansive, bright-red YMCA takes all comers, regardless of age, religion or gender. Rooms are pleasant and clean, and there's an internet cafe, lockers for valuables (₹20), a weight room and table tennis. Book ahead April to July.

Le Royale

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2651002; le_royale@hotmail.com; Jakhu Rd; r ₹2000-3500) Perched on the track up to Jakhu Temple, this boutique hotel has plenty of charm, with tastefully furnished rooms. It's close to the Ridge but tucked away enough to feel private. The Green Leaf restaurant is good and there are mountain views from the garden.

Oberoi Cecil

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2804848; www.oberoicecil.com; the Mall; s/d from ₹12,750/14,250, ste from ₹25,750; ☎@☎☎) Along the Mall about 2km west of Scandal Point, this grand high-rise is Shimla's glitziest five-star hotel. Colonial grandeur outside gives way to luxurious comforts within, and the cavernous colonial-style central atrium has a gorgeous bar and restaurant, open to nonguests. There's wi-fi throughout.

Hotel White

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2656136; www.hotelwhiteshimla.com; Lakkar Bazar; r ₹1000-1350, ste from ₹1600) Northeast of Scandal Point through the bustling bazaar, this place is well run and priced right – rates are fixed all year. No two rooms are the same, but all are clean and comfortable. The huge suites here are perfect for families.

Hotel Amar Palace

HOTEL \$

(☎2804055; d ₹500-1700) Off the road up to Jakhu Temple, Amar Palace has a wide range of rooms. Some are pristine, with fresh wood panelling, loveseats and marble sinks. Others are slated for an upgrade so see a few, since some of the cheaper rooms are nicer than the expensive ones. Most have great valley views and prices are negotiable.

Hotel Gulmarg

HOTEL \$

(☎2653168; gulmarghotel@yahoo.com; r ₹660-1600; ste from 2000; ☎) Found below the Mall

Shimla

📍 Sights

- 1 Kali Bari Mandir B2
- 2 Offices of the Accountant
General A2
- 3 Rotheny Castle F2
- 4 Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara C3

🏠 Sleeping

- 5 Hotel Amar Palace F2
- 6 Hotel Classic A2
- 7 Hotel Dalziel B2
- 8 Hotel Doegar F3
- 9 Hotel Gulmarg B2
- 10 Hotel White E2
- 11 Le Royale F2
- 12 YMCA E2

🍴 Eating

- 13 Ashiana C4
- 14 Baljee's B4
- 15 Cafe Sol E3

- Goofa (see 13)
- Indian Coffee House (see 16)

🍷 Drinking

- 16 Devico's Bar A3
- 17 Himani's C4

🎭 Entertainment

- 18 Gaiety Theatre B4

🛍 Shopping

- 19 Asia Book House B4
- 20 Himachal Emporium A3
- 21 Minerva Bookshop B4
- 22 Tibetan Clothes Market B3
- 23 Tibetan Handloom Shop E3

Information

- 24 Additional District Magistrate A3
- 25 Asian & International Travels E2
- 26 Great Escape Routes F2

and spread over several buildings and annexes, this huge honeymoon hotel offers a mixed bag, from plain, boxlike singles to gloriously chintzy doubles with round beds and mirrored ceilings to palatial family suites. Low-season discount is up to 50%.

Hotel Classic

HOTEL \$

(☎2653078; d ₹660-880) Classic is a worn but welcoming place and the location is handy for the train station and Scandal Point. The lower rooms with windows facing out over the valley and Annandale meadow are more expensive, but all rooms have TV and hot water. Some were being renovated at the time of research.

Hotel Dalziel

HOTEL \$

(☎2652691; www.hoteldalziel.com; the Mall; d ₹550-900) Dalziel advertises heritage on a budget, and it's hard to argue with this claim. Well located at the west end of the Mall, the old building – a former colonial bungalow – has a lodge-like lounge area and faded rooms in varying states of cleanliness. All have TV and hot water.



Eating

Befitting a holiday town and state capital, Shimla has plenty of places to eat, especially along the Mall and the Ridge. As well as the formal restaurants, there are dozens of Indian fast-food places in Middle Bazar serving samosas, potato cakes, *channa puri* (spiced

chickpeas and puffed fried bread) and other snacks. Unless otherwise stated, the following eateries are open from 10am to 10pm.

Cafe Sol

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(the Mall; dishes ₹140-400; ☀11am-10pm) In the atrium on the roof of Hotel Combermere but entered straight off the Mall, Sol serves tasty plates of Mexican, Italian and Mediterranean food, and has the best cake selection in Shimla. At the time of research, unsecured wi-fi networks were accessible here.

Baljee's

INDIAN \$\$

(the Mall; mains ₹70-240) Opposite the Town Hall, Baljee's gets packed with Indian families, many of whom come for the snacks and South Indian specialities. Breakfasts of omelettes, toast and dosas are good, and there's a popular counter selling Indian sweets.



Indian Coffee House

CAFE \$

(the Mall; dishes ₹20-35; ☀8.30am-9.30pm) A Shimla institution, the Indian Coffee House is like an old boys' club with its ageing booths, uniformed waiters and blackboard menu. It's the most atmospheric place in town for breakfast, cheap dosas and coffee (don't even ask for tea!).

Ashiana

INDIAN \$\$

(the Ridge; dishes ₹65-230; ☀9am-10pm) In a fanciful circular building on the Ridge, this is an almost elegant restaurant and a good people-watching spot. As well as tasty In-

dian dishes there are sizzlers, Chinese and a few Thai favourites. In Ashiana's basement, **Goofa** serves similar food at slightly cheaper prices, but with no views.

Cecil Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$\$\$

(☎2804848; the Mall; mains from ₹400, breakfast/dinner buffet ₹650/950) For a formal night out, look no further than the colonial elegance of the Cecil Restaurant at the Oberoi. An à la carte menu is available but there are sumptuous buffets for breakfast and dinner. Book ahead. There's also a casual garden restaurant, or you can opt for a drink in the atrium lobby bar.



Drinking

Himani's

BAR

(the Mall) The neon and marble decor is straight out of the 1980s, but Himani's is a good place for a casual drink or plate of chicken tikka. The top-floor terrace overlooking the Mall is perfect on a sunny afternoon.

Devico's Bar

BAR

(the Mall; 10am-10pm) Head upstairs above Café Coffee Day for a beer or cocktail in this casual bar with couches, chairs and stools.



Shopping

Local holidaymakers head to the bustling Lakkar Bazar to haggle for wood and handloom souvenirs, but Middle Bazar, on the way down to the bus station, is more interesting. You can buy everything here from tin pots and peacock feathers to henna kits to 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 Clothes Market**, behind the tourist office.

Carpets, shawls and other Himachal souvenirs are sold at **Himachal Emporium** (☎2011234; the Mall; ☺Mon-Sat), while Tibetan souvenirs are sold at the **Tibetan Handloom Shop** (☎2808163; the Mall), aiding Tibetan refugees.

For English-language books and maps of the region, try **Asia Book House** (the Mall; ☺10am-8.30pm) or **Minerva Bookshop** (☎2803078; the Mall; ☺10.30am-8pm).



Information

Laws exist banning plastic bags, littering, smoking and spitting in public places; police can hit offenders with a ₹500 fine.

Emergency

Indira Gandhi Medical College (☎2803073; the Ridge, Circular Rd; 24hr)

Tourist police (☎2812344; Scandal Point)

Internet Access

There are a few internet places along the Mall; for wi-fi, try to jump on the occasional unsecured network that filters into some of the restaurants and cafes around town.

Asian & International Travels (the Mall; per hr ₹30; ☺9am-9pm) Cramped place on the Mall.

Interwebs (the Mall; per hr ₹30, wi-fi ₹60; ☺9.30am-9.30pm) The best of the bunch on the Mall, and the rare wi-fi hotspot in Shimla.

Play World Cybercafe (the Mall; per hr ₹30; ☺9am-8.30pm)

Money

If you're heading out to Kinnaur, Spiti and Lahaul, stock up on rupees in Shimla. Numerous 24-hour ATMs are dotted around Scandal Point and the Mall.

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

State Bank of India (the Mall; ☺10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) West of Scandal Point; has an ATM opposite.

State Bank of India ATM (Scandal Point)

Post

Main post office (the Ridge) Looks after parcels and poste restante. There are several suboffices west along the Mall.

INNER LINE PERMITS IN SHIMLA

Permits for travel from Rekong Peo to Tabo in Spiti are issued by the office of the **Additional District Magistrate** (☎2657005; ☺10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat each month), in the Collectorate Building, which is down a couple of flights of steps from the Mall about 200m west of Scandal Point. Permits (₹200) are usually issued within 30 minutes. You'll need two passport photos, copies of your passport identity and visa pages, and a letter from a local travel agency stating that they're taking responsibility for you (₹100-200). At this office, permits are only given to groups of four or more, so find other travellers to connect with or get your papers in Rekong Peo (p293) or Kaza (see the boxed text p340), where restrictions are looser.

Tourist Information

HPTDC tourist office (Himachal Pradesh Tourist Development Corporation; ☎2652561; www.hptdc.gov.in; Scandal Point; ☀9am-8pm, to 6pm Aug, Sep & Dec-Mar) Helpful for advice, brochures and booking HPTDC buses, hotels and tours, along with a railway booking window. There are satellite booths by the Inter State Bus Terminal and the Victory Tunnel.

Travel Agencies

Great Escape Routes (☎5533037; www.greatescaperoutes.com; 6 Andi Bhavan, Jakhu) Specialises in trekking and adventure tours around Shimla and throughout North India. Hires out mountain bikes for ₹500 per day and has an internet cafe.

YMCA Tours & Treks (☎9857102657; www.himalayansites.com; Shimla YMCA, the Ridge) The affable and knowledgeable Anil Kumar runs day trips around Shimla as well as treks throughout Himachal and Uttarakhand.

Getting There & Away

Air

Jubbarhatti airport, 23km south of Shimla, is served by **Kingfisher Airlines** (☎1800 2093030; www.flyingfisher.com). Weather permitting, there are daily flights from Shimla to

Delhi. **Jagson Airlines** (☎2625177; www.jagsonairline.com) flies to Kullu on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Bus

The HPTDC and private travel agencies offer overnight deluxe buses to Delhi (₹760, nine hours), plus morning and evening buses to Manali (₹500, 10 hours) in season (April to June, October and November). They depart from the deluxe bus stand near Victory Tunnel. There are also four HRTC Volvo buses to Delhi (₹775, nine hours) each day, along with three AC deluxe (₹520) and three semi-deluxe (₹300) rides. Deluxe/semi-deluxe buses head to Manali (₹455/325, 10 hours) a few times daily. The government buses leave from the large and chaotic **Inter State Bus Terminal** (☎2656326; Cart Rd). Make reservations at counter 9 and get information at counter 8, or do both at the booth by the HPTDC Tourist Office at Scandal Point. See the boxed text below for services.

Regular buses to Chail (₹50, 2½ hours), Naldehra (₹25, one hour) and Tattapani (₹50, 2½ hours) leave from the small Rivoli (Lakkar Bazar) bus stand, north of the Ridge.

Taxi

The **Kalka-Shimla Taxi Union** (☎2658225) has its stand near the ISBT, while **Vishal Himachal**

BUSES FROM SHIMLA

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Chamba	440	14	four daily
Chandigarh	180/320 (ordinary/deluxe)	four	every 15 minutes
Dehra Dun	240	nine	three daily
Delhi	280/520 (ordinary/deluxe)	nine	hourly
Dharampur (for Kasauli)	85	2½	regularly
Dharamsala	295	10	five daily
Haridwar	265	10	five daily
Jammu	410	12	4.10pm 5.30pm
Kullu	385	8½	five daily
Manali	440	10	five daily
Mandi	165	six	hourly
Nahan	150	five	four daily
Narkanda	65	two	regularly
Paonta Sahib	170	seven	five daily
Rampur	150	five	hourly
Rekong Peo	265	10	hourly
Rohru	160	six	regularly
Sangla	270	10	7.30am
Sarahan	170	eight	three daily

TAXIS FROM SHIMLA

DESTINATION	ONE-WAY FARE (₹)
Airport	750
Chail	1150
Chandigarh	1750
Dehra Dun	3600
Dharamsala/McLeod Ganj	3600/3800
Kasauli	1400
Kullu	3000
Manali	3700
Naldehra	700
Narkanda	1250
Rekong Peo	4000
Sarahan	3400
Tattapani	1250

Taxi Operators Union (☎2805164) operates from the bottom of the passenger lift. Share taxis are available to Kalka between noon and 2pm (₹275). Taxis from the train station or the ISBT to the passenger lift cost around ₹70. There's another taxi stand next to the Rivoli bus stand.

Train

One of the little joys of Shimla is getting to or from it by the narrow-gauge toy train from Kalka, just north of Chandigarh. Although the steam trains are long gone, it's a scenic four- to six-hour 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 – about a 15-minute uphill walk. The left-luggage office is open 9am to 5pm.

Ordinary trains (1st/2nd class ₹189/16) run downhill to Kalka at 8.30am, 2.25pm and 6.15pm, returning at 4am, 6am and 12.15pm. To travel in style, catch the posh *Shivalik Express* at 5.40pm (returning at 5.30am; ₹280, 1st class only) or the *Himalayan Queen* at 10.30am (returning at 4pm; ₹167, chair car only). All 1st-class prices include food.

The *Himalayan Queen* service connects with the *Himalayan Queen* trains to and from Delhi (chair car/2nd class ₹284/75). The train from Delhi's Nizamuddin station leaves at 5.25am, departing from New Delhi station at 5.50am.

There's a rail booking office next to the tourist office on the Ridge (☎9am-4pm), or you can book at the train station.

i Getting Around

The only way to get around central Shimla is on foot. Fortunately, there's a two-part **lift** (per per-

son ₹7; ☎8am-10pm, till 9pm Jul-Sep) connecting the east end of the Mall with Cart Rd, a 15-minute walk east of the ISBT. Taxis from the train station to the bottom of the lift cost about ₹100.

Around Shimla

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.

About 15km north of Mashobra, **Naldehra** is famous chiefly for the **Naldehra Golf Course** (☎0177-2747739; www.naldehragolf.com; green fees Indian/foreigner ₹250/500, club hire ₹250; ☎7am-6pm), established in 1905 by British viceroy Lord Curzon. Set among tall cedars – some of which stand directly between the tee and green – it's a challenging course. Hire a caddy (₹40/70 for nine/18 holes) or you won't know where you're going. Ponies can be hired for treks along the ridge and there are pine-scented walks.

At the golf course, **Hotel Golf Glade** (☎0177-2747739; d ₹1500-1600) is an upmarket HPTDC property offering smart hotel rooms around an inviting restaurant and bar.

TATTAPANI

☎01907 / ELEV 656M

About 30km below Naldehra, on the banks of the Sutlej River, tiny Tattapani is known for its steaming **sulphurous springs**, which once spilled out onto a sandy river beach. By

the time you read this they, along with the once-great Spring View Guest House, should be submerged beneath the Sutlej thanks to a dam that's being built about 35km downstream.

The village has several **temples** linked to the cult of Rishi Jamdagam, and you can walk to **sacred Shiva caves** and former **palaces**. Ask directions locally or at New Spring View Guest House.

If you've come for the waters, your only option is the spa at the fancy new **Hotel Hot Spring** (☎230736; www.hotelhotspring.in; ₹3000-6000; ☹), which is moderately luxurious (it's got an elevator!) if relatively soulless. You can soak in the pools as a non-guest (₹100-350) and stay at the **New Spring View Guest House** (☎230711; www.newspringview.com; ₹ without/with AC ₹500/1200; ☹) just down the road, which has simple, bright and immaculate rooms and a good inexpensive restaurant.

Buses leave from Tattapani to Shimla every hour or so for much of the day.

NARKANDA

☎01782 / ELEV 2708M

About 65km northeast of Shimla, Narkanda is a nondescript truck-stop town for most of the year, but from January to March it transforms into a modest ski resort. The HPTDC offers three-/five-/seven-day skiing packages from ₹2739/4565/6391, including accommodation, meals, equipment and tuition, but not transport – see www.hptdc.nic.in for dates.

On the busy main road in the village centre, **Hotel Mahamaya Palace** (☎242448; ₹500-900) has a suitably alpine mood, or try **HPTDC Hotel Hatu** (☎242430; www.hotelhatu.tripod.com; d ₹1200-2100), off the main road, with pleasant gardens, snug rooms and a restaurant and bar.

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 ₹100, d ₹800-1000; ☹), 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.

SOUTH OF SHIMLA

The hilltop village of **Chail**, 65km south of Shimla, lays claim to the world's highest cricket ground, a 3km walk from town. As well as forest strolls, there's a **wildlife park** abundant with deer and birds. Stay at **Hotel Pineview** (☎248349; ₹ from ₹200) or **Palace Hotel** (☎248141; palace@hptdc.in; ₹1600-8500; ☹) a former maharaja's pad, luxurious in a Raj-era way.

Continuing southeast, **Renukaji** (Renuka Lake) is Himachal's largest lake and site of the week-long **Renuka Mela** festival each November, honouring the goddess Renukaji. The lake is an hour by bus from **Nahan**, which is well-connected to Shimla.

Virtually on the Uttarakhand state line, **Paonta Sahib** is famous as the one-time home of Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Sikh guru. The sprawling **Paonta Sahib Gurdwara** is set on banks of the Yamuna River where Gobind Singh got off his horse. You can eat at the gurdwara and stay in its guest-rooms (donation encouraged), or head for the nearby **Hotel Yamuna** (☎222341; d ₹700-900, with AC ₹1400-2000; ☹), which could use a paint job but has very friendly management. There are hourly morning buses to Shimla (₹200, seven hours) and plenty of services to Dehra Dun (₹40, two hours).

Kinnaur Valley

The old Hindustan-Tibet Hwy – built by the British as a sneaky invasion route into Tibet – runs northeast from Shimla through the Kinnaur Valley, providing access to mountain villages with slate-roofed temples, the vast apple orchards, and some of Eastern Himachal's grandest views. The Kinnauris, or Kinners, are proud Aryan people who mainly survive from farming and apple growing. You can recognise Kinners all over India by their green felt *basheri* hats.

To truly appreciate Kinnaur, you have to leave the main road, much of which currently feels like an endless construction zone due to the multiple dam projects that are turning the powerful Sutlej River into a massive generator. With an easy-to-obtain inner line permit (see p293) you can travel onwards to the mountain deserts of the Spiti Valley.

Formuchoftheyear, Kinnauris are a relaxed rural retreat, but that all changes in September/

October when Bengali holidaymakers flood into Kinnaur from the plains. Simultaneously, the annual apple harvest lures hundreds of fruit wholesalers from right across India. At this time it can be impossible to find a room anywhere in Kinnaur, especially in popular spots such as Kalpa and the Sangla Valley.

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 bustling little town was once the capital of the Bushahr rajahs. Today, Rampur is mainly a place to change buses, but if you decide to stick around, check out the delightful, terraced and turreted **Padam Palace**, built in 1925 for the maharaja of Bushahr; only the garden is open to visitors.

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

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Rampur isn't the ideal spot to overnight in Kinnaur, but there is cheap lodging if you get stuck.

Hotel Satluj View

HOTEL \$

(☎233924; r ₹300-550) Just behind the temple across the road from the bus station and down a flight of stairs, cheap rooms are grubby holes, while the more expensive ones are clean and pleasant, with big windows overlooking the river. The restaurant (mains ₹50-200) is the best place to eat near the bus station.

Hotel Bushehar Regency

HOTEL \$\$

(☎234103; d ₹1200-1400, with AC ₹1800-2100; 🍷) This standard HPTDC property on the western edge of Rampur has spacious rooms and a decent restaurant.

🚗 Getting There & Away

Rampur's chaotic bus station has frequent services to Rekong Peo (₹100, five hours) and Shimla (₹150, five hours) via Narkanda. Buses to Sarahan (₹45, two hours) leave every two hours. Three daily buses run to Sangla (₹105, five hours).

SARAHAN

☎01782 / ELEV 1920M

The former summer capital of the Bushahr kingdom, Sarahan is dominated by the fabulous **Bhimakali Temple** (☉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 century. The tradition lives on in a tamer form in the Astomi ritual during October's **Dussehra** celebration, when a menagerie of animals is sacrificed to Bhimakali, including goats, chickens and buffalo.

There are peaceful walks in the surrounding hills – stroll downhill to the **Buddhist gompa** 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

For such a tiny village, Sarahan has some good places to stay. Apart from the temple guesthouse, all hotels offer significant discounts out of season (August and December to March).

Temple Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(☎274248; dm ₹50, r ₹250-350) The obvious place to stay is within the ancient temple precinct and, unlike most temple accommodation, rooms here are far from gloomy and austere. Dorm rooms are basic, but the upper-storey rooms are bright and airy, with hot water.

Hotel Trehan's

HOTEL \$\$

(☎274205; r ₹880-1200) Run by a friendly family, rooms here have carved ceilings, big windows, TV and cheap tapestries of Indian epics that give the place a touch of character. Shared terraces have great views of the valley and the mountains beyond it.

🚗 Getting There & Away

Direct buses run to Shimla from Sarahan (₹200, eight hours) via Rampur (₹45, two hours) at 8am, 11.45am and 1.30pm. The 8am bus continues on to Haridwar. From early morning to late afternoon, there's a regular service to Rampur and Jeori (₹20, 45 minutes), the junction on the

main road from where you can catch buses to other destinations. Note that times are approximate and buses may leave earlier than scheduled. Taxis from Jeori to Sarahan cost ₹350.

SANGLA

📍01786 / ELEV 2680M

The Sangla, or Baspa, Valley is a deeply carved cleft between burly mountain slopes, where evergreen forests rise to alpine meadows crowned by snowy summits. Down below churns the frothy Sangla River. Villages here, especially further up the valley, feature houses and temples built in traditional Kinnauri wood-and-stone-style. The area is best avoided during the busy Dussehra (Durga Puja) season, when it's overrun by Indian vacationers. The hair-raising road to the valley begins at Karcham on the Rekong Peo-Shimla Hwy, passing the gushing outflow pipes from a big hydroelectric plant.

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 the so-called benefits of hydroelectricity are changing all that. Wooden houses are being rebuilt in concrete and new hotels are springing up on every corner. You'll have to head into the hills to find the serenity that the valley was once famous for, though there are neck-craning views of Kinner Kailash from here and a few guesthouses set in blissfully peaceful gardens. 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 **Phulek Festival** in September.

Sleeping & Eating

All hotels are booked solid during Durga Puja, but ask about discounts outside of September and October, which comprise the main tourist season.

Braham Villa Guest House GUESTHOUSE \$
(📍9459385863; r ₹300-400) A two minute walk up a trail from the main road, this four-room, family-run place surrounded by orchards and gardens has enormous, clean rooms; the ones upstairs have carved wooden ceilings. There are long, gorgeous views up the valley from the shared terrace.

Sangla Resort GUESTHOUSE \$
(📍242201; d ₹650-900) Uphill from the bridge near the town centre, this is one of Sangla's most appealing places. A stone chalet is set in peaceful gardens and surrounded by orchards. Rooms are spotless and the shared terrace and balconies have great valley views.

Baspa Guesthouse HOTEL \$
(📍9805649350; d ₹400-660) Run by a genial Kinnauri family, centrally-located Baspa offers a range of decent rooms with wood panelling and enough mirrors to satisfy Narcissus. There are good views from the upper floors.

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

Getting There & Away

Buses run in the morning to Rampur (₹100, five hours) and there are two daily buses to Rekong Peo (₹50, three hours), one in the morning, the other at about 3pm. Local buses run up the valley to Chitkul (₹30, 1½ hours) at around noon and 5pm. Buses run to Shimla (₹250, eleven hours) at 6.30am and 5.30pm.

Share jeeps can take you up to Chitkul (₹40, one hour) or down to Karcham (₹45, 1½ hours), on the main Shimla-Rekong Peo bus route. Taxis cost ₹1000 to Rekong and ₹1600 to Sarahan.

AROUND THE SANGLA VALLEY

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* 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) another 10km up the road. The last stop on the old trade route to Tibet – and an increasingly popular stop for backpackers – Chitkul is easily the most scenic settlement along the Sangla. A tiny wooden hamlet, it sits in a meadow above the treeline with full-on views of Rani Khanda Mountain up the valley. There are easy walks along the river and strenuous scrambles into the hills; this is where the trail circumambulating Kinner Kailash descends into the Sangla Valley.

A handful of basic guesthouses in Chitkul have rooms from ₹100-300; among the best of the bunch is **Thakur Guest House** (r ₹250), with stone walls and carpeted floors. Buses leave Chitkul at 6am and 2pm, going through Sangla (₹30, one hour) all the way to Rekong Peo (₹60, 3½ hours).

REKONG PEO

📍01786 / ELEV 2290M

Rekong Peo is the main administrative centre for Kinnaur and an important transport hub, but the main reason to visit is as a stepping stone to the pretty village of Kalpa, or to obtain a permit for onward travel to Tabo in Spiti. A steep walk above town near the radio mast is the **Kinnaur Kalachakra Celestial Palace** (Mahabodhi Gumpa), with a 10m-high statue of Sakyamuni and great views across to Kinner Kailash (6050m).

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.

There is nowhere to change money, but the State Bank of India ATM in the main bazaar accepts international cards.

The **Tourist Information Centre** (📍2222897; 🕒10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month) below the bazaar provides some local information but is mainly kept busy as a rail reservation office. There's also an internet cafe (per hour ₹50) here. This is the place to arrange **inner line permits** for onward travel to Tabo in Spiti. The office issues permits (₹350) within a few hours. It's best to show up as early in the day as possible. You'll need a couple of passport-sized photos and copies of your passport identity and visa pages. Solo travellers may run into minor hassles getting permits here since the powers-that-be prefer groups of two or more, so if you're alone you can streamline the process by hooking up with someone else just for paperwork purposes.

In the main bazaar, **Little Chef Restaurant** (per hr ₹40; 🕒8am-10pm) has internet access.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating**Ridang Hotel**

HOTEL \$

(📍9816820767; d ₹300-900) The best of several hotels lining the main bazaar, Ridang has a range of tidy rooms, some carpeted and all with TV. There's also a good restaurant.

Hotel Mehfil

INDIAN \$\$

(ITBP Rd; mains ₹45-230) Uphill from the bazaar, near the start of the steps up to the bus stand, Mehfil serves some of the coldest beer in North India, and a big range of veg and nonveg food. Eat on the restaurant side to avoid the local drunks in the bar.

📍 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.

Buses run roughly hourly to Shimla (₹265, 10 hours) from 4am to 7pm, via Jeori (for Sarahan; ₹90, four hours) and Rampur (₹120, five hours). To Sangla there are direct buses at 9.30am, 1pm and 4pm (₹50, 2½ hours) or you can take any bus heading south and change at Karcham (₹25, one hour).

For Spiti, there's a 7am bus to Kaza (₹250, 11 hours) via Nako (₹125, five hours) and Tabo (₹200, nine hours). A second bus leaves for Tabo at 4pm, and another heads only as far as Nako at noon. You need an inner line permit to travel this route – see left.

Local buses run hourly from the main bazaar to Kalpa (₹10, 30 minutes), or you can take a chartered taxi (₹200) or shared taxi (₹30). Taxis charge ₹1000 to Sangla and ₹4000 to Shimla or Kaza.

KALPA

📍01786 / ELEV 2960M

Reached by a winding road above Rekong Peo, Kalpa is a little gem. Majestic views of the Kinner Kailash massif grab your eyeballs and don't let go. The surrounding orchards and forest provide easy walks, or you can just wander the narrow cobbled streets. There are several simple guesthouses here, 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**.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

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

Hotel Blue Lotus

HOTEL \$

(📍2260001; r ₹350-900) Hard to beat for its combination of convenience, quality and price, this friendly place has a range of rooms and a wide, sunny terrace facing directly across to the mountains – ideal for a breakfast or just hanging out in a state of Himalayan-inspired awe.

Hotel Rollingrang

HOTEL \$

(📍9816421102; d ₹500-600, without bathroom ₹300) Up in a peaceful spot on the hillside above the village, rooms here are spacious

and sparkling clean, with enormous bathrooms. The best have balconies with perfect mountain views. In all, it's great value.

Hotel Kinner Villa

HOTEL \$\$

(☎226006; r ₹1800) Reached via a 1km walk through orchards and farmland beyond the village, Kinner Villa is the pick of Kalpa's guesthouses. Rooms have superb mountain views and there are heated lounges with big windows facing the valley for winter.

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

Getting There & Away

Local minibuses run throughout the day between Kalpa and Rekong Peo (₹10, 30 minutes), or you can take a taxi (₹30/200 shared/chartered) or walk – follow the well-worn stepped path rather than the winding road. If heading to the Sangla Valley, catch the 'Chitkul Express' direct from Kalpa at around 9am, stopping in Sangla (₹60, three hours) and Chitkul (₹90, five hours).

CENTRAL HIMACHAL PRADESH

Central Himachal is dominated by the Kullu and Parvati Valleys – famous for the production of woollen shawls and charas. The area is popular with hippies, honeymooners, trekkers and adrenaline junkies, and is home to Manali, one of the state's main travellers' centres. This is also the main route northwards, and many people continue from Manali 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. It's no tourist town, and it 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 Shaivite 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.

Mandi is centred on a sunken shopping complex called Indira Market, arranged around a pretty garden square, with the steps leading to the Raj Mahal Palace on one side. The bus stand is on the east side of the Beas River; a ₹15 autorickshaw ride away. Though not a top-shelf destination, it's a nice place to stop and get off the tourist trail for a few days.

Sights & Activities

Bhutnath Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

Along the river, this brightly painted temple dating from the 7th century AD is the focal point for the animated **Shivaratri Festival** in February, honouring Lord Shiva.

Other River Temples

HINDU TEMPLES

If you follow Bhutnath Bazar to the river, you'll find bathing ghats with a giant statue of **Hanuman** and a long avenue of carved stone *sikharas* (Hindu temple-spires). Most impressive are the **Panch Bahktar** 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.

Rani Amrit Kaur Park

PARK

Perched at the top of Tarna Hill is **Rani Amrit Kaur Park**, with superb views and the colourful **Syamakali Temple**, decorated with paintings of ferocious incarnations of Kali. You can walk the 5km from town or take an autorickshaw (₹50).

Sleeping & Eating

There are several hotels and places to eat conveniently lining Indira Market.

Evening Plaza Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎225123; d from ₹500, with AC ₹990; ☹) Right on the main square, this is reliable value offering clean rooms with TVs and a resident moneychanger. Front-facing rooms are best but the noisiest.

Raj Mahal Palace Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$

(☎222401; www.rajmahalpalace.com; r from ₹900, with AC ₹1700, ste ₹2000-3200; ☹) Mandi's most romantic hotel, this refurbished heritage place occupies part of the palace of Mandi's royal family. The rooms are bright, cosy and clean, some with the air of a colonial hunting lodge, some with a modern

chalet design. The **Garden Restaurant** here (mains ₹60 to ₹160, open 7am to 11pm) is the best in town, set under trees, with a choice of indoor and outdoor dining, excellent veg and nonveg food and the Copacabana Bar.

Treat Restaurant

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Indira Market; dishes ₹30-130) On the lower level of the market square, this small but swish restaurant is a popular meeting spot and serves up Chinese and South Indian food in air-conditioned comfort. They've got good omelettes and decent coffee for breakfast.

i Information

There isn't anywhere to change travellers cheques, but there are international ATMs at the State Bank of India and HDFC around the market square, while the Evening Plaza Hotel can change US dollars (cash). There are several internet cafes around the square.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

The bus station is across the river in the eastern part of town. Local buses run to Rewalsar (₹25, 1½ hours, hourly) until early evening from Indira Chowk, below the Raj Mahal Hotel.

Taxi

Taxis at the bus station charge ₹1000 to Kullu, ₹800 to Bhuntar airport and ₹600 for a return trip to Rewalsar. Expect to pay around ₹1500 per day for longer trips to the Banjar Valley and Great Himalayan National Park.

Indian scholar 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.

Today it's home to the ochre-red **Drikung Kagyu Gompa**, with an active *thangka* (Tibetan cloth painting) school, academy of Buddhist studies and a large, central Sakya-muni statue. Just beyond is the pale blue **gurdwara** (Sikh temple) built in honour of Guru Gobind Singh in the 1930s. In the other direction, the **Tso-Pema Ogyen Heru-kai Nyingmapa Gompa** has artful murals and atmospheric *pujas* (offerings or prayers) in the morning and afternoon. Uphill from the lake is the towering white **Zigar Drukpa Kagyud Institute**, with outsized statues of tantric deities. A 12m-high statue of Padmasambhava surveys his kingdom from the hillside. 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 **Padmasambhava Cave** on the ridge, where Padmasambhava allegedly meditated (you can also walk here from the lakeshore).

At the ghats on the northwestern side of the lake is a remarkable fish-feeding frenzy where hundreds of fish practically jump out of the water to get to the puffed rice being thrown in by pilgrims.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Lotus Lake

HOTEL \$

(☎240239; hlotuslake@yahoo.com; r ₹350-600) Facing the lake, this spotless modern place is Buddhist-run and the bright rooms, with TV and hot water, are a bargain.

Rewalsar Lake

☎01905 / ELEV 1350M

High in the hills about 24km southwest of Mandi, the sacred lake of Rewalsar is revered by Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs. The

BUSES FROM MANDI

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Aut	45	one	half-hourly
Bhuntar	70	two	half-hourly airport
Chandigarh	190	six	10 daily
Delhi	320/625 (ordinary/deluxe)	12	10 daily
Dharamsala	165	six	six daily
Kullu	85	2½	half-hourly
Manali	125	four	half-hourly
Shimla	165	six	hourly

Drikung Kagyu Gompa Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(☎240364; www.dk-petsek.org; r without bath-room ₹100-200) The guesthouse at the red gompa has simple but cosy quarters for pilgrims and nonpilgrims. Bucket hot water is included. There's a shared terrace with peaceful lake views.

There are several *dhabas* and simple Buddhist restaurants. **Emā Ho Coffee Shop** (drinks & snacks ₹15-40), at the entrance to the Drikung Kagyu Gompa, helps support the monastery with the coffees, teas and fresh baked pastries it serves. **Kora Community Cafe** (meals ₹30-80), near Hotel Lotus Lake, is good for coffee, Tibetan snacks and veg thali.

i Getting There & Away

Frequent buses go to Rewalsar from Mandi (₹25, 1½ hours), making for an easy day trip. A taxi from Mandi costs ₹450/600 one way/return.

Mandi To Kullu

About 15km south of Kullu near the village of Bajaura is **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 tallest temple towers in Himachal – damaged by an earthquake in 1905 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 ₹10/200, camera ₹50/150, video ₹2500/5000) was established in 1984 to preserve the home of 180 species of birds and

rare mammals, such as black bears, brown bears, musk deer and the ever-elusive snow leopard. The park also runs programs that provide a sustainable income for people living on the periphery of the conservation area.

Wildlife is best spotted on a three- 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.

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

Bhuntar

☎01902

Bhuntar is a highway town with the main airport for the Kullu Valley (the airport is smack in the centre of town, by the Beas River) and a handful of hotels catering to airline passengers. This is also the junction town for buses to the beautiful Parvati Valley. Most travellers merely pass through on the road to or from Manali or Kasol, or stay at Kullu, 10km down the road.

Bhuntar has a State Bank of India ATM, which is the last place you're able to get cash with plastic if you're headed to the Parvati Valley.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

There are a few choices opposite the airport, and 500m north in the main bazaar.

Hotel Bala Ji Inn

HOTEL \$

(☎265096; d ₹500-1250) By the junction where the road forks to the Kullu and Parvati Valleys, rooms here are clean and modern. The rooftop terrace has great views of the river.

Hotel Amit

HOTEL \$

(☎265123; d ₹550-1550) Next door to the Bala Ji, Amit offers smarter rooms with surprisingly stylish furnishings. There's also a good restaurant downstairs.

There are several *dhabas* at the bus stand, or more-substantial meals are available at **Malabar Restaurant** (mains ₹40-120), opposite the airport.

i Getting There & Away

Air

The airport is next to the bus stand. **Kingfisher Air** (www.flyingfisher.com) has a daily flight to Delhi.

Jagson Airlines (☎265222; www.jagsonairlines.com; Bhuntar airport; ☀8am-5pm) has short-hop flights from Delhi to Bhuntar and on to Dharamsala on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and from Delhi to Bhuntar via Shimla on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Baggage limit is a measly 10kg.

Bus

There are very regular services to Manali (₹50, three hours), Kullu (₹13, 30 minutes) and Mandi (₹68, two hours). Buses to other destinations pass through three hours after leaving Manali. For the Parvati Valley, there are regular services to Manikaran (₹40, three hours) via Kasol (₹35, 2½ hours) and Jari (₹25, one hour).

Taxi

The taxi stand is next to the bus stand. Fares include Jari (₹550), Kasol (₹750), Kullu (₹300), Manali (₹1100), Mandi (₹1400) and Manikaran (₹900).

Parvati Valley

☎01902

The Parvati River winds from the highway at Bhuntar to the hot springs at Manikaran and beyond, and the sublime surrounding valley is a popular traveller hang-out. Over the years the Parvati Valley has developed a well-deserved reputation for its wild and cultivated crops of charas – as well as its natural beauty. A couple of villages along the river have been transformed into hippie resorts, offering cheap accommodation, international food and a nonstop reggae soundtrack to crowds of dreadlocked and taffeta-skirted travellers. There are some excellent treks in the area – including the trek to the intriguing mountain village of Malana, over the Chandrakani Pass to Nagar, or across the Pin-Parvati Pass to Spiti. For safety reasons, solo trekking is not recommended – see the boxed text, p298.

JARI & MALANA

About halfway along the Parvati Valley, **Jari** is a busy little village straddling the highway, but it's the quietest of the traveller hang-outs in the valley. Most travellers stay above the village in the peaceful hamlet of Mateura Jari – it's worth the hike up to it.

Jari is the starting point for the trek to the mountain village of **Malana**, though a road now goes most of the way there – you can arrange a taxi in Jari, Kasol or Manikaran. Malana was once an isolated sprawl of traditional wood and stone houses, but about half of them burned in a fire in 2008 and

some have been replaced by cinder block boxes. The villagers have their own unique caste system and, while Hindu, each February they perform a Muslim ritual, slaughtering and eating a sheep. Charas is an integral part of their religious practice.

Visitors no longer need to wait on the outskirts of the village to be invited in, but once inside you must obey a litany of esoteric rules or face minimum fines of ₹1000. For example, it's forbidden to touch any of the villagers or their belongings, including homes, temples or buildings – they want nothing soiled by the spiritually impure hands of low-caste or non-Hindus. To get the most out of the cultural experience and avoid breaking any rules, it's worthwhile to visit with a knowledgeable guide (₹3000, including transport).

There are a few guesthouses above the village proper, where foreigners are welcome to stay overnight for around ₹150. A taxi (₹750 one-way from Jari) will take you to the end of the road, from where it's a steep one-hour walk up to the village. Carry your passport as you must show it to security at the hydroelectric plant. It's also possible to walk the 17km all the way to Malana, both from Jari and from Kasol.

For guide services to Malana or for any trekking around the Parvati Valley, contact **Negi's Himalayan Adventure** (☎9816081894; www.negis-himalayan-adventure.com) in Jari. Owner Chhape Negi is head of the area's mountain rescue team (meaning if travellers or locals go missing in the hills, he gets the call), so he's as reliable as it gets. He also runs a museum with shelves full of traditional artefacts from Malana along with a small guesthouse in the village of Chowki, across the river from Jari.

Sleeping & Eating

Most guesthouses are a steep 1.5km walk above Jari through cornfields to the beautifully serene hamlet of Mateura Jari – follow the guesthouse signs from the main road. None have private bathrooms.

Village Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9805190051; ₹100) This large, welcoming guesthouse is the first place you come to in Mateura Jari, with a big walled garden and rooms in several old village houses. The owners are charming and the spotless rooms are a bargain. Meals are available.

Just uphill from Village Guest House, near some ornate wooden temples, are the laid-back **Chandra Place Guesthouse**

WARNING – DEADLY VACATIONS

Since the mid-1990s more than two dozen foreign tourists have 'disappeared' from the Kullu and Parvati Valleys. While some got too deep into the high-stakes local drug trade and crossed the wrong people, others became lost or fatally injured while trekking alone through the confusing and rugged mountain terrain.

If you plan to head into the hills, especially around the Parvati Valley, we recommend going with a guide who can steer you away from natural – and human – hazards. It's a good idea to tell your hotel know where you are going and when you plan to return, avoid walking alone, and be cautious about befriending *sadhus* (holy people) or others wandering in the woods. So go, hike, and enjoy this incredible area – just be smart about it, for your mother's sake!

(☎9805969606; r ₹100), with an awesome covered porch with blissful views, and **Rooftop Guesthouse** (☎275434; r ₹100), both offering a pleasant, villagey vibe.

i Getting There & Away

Buses from Bhuntar to Manikaran stop in Jari (₹25, one hour). A one-way taxi between Bhuntar and Jari is around ₹550.

KASOL

☎01902

Spread out along the lovely Parvati River and with mountain views to the northeast, Kasol is the main traveller hang-out in the valley. It's a small village, but with reggae bars, traveller restaurants, internet cafes and cheap guesthouses catering to a largely hippie/Israeli crowd, it's like Vashisht or Old Manali – without the large town attached. You'll either love it or loathe it. Still, it's an easy base from which to explore the valley and chill out. The village is divided into Old Kasol on the Bhuntar side of the bridge, and New Kasol on the Manikaran side, but there's little to distinguish between the two sides.

Kasol has plenty of internet cafes charging ₹40 per hour, and several travel agents will happily change cash and travellers cheques.

From Kasol, it's a demanding four-hour walk to the mountain village of **Rashol**, where there are a couple of basic guesthouses.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

Most guesthouses close down for winter from November to April.

Old and New Kasol have loads of traveller restaurants serving cakes and identical menus of traveller fare – **Moon Dance Cafe & German Bakery** and **Evergreen Restaurant** are good choices.

Alpine Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎273710; alpinehimachal@gmail.com; d ₹400-600, q ₹800) One of the best places in town, this sturdy brick-and-timber place is set among pine trees next to the river in Old Kasol. Lawns and terraces provide space for swapping travel stories, and spacious rooms bask in the natural sounds of river and forest.

Taji Place

HOTEL \$

(☎9816461684; d ₹200-400, cottage ₹700) A big pink house in a sweet little meadow down by the river in New Kasol, Taji has a range of tidy rooms, a couple of well-equipped cottages in the garden, and a private hot spring.

Panchali Holiday Home

HOTEL \$

(☎273095; r ₹400-1200) Set back from the main road, this modern hotel has rooms with TVs, phones and geysers. They don't have a ton of character, but they're clean and comfortable. Front rooms have nice balconies, and some have an extra bed perfect for a child.

Bhoj Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$

(mains ₹50-150) The loungey furniture, funky music and great food make this a popular hang-out in Old Kasol. A full menu of Indian, Chinese and continental includes local river trout and desserts like 'Hello to the Queen'.

Little Italy

ITALIAN \$

(mains ₹60-120) Pizzas and pasta dishes are better than average at this 1st-floor restaurant, and you can get a cold beer.

i Getting There & Away

Buses from Bhuntar to Manikaran pass through Kasol (₹25, 2½ hours). Fares at the taxi stand near the bridge in Kasol include Manikaran (₹100), Jari (₹200), Bhuntar (₹600), Kullu (₹800) and Manali (₹1600).

With steam rising from the enormous temple beside the Parvati River, Manikaran is famous for its hot springs and is an important place of pilgrimage for Sikhs and Hindus. The name means 'Jewel from the Ear' – according to local legend, a giant snake stole earrings from Parvati while she was bathing, then snorted them out into the ground. This released the hot springs that bubble beneath. The water emerging from the ground is hot enough to boil rice (as high as 94°C) 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 enormous multistorey **Sri Guru Nanak Ji Gurdwara**, which was built in 1940 by Sant Baba Narain Har Ji and lurks behind a veil of steam on the north side of the river. It's a temple with bathing pools and a 'hot cave', which is like a steam room. The shrine inside is revered by both Hindus and Sikhs and receives a steady stream of pilgrims.

There are baths with separate facilities for men and women in the village, too, with water diluted to a bearable temperature. The village also has several temples, including the stone hut-style **Raghunath Mandir**, and the ornate wooden **Naini Devi Temple**. Keep an eye out for pots of rice and bags of

potatoes boiling in the vents, fumaroles and springs around the village and gurdwara.

 **Sleeping & Eating**

Manikaran is much less traveller-oriented than Kasol, but there are several budget guesthouses near the gurdwara. Most hotels are on the north side of the river in the main village, reached by a suspension bridge from the bus stand. Note that alcohol is banned on the gurdwara side of the river.

Fateh Paying Guesthouse HOTEL \$

(☎9816894968; r ₹200) Signposted down an alley in the old part of the village, this big blue house has nice simple rooms, welcoming owners and a cool vibe. The rooftop terrace is set among the pitched stone roofs of old village homes.

Padha Family Guest House HOTEL \$

(☎9418408073; d ₹100-250) In the bazaar just before the gurdwara, this recommended budget place has a range of simple rooms with shared and attached bathrooms. Some have great river views, some have balconies. Downstairs is a good restaurant and a square plunge pool full of spring water.

Country Charm Hotel HOTEL \$

(☎9805683677; d ₹500-600) On the south side of the river near the bus stand, Country

PIN-PARVATI VALLEY TREK

Best attempted from mid-September to mid-October, this strenuous but rewarding six to 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 be self-sufficient or go with a trekking agency from Kasol or Manali (see p305). The stages described here may be different than those preferred by your trekking agency – many take more days to do shorter stages – but this is a good baseline to work from, especially for independent trekkers.

The trail starts at Pulga – easily accessible by bus or taxi from Manikaran. From Pulga, the route ascends through forest and pasture to Thakur Khan. Two more days through an arid alpine zone takes you to High Camp for an overnight stop before attempting the pass. A challenging tramp over snow and scree will take you up to the ridge, then down into the Pin Valley. The final stage easily could be broken up to allow for two days hiking through the Pin Valley National Park to the village of Mud, which has a daily bus connection to Kaza.

STAGE	ROUTE	DURATION (HR)	DISTANCE (KM)
1	Pulga to Khir Ganga	four to five	10
2	Khir Ganga to Thakur Khan	six	15
3	Thakur Khan to Mantalai	seven	16
4	Mantalai to High Camp	four	12
5	High Camp to Pin Valley Camp via Pin-Parvati Pass	five to six	12
6	Pin Valley Camp to Mud	eight	20

Charm has views across to the village and gurdwara. Rooms are comfortable, with spotless bathrooms. The upstairs balconies practically hang out over the river.

Holy Palace Restaurant MULTICUISINE \$
(mains ₹50-135) Travellers and pilgrims are lured here by the cosy surroundings, pop soundtrack and a broad menu of Indian, Chinese and continental veg and nonveg food.

i Getting There & Away

Buses run regularly between Manikaran and Bhuntar (₹35, 2½ hours), via Kasol (₹5, 15 minutes). For Manali, change in Kullu or Bhuntar. Day trips by taxi can be arranged in Manali, Kullu or Bhuntar.

From Manikaran, taxis charge ₹100 to Kasol, ₹900 to Bhuntar, ₹1000 to Kullu and ₹1700 to Manali.

Kullu

📍01902 / POP 18,300 / ELEV 1220M

Kullu is the administrative capital of the Kullu Valley and marks the beginning of the ascent to Manali. Although there's not a great deal of interest in the town itself, Kullu makes a gritty change from the hippie holiday resorts found elsewhere in the valley. In October, Kullu hosts one of the largest and loudest **Dussehra** festivals in India. 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 and musicians. With some 30,000 devotees hitting town, accommodation is scarce, but it's an easy day trip from Manali or even Kasol.

Kullu is divided in two by the Sarvari 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 shortcut down through the bazaar below the Hotel Shobla International.

👁 Sights & Activities

Raghunath Temple HINDU TEMPLE
The pre-eminent temple in Kullu is the **Raghunath Temple**, which enshrines a revered idol that's paraded through town during Dussehra. To get there, 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.

Other Temples

HINDU TEMPLES

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.

Gijleshwar Mahadev

HINDU TEMPLE

Reached via a 3km trek from Chansari, 11km southeast of Kullu on the east bank of the Beas, the hilltop temple of **Gijleshwar 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.

👉 Tours

The **Kullu Taxi Operators' Union** (📞222332) offers sightseeing tours from the taxi stand for around ₹1000.

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Vikrant

HOTEL \$

(📞222756; d ₹300-600) Centrally located down a quiet alley behind the maidan, Vikrant is a good budget choice. Wood paneling and blue carpeting give rooms a simple charm. Those on the upper floors are bigger and brighter than those on the ground floor, but all have TVs and hot showers.

Hotel Aaditya

HOTEL \$

(📞9857062618; d ₹380-770) Just across the footbridge from the bus station at the southern end of the bazaar, Aaditya tries harder than most in this price range, with quality bedframes and oddly fancy bathroom fixtures. The best are the top-floor rooms with balconies overlooking the river.

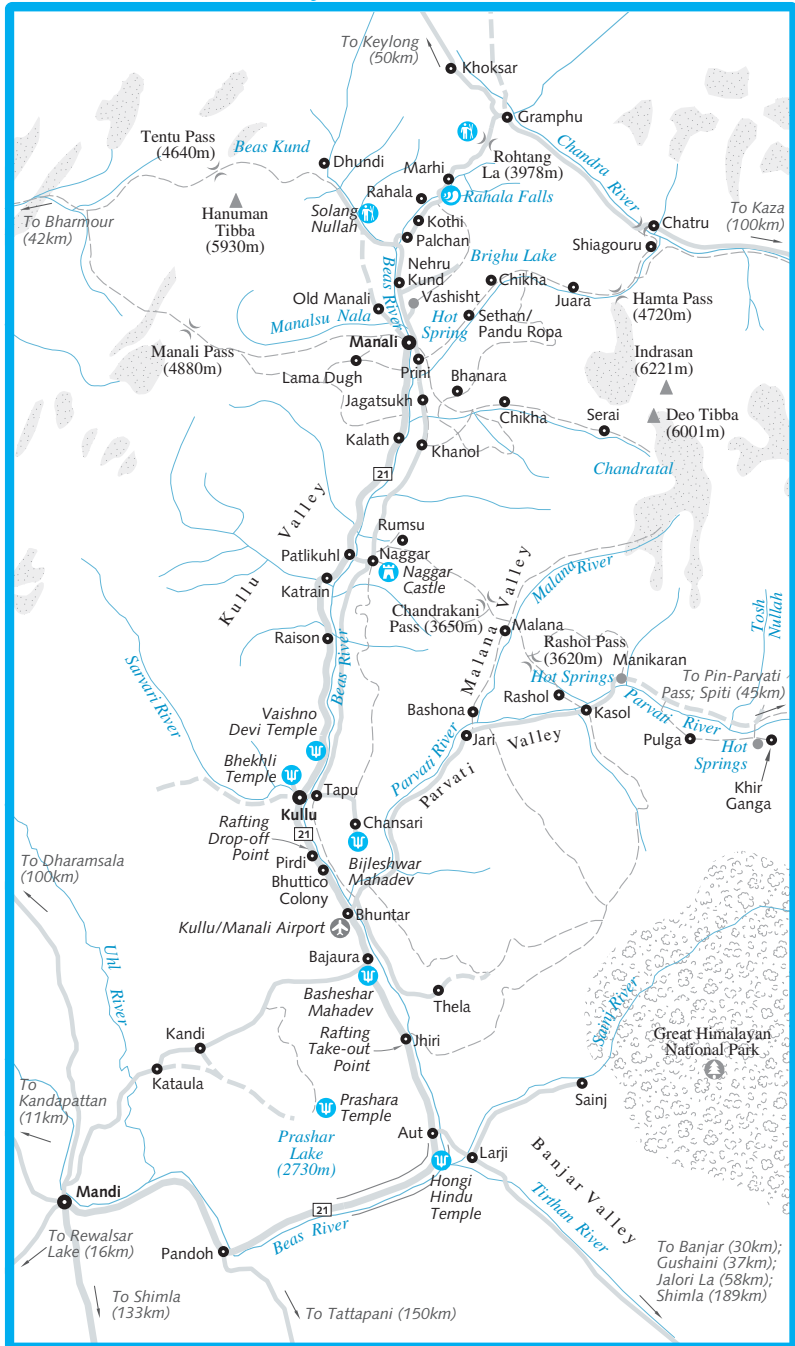
Hotel Shobla International

HOTEL \$\$

(📞222800; www.shoblainternational.com; r ₹1650-2200, ste ₹2750-3850; 🍷) Although this is the best of the business hotels in Kullu's centre, rooms in this modern hotel near the bazaar are clean but nothing special. There's a good restaurant and bar downstairs.

🍴 Eating

There are numerous *dhabas* clustered around the taxi stand and bus station, and



plenty of cheap eats in the narrow bazaar. The restaurant at Hotel Shobla International is also worth trying. For non-Indian food, head for **Hot Stuff** or **Planet Food**, both near the tourist office.



Shopping

Kullu has several outlets selling the valley's famous shawls, or you can buy at the source at the huge Bhuttico hand-loom centre just south of Kullu – see boxed text, p304. There's another Bhuttico Store in Akhara Bazaar.



Information

The **HPTDC tourist office** (☎222349; ☀10am-5pm) is near the taxi stand on the maidan. 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 cafes on the main road in Dhalpur charging ₹30 per hour.

There's an international ATM at the State Bank of India, south of the maidan, and another in the bazaar.



Getting There & Away

Air

The airport for Kullu is 10km south at Bhuntar.

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 p312 for more details.

See the boxed text below for useful buses around the valley.

Taxi

The taxi stand on the maidan books tours and charter trips – a day of sightseeing costs ₹1000.



Getting Around

Authorickshaws provide services around Kullu; trips in town should cost around ₹30.

Naggar

☎01902 / ELEV 1760M

Centred on imposing Naggar Castle, the slumbering village of Naggar was the capital of Kullu for 1500 years. Russian painter Nikolai Roerich settled 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. There are several small internet cafes and, although it's an easy day trip from Manali, there are some decent guesthouses and restaurants around the castle.

Sights & Activities

Naggar Castle

HISTORIC BUILDING

(foreigner ₹15; ☀7am-10pm) Built by the Sikh rajahs of Kullu in 1460, this beautiful fort 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, and there's also a restaurant.

Roerich Gallery & Urusvati Museum

MUSEUM

The main road through the village continues for 2km to **Roerich Gallery** (☎248290; www.roerichtrust.org; adult/child combined admission to folk & art museum ₹30/20, camera/video ₹25/60; ☀10am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun, to 5pm Nov-Mar), the former home of eccentric Russian painter Nikolai Roerich, who died in Naggar in 1947. The lower floors display some of Roerich's surreally colourful paintings, 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.

BUSES FROM KULLU

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Aut	35	1½	every 15min
Bhuntar	13	30min	every 10min Airport
Manali	45	1½	every 10min
Mandi	82	2½	every 10min
Manikaran	60	three	hourly

TAXIS FROM KULLU

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)
Bhuntar	300
Jari	700
Kasol	850
Manali	800
Mandi	1200
Manikaran	900
Naggarr	600

A five-minute walk uphill from the gallery is the **Urusvati Himalayan Folk & Art Museum** (admission with the gallery ticket), which houses the painter's personal collection of ethnological artefacts and photos of the Roerich family.

Temples

HINDU 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 Narayan (an incarnation of Vishnu). Just below Roerich Gallery is the pagodalike **Tripura Sundari Devi Temple**, surrounded by carved wooden out-buildings. High up on the ridge above Naggarr, the **Murlidhar Krishna Temple** is reached by a woodland path beyond the Roerich Gallery.

Trekking

TREKKING

Naggarr is the starting point for the excellent three-day trek to Malana village and Jari via Chandrakhani Pass (3660m). Ravi Sharma at Poonam Mountain Lodge is an experienced operator who can organise this trek, as well as all-inclusive longer treks around the Kullu Valley to Manikaran, Lahaul and Spiti and Ladakh for around ₹1700 per day. Jeep safaris cost around ₹2500 per day.

Sleeping & Eating

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

Castle Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎248316; www.hptdc.gov.in; d ₹1200-4000) The most atmospheric accommodation in town is the castle itself. Wood and stone corridors open onto a wide variety of rooms, some original and decked out in colonial finery, others completely refurbished. The views

from valley-side rooms are superb. Even if the hotel isn't within your budget, there's a good restaurant and terrace overlooking the valley.

Poonam Mountain Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎248248; www.poonamlodge.com; r ₹300-400; @) Just below the castle, the wood-panelled rooms at this well-kept lodge are cosy and comfortable, and the owner, Ravi Sharma, is a mine of local trekking information. For longer stays you can rent his traditional stone-and-timber two-storey house in the nearby village for ₹5000 a month.

Chanderlok Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎248213; d ₹250) Though the rooms here are more basic than at any other place listed, Chanderlok's outdoor garden and lawn opens up into a cool 1500-year-old stone temple complex. Cheaper rooms have bucket hot water and mattresses on the floor; slumber-party style; the best rooms have real beds and geysers.

Hotel Ragini

HOTEL \$\$

(☎248185; raginihotel@hotmail.com; r ₹700-1200; @) Ragini is a clean, modern hotel that's popular for its bright rooms with parquet floors and balconies, and its garden. The rooftop restaurant serves great food, and there's an ayurvedic healing spa if your chakras need a tweak.

La Purezza

ITALIAN \$

(meals ₹50-120; ☀11am-10pm, closed winter) On the road to Roerich Gallery, this rooftop cafe serves surprisingly good pizza, pasta and fresh trout. Bring patience.

Getting There & Away

Local buses run regularly between Manali and Naggarr from 6am to 6pm (₹20, one hour). A return taxi from Manali to Naggarr costs ₹650, and from Kullu it's ₹750.

SHOPPING FOR SHAWLS

The Kullu Valley is famous for its shawls, and the highway between Bhuntar and Manali is lined with scores of shops, showrooms and emporiums dedicated to selling traditional Kullu shawls. The shawls are woven on wooden hand-loom 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, which has showrooms in Manali, Kullu, Bhuntar and other major towns around the state. Established in 1944 by a group of village women, Bhuttico charges fixed prices, so it's a good place to gauge price and quality. Expect to pay upwards of ₹400 for lambswool, from ₹1400 for angora, from ₹3300 for pashmina and ₹6800 for the exquisitely embroidered shawls worn by village women.

Manali

☑️01902 / POP 4400 / ELEV 2050M

With super views of the Dhauladhar and Pir Panjal Ranges, and the fast-flowing Beas River running through the town, Manali is a year-round magnet for tourists. Backpackers come to hang out in the hippy villages around the main town; adventure tourists come for trekking, paragliding, rafting and skiing; and Indian honeymoon couples or families come for the cool mountain air and their first taste of snow on a day trip to Rohtang La. Over the years, many tourists have been lured here by the famous Manali charas, which is seriously potent stuff. Though in Old Manali it's smoked fairly openly, it's still illegal and local police do arrest people for possession (or hit them for bribes).

As the main jumping-off point for Ladakh, Spiti and Lahaul, it makes sense to unwind here for a few days before continuing the long journey into the mountains. Daily buses and jeeps to Leh, Keylong and Kaza leave from approximately June to October. Most travellers stay in the villages of Vashisht or Old Manali, which have a laid-back vibe and plenty of services, but close for winter from sometime in October to May.

Manali's main street is the Mall, part of the highway that runs into town. The bus and taxi stands are here and most hotels and restaurants are on alleys to the 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.

👁️ Sights & Activities

Hadimba Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Map p306) Also known as the Dhungri Temple, this ancient wood and stone mandir 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**. 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.

Hadimba is a 20-minute walk northwest of Manali, or you can take an autorickshaw (₹50).

Buddhist Monasteries

BUDDHIST TEMPLES

There's a small Tibetan colony just south of the town centre. The **Himalayan Nyinmapa Buddhist Temple** (Map p308; ☀️6am-6pm) contains a two-storey statue of Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha.

Further along the same lane is the more traditional **Gelukpa Cultural Society Gumpa** (Map p308; ☀️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.

Old Manali

AREA

About 2.5km above the Mall on the far side of the Manalsu Nala stream, Old Manali still has some of the feel of an Indian mountain village once you get past the core backpacker zone. There are some remarkable old houses of wood and stone, and the towering **Manu Maharishi Temple** (off Map p306) is built on the site where Manu is said to have meditated after landing the boat that saved humanity. A trail to Solang Nullah (11km) runs north from here through the village of Goshal (2km).

Nature Parks

PARKS

A large grove of deodars (cedars) on the banks of the Beas has been set aside as a **nature park** (Map p308; admission ₹10; ☀9am-7pm), with a small aviary of Himalayan birds, including the monal pheasant, Himachal's state bird. South of the centre is the similar **Van Vihar Park** (Map p308; admission ₹10; ☀8am-7pm, to 5pm in winter).

👉 Tours

In season, the HPTDC offers day tours by bus to Rohtang La (₹290) and Manikaran and the Parvati Valley (₹330), if there are enough takers. Private travel agencies offer similar bus tours.

The **Him-Anchal Taxi Operators Union** (Map p308; ☎252120; the Mall) has fixed-price tours, including Rohtang La (₹1900), Solang Nullah (₹600) and Naggar (₹650).

Adventure Tour Operators

The following places are reliable and well established and can arrange treks, tours and adventure activities – see boxed text, p311, for popular options.

Antrek Tours & Travel OUTDOOR ADVENTURE (Map p308; ☎252292; www.antrek.co.in; 1 Ram-bagh, the Mall)

Arohi Travels OUTDOOR ADVENTURE (Map p308; ☎254421; www.arohico.adventures) Located off the Mall, and also has an office at Hotel Arohi in Vashisht (Map p306).

Himalayan Adventurers OUTDOOR ADVENTURE (Map p308; ☎252750; www.himalayanadventurers.india.com; 44 the Mall)

TOP CHOICE **Himalayan Extreme Center** OUTDOOR ADVENTURE (Map p306; ☎9816174164; www.himalayan-extreme-center.com) With one office in Old Manali and one in Vashisht, your one-stop shop for any adventure activity.

North Face Adventure Tours

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

(Map p308; ☎254041; www.northfaceindia.com; the Mall)

Tiger Eye Adventure OUTDOOR ADVENTURE (Map 000; ☎252718; www.tigereyeadventure.com; Old Manali) Especially recommended for transport to Leh.

🛏 Sleeping

Manali has some of the best-value accommodation in the state, though prices are highest during the peak seasons of April to June, September, October and Christmas. At other times, discounts are standard, but bargain anyway. Heating is rare in Manali so be prepared to dive under a blanket to stay warm.

Few backpackers choose to stay in central Manali unless planning to catch an early bus – the best budget places, by far, are a short distance north in the villages of Old Manali and Vashisht.

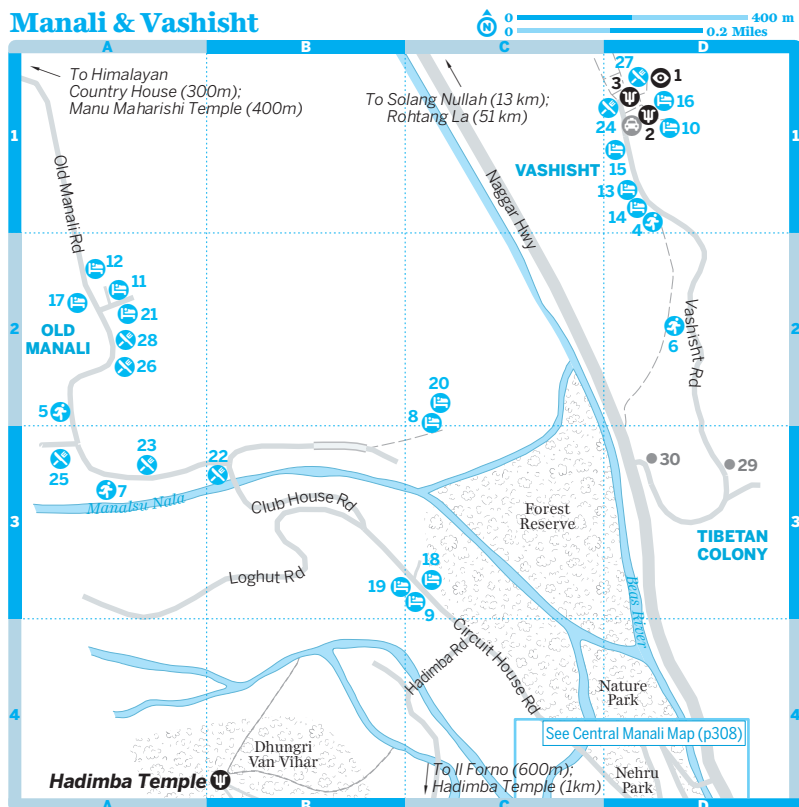
Manali also has some fine upmarket hotels and all are found along Circuit House Rd, heading uphill to Old Manali.

MANALI

Sunshine Guest House GUESTHOUSE \$ (Map p306; ☎252320; Circuit House Rd; ₹400) This rambling, wooden Raj-era mansion will appeal to lovers of unfussy colonial character rather than modern comforts. Enormous rooms with fireplaces (firewood is extra) and giant bathrooms may be a bit draughty, but the balconies, sunrooms and overgrown garden are straight out of a storybook.

Johnson Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$ (Map p308; ☎253764; www.johnsonhotel.in; Circuit House Rd; d ₹2750-3200; 🍷🍷🍷) One of several places named in honour of the Raj-era landowner Jimmy Johnson. This is a classy wood-and-stone hotel that has snug heritage rooms, a century-old lodge and lovely gardens, as well as an excellent restaurant. Everything's in immaculate shape, making this a high-end place that's worth the price.

Negi's Hotel Mayflower HOTEL \$\$\$ (Map p306; ☎252104; www.negismayflower.com; Club House Rd; r ₹3000; 🍷🍷) Mayflower is a stately wooden lodge with cascading balconies and cosy but luxurious wood-panelled rooms, some with open fireplaces (firewood costs extra). The lawns and gardens are a good place to relax in the afternoon.



Pushpak Hotel

(Map p308; ☎2513656; d ₹300) Down an alley opposite the bus station, this is one of the better budget places along the Mall. Rooms have surprisingly nice carpeting and those overlooking the street have great light. The ones toward the back are quieter.

HOTEL \$

Johnson Lodge

(Map p308; ☎251523; www.johnsonslodge.com; Circuit House Rd; d ₹2900, cottage ₹6350; ☎@) Built in wood and timber in the traditional Himachal style, but slick and contemporary inside, this towering hotel boasts bright, designer rooms that are starting to show some wear, as well as luxurious two- and three-bedroom cottages.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Banon Resorts

(Map p306; ☎253026; www.banonresortsmanali.com; d ₹4500-6000, cottages from ₹12,000; ☎@) This luxury hotel is the most comfortable in Old Manali. Centrally heated rooms in the

HOTEL \$\$\$

main hotel are spacious but surprisingly plain, while the two-bedroom cottages are the last word in luxurious peace and privacy.

Hotel Snow View

(Map p308; ☎252684; www.snowviewhotelmanali.com; d ₹1800-2500; ☎) Right in the centre of town, Snow View is a comfortable, if bland, business hotel that's got one thing to boast about – an elevator! – along with all the mod cons you would expect for the price, plus a bar and restaurant.

HOTEL \$\$\$

OLD MANALI

Uphill from Manali on the far side of the Manaslu Nala stream, Old Manali is a well-established traveller centre and has Manali's best budget accommodation. Hotels are spread over a kilometre or more from the stream northwards to the village proper, but most are in an enclave about halfway along. Most places close down in late October when many locals head to Goa for the winter.

Manali & Vashisht

📍 Top Sights

Hadimba Temple B4

📍 Sights

- 1 Public Baths D1
- 2 Rama Temple D1
- Shiva Temple (see 2)
- 3 Vashisht Mandir D1

📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

- Arohi Travels (see 13)
- 4 Himalayan Extreme Center D1
- 5 Himalayan Extreme Center A2
- 6 Shri Hari Yoga Ashram D2
- 7 Tiger Eye Adventure A3

📍 Sleeping

- 8 Apple View Paying Guest House C2
- 9 Banon Resorts C3
- 10 Dharma Guest House D1
- 11 Dragon Guest House A2
- 12 Drifters' Inn A2
- 13 Hotel Arohi D1
- 14 Hotel Brighu D1

- 15 Hotel Surabhi D1
- 16 Kalptaru Guest House D1
- 17 Mountain Dew Guesthouse A2
- 18 Negi's Hotel Mayflower C3
- 19 Sunshine Guest House B3
- 20 Up Country Lodge C2
- 21 Veer Guest House A2

📍 Eating

- 22 Blue Elephant Cafe B3
- 23 Dylan's Toasted & Roasted A3
- Freedom Cafe (see 13)
- 24 Fuji Restaurant D1
- 25 Lazy Dog Lounge A3
- 26 Pizza Olive A2
- 27 Rainbow Cafe D1
- 28 Shiva Garden Cafe A2
- Veer Restaurant (see 21)
- World Peace Cafe (see 15)

📍 Transport

- 29 Anu Auto Works D3
- 30 Enfield Club D3



Veer Guest House

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎252710; veerguesthouse@hotmail.com; r ₹400-700; 📍) Set in a pretty garden, long-running Veer is one of Old Manali's best-value hotels. Rooms in the quaint lime-green original section with wood-plank flooring have plenty of character, while new rooms at the front are bright and slick, with TVs and private balconies. Staff is easygoing and helpful, and there's a great little restaurant and an internet cafe.

Drifters' Inn

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎9805033127; www.driftersinn.in; r ₹500-800; 📍📺) This relative newcomer in Old Manali does it right, with stylish rooms with quality wood furnishings and outdoor terraces on every floor. If you don't need TV, stick to the cheaper rooms. There's a laid-back cafe downstairs.

Himalayan Country House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(off Map p306; ☎252294; www.himalayancountryhouse.com; Old Manali; r ₹600-1000) Ensnared at the end of the road in Old Manali, this four-storey stone and timber hotel overlooks the slate roofs of village homes and across to the mountains. It's beautifully designed, with traditional carved doors and compact wood-panelled rooms opening on to shared

balconies with the best valley views of any hotel on this side of the Beas.

Mountain Dew Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎9816446366; d ₹300-400) This yellow three-storey hotel has good-sized rooms and nice balconies where laptop users can sometimes catch the wi-fi signal from the attached coffee shop. It's all-around good value for Old Manali.

Apple View Paying Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

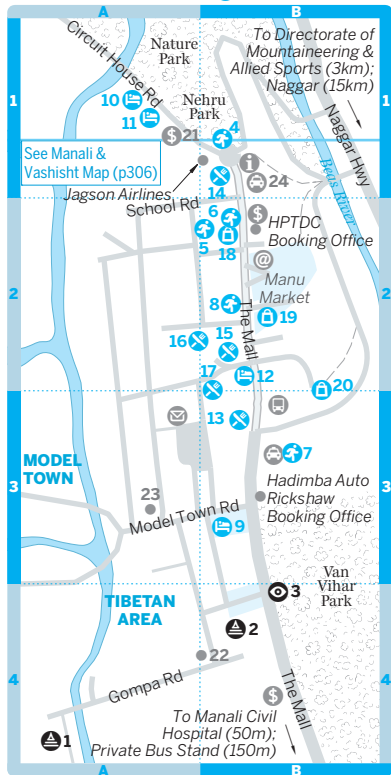
(Map p306; ☎253899; r without bathroom ₹200) Up a pathway behind the HPTDC Club House, this delightful village guesthouse is set on a peaceful garden plot among apple orchards. The rooms are basic but well cared for, and the upstairs patio is perfect for hanging out. If full, try the similar **Up Country Lodge** (Map p306; ☎252257; d ₹200-400) next door.

Dragon Guest House

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎252290; www.dragontreks.com; Old Manali; r ₹400-1000, ste from ₹2500; 📍📺📺) A one-time backpackers' place moving upmarket, Dragon has a beautiful stone-and-wood facade and an orchard out front. Some of the less expensive rooms don't quite live up to

Central Manali



the exterior, but the spacious suites at the top are 'honeymoon' standard. There's a good restaurant, an internet cafe, and a reliable travel agency for treks and tours.

Eating

Manali has some fine Indian and international restaurants, and there are lots of cheap travellers' cafes in Old Manali and Vashisht. Most restaurants serve trout sourced from local farms.

MANALI

Mayur

INDIAN/MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p308; Mission Rd; dishes ₹70-250; ☎9am-11pm) Locals rate Mayur highly for its well-prepared North and South Indian specialities. Downstairs is traditional Indian, in decor as well as cuisine, while the contemporary upstairs bistro serves dishes such as croquettes, chicken stroganoff and, oddly, Marmite toast.

Central Manali

Sight

- 1 Gelukpa Cultural Society Gopma.....A4
- 2 Himalayan Nyinmapa Buddhist Temple.....B4
- 3 Van Vihar Park Entrance.....B4

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 4 Antrek Tours & Travel.....B1
- 5 Arohi Travels.....B2
- 6 Himalayan Adventurers.....B2
- 7 Him-Anchal Taxi Operators Union Tours.....B3
- 8 North Face Adventure Tours.....B2

Sleeping

- 9 Hotel Snow View.....B3
- 10 Johnson Hotel.....A1
- 11 Johnson Lodge.....A1
- 12 Pushpak Hotel.....B2

Eating

- 13 Chopsticks.....B3
- Johnson's Cafe.....(see 10)
- 14 Khyber.....B1
- 15 Manali Sweets.....B2
- 16 Mayur.....A2
- 17 Peace Cafe.....B2

Shopping

- 18 Bhuttico.....B2
- 19 Bhuttico.....B2
- 20 Tibet Art Collections.....B2
- Tibet Emporium.....(see 18)

Information

- 21 Trans Corp Forex.....A1

Transport

- 22 Himalayan Inder Motors.....B4
- 23 Life Adventure Tours.....A3
- Manali Luxury Coach Owners Association.....(see 24)
- 24 Taxi Booking Desk.....B1

Il Forno

ITALIAN \$\$

(off Map p306; Hadimba Rd; mains ₹140-270; ☎12.30-10.30pm) Perched on a hillside near Hadimba Temple, Il Forno is a genuine Italian restaurant in a superb Himachal stone and timber building. The wood-fired pizzas, calzone, lasagne and pasta dishes are prepared by a Veronese chef and you can enjoy an espresso or beer with wonderful valley views from the garden terrace.

Johnson's Cafe

CONTINENTAL \$\$

(Map p308; Circuit House Rd; dishes ₹120-350; ☺8am-10.30pm) The restaurant at Johnson Hotel is one of the best in town for European food, with dishes like lamb and mint gravy, smoked chicken, and fig and apple crumble. The restaurant-bar is cosy, but on warm evenings or sunny afternoons, the garden terrace is the place to be.

Chopsticks

ASIAN \$\$

(Map p308; the Mall; dishes ₹60-270; ☺7.30am-10.30pm) The most popular traveller choice along the Mall in Manali town, this intimate Tibetan-Chinese-Japanese place is always busy. Naturally there are Indian dishes here, too, along with local trout. Cold beers and fruit wines are also served. Arrive early to secure a table in the evening.

Khyber

AFGHANI \$\$

(Map p308; the Mall; dishes ₹80-250; ☺8am-midnight) Upstairs by the main junction, this darkened bar and restaurant is central Manali's best place for a cold beer or bottle of fruit wine or cider. The food is also good – the speciality is meat-heavy Punjabi and Afghani cuisine but there's also Chinese, continental, and tandoori trout. Drinks are reasonably priced, and the booths are a good place to huddle.

Peace Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p308; Siyali Mahadev Market; mains ₹70-200; ☺8.30am-10pm) Down an alley near the post office, this cosy 1st-floor Tibetan-run restaurant serves possibly Manali's biggest range of global food, from *momos* to Japanese noodles, and local river trout to Hong Kong lamb. Service is friendly and efficient.

Manali Sweets

SWEETS \$

(Map p308; snacks from ₹10; ☺from 7am) Manali's favourite *dhaba* (snack bar), serving Indian sticky sweets, hot chai, samosas and hot veg snacks from early morning to late at night.

OLD MANALI

There are numerous garden restaurants serving all the usual suspects – pizzas, pitabread wraps, *momos*, banana pancakes, apple pie – from early morning to late evening. All these places close by the start of November. Popular backpacker restaurants include **Shiva Garden Cafe** (Map p306) and **Blue Elephant Cafe** (Map p306) near the river, both serving decent traveller fare for ₹50 to ₹120.

**Lazy Dog Lounge**

FUSION \$\$

(Map p306; mains ₹70-300; ☺) This restaurant/bar overlooking the river features big plates of fresh and flavourful international food that's steps above typical backpacker fare. Sit on chairs, benches or floor cushions in a space that's classy yet earthy, or relax in the outdoor garden. The beer (₹120-230) and wine (₹180-1250) lists are plenty long and the desserts will sate your sweet tooth.

**Dylan's Toasted & Roasted**

CAFE \$

(Map p306; www.dylanscoffee.com; drinks & snacks ₹20-100; ☺10am-8pm Mon-Sat) Manali's mellowest hang-out, this hole-in-the-wall cabin-style coffeeshop in Old Manali serves the best espresso coffee in town, cinnamon tea, hearty breakfasts, garlic cheese toast and wicked desserts like chocolate-chip cookies and 'Hello to the Queen'. DVD movies are shown in an adjoining room.

Veer Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$

(Map p306; mains ₹60-150; ☺8am-10pm) Located at Veer Guest House, this relaxed restaurant has garden tables with umbrellas outside and cushions on the floor inside. Most nights a Bollywood movie is playing on the TV. The barbecued chicken is a treat and service is good-humoured.

Pizza Olive

ITALIAN \$\$

(Map p306; mains ₹80-160; ☺9am-10pm) The aromas wafting from the pizza oven give this place an authentic Italian feel and the pizzas and pasta dishes don't disappoint. You can eat indoors or out in the garden.

**Drinking**

Restaurants double as bars to form the centre of nightlife in Manali, and most serve alcohol. Himachal's bounteous orchards produce huge quantities of apples, pears, plums and apricots, some of which are fermented locally and made into alcoholic cider and perry (pear cider) and a wide range of strong fruit wines. In Manali town, the best places for a beer or fruit wine are Khyber and Chopsticks. The upmarket Johnson Hotel, Johnson Lodge and Banon Resort also have good bars.

In Old Manali, most traveller cafes serve beer. In Vashisht, Rainbow Cafe is the place to be.

**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 p308; ☎252974; NAC

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN MANALI

Manali is the adventure sports capital of Himachal Pradesh, and all sorts of outdoor activities can be organised through tour operators in town (see Tours, p305).

Fishing

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

Jeep Safaris

Jeep safaris can be arranged to Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti for around ₹2600 per day, visiting monasteries, mountain passes and glacial lakes, with accommodation in tents or village guesthouses.

Mountain Biking

Though you may think that the steep slopes around Manali would have some prime mountain biking, you'll probably have to take a car to most tracks that are worth riding. Agencies offer bike hire for ₹450 to ₹850 per day (and can give current info on routes) 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** (off Map p306; ☎250337; www.adventurehimalaya.org), in Aleo, 3km south of Manali. Basic eight-day mountaineering courses run between May and October for ₹3400/13,000 (Indian/foreigner), including food, accommodation, guides and training. The courses cover essential trekking techniques and a series of local ascents. Local agencies can arrange expeditions to Hanuman Tibba (5930m) and Deo Tibba (6001m).

Paragliding

Paragliding is popular at Solang Nullah from April to October. Short flights start at ₹700 for a two-minute flight, but adventure tour operators can organise longer flights from surrounding take-off points for ₹1500 to ₹3000.

Rafting

White-water rafting trips on the Beas River can be arranged in Manali, starting from Pirdi, 3km downriver from Kullu. There is 14km of Grade II and III white water between Pirdi and

Market) has a good choice, while **Tibet Emporium** (Map p308; ☎252431; the Mall) stocks Tibetan knick-knacks and funky T-shirts.

Shawls are sold all over Manali. A good place to start is at the cooperative **Bhuttico** (Map p308; ☎260079; the Mall), which charges fair, fixed prices and has another store located in Manu Market. Several other cooperatives have shops around the Mall.

i Information

Internet Access

Many travel agencies offer internet access, and there are numerous internet cafes in Old Manali

and Vashisht charging ₹30 to ₹40 per hour. The following places are in town.

Cafe Digital (Map p308; Manu Market; per hr ₹50; ☎8am-11pm)

Hingiri Adventure & Tours (Map p308; the Mall; per hr ₹50; ☎9.30am-9.30pm)

Medical Services

Manali Civil Hospital (off Map p308; ☎253385) Just south of town.

Money

Banks in Manali don't offer foreign exchange but there are private moneychangers, and the State Bank of India has two international ATMs – the one at the bank branch south of the pedestrian

the take-out point at Jhiri; trips cost around ₹600 per person. 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 (p305) in Vashisht offers day trips for ₹1500/900 per full-/half-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. Skiing and snowboarding equipment can be hired through tour operators in Manali or accommodation places in Solang Nullah for ₹500 per day. Year-round high-altitude skiing expeditions can be arranged on virgin powder (experienced skiers only) through Himalayan Extreme Center for around ₹2500 per day (trips last three to five days). Costly heli-skiing trips to high-altitude powder can be arranged through Himachal Heli Adventures (☎9816025899; www.himachal.com).

Walking & Trekking

Manali is a popular starting point for organised mountain treks. Most agencies offer multi-day treks for around ₹2500 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).

Plenty of shorter walks are possible from Manali, though the usual rules on safe trekking apply – tell someone where you are going and never walk alone. The 13km 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. You can make arrangements in Manali or in Solang Nullah – expect to pay ₹300 for a roll down the hill.

Other Activities

Other activities available in the area include horse riding (₹900 per day) and canyoning (₹2400 per day). Quad bike rides around Solang Nullah cost ₹500 for a quick 4km round or ₹1500 per hour. Short hot-air balloon rides are sometimes organised from Solang Nullah during summer.

mall has shorter queues. If you are heading north to Ladakh, Lahaul or Spiti, change some extra money here.

Trans Corp Forex (Map p308; The Mall; ☎9.30am-7.30pm) Changes cash and cheques.

Post

Manali sub-post office (Map p308; Model Town; ☎9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) For poste restante and parcels (before 2pm only).

Tourist Information

HPTDC booking office (Map p308; ☎252116; the Mall; ☎7am-8pm, 9am-5pm in winter) Can book seats on HPTDC buses, and rooms in HPTDC hotels.

Tourist office (Map p308; ☎253531; the Mall; ☎8am-9pm, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat in winter) Helpful for brochures and local information. You can book train tickets at the railway booking office (open 8am to 1.30pm Monday to Saturday) next door.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Manali's closest airport is 50km south at Bhunter. You can book seats at travel agencies in Manali or at **Jagson Airlines** (Map p308; ☎252843; www.jagsonairlines.com; the Mall).

Bus

The bus station has a **booth** (Map p308; ☎252323; 🕒5am-7pm) for advance bookings.

Luxury buses are run by the **HPTDC** (Map p308; ☎252116; the Mall) and **Manali Luxury Coach Owners Association** (Map p308; ☎253816; the Mall). Tickets can be bought from their offices or from travel agencies thronging the Mall.

KULLU & PARVATI VALLEYS Buses go to Kullu every 30 minutes (₹45, 1½ hours), continuing to Mandi (₹125, four hours) via the airport at Bhuntar (₹60, two hours). Regular local services run to Naggar (₹25, 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 (see p1193 for more info).

Government buses (₹610) leave at 1pm, with an overnight stop in Keylong. Private buses run till around mid-October, charging about ₹1700 and stopping at Keylong or Sarchu.

LAHAUL & SPITI The Rohtang La, on the road between Manali and Keylong, is normally open from June to late October and the Kunzum La, between Manali and Spiti, is open from July to mid-October (exact dates depend on snow conditions). Note that Rohtang La is usually closed Tuesdays for road maintenance; some buses leave early enough to beat the closure but if you plan on heading north on a Tuesday check this out in advance. This route is also particularly susceptible to closure – sometimes for days – due to bad weather.

In season, there are regular buses to Keylong between 4am and 10.30am (₹130, six hours). Shared jeeps to Keylong can sometimes be found near the bus stand at around 8am or 9am for ₹300 per seat. For Spiti, buses leave for Kaza (₹230, 10 hours) at 5am and 6am; the 5.30am service continues to Tabo (₹295, 13 hours).

DELHI & CHANDIGARH The most comfortable options for Delhi are the daily HPTDC buses to the Himachal Tourism office on Janpath in Delhi. The AC Volvo coach leaves at 5.30pm (₹1190).

All buses run via Chandigarh (₹450, 10 hours). Book at the HPTDC booking office.

Private travel agencies run similar services to Delhi's Paharganj, but make sure you're getting a deluxe bus all the way through to Delhi.

Government buses run regularly from the bus stand till mid-afternoon; the fare to Delhi is ₹465/810/1050 (ordinary/deluxe/AC). Volvos depart at 5.45am and 4pm.

OTHER DESTINATIONS In season, HPTDC and private companies run buses to Shimla (₹450, 10 hours) and Dharamsala/McLeod Ganj (₹450, 10 hours).

For details of public buses see the boxed text below.

Taxi

The **Him-Anchal Taxi Operators Union** (Map p308; ☎252120; the Mall) has share minibuses to Leh (₹1600, 14 hours) at 2am from July to mid-October; book a day in advance. In season, travel agents can usually help organise share jeeps. Seats cost the same if you disembark at Keylong. Share jeeps to Kaza are rare and cost about ₹800. Sightseeing trips to the Rohtang La cost ₹1900.

Other one-way fares:

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)
Bhuntar airport	1000
Dharamsala	3500
Kaza	6000
Keylong	4200
Kullu	700 (950 via Naggar)
Leh	15,000
Manikaran	1500
Naggar	650
Solang Nullah	600

Getting Around

Autorickshaw

Autos run to Old Manali and Vashisht for ₹50. If you can't find an auto in the street, head to the

PUBLIC BUSES FROM MANALI

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Amritsar	420	17	1.45pm & 3.30pm
Dehra Dun	460	16	11am, 6.30pm & 8.30pm
Dharamsala	295	10	7.45am & 7pm
Haridwar	450	17	11am, 12.30pm, 3pm & 8.30pm
Jammu	440	12	4pm
Shimla	305/440 (ordinary/deluxe)	10	5 daily

Hadimba Auto Rickshaw Booking Office (Map p308; ☎253366; the Mall).

Motorcycle

Many people tackle the mountain passes to Ladakh or Spiti on bought or rented bikes. The **Enfield Club** (Map p306; ☎251094; Vashisht Rd), by the turn-off to Vashisht, does Enfield repairs and sells secondhand machines.

Several places rent out motorbikes, but make sure the price includes third-party insurance. The going rate per day is ₹600 for a 500cc Enfield, ₹400 for a 350cc Enfield and ₹350 for a 100cc to 150cc Yamaha, Honda or Bajaj. Reliable rental places include the following:

Anu Auto Works (Map p306; ☎9816163378; Vashisht Rd)

Himalayan Inder Motors (Map p308; ☎9816113973; Gompa Rd)

Life Adventure Tours (Map p308; ☎253825; Diamond Hotel, Model Town Rd)

Around Manali

VASHISHT

☎01902

About 3km north of Manali on the slopes east of the Beas River, Vashisht (Map p306) is a village in its own right, but, much like Old Manali on the other side of the river (but even quieter), it's a satellite of Manali and is a popular travellers' hang-out. Indian tourists mostly come here to bathe in the hot springs and tour the temples, while foreign tourists largely come here for the cheap accommodation, chilled atmosphere and charas. 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. Vashisht is far more compact than Old Manali – travel agencies, moneychangers, traveller restaurants and internet cafes line the single street, all within a few minutes' walk.

👁 Sights & Activities

Vashisht Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

(Map p306) 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. The hot-springs area is always busy with locals doing their laundry or washing dishes. 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 Kinnari style.

Activities

Travel agencies can arrange treks and other adventure activities around the valley (see the boxed text p311).

Along the walking track down to the Beas, orange-roofed **Shri Hari Yoga Ashram** (☎9418047038; ☺closed Oct-Apr) offers daily yoga classes for beginners at 10am, and advanced classes at 8am and 4.30pm (₹100 to ₹150).

🛏 Sleeping

Most places close from late October to April. Prices listed here can double in the peak season (April to June, September and October).

Dharma Guest House

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎252354; r ₹200-1000; @) Up a steep path above Rama Temple, this huge and expanding place has rooms in all budgets, and the hike up is rewarded with the best valley views from any hotel on either side of the Beas River. The older wing has basic but clean rooms that get more expensive as you get higher, while the new section has spacious deluxe rooms with TV, hot water and balconies.

Hotel Surabhi

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎252796; www.surabhihotel.com; d ₹400-1000) One of several big modern places on the main road but facing out over the valley, Surabhi is excellent value. Spacious, clean rooms have balconies with great mountain and river views and all have TVs and hot water. This is one place where you don't really need to spring for the more expensive rooms.

Hotel Arohi

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎254421; www.arohiecoadventures.com; d ₹500-900; 🍷) Run by experienced and welcoming mountaineer, trekker and tour operator, Mr Thakur, Arohi has midrange standard rooms with TVs and geysers and views from everywhere, including the restaurant.

Hotel Brighu

HOTEL \$

(Map p306; ☎253414; d ₹350-450, ste 800) This big old-fashioned wood and stone place has some interesting rooms with velour bedheads, and huge timber balconies with valley views. Although faded, rooms are carpeted and clean, with TV and hot water. The big family suite is a great deal.

Kalptaru Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p306; ☎9418845343; d ₹200) This big old village house above the temple has plenty of character. Rooms are simple, but there's a nice garden patio where the air is filled with the sound of the gushing springs just below. Upstairs rooms have nice views over the village.

Eating

Vashisht has several good traveller cafes and hotel restaurants. Most close down for the winter by November.

Rainbow Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p306; mains ₹70-150; ☎8am-10pm) Most people end up at this rooftop Vashisht institution at the end of an evening. Come here for decent traveller fare – breakfast, *momos*, yak cheese pasta, pizzas and thalis, as well as cold beers and an endless reggae soundtrack. There's an internet cafe downstairs.

Freedom Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$

(Map p306; mains ₹50-150; ☎7.30am-11pm) It's hard to resist the fun of this colorful outdoor cafe-on-stilts, which serves clay-oven pizzas and Thai, Mexican and Israeli dishes.

World Peace Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p306; mains ₹65-155; ☎8am-10pm) On the rooftop at Hotel Surabhi, this popular choice has cushions on the floor, a menu of Italian, Mexican and Israeli food, and views across to the Dhaulardhar range from a huge patio. If you play an instrument, bring it to the open jams on Wednesday and Sunday nights.

Fuji Restaurant

JAPANESE \$

(Map p306; mains ₹60-110; ☎8am-10pm Mon-Sat) On the rooftop of Negi's Paying Guesthouse, past the temple, this authentic Japanese veg place specialises in noodles and miso soup.

Getting There & Away

Autorickshaws charge ₹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 it's about 30 minutes; take the trail near the Himalayan Extreme Center past the Shri Hari Yoga Ashram and down to the banks of the Beas River. Coming uphill, the trail begins about 200m north of the Vashisht turn-off.

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-Naggur road, but it's camping all the way so it's best to take an organised trek.

From Prini, the route climbs through pine forests to Sethan, then open meadows to Chikha. A waterfall campground 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 Shia- gouru via Hamta Pass	7-8	10
4	Shiagouru to Chatru	3-4	8

SOLANG NULLAH

☎01902

About 13km north of Manali, Solang Nullah is Himachal's favourite winter ski resort. From January to March, skiers and snowboarders can enjoy 1.5km of alpine-style runs, taking a brand new gondola up to 3200m. A small drag-lift runs up the beginners' slopes. With the impressive backdrop of snowcapped Friendship Peak, it's also a year-round 'beauty spot', with a carnival-like atmosphere in summer.

Adventure-tour companies in Manali and hotels in Solang Nullah run ski and snowboard courses and rent out equipment – expect to pay ₹500 per day, plus ₹300 for use of the ski lifts. If you're up for an adventure in fashion, mangy winter clothing and slightly tired ski gear can be rented at dozens of wooden huts on the road between Solang Nullah and Manali.

In summer, Solang Nullah meadow, (which becomes a mud pit during the monsoon) is booming with Indian day-trippers taking pony rides (from ₹150), quad-bike rides (from ₹500), zorbing (from ₹300) and paragliding (from ₹700 for a tame flight down the slope). The surrounding hills are also good for walking – the **Shiva temple** 3km above the village is a popular destination.

Solang Nullah village has an alpine feel in the winter months: there are a few

chalet-style guesthouses with heaters and hot showers. At other times it's an OK base for local trekking, but it's close enough to Manali that there's no real need to stay here. If you do, try **Hotel Iceland** (☎256008; www.icelandsolang.com; ₹ ₹500-3000), a genuine ski lodge with great rooms, equipment rental, restaurant and bar.

Buses to Solang Nullah (₹15, one hour) leave Manali at 8am, 9.30am, 2pm and 4pm, heading back immediately on arrival. A taxi from Manali is ₹600, or it's a two-hour walk from Old Manali. Snow may make the road impassable in January and February, which usually means walking the 3km from the village of Palchan on the highway.

WESTERN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Western Himachal Pradesh is most famous as the home of the Tibetan government in exile, near Dharamsala, but consider travelling further afield to the fascinating Chamba Valley. The official website for Kangra district is <http://hpkangra.nic.in>, while the official Chamba Valley site is <http://hpchamba.nic.in>.

Dharamsala

☎01892 / POP 19,800 / ELEV 1219M

Dharamsala is best known as the home of the Dalai Lama, but the grubby market town where the buses pull in is actually Lower Dharamsala. The Tibetan government in exile is based just uphill in Gangchen Kyishong, and travellers make a beeline further uphill to the remarkably busy little traveller town of McLeod Ganj, also known as Upper Dharamsala. The bus station, a small museum and the bustling Kotwali Bazar can be found in Dharamsala, but otherwise it's just a place to pass through on your way to McLeod or Bhagsu.

The **State Bank of India** (☎10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) accepts travellers cheques and changes cash, and there's an ATM about 50m up the street.

👁 Sights

Museum of Kangra Art

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹10/50; ☎10am-5pm Tue-Sun) The Museum of Kangra Art near the bus station displays some fine miniature paintings from the Kangra school, along with temple

carvings, fabrics and embroidery, weapons and palanquins belonging to local rajahs.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

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

Kashmir House

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎222977; d ₹1200-2200) A short hike up the hill towards Gangchen Kyishong, this well-run heritage hotel once belonged to the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

Hotel Dhauladhar

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎224926; ₹ ₹1500-3000) Way better than Dharamsala's budget dives, rooms are comfortable if overpriced.

Hotel Paradise

HOTEL \$

(☎224207; Kotwali Bazar; ₹ ₹250) A short walk uphill from the bus stand, rooms range from glorified prison cells to spartan but cleanish.

Andy's Midtown Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$\$\$

(mains ₹100-300; ☎10am-10.30pm) Dharamsala's best restaurant. Come for kebabs, rich curries, burgers and a fine veg or nonveg thali, and sit on a horse saddle at the bar in the back.

📍 Getting There & Away

Air

See p326 for details of air services to the area.

Bus

There's a regular shuttle service from Dharamsala bus station to McLeod Ganj (₹10, 35 minutes) about every half-hour till about 7pm. For Delhi there's a deluxe Volvo bus at 8pm (₹785, 12 hours). See the boxed text p316, for other services.

Taxi

The **taxi stand** (☎222105) is up some steep steps from the bus stand. Shared jeeps (₹10 per person, 30 minutes) to McLeod Ganj leave when full. Day tours covering less than 80km can be arranged for ₹1400 per day.

Fixed one-way fares:

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)
Gaggal airport	400
Jawalamukhi	700
Kangra	500
Masrur	900
McLeod Ganj	150
Palampur	700

BUSES FROM DHARAMSALA

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Amritsar	165	7	5am
Chamba	210	8	six daily
Dalhousie	150	6	7.30am & 12.15pm
Dehra Dun	375	13	9pm
Delhi	290-785	12	11 daily
Gaggal	12	30min	frequently
Jammu	160	5	9.45am
Jawalamukhi	60	1½	hourly
Kangra	20	1	frequently
Kullu	210	9	four daily
Manali	250	10	four daily
Mandi	150	6	five daily
Palampur	40	2	frequently
Pathankot	100	3½	hourly
Shimla	280-430	10	seven daily

Train

The nearest train station is Kangra Mandir, on the slow narrow-gauge line from Pathankot to Jogindarnagar – see the boxed text p330. Reservations for other services from Pathankot can be made at the **Rail Reservation Centre** (☎226711; Hotel Dhauladhar; ☉8am-2pm Mon-Sat).

McLeod Ganj

☎01892 / ELEV 1770M

When travellers talk of heading up to Dharamsala (to see the Dalai Lama...), this is where they mean. Around 4km above Dharamsala town – or 10km via the main bus route – McLeod Ganj is the headquarters of the Tibetan government in exile and the residence of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. Along with Manali, it's the big traveller hang-out in Himachal Pradesh, with many budget hotels, trekking companies, internet cafes, restaurants and shops selling Tibetan souvenirs. Naturally, there's a large Tibetan population here, many of whom are refugees, so you'll see plenty of maroon robes about, especially when the Dalai Lama is in residence.

McLeod (named after David McLeod, Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab) was established in the mid-1850s as a British garrison and it served as an administration centre for the colonial government until the earth-

quake of 1905. It was a backwater until 1960, when the Dalai Lama claimed asylum here following the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

Since then, McLeod has become a 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.

Waterproof clothing is handy for McLeod Ganj: it rains a lot. Many shops and businesses are closed on Monday.

From the Main Chowk, 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.

Buses now arrive and depart from a new depot about 200m north of the Main Chowk, just past the autorickshaw stand and the shared jeep lot, on the lower road that heads toward the Church of St John in the Wilderness and Dal Lake. The taxi stand is located on Mall Rd.

Sights

Tsuglagkhang Complex

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(Temple Rd; Central Chapel; ☉nonresidents 5am-8pm) The main focus of visiting pilgrims, monks and many tourists is the Tsuglagkhang,

comprising the *photang* (official residence) of the Dalai Lama, the Namgyal Gomba, 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. Note that during teachings, cameras, mobile phones, cigarettes and lighters are not permitted in the temple.

The remaining buildings form the **Namgyal Gomba**, where you can watch monks debate most afternoons, sealing points of argument with great flourish, a foot stamp and a theatrical clap of the hands. The monastery bookshop has a good selection of Buddhist texts, and you can enjoy cakes and vegetarian food at Namgyal Cafe.

Just inside the main entry gate is the **Tibet Museum** (admission ₹5; ☉9am-5pm), telling the 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 downhill road to the left at the entrance to the temple and follow the winding path leading off to the right. It passes through forest strewn with prayer flags before emerging back on Temple Rd.

Secretariat of the Tibetan Government in Exile

MUSEUM

Inside the government compound at Gangchen Kyishong, the **Library of Tibetan Works & Archives** (Secretariat Complex; www.ltwa.net; ☉9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) preserves the Tibetan texts spared from the Cultural Revolution. Many have since been translated into English and other European languages. Regular visitors can become temporary members (₹50 per month; passport needed for ID) to access the collection.

Upstairs is a fascinating **cultural museum** (admission ₹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 Gomba**, home to the Tibetan state oracle.

Tibetan Medical & Astrological Institute (Men-Tsee-Khang)

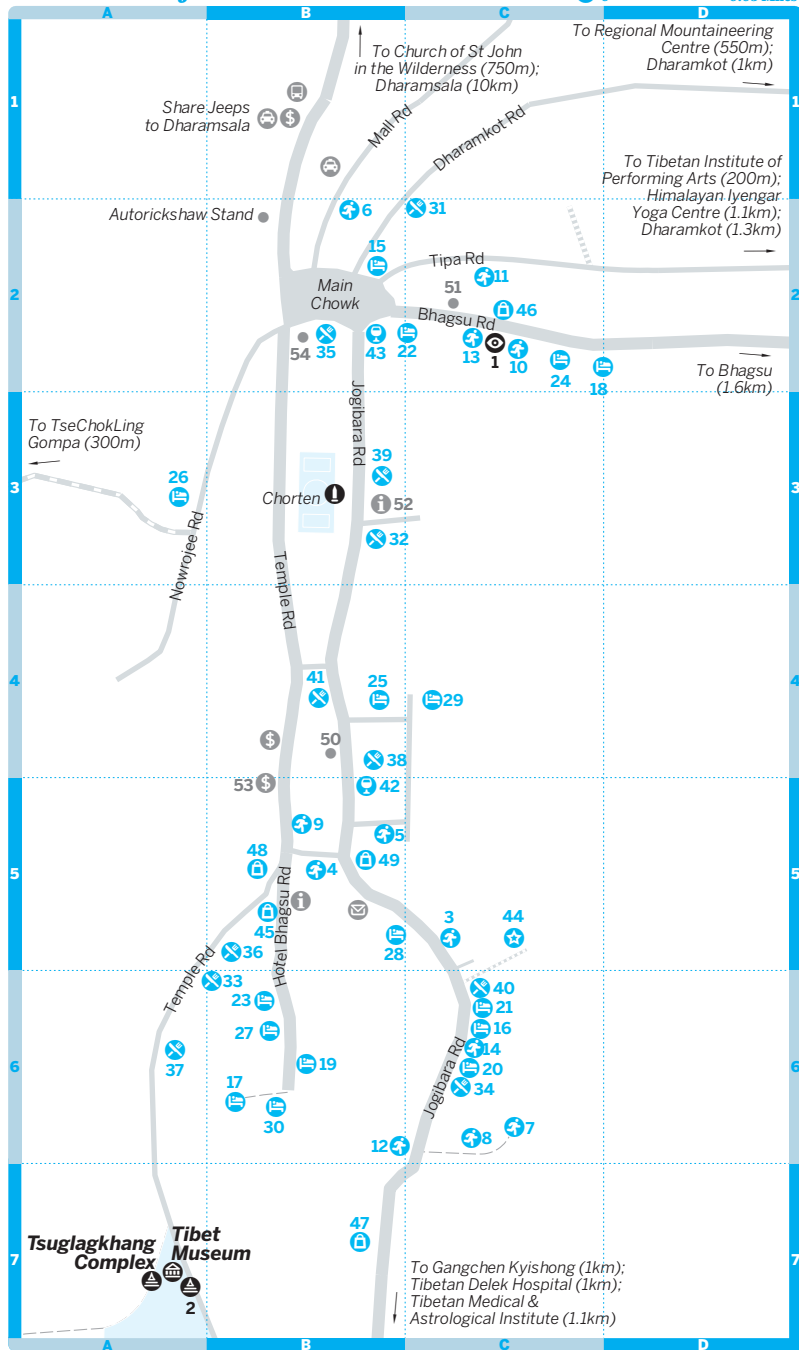
AMCHI

Established to preserve the ancient arts of *amchi* (traditional Tibetan medicine) and astrology, the **Men-Tsee-Khang** (☎223113; www.men-tsee-khang.org; 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.

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

MEETING THE DALAI LAMA

Meeting face to face with the Dalai Lama is a lifelong dream for many travellers and certainly for Buddhists, but private audiences are rarely 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 teachings held at Gangchen Kyishong during the monsoon (July/August), after Losar (Tibetan New Year) in February/March and on other occasions, depending on his schedule. For annual schedules and just about everything you need to know about His Holiness, check out www.dalailama.com. To attend, you have to register with your passport and two passport photographs, at the **Branch Security Office** (☎221560; Bhagsu Rd; ☉9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat each month). Sign up a few days before the teaching begins for the best chance of getting in.



At the base of a long flight of steps off of Nowrojee Rd, 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.

McLeod Ganj

📍 Top Sights

- Tibet Museum..... A7
- Tsuglagkhang Complex..... A7

📍 Sights

- 1 Environmental Education Centre..... C2
- Gu Chu Sum Movement Gallery..(see 34)
- 2 Kalachakra Temple..... A7
- Namgyal Gompa.....(see 2)

📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 3 Bhimsen's Cooking Class..... C5
- 4 Dr Lobsang Khangkar Memorial Clinic..... B5
- 5 Dr Yeshi Dhonden..... B5
- 6 Eagle's Height Trekkers..... B2
- High Point Adventure.....(see 27)
- 7 Hope Education Centre..... C6
- 8 Learning & Ideas for Tibet..... C6
- 9 Lha..... B5
- 10 Lhamo's Kitchen..... C2
- 11 Men-Tsee-Khang Clinic..... C2
- Nisha's Indian Cooking Course...(see 40)
- 12 Sangye's Kitchen..... B6
- 13 Tibetan Settlement Office..... C2
- 14 Tibetan Universal Massage..... C6
- Universal Yoga Centre.....(see 44)
- VolunteerTibet.....(see 12)

📍 Sleeping

- 15 Asian Plaza Hotel..... B2
- 16 Cheryton Cottage Guest House..... C6
- 17 Honor House Hotel..... B6
- 18 Green Hotel..... C2
- 19 Hotel Bhagsu..... B6
- 20 Hotel Ladies Venture..... C6
- 21 Hotel Mount View..... C6
- 22 Hotel Tibet..... C2
- 23 Kareri Lodge..... B6
- 24 Kunga Guesthouse..... C2
- 25 Loseling Guest House..... B4
- 26 Om Hotel..... A3
- 27 Pema Thang Guest House..... B6
- 28 Takhyil Hotel..... B5
- 29 Tibetan Ashoka Guest House..... C4
- 30 Zamabala House..... B6

📍 Eating

- Beans Cafe.....(see 43)

- 31 Common Ground Café.....C2
- Green Hotel.....(see 18)
- 32 Jimmy's Italian Kitchen.....B3
- Khana Nirvana.....(see 47)
- 33 Khana Nirvana.....B6
- 34 Lung Ta.....C6
- Mandala Wifi Coffee House.....(see 36)
- 35 McLo Restaurant.....B2
- 36 Moonpeak Espresso.....B5
- 37 Moonpeak Thali.....A6
- Namgyal Cafe.....(see 2)
- Nick's Italian Kitchen.....(see 24)
- 38 Ogo's Cafe Italiano.....B4
- Peace Cafe.....(see 28)
- 39 Snow Lion Restaurant.....B3
- 40 Taste of India.....C6
- 41 Tsongkha.....B4

📍 Drinking

- 42 Aroma.....B5
- 43 X-cite.....B2

📍 Entertainment

- Khana Nirvana.....(see 47)
- 44 Tibetan Music Trust.....C5

📍 Shopping

- 45 Bookworm.....B5
- Green Shop.....(see 1)
- 46 Hills Bookshop.....C2
- Namgyal Bookshop.....(see 2)
- 47 Stitches of Tibet.....B7
- 48 TCV Handicraft Centre.....B5
- 49 Tibetan Handicrafts Cooperative Centre.....B5

Information

- Branch Security Office.....(see 13)
- 50 Himachal Travels.....B4
- 51 Himalaya Tours & Travels.....C2
- 52 Information Office of Central Tibetan Administration.....B3
- 53 Thomas Cook.....B5

Transport

- 54 Bus Ticket Office.....B2

TIBETAN EXILES

In October of 1950, about a year after Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese troops invaded Tibet. At the time, Tibet was an independent state led by the Dalai Lama. A year later, in October 1951, Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, fell. After resistance simmered for years in the countryside, protests against the Chinese occupation broke out on the streets of Lhasa in 1959. As the Chinese Army squelched the uprising, it fired upon Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's summer palace. Believing his life or his freedom was at risk, the Dalai Lama secretly fled across the Himalayas to India, where he received asylum.

China says its army was sent to Tibet as liberators, to free Tibetans from feudal serfdom and improve life on the vast high plateau. It hasn't worked out that way. While the commonly quoted figure of 1.2 million Tibetans killed since 1950 is seriously disputed – even by Western scholars – no independent observers question the reality of the suffering and human rights abuses, as well as huge losses to Tibet's cultural legacy, that have occurred under Chinese occupation. Each year, at least 2500 Tibetans risk the dangerous, clandestine crossing over the mountains into India, and it's estimated that about 130,000 refugees are now living outside their homeland. Most come first to the Dharamsala area, where they find support from their community, their government-in-exile and a legion of NGOs. About 80,000 exiles live around Dharamsala today.

If you're interested in volunteering with the Tibetan community, see the boxed text on p323.

Gu Chu Sum Movement Gallery GALLERY

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

Environmental Education Centre LEARNING CENTRE

(Bhagsu Rd; ☎8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Established by the Tibetan Welfare Office, this centre provides education on environmental issues. You can refill your water bottle, and the adjacent **Green Shop** (Bhagsu Rd; ☎10am-5pm Tue-Sun) sells handmade paper and other organic products.

Church of St John in the Wilderness CHURCH

Just off the main road into McLeod, this church 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, Yoga & 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.

Lha (☎220992; www.lhasocialwork.org; Temple Rd; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Fri) runs yoga classes from 5pm to 6.30pm (₹100 per session) and also offers reliable massage treatments.

Universal Yoga Centre (☎9418291929; www.vijaypoweryoga.com; Yongling School, Jogibara Rd) gets good reports for drop-in yoga classes and longer courses.

Walks

Short walks around McLeod include the 2km stroll to **Bhagsu** and the 3km walk northeast to **Dharamkot** for uplifting views south over the valley and north towards the Dhauladhar Ridge. You can do a loop to Bhagsu, across to Dharamkot and back down to McLeod in a few hours.

About 4km northwest of McLeod Ganj on Mall Rd, peaceful **Dal Lake** is home to the **Tibetan Children's Village** (☎221348; www.tcv.org.in; ☎9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri), which provides free education for some 2000 refugee children. Visitors are 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 one- or 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 **Indrahar La** (4300m) and the Chamba Valley.

Trekking

It's possible to trek from McLeod Ganj to the Kullu, Chamba, Lahaul and Spiti Valleys, and there are several agencies in town that can make the necessary arrangements. The most popular route crosses the 4300m Indrahar La over the Dhauladhar to Bharmour (p328). All-inclusive treks costs around ₹1500 to ₹2000 per person, per day.

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 TREKKING
(☎221097; www.trekking.123himachal.com; Mall Rd) Also runs birdwatching tours and jeep safaris.

High Point Adventure TREKKING
(☎220718; www.trek.123himachal.com; Hotel Bhagsu Rd) Highly recommended, with some of the best prices in town.



Courses

Yoga, Meditation & Philosophy

Several organisations offer long-term courses in Buddhist philosophy and meditation. They have strict rules on silence, alcohol and smoking.

Himalayan Iyengar Yoga Centre YOGA
(☎221312; www.hiyogacentre.com; Tipa Rd; ☀Apr-Oct) Five-day courses start every Thursday (₹3000).

Tushita Meditation Centre MEDITATION
(☎221866; www.tushita.info; ☎registration 9.30-11.30am & 12.30-4pm Mon-Sat) Near Dharamkot, Tushita offers 10-day residential retreats in Buddhist philosophy, courses for advanced students and shorter programs, including drop-in meditation – see the website for course dates.

Vipassana Meditation Centre MEDITATION
(☎221309; www.sikhara.dhamma.org; ☎registration 4-5pm) Located in Dharamkot, this centre runs strict 10-day retreats on *vipassana* (mindfulness meditation) from April to November.

Library of Tibetan Works & Archives BUDDHISM
(☎222467; itwa.net) At the Gangchen Kyishong complex, there are Buddhist philosophy courses for ₹200 per month, plus ₹50 registration.

Cooking
Cooking courses in McLeod Ganj cover everything from South Indian dosas to chocolate *momos*. Book the following courses one day in advance:

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

Lhamo's Kitchen COOKING
(☎9816468719; Bhagsu Rd; classes ₹300, 3-day courses ₹550; ☀10.30am-12.30pm, 5-7pm) Recommended courses in vegetarian Tibetan cooking.

AMCHI

Amchi (traditional Tibetan medicine) is a centuries-old holistic healing practice and a popular treatment for all kinds of minor and persistent ailments. There are several clinics around town, including **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.

The most popular practitioner in town is the former physician to the Dalai Lama, **Dr Yeshi Dhonden** (☀8am-1pm), whose tiny clinic is squirreled away off Jogibara Rd, down an alley past Ashoka Restaurant. No appointment is necessary: you arrive at 8am and collect a token and approximate consultation time. You come back with a sample of urine, which, along with a quick examination, is all the doctor needs to prescribe the appropriate herbal pills. Many locals and expats swear by his treatments.

For an insight into *amchi*, visit the Tibetan Medical & Astrological Institute (Men-Tsee Khang; p317).

Sangye's Kitchen

COOKING

(☎9816164540; Jogibara Rd; classes ₹250; ☺10am-noon & 4-6pm Thu-Tue) Tibetan treats, with a different menu daily. Next to Tashi Choeling Monastery.

Nisha's Indian Cooking Course

COOKING

(☎9318877674; www.indiancookingcourse.com; Taste of India Restaurant, Jogibara Rd; courses ₹700) Three-day veg and nonveg North Indian courses.

Language

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

Lha (☎220992; Temple Rd; ☺10am-5pm Mon-Fri) offers private Tibetan-language tuition for ₹100 per hour.

There are several independent Tibetan teachers – check *Contact* magazine for details. Classes run by **Pema Youton** (☎9418603523) get good reports.

Massage

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

★ 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), east of Main Chowk. The annual **Opera Festival** is held in February or March, while the **TIPA Anniversary Festival** takes place in August.

In December or January, McLeod celebrates **Losar** 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** 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 advised year-round, especially from April to June, October and November.

**Chonor House Hotel**

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎221006; www.norbulingka.org; s/d from ₹2300/2900, ste ₹2800/3500; @) Hidden down a track off Hotel Bhagsu Rd, Chonor House is a real gem. It's run by the Norbulingka Institute (p328), and rooms are decked out with its wonderful handicrafts and fabrics. Each room has a Tibetan theme that runs from the bedspreads to the murals on the walls. There's also a lovely garden, shop, restaurant and net cafe.

Green Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎221200; www.greenhotel.biz; Bhagsu Rd; r from ₹800, @☺) A long-time traveller favourite, Green has a diverse range of sunny, stylish rooms in two buildings, some with valley and mountain views. The busy restaurant and internet cafe here feel like the hip place to be.

Pema Thang Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎221871; www.pemathang.net; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; d ₹825-1155; ☺☺) A tasteful Tibetan-style guesthouse, with a great restaurant and spacious, well-lit rooms with comforting, homely furnishings. The one single room (₹650) is an ideal writer's haven.

Om Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎221313; omhotel@hotmail.com; Nowrojee Rd; d with/without bathroom ₹375/200) Conveniently located down a lane below the main square, the friendly family-run Om has pleasing rooms with good views and a great little terrace restaurant that catches the sunset over the valley. This might be the best deal in town.

Zambala House

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎221121; www.zambalahouse.com; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; d ₹2000-2900; ☺) Still feeling fresh-out-of-the-box, this place down the same lane as Chonor House is has spacious modern rooms with the best bathrooms in town. The views from the upper floor balconies are so good you might never turn on the flat screen TV.

Hotel Ladies Venture

HOTEL \$

(☎9816235648; shantiazad@yahoo.co.in; Jogibara Rd; s ₹200, d ₹250-500) Named by the previous lady owners, this peaceful green-and-yellow hotel welcomes all with wraparound balconies, flower pots, a range of tidy rooms and lovely mountain views from the rooftop terrace.

Cheryton Cottage Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎221993; tcheryl_89@yahoo.com; Jogibara Rd; d ₹700, apt ₹1500) In the garden behind

VOLUNTEERING IN MCLEOD GANJ

McLeod Ganj has more volunteering opportunities than anywhere else in Himachal Pradesh. Travellers can get involved in short-term volunteering such as English-language conversation classes or cleaning up litter, but for longer-term placements always look for a position that matches your existing skills. 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; ☀10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), a community organisation that arranges placements in areas of need – eg teaching, computer training and social services. Volunteers with two months or more to spare are preferred, but short-term spots can also be arranged.

Lha (☎220992; www.lhasocialwork.org; Temple Rd; ☀10am-5pm Mon-Fri) also arranges placements at a variety of local community projects, including those for English- and French-language teachers, grant writers or website developers.

Hope Education Centre (☎9218947689), off Jogibara Rd, runs conversational English classes for Tibetan refugees from 4.30pm to 6pm Monday to Friday, often held informally over coffee at Cafe Oasis. Anyone is welcome to turn up.

Learning & Ideas for Tibet (☎9418794218; www.learningandideasfortibet.org; Jogibara Rd; ☀9am-5pm) has a variety of positions, including teaching and editing the autobiographies of Tibetan political prisoners and exiles.

Tibetan Settlement Office (☎221059; www.twodhasa.org; 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, including environmental efforts such as their Clean Upper Dharamsala Project.

Many organisations seeking volunteers also advertise in the free magazine *Contact*. The magazine itself looks for volunteers to help with writing, proofreading or design.

Chocolate Log, Cheryton has four peaceful rooms with a relaxing outdoor space. The four-room apartment next door is fully self-contained. While the new owners don't run things quite as tightly as the previous ones, it's still good value.

Hotel Tibet

HOTEL \$\$

(☎221587; htdshala@sancharnet.in; Bhagsu Rd; ₹600-1000; ☎) A short walk from the bus stand, this place has the feel of an upmarket hotel yet it's at almost budget prices. It's run by the Tibetan government, and has a good restaurant and bar. All rooms have TV and hot water; credit cards accepted.

Takhyil Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎221152; Jogibara Rd; ₹400-600) A calm vibe and tidy rooms with TVs and hot showers add up to a good package at this Tibetan-run hotel that's just downhill from the chorten.

Hotel Bhagsu

HOTEL \$\$

(☎221091; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; d ₹1200-2400; ☎) On the road above the bazaar and Tsuglagkhang, this popular HPTDC hotel has a solid Raj-era feel and attractively decorated rooms, some with valley views.

Asian Plaza Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎220655; www.asianplazahotel.com; Main Chowk; d ₹1800-3500, ste ₹3200) Opposite the noisy bus stand, this is a clean and modern business-type hotel with all the conveniences you would expect for the price but little in the way of charm.

Tibetan Ashoka Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎221763; d with/without bathroom ₹350/100) Off Jogibara Rd, down an alley near the chorten (Tibetan for stupa), this big place looks out on the valley and catches plenty of sunlight. Its clean, simple rooms fill up in season, but advance reservations aren't accepted.

Loseling Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9218923305; d ₹250-350) Down the same alley as Tibetan Ashoka Guest House, Loseling is run by a Tibetan monastery based in Karnataka. It's a good cheapie and all rooms have a hot shower; cheaper ones have squat toilets.

Kareri Lodge

HOTEL \$\$

(☎221132; karerih@hotmail.com; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; ₹770-1100; ☎) Squeezed in among a string of more-upmarket hotels, Kareri has

five well-worn but clean rooms, some with huge windows and prime views. There's a good vibe here, helped by the friendly manager who offers a reliable trekking service.

Hotel Mount View HOTEL \$
(☎221382; Jogibara Rd; ₹300-500) A tidy Kashmiri-run hotel offering a range of good rooms that extend well back from the street to reveal valley views from the rear balconies. The owners run a trekking outfit and tours to Pahalgam in Kashmir, but be sure to check that conditions in the area are safe before signing up.

Kunga Guesthouse GUESTHOUSE \$
(☎221180; Bhagsu Rd; d ₹300-600) Above Nick's Italian Kitchen, Kunga's clean rooms are popular and offer reasonable value.



Eating

Restaurants

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 and at the entrance to the Tsuglagkhang.



TOP CHOICE Moonpeak Thali

INDIAN \$\$
(Temple Rd; mains ₹70-200; ☎9am-10.30pm; 🍷) With a stylishly understated dining room and a tasteful blend of Tibetan and Indian artwork, this new place might just have the best food in town. Among the culinary highlights is the Himachali Thali, a sampler of regional dishes. To reach the tables on the rooftop terrace, you walk through the kitchen – and it's clean!

Oogo's Cafe Italiano

ITALIAN \$\$
(Jogibara Rd; mains ₹60-150) This cute hole-in-the-wall place serves up mainly Italian fare, but with a few surprises – waffles, baked potatoes, intriguing pasta dishes like 'chicken vodka' and even grilled lamb chops. The atmosphere is warm and busy and there are tempting desserts, as well as a bookshelf full of reading material.

Green Hotel

MULTICUISINE \$
(Bhagsu Rd; mains ₹50-100; ☎6.30am-9.30pm; 🍷) This traveller-oriented hotel restaurant with comfy chairs and couches serves good vegetarian food and the earliest break-

fasts in town. The internet cafe and wi-fi are a bonus.



Common Ground Cafe

ASIAN FUSION \$\$
(Dharamkot Rd; www.commongroundsproject.com; mains ₹60-100; ☎11am-9pm) The mission of the NGO that runs this restaurant is to promote understanding between Tibetan and Chinese people, and food is used symbolically here. The menu is a sizzling variety of cross-cultural dishes, served in a pleasingly laid-back atmosphere.

McLlo Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$
(Main Chowk; mains ₹125-225; ☎10am-10pm) Crowded nightly and justifiably popular, this big place above the noisy main square serves a mind-boggling menu of Indian, Chinese and international fare, including pizzas and pasta. It's also one of the best places to enjoy an icy cold beer (₹115), and it has cider and wines.

Peace Cafe

TIBETAN \$
(Jogibara Rd; dishes ₹30-55; ☎7.30am-9.30pm) This cosy little cafe is always full of monks chatting and dining, and tasty Tibetan *momos*, chow chow (stir-fried noodles with vegetables or meat) and *thukpa*.



Lung Ta

JAPANESE \$
(Jogibara Rd; mains ₹40-60; ☎noon-8.30pm Mon-Sat) The set menu changes daily at this popular, nonprofit, vegetarian Japanese restaurant. Food and ambience are authentic and many Japanese travellers come here for a taste of home.

Nick's Italian Kitchen

ITALIAN \$
(Bhagsu Rd; meals ₹50-100; ☎7am-9pm) At Kunga Guesthouse, Nick's has been serving up tasty vegetarian pizzas, pasta and gnocchi for years. Follow up with heavenly desserts like chocolate brownies with hot chocolate sauce. Eat inside by candlelight or out on the terrace.

Taste of India

INDIAN \$
(Jogibara Rd; mains ₹60-130) This tiny place has just five tables and is often full of diners savouring North Indian veg and nonveg curries. Chicken dishes can be unsatisfyingly skimpy.

Tsongkha

TIBETAN \$
(Jogibara Rd; dishes ₹40-90; ☎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

TIBETAN \$

(Jogibara Rd; dishes ₹45-70; ☎7.30am-9.30pm) Behind the Snow Lion guesthouse, this is another good place to come for *momos*, *thukpa* and *tingmo*.

Jimmy's Italian Kitchen

ITALIAN \$

(Jogibara Rd; dishes ₹60-130) Jimmy's is a well-established Italian place with a new location upstairs opposite the chorten. Authentic pizzas with real pepperoni, and a good range of pasta dishes.

**Namgyal Cafe**

CAFE \$

(snacks ₹30-80; ☎10am-10pm Tue-Sun) Located at Namgyal Gumpa (part of the Tsuglagkhang Complex), this cafe serves cakes and vegetarian food. It also provides vocational training for refugees.

Cafes

McLeod has some of the best cafes in North India, with several places serving good espresso coffee, cappuccino and English-style tea.

Beans Cafe

CAFE \$\$

(Main Chowk; coffees/mains ₹ 30/70-150; ☎8.30am-9.30pm; ☎☎) This two-level coffee house serves up satisfyingly strong java and has a mixed menu of full meals and yummy desserts. You can get on one of their computers or bring your laptop.

Moonpeak Espresso

CAFE \$

(Temple Rd; coffees & meals ₹30-100; ☎7am-8pm; ☎) A little bit of Seattle, transported to India. Come for excellent coffee, cakes, imaginative sandwiches and dishes like poached chicken with mango, lime and coriander sauce.

Mandala Wifi Coffee House

CAFE \$

(Temple Rd; snacks ₹25-90; ☎7am-8pm; ☎) Next to Moonpeak, Mandala has an even more inviting terrace and serves tasty wraps, sandwiches and coffee.

Khana Nirvana

CAFE \$

(www.khananirvana.org; Temple Rd; meals ₹35-85) Up a steep stairway, this community cafe is a relaxed hang-out serving healthy vegetarian breakfasts, soups and salad, pita sandwiches, burritos and organic tea. There's local entertainment most nights.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

McLeod's bars are mostly clustered around the main *chowk* (town square) and charge around ₹115 for a big bottle of beer. The best choices for a drink are McLo Restau-

LET'S DRINK TO 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. Plastic bags are banned in Himachal Pradesh but bottles are not. Give the countryside a chance and refill your drinking water bottle for around ₹5 at one of the filtered-water stations around McLeod Ganj. There's one at Lha (p320), one at the Environmental Education Centre (p320) and one at Green Hotel (p322).

rant and **X-cite**, both in the bus stand area. Hotel Tibet, **Aroma** (Jogibara Rd) and Hotel Mount View also have bars. Takeaway beer (₹80) and spirits (from ₹70) are available from several small **liquor stores**, including one right opposite the bus stand.

**Khana Nirvana**

CULTURAL PROGRAM

(www.khananirvana.org; Temple Rd) Cool community cafe with a program of arts and entertainment most nights. There's an open-mic night on Monday, documentary films about Tibet on Tuesday, and Tibetan speakers on Sunday.

Tibetan Music Trust

LIVE MUSIC

(☎9805661031; www.tibetanmusictrust.org; admission by donation) Performances of Tibetan folk music are held with varying regularity at Yonglings School, off Jogibara Rd. The live shows feature demonstrations of traditional regional Tibetan instruments and song. It's a great cultural and educational experience.

**Shopping**

Dozens of shops and stalls sell Tibetan artefacts, including *thangkas*, 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.

Bookworm (☎221465; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; ☎9am-6.30pm Tue-Sun) and **Hills Bookshop** (☎220008; Bhagsu Rd; ☎10am-9.30pm) are good general bookstores, while **Namgyal Bookshop** (☎221492; Tsuglagkhang Complex;

☺9.30am-noon & 1-6pm Tue-Sun) specialises in Buddhist texts.



Tibetan Handicrafts Cooperative

Centre

HANDICRAFTS

(☎221415; Jogibara Rd; ☺8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Employs newly arrived refugees in the weaving of Tibetan carpets. You'll pay around ₹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.



Stitches of Tibet

HANDICRAFTS

(☎221527; www.tibetanwomen.org; Jogibara Rd; ☺10am-5pm Tue-Sun) This organisation offers a similar tailoring service to that of the Tibetan Handicrafts Centre of Tibet, providing work for newly arrived women refugees.



TCV Handicraft Centre

HANDICRAFTS

(☎221592; www.tcvcraft.com; Temple Rd; ☺10am-5pm Tue-Sun) Has a huge range of Tibetan souvenirs at fixed prices. Sales benefit the Tibetan Children's Village.



Information

Media

Contact (www.contactmag.org) is an informative, free local magazine that contains some useful listings, as well as details regarding courses and volunteer work. It's also a useful website.

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

Medical Services

Traditional Tibetan medicine known as *amchi* is a popular form of treatment in McLeod Ganj – see p321.

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

Money

Several places around town offer Western Union money transfers.

HDFC ATM (Lower Rd; ☺24hr) Located upstairs at the new bus depot.

State Bank of India (Temple Rd; ☺10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Has a busy international ATM.

Thomas Cook (Temple Rd; ☺9.30am-6.30pm)

Post

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

Tourist Information

HPTDC tourist office (☎221205; Hotel Bhagsu Rd; ☺10am-5pm, closed Sun in Jul-Aug & Dec-Mar) Offers maps and guides, and can also make bookings for HPTDC hotels and buses around Himachal.

Information Office of Central Tibetan

Administration (☎222457; www.tibet.net; Jogibara Rd; ☺9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) For information on Tibetan issues.

Travel Agencies

Numerous travel agencies can book train and bus tickets, and can also arrange tours and treks.

Himachal Travels (☎221428; himachaltravels@sancharnet.in; Jogibara Rd)

Himalaya Tours & Travels (☎220714; www.akupema.net/himalaya; Bhagsu Rd)

Getting There & Around

Many travel agencies in McLeod Ganj will book train tickets for services out of Pathankot for a fee. See p316 for train services in the Kangra Valley.

Air

McLeod Ganj's nearest airport is at Gaggal, 15km southwest of Dharamsala. **Kingfisher** (www.flykingfisher.com) flies to Delhi daily at 1pm. Book at a travel agency.

Authorickshaw

Authorickshaws are useful for getting around the immediate area – the autorickshaw stand is just north of the bus stand. Sample fares include Bhagsu (₹30), Jogibara (₹50), Dal Lake (₹60) and Dharamkot (₹50).

Bus

While the new bus terminal is now just north of the autorickshaw stand, the ticket office is still at McLeod's main square. There, you can book Himachal Roadways Transport Corporation (HRTC) buses up to a month in advance. Travel agencies can book seats on deluxe private buses to Delhi (₹800, 12 hours, 6.30pm), Manali (₹500, 10 hours, 8pm) and other destinations, and there are regular long-haul buses from Dharamsala. For more details on buses from McLeod Ganj see the table, p327.

Taxi

McLeod's **taxi stand** (☎221034) is on Mall Rd, north of the Main Chowk. To hire a taxi for the day, for a journey of less than 80km, expect to pay ₹1400.

Fares for short hops include Gangchen Kyishong (₹80), Dharamkot (₹80), Dharamsala's Kotwali Bazaar (₹150), Dharamsala bus station (₹170), Norbulingka Institute (₹350) and the

BUSES FROM MCLEOD GANJ

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Dehra Dun	325	13	8pm
Delhi	325	12	4am, 6pm, 7pm (ordinary); 4.30pm, 7.45pm (deluxe); 7.30pm (AC)
Manali	255	11	6am, 6.30am, 5pm
Pathankot	65	4	five daily

airport (₹600). Return fares are about a third more, while longer fares are similar to those charged by the taxi stand in Dharamsala – see p315.

Around McLeod Ganj

BHAGSU & DHARAMKOT

📍01892

Through pine trees to the north and east of McLeod lie the villages of Dharamkot and Bhagsu, which can both be visited on a pleasant half-day hike, or as an alternative accommodation base. Bhagsu (Bhagsunag) in particular is developing into a travellers' hot spot. 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 **temple** with stairways passing through the open mouths of a cement crocodile and lion. Head uphill a bit and you'll enter a backpackerland heavy with Hebrew signage, where you can lounge in cafes, take drumming lessons and yoga classes, and forget that there's a crisis in Tibet. Continuing through Bhagsu, you can walk on to Dharamkot and back to McLeod, or climb up to Triund alongside a gushing **waterfall**.

Various alternative therapies are available in the backpacker enclave. The **Buddha Hall** (📍221749; www.buddhahall.com) has courses in reiki, yoga and Indian classical music. Bhagsu has half a dozen internet cafes and travel agencies.



Sleeping

BHAGSU

Oak View Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍221530; d ₹350) Clean guesthouse on the path to Upper Baghsu with a classic backpacker vibe – right down to the Bob Marley flag in the common lounge area. All rooms have hot water and TV.

Sky Pye Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍220497; d ₹300-800; @) A little further up the hill from Oak View, Sky Pye is another good-value traveller hang-out that's often full. There are views from the terrace and from some rooms, and there's an internet cafe and a cute little restaurant with low tables and cushions on the floor.

DHARAMKOT

Dharamkot is much more low-key than Bhagsu, but has a small knot of guesthouses near the Himalayan Iyengar Yoga Centre.

Kamal Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍226920; d with/without bathroom ₹200/75) Friendly five-room guesthouse with roof terrace.

New Blue Heaven Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(📍221005; www.hotelnewblueheaven.com; d ₹350-880; @) Spotless carpeted rooms with TV, hot water and balconies overlooking the valley make this a solid choice. Upper-floor rooms have the best views.



Eating

Bhagsu is full of busy German bakeries and backpacker cafes serving falafel, hummus and Tibetan food.

Ashoka International Restaurant

ASIAN \$

(mains ₹30-140; ☺lunch & dinner) Bhagsu's best Indian and Chinese food is served in a smart dining room with a choice of floor cushions or normal tables.

Oasis Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(mains ₹80-150; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) In front of the Oak View Guesthouse you'll find this inviting dining space with a Thai/Israeli/Italian emphasis on the menu.

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 young 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; www.kagyuooffice.org) in Sidhibari. Public audiences take place here on Wednesday and Saturday at 2.30pm; 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 (₹5, 15 minutes) or you can take a taxi for ₹250 return. Tapovan is a 2km walk south along a quiet country road.

NORBULINGKA INSTITUTE

☎01892

About 6km from Dharamsala, the wonderful **Norbulingka Institute** (☎246405; 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 craftworks, 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 ₹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. On Sundays and the second Saturday of each month the workshops are closed but the rest of the grounds are open.

Set in the gorgeous Norbulingka gardens, **Norling Guest House** (☎246406; normail@norbulingka.org; s/d from ₹1400/1800) offers fairy-tale rooms decked out with Buddhist murals and handicrafts from the institute, and arranged around a sunny atrium. Meals are available at the institute's Norling Cafe.

To get here, catch a Yol-bound bus from Dharamsala and ask to be let off at Sidhipur (₹5, 15 minutes), near the Sacred Heart School, from where it's a 15-minute walk. A taxi from Dharamsala will cost ₹300 return.

MCLEOD GANJ TO BHARMOUR TREK

This popular six- to seven-day route crosses over the Indrahara La (4300m) to the ancient village of Bharmour in the Chamba Valley. The pass is open from September to early November and you can start this trek, and make all arrangements, in McLeod Ganj 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 Lahesh 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.

STAGE	ROUTE	DURATION (HR)	DISTANCE (KM)
1	McLeod Ganj to Triund	4-5	9
2	Triund to Lahesh Cave	4-5	8
3	Lahesh Cave to Chata Parao over Indrahara La	6	10
4	Chata Parao to Kuarsi	5-6	15
5	Kuarsi to Chanauta	6-7	16
6	Chanauta to Garola	5-6	12
7	Garola to Bharmour	5-6	14

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 p443 for more on the legend). It's 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, an ₹80 autorickshaw ride from the bus stand, the impregnable-looking **Kangra Fort** (Nagar Kot; Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☀dawn-dusk) soars above the confluence of the Manjhi and Banganga Rivers. The fort was used by Hindu rajas, 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.

Royal Hotel & Restaurant (☎265013; royalhotel@rediffmail.com; r ₹400-500), on the main road between the steps of the main temple and the bus stand, has neat, tiled rooms with hot showers, plus a decent restaurant.

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 ₹25 autorickshaw ride from the centre. There are frequent buses to Dharamsala (₹20, one hour), Palampur (₹35, 1½ hours), Pathankot (₹70, three hours) and Jawalamukhi (₹30, 1½ hours).

Trains pull into Kangra Mandir station, 3km east of town, and Kangra station, 5km south. Travellers have reported problems getting an autorickshaw from the stations into town.

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

MASRUR

A winding road runs southwest from Gaggal through pleasant green hills to the 10th century **temples** (Indian/foreigner ₹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 Dharamsala (₹1200 return), or you can get as far as Lunj (₹25, 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 town and **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. The gold dome and spire were installed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the 'Lion of Punjab', who purportedly never went into battle without seeking a blessing from the temple.

Hotel Jawalaji (☎222280; d ₹600-800, with AC ₹1300-2000; ☎) is a superior HPTDC property, with well-loved rooms, conveniently located for walks to the temple and outlying countryside.

Buses to Dharamsala (₹50, 1½ hours) and Kangra (₹30, 1½ hours) leave all day from the stand below the road leading up to the temple. Taxis charge ₹700/1000 one way/return from McLeod Ganj.

Dharamsala To Mandi

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 few hours observing the tea-making process at the **Palampur Tea Cooperative** (☎230220; ☀10.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Fri), about 2km south of town on the main road between Kangra and Mandi.

HPTDC Hotel Tea-Bud (☎231298; d ₹900-2000), 1km north of Main Bazar on the edge of town, has large grounds and a good restaurant; rooms are spacious and well kept. The more-expensive rooms are in a newer block but the old ones aren't bad.

The bus station is 1km south of Main Bazar; an autorickshaw from the centre costs ₹20. Buses leave all day for Dharamsala (₹40, two hours). A taxi from Dharamsala costs ₹700. Palampur is a stop on the Pathankot-Jogindarnagar rail line. If taking the bus from here to Mandi, the best views are from the right-side seats.

BAIJNATH

📍01894 / ELEV 1010M

The small town of Baijnath, 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** in late February and early March.

Most people visit on a day trip, or a stop on the journey from Mandi to Dharamsala. The Pathankot-Jogindarnagar rail line passes through Paprola, about 1km west of the main bus stand.

TASHIJONG & TARAGARH

About 5km west of Baijnath, and 2km north from the Palampur road, the village of Tashijong is home to a small community of Drukpa Kagyud monks and refugees. The focus of life here is the impressive **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** (📍01894-242034, 📞in Delhi 011-24692317; www.taragarh.com; r ₹4000-5500; 🏠🏠), 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. It's set in beautiful grounds with a pool and tennis courts. The restaurant serves lavish buffet meals (₹300 to ₹500).

Both villages can be reached on the buses that run along the Mandi-Palampur Hwy – just tell the bus driver where you want to get off.

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 132.5km for an out-and-return flight was set here. International teams come to challenge the record every May for the **Himalayan Hang-Gliding Rally**, while paragliders compete in the **Himalayan Open** in autumn.

A taxi from McLeod Ganj to Billing will cost ₹900. Alternatively, travel by bus or train to Jogindarnagar (on the route to Mandi) and take a taxi there for ₹400 return.

Chamba Valley

The Chamba Valley is a 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 travellers make it out here, with even fewer continuing up the valley beyond the old hill station of Dalhousie.

DALHOUSIE

📍01899 / POP 10,500 / ELEV 2036M

With its plunging pine-clad valleys and distant mountain views, Dalhousie is another of those cool mountain retreats that the British left behind. Since independence, the colonial mansions have been joined by the posh Dalhousie Public School and numerous modern hotels catering to honeymooners from the plains, along with the obligatory army cantonment. There's not

KANGRA VALLEY 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 Jogindarnagar (nine hours). There are seven trains a day – two as far as Jogindarnagar and five as far as Baijnath. Ordinary trains cost ₹42 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.

a lot to do here other than stroll around admiring the views.

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 among the pines at opposite ends of the ridge.

Unusually for a hill station there are few truly steep roads, but Dalhousie is spread far enough to be exhausting. The market areas at Subhash Chowk and Gandhi Chowk are linked by lanes – Thandi Sarak (Cold Rd), and Garam Sarak (Hot Rd). The latter lane receives more sunshine. The bus stand area, with several good hotels, is about 2km north.

Street lighting is limited so carry a torch at night.

Sleeping

Dalhousie has more than 100 hotels spread across various ridges and lanes. Most are either old or just look old. High season runs from April to July, and Christmas to New Year, and there's a mid-season from September to late October; expect at least 50% off at other times.

Hotel Grand View HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎240760; www.grandviewdalhousie.in; d ₹1800-2000, ste ₹2500-4500) The Grand has great rooms loaded with colonial character, including four-poster beds, bathrooms with dressing rooms attached. And it more than lives up to its name. The stately 1920s hotel is surrounded by gardens gazing across to views of the Pir Panjal peaks, and the spacious Raj-inspired rooms open out to sunny glass-panelled hallways. There's a spa with sauna, jacuzzi and exercise room.

Hotel Craggs GUESTHOUSE \$
(☎242124; Garam Sarak; r ₹400-700, cottage ₹800) For colonial character and valley views, Craggs is the pick of the budget places – listed rates are half this price most of the year. Down some steps from the Subhash Chowk end of Garam Sarak, this big old house has huge rooms and a large front terrace offering spectacular views of the valley – the upper-floor rooms with front sitting room are easily the best and there's a self-contained cottage.

Youth Hostel Dalhousie HOSTEL \$
(☎242189; yh_dalhousie@rediffmail.com; dm ₹100, r ₹250; @) A 200m walk down a back lane opposite the bus stand, Dalhousie's hostel is spotless and run with military precision.

Dorms are single sex, showers are hot, and facilities include internet access, free wi-fi and a dining hall. YHA rules include a 10pm curfew, no alcohol, and vacating of rooms from 10am to 12.30pm for cleaning. There can also be noisy school groups – but it's a welcoming place with fixed rates all year.

Hotel Mount View HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎242120; www.hotelmountview.com; Club Rd; r ₹2400-3100, ste ₹3400-4200) There's an undeniable Raj-era charm to this delightful hotel, full of dark-wood finishes and period furnishings. Less expensive rooms are smallish but well equipped; some bigger rooms are spacious but offer less than they should for the price. There are good valley views from the well-tended garden terrace.

Eating

Both Subhash Chowk and Gandhi Chowk have places to eat. Most restaurants are open from 9am to 10pm. None of Dalhousie's hotels are licensed to serve alcohol.

Kwality Restaurant INDIAN \$\$
(Gandhi Chowk; dishes ₹75-180) Regarded as Dalhousie's best independent restaurant, the extensive veg and nonveg menu covers Indian and Chinese as well as burgers, pizza and sizzlers.

Lovely Restaurant INDIAN \$
(Gandhi Chowk; mains ₹50-130; ☀9am-10pm) Has the typical list of Indian and Chinese plates, along with Bollywood movies playing on the flatscreen TV.

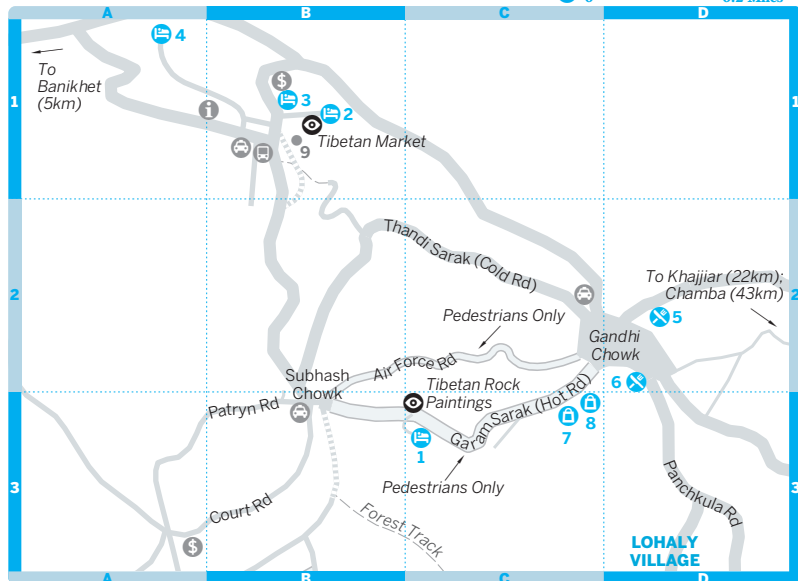
The restaurants at Hotel Grand View and Mount View near the bus stand offer a charming colonial dining experience and multicuisine menus. For cheap eats, there are several Punjabi *dhabas* on the south side of Subhash Chowk.

Shopping

Close to Gandhi Chowk on Garam Sarak, you'll find fair-priced Kullu shawls and hats at **Bhuttico** (☎240440; ☀10am-6pm Mon-Sat) and a good selection of Tibetan carpets and handicrafts at the **Tibetan Refugee Handicraft Centre** (☎240607; ☀10am-6pm Wed-Mon). Just up from the bus stand, the **Tibetan Market** sells textiles, clothing and trinkets for the holiday crowd.

Information

At the Tibetan Market and near Gandhi Chowk there are internet cafes charging ₹40 an hour. **HPTDC tourist office** (☎242225; ☀10am-5pm Apr-Jul, closed Sun Aug-Mar) Opposite the bus stand; helpful staff can advise on bus times.



State Bank of India (🕒24hr) International ATM, near the bus stand.

Trek-n-Travels (📞242160; Tibetan Market) Near the bus stand; can arrange treks around Chamba Valley from ₹800 per day.

i Getting There & Away

BUS The booking office at the bus stand is invariably closed, but the tourist office next door can help with bus information: for long-distance services, there are many more options from Banikhet, a major transport hub about 10 minutes ride from Dalhousie (bus/taxi ₹10/150). Four buses run to Chamba (₹70, two hours); two through Khajjiar (₹30, one hour). For more-frequent Chamba buses, head to Banikhet first. See the table, p333, for direct services.

TAXI There are unionised taxi stands with fixed fares at Subhash Chowk, Gandhi Chowk and the bus stand. From the bus stand, you'll pay ₹50 to Subhash Chowk and ₹100 to Gandhi Chowk. Other one-way fares:

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)
Bharmour	2500
Chamba	930 (1150 return)
Dharamsala	2050
Kalatop	520 (930 return)
Khajjiar	620 (720 return)
Pathankot	1550

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

India's so-called 'Mini Switzerland'; this grassy bowl-shaped *marg* (meadow), 22km from Dalhousie, is ringed by pines and thronged by Indian holidaymakers. In among the *dhabas* on one side is the **Khajjinag Temple**, with fine woodcarvings and crude effigies of the five Pandavas, installed here in the 16th century.

In season, **pony rides** around the meadow and its small central lake cost from ₹100, and **zorb**ing in giant inflatable balls costs from ₹200 for a quick roll. Since there are no big slopes as such, you get pushed along – not exactly high adrenaline!

There are a handful of fast-food restaurants and several hotels, but most travellers make a day trip here by bus from Chamba (₹25, 1½ hours) or Dalhousie (₹30, one

Dalhousie

Sleeping

- 1 Hotel Craggs C3
- 2 Hotel Grand View B1
- 3 Hotel Mount View B1
- 4 Youth Hostel Dalhousie A1

Eating

- 5 Kwaliti Restaurant D2
- 6 Lovely Restaurant D2

Shopping

- 7 Bhuttico C3
- 8 Tibetan Refugee Handicraft Centre C3

Information

- 9 Trek-n-Travels B1

hour). Buses run on this route about five times a day. If you do decide to stay, the best option is the **HPTDC Hotel Davdar** (☎236333; ₹1100-2000).

CHAMBA

☎01899 / POP 20,700 / ELEV 996M

Ensclosed in the valley of the fast-flowing Ravi River, 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 it finally fell to the British in 1845. Every year since 935, Chamba has celebrated the annual harvest with the **Minjar Festival** in July/August, in honour of Raghuvira (an incarnation of Rama).

Although en route to Bharmour and popular trekking country, Chamba is well off the tourist radar, giving it the feeling of an everyday but surprisingly mellow In-

dian town. 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.

Sights & Activities

Lakshmi Narayan Temple Complex

HINDU TEMPLE

Opposite the Akhand Chandi Palace are six **sikharas** dating from the 10th to the 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-5pm Mon-Sat) displaying religious artefacts.

Other Temples

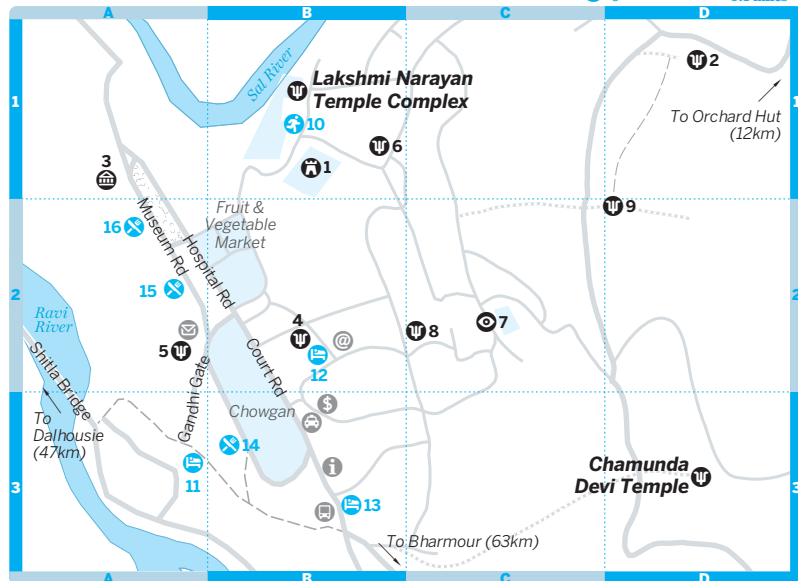
HINDU TEMPLES

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 effigies 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

BUSES FROM DALHOUSIE

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Amritsar	120	6	6am
Delhi	370/590	12	3pm/7.30pm (ordinary/ deluxe)
Dharamsala	130	6	7am, 11.50am & 2pm
Jammu	120	6	10am
Pathankot	70	3	10 daily
Shimla	350	12	12.45pm



is highly venerated by local women and the four-day **Sui Mata Mela** is celebrated each April on the Chowgan in her honour.

By the Chowgan is the 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

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Uphill from the Chowgan and lording over the town is the unmissable 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 fortresslike, rusty-coloured **Rang Mahal** (Old Palace), which once housed the royal granary and treasury and now houses a handicrafts shop.

Bhuri Singh Museum

MUSEUM

(☎222590; Museum Rd; Indian/foreigner ₹10/50, camera ₹50; ☀10am–5pm Tue–Sun, closed 2nd Sat each month) Founded in 1908 and named after the Chamba ruler of that time, this museum has a wonderful collection of miniature paint-

ings from the Chamba, Kangra and Basohli schools, plus wood carvings, weapons, *rumals*, intriguing copper-plate inscriptions, relics from the rajas and ornately carved fountain slabs from around the Chamba Valley. There's detailed labelling in English.

Tours

Near the Lakshmi Narayan complex, **Mani Mahesh Travels** (☎222507, 9816620401; manimaheshtravels@yahoo.com) can arrange treks with guides and porters in the foothills of the Pir Panjal and Dhauladhar (₹1500 to ₹2000 per person, per day, depending on altitude), as well as informative tours of Chamba's temples (from ₹550).

Sleeping

Unlike Dalhousie, Chamba is not a tourist town, so hotel prices vary little by season.

TOP CHOICE Orchard Hut

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9418020401; orchardhut@hotmail.com; r ₹500–850) About 12km from Chamba in the tranquil Saal Valley, this friendly village guesthouse is a peaceful place to immerse in the countryside. Great homecooked meals are served and there are some sweet walks in the area. Staff at Mani Mahesh Travels in Chamba will arrange transfers.

Chamba

📍 Top Sights

Chamunda Devi Temple.....	D3
Lakshmi Narayan Temple Complex	B1

📍 Sights

1 Akhand Chandi Palace	B1
2 Bajreshwari Devi Temple.....	D1
3 Bhuri Singh Museum.....	A1
4 Champavati Temple.....	B2
5 Harirai Mandir.....	A2
6 Radha Krishna Temple.....	B1
7 Rang Mahal.....	C2
8 Sitaram Temple.....	C2
9 Sui Mata Shrine	D2

🚌 Activities, Courses & Tours

10 Mani Mahesh Travels	B1
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🛏 Sleeping

11 Chamba House.....	A3
12 Hotel Aroma Palace.....	B2
13 Jimmy's Inn.....	B3

🍴 Eating

14 Cafe Ravi View	B3
15 Jagan Restaurant	A2
16 Park View Restaurant.....	A2

🛍 Shopping

Himachal Emporium	(see 7)
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Hotel Aroma Palace

HOTEL \$\$

(☎225177; www.hotelaromapalacechamba.com; s/d from ₹550/700, deluxe r ₹1000-3300; @📶) Uphill from the taxi stand and past the courthouse, this modern place has a range of tidy rooms, an internet cafe, a restaurant and a sunny terrace with views over Chowgan. The cheaper rooms are disappointing – you can't swing a cat in the single rooms and others have their own bathroom outside off the hall – but if you pay a bit more you get the real deal.

Chamba House Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎222564; Gopal Nivas; d ₹350-700) With fine views over the Ravi River from its balcony, this creaky heritage building near Gandhi Gate is Chamba's best budget bolthole. Rooms are quaint, with wood floors, giving it a homey cottage feeling. The manager speaks little English, but it's very welcoming.

Jimmy's Inn

HOTEL \$

(☎224748; r ₹200-400) If you're really pinching rupees, head to Jimmy's, across from the bus stand.

🍴 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. Chamba's most interesting restaurants are clustered together just south of the museum.



Park View Restaurant

INDIAN \$

(Museum Rd; dishes ₹30-110; ☎8am-11pm) Up a flight of stairs, the low-ceilinged dining room feels like someone's attic. The veg and nonveg food is fantastic – order some *jheera* (cumin) rice and curd and a copper pail of dhal on the side, or chicken cooked twelve different ways (including lemon chicken).

Jagan Restaurant

INDIAN \$

(Museum Rd; dishes ₹30-180) It's nothing flash but Jagan offers the tasty Chamba speciality *chamba madhra* (kidney beans with curd and ghee) for ₹65, plus a good selection of veg curries and chicken dishes. The top-floor Madhusala Bar is a no-frills place to have a beer and gaze over the town through glassless windows.

Cafe Ravi View

INDIAN \$\$

(Chowgan; mains ₹40-250; ☎9am-9pm) In a circular hut overlooking the Ravi River, this HPTDC-run snack house is worth a visit as much for the icy-cold beers and outdoor terrace as for the food. It serves a good range of Indian and Chinese veg food – including dosas and bargain veg thalis (₹40).

🛍 Shopping

Housed in the Rang Mahal, the **Himachal Emporium** (☎222333; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat) 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 ₹300.

📍 Information

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

Cyberia

(per hr ₹30; ☎9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Near Hotel Aroma Palace; has broadband connection and helpful staff.

Himachal Tourist Office

(☎224002; Court Rd; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat) In the yellow building in the courtyard of Hotel Iravati. Has limited local information but lots of brochures.

Post office (Museum Rd; ☎9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat)

i Getting There & Away

Six daily buses make the hair-raising run to Bharmour (₹70, three hours), though the road can be temporarily blocked by rockfalls. The best views on this route are from seats on the left side. Buses for Dalhousie run every two hours (₹60, 2½ hours), some going via Khajjair (₹30, 1½ hours). There are also buses to Dharamsala (₹175, eight hours).

Official taxi fares include Khajjair (₹700 return), Bharmour (₹1200/1500 one way/return), Dalhousie (₹1000) and Dharamsala (₹2500).

BHARMOUR

📍01895 / ELEV 2195M

Hovering on the edge of a seemingly bottomless valley, the charming mountain village of Bharmour is reached by a mountain road as scenic as it is perilous, winding 65km east of Chamba. This ancient slate-roofed settlement was the capital of the princely state of Chamba until AD 920, and there are fascinating temples and treks to surrounding mountain passes. In fact, you can trek from here all the way to McLeod Ganj. The villages around Bharmour are home to the seminomadic Gaddis, pastoralists who move their flocks up to alpine pastures during the summer, and descend to Kangra, Mandi and Bilaspur in winter.

👁 Sights & Activities

Chaurasi Temples

HINDU TEMPLE

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.

Trekking

TREKKING

Treks from Bharmour can be arranged through the **Himalayan Travelling Agency** (📞225059), by the HP State Coop Bank in the bazaar, and the **Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports** (📞225036), on the track above the jeep stand. Expect to pay around ₹1500 a day, for food, tents, guides and porters. The trekking season lasts from May to late October.

Trekking destinations include Key-long and Udaipur in Lahaul, Baijnath and McLeod Ganj in the Kangra Valley, and the popular trek to the sacred lake at **Manima-**

hesh, a three-day, 35km hike above Bharmour. In August/September, pilgrims take a freezing dip in Manimahesh Lake as part of the **Manimahesh Yatra** in honour of Lord Shiva.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

As well as hotel restaurants, there are several *dhabas* on the path to the Chaurasi temples.

Chaurasi Hotel & Restaurant

HOTEL \$

(📞225615; r ₹500-900, mains ₹45-160) You can't miss this blazing red multistorey building on the temple road. Though carpets are a little ratty, this is a good-value hotel with generous-sized rooms offering soaring views over the valley, especially from the top-floor room with balcony. The multicuisine restaurant here is Bharmour's best.

Chamunda Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📞225056; r ₹300) This pink village house with purple balconies only has bucket hot water, but rooms are comfortable enough for the price. Run by a friendly family, it's on the lower road from the jeep stand.

i Getting There & Away

Buses leave every few hours for the rugged trip to Chamba (₹65, three hours), but expect delays due to landslides. If you want to get a seat, board early! For the ride to Chamba, the best views are from the right side of the bus. Taxis charge ₹1100 but you can bargain at the jeep stand.

LAHAUL & SPITI

This vast, desolate corner of Himachal Pradesh is also one of the most sparsely populated regions on earth. Lahaul is a relatively green valley north of the Rohtang La, but as you travel east into Spiti the landscape transforms into a rugged network of interlocking river valleys hidden in the rain shadow of the Himalaya. It's 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. 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, with exact dates depending on snow conditions. At other times, the entire region is virtually cut off from the outside world, except for the rugged Hindustan-Tibet Hwy from Kinnaur.

For more information on Lahaul and Spiti, visit the local government website at <http://hplahaulspiti.gov.in>.

Losar, the Tibetan New Year, is celebrated in villages throughout Lahaul and Spiti in January or February, depending on the lunar calendar.

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 and ruled by various Rajas, then fell under the British administration. Yet it 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 from 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! On the plus side, when monsoons are drenching the rest of the state, it's usually sunny here.

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.

Lahaul

Separated from the Kullu Valley by the 3978m Rohtang La and from Spiti by 4551m Kunzum La, Lahaul is greener and more developed than Ladakh and Spiti, but most travellers whistle straight through on the road between Manali and Leh, missing most of what Lahaul has to offer. The capital, Keylong, is an easy stop on the popular Leh to Manali bus trip and you can detour to a number of mountain villages and medieval monasteries that are blissfully untouched by mass tourism.

Normally, government buses between Manali and Leh run from mid-July to mid-September; at the time of research, these services were suspended due to catastrophic landslides. By the time you read this, we expect them to be up and running again. Private buses and shared minivans operate from late June to 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 and switchbacks to the bare rocky slopes below snow-clad **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. At the pass, look out for the small, dome-shaped temple that marks the source of the Beas River.

On the far side of the pass, the road plunges spectacularly down into the awesome

Lahaul Valley, a rugged landscape of soaring crags, alpine meadows and mesmerising waterfalls plunging from glacial heights. 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 foreigners must show their passports. The road passes through a sheer-sided valley, hemmed in by skyscraping rocky peaks.

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*, 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 enlightened beings).

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**, where Hindus worship the idol inside as Shiva while Buddhists venerate it as Avalokitesvara. It's a major pilgrimage site for both religions during the **Pauri Festival** in August.

KEYLONG

☎01900 / ELEV 3350M

The capital of Lahaul stretches along one side of the green Bhaga Valley just below the Manali-Leh Hwy, and it's a popular overnight stop for many buses plying that route. Hence many travellers only see Keylong briefly and in the dark, but a longer stay reveals grand mountain views, a laid-back village lifestyle and plenty of scenic walks; for tips on day hikes, visit **Brokpa Adventure** (☎9418165176) in the bazaar.

The bus stand is off the highway, just above the main bazaar. At the south end

of town is the sort-of-interesting **Lahaul & Spiti Tribal Museum** (☎10am-5pm Tue-Sun), with traditional costumes, old dance masks and treasures from local gompas. There is a State Bank of India ATM at the north end of the bazaar.

Keylong celebrates the annual **Lahaul Festival** in July with a big, bustling market and various cultural activities.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a few hotels around the bus stand, and more about five minutes walk into town.

Hotel New Gyespa

HOTEL \$

(☎222207; ₹400) The best choice of hotels by the bus stand, rooms at the New Gyespa actually seem fairly new. Windows give good light, and some have views of the valley. Every room has TV and hot water.

Hotel Tashi Deleg

HOTEL \$\$

(☎222450; ₹850-1750) Through the main bazaar, this big white place is Keylong's nicest hotel. Rooms on upper floors cost more, but all open out onto a balcony with mountain and valley views. The restaurant serves good Indian, Chinese and Tibetan food (meals ₹40 to ₹100), as well as cold beers.

Lamayuru Restaurant

INDIAN \$

(mains ₹40-140; ☎7am-11pm) A popular local restaurant down in the bazaar, you'll find a long list of Indian and Chinese staples, along with a full breakfast menu.

Aside from the hotel restaurants, there are plenty of *dhabas* on the highway and along the bazaar. For Tibetan food, **Pau Gompa Sonju Dhaba** (mains ₹40; ☎7am-7pm) has yummy soup, momos and noodle dishes.

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. Through bookings are only taken in Manali, so arrange a seat the day before, if you break the journey.

Normally, buses to Leh (15 hours) leave at 5am, arriving at about 8pm the same evening. At the time of research, these services were suspended due to massive landslides in Ladakh.

There around six daily buses to Manali (₹135, six hours). There's no direct bus to Kaza in Spiti: take the 5.30am bus and change at Gramphu (₹60, two hours); the bus from Manali to Kaza pulls in around 8.30am.

For the Pattan Valley, there are six daily buses to Udaipur (₹65, two hours).

AROUND KEYLONG

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 *chaams* (ritual masked dances performed by Buddhist monks in gompas to celebrate the victory of good over evil and of Buddhism over pre-existing religions) are held here every June or July, depending on the Tibetan calendar. 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.

Dropped 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.

Perched on the side of the valley above the village of Satingri, the ancient **Tayul Gompa** has elegant mural work and a 4m-high statue of Padmasabhava, flanked by his two manifestations, Sighmukha and Vijra-varashi. Tayul is about 6km from Keylong, reached by a fairly long day-hike.

About 20km northeast 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** (admission ₹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; www.hotelibexjispa.com; dm/d ₹150/1800) on the main road.

Spiti

Separated from the fertile Lahaul Valley by the soaring 4551m Kunzum La, Spiti is another piece of Tibet transported to India. Villages are few and far between in this serrated, rocky landscape and they arrive like mirages –

clusters of whitewashed homes nestled on the arid valley floor or perched in nooks on the slopes a thousand feet up. Even more impressive are the Buddhist monasteries built high on the sides of the valley and dwarfed by the sheer scale of the surrounding terrain. Local farmers eke out a living on the small strip of greenery that hugs the banks of the Spiti River and in isolated hamlets far above it.

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 Rekonng Peo in Kinnaur, but a few travellers go against the flow and travel west to Keylong or Ladakh. Sections of the road are frequently washed away by floods and landslides, especially between Nako and Rekonng Peo, so build some extra time into your itinerary in case of delays.

In either direction, an inner line permit is required for the stretch from Tabo to Rekonng Peo – see the boxed text, p340.

GRAMPHU TO KAZA

From the *dhaba* at **Gramphu**, the road to Spiti follows the dramatic Chandra River gorge, which was carved by glaciers as the Himalaya thrust upwards 50 million years ago.

At **Battal**, a rough track runs 14km north to lovely **Chandratal** (Moon Lake), a tranquil glacial pool set among snow peaks at 4270m. From June to September you can probably stay in comfortable tents (per person inc meals ₹550) on the lakeshore, but these are operated on a year-to-year basis so there’s no guarantee they’ll be there when you arrive. 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 switchbacks precipitously up to **Kunzum La** (4551m), the watershed between the Spiti and Lahaul Valleys. Buses perform a respectful circuit of the stupas strewn with fluttering prayer flags 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, where there's a passport check. A couple of basic guesthouses allow you to break the journey here; the friendly **Samsong Cafe & Guesthouse** (r with/without bathroom ₹600/200) has simple but clean rooms and hot meals.

The final stretch to Kaza follows the edge of the Spiti River, passing the large **Yangchen Choling** nunnery at Pangmo, and 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).

KAZA

📍01906 / ELEV 3640M

The capital of Spiti, Kaza sits on the eroded flood plain of the Spiti River and is the biggest settlement you'll encounter in this empty corner of the state. Still, it's relatively small, feeling like a frontier town with an easygoing pace. The setting is wonderfully rugged – jagged mountains rise on either side and the river coils across the valley floor like twisted locks of Medusa's hair. The colourful new **Sakya Gompa** dominates the high road in New Kaza – where the town's administrative centre is located – while the ramshackle bazaar and whitewashed buildings of Old Kaza spread out on the other side of the stream that divides the town.

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**. All sorts of goods are bought and sold and traders wear their finest clothes.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a surprising number of guesthouses squirrelled away close to the bus and taxi stands in Old Kaza, as well as a few places along the highway and across the stream in New Kaza. Most places close down by November.

Sakya Abode

HOTEL \$

(📍222256; r ₹500-600) On the main road in New Kaza, near the gompa, this is one of the best values in town. With a modest combination of character and class, it looks like it should cost more. Bright, comfy rooms open onto shared terraces that overlook a grassy-

INNER LINE PERMITS IN KAZA

To travel between Tabo in Spiti and Rekong Peo in Kinnaur, travellers need an inner line permit. This is easily arranged in Kaza – free permits are usually issued in around twenty minutes by the **Assistant District Commissioner's Office** (📍222202; ☎️10.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat each month) in New Kaza – look for the big green-roofed building behind the hospital. You'll need two passport photos and photocopies of the identity and visa pages from your passport. Solo travellers have no problems getting permits here. Permits can also be obtained in Rekong Peo and Shimla.

lawned courtyard, and the restaurant is inviting (and appears remarkably hygienic).

Hotel Mandala

HOTEL \$

(📍222757; d ₹450) Right next to the taxi stand, Mandala is the cleanest budget option in Old Kaza. Run by a friendly family, there's a good restaurant and the location is handy.

Zanchuk Guest House

HOTEL \$

(📍9418537545; r with/without bathroom ₹150/500) Near the footbridge between Old and New Kaza, this popular backpacker guest house has good views from a sunny terrace. Rooms are rough around the edges, but prices for those with bathrooms are definitely negotiable.

Banjara Kunphen Retreat

HOTEL \$\$

(📍222236; www.banjaracamps.com; d ₹2000; ☎️May-Oct) This modern set-up near the police station in New Kaza will appeal to travellers looking for extra comfort. Rooms are bright and tastefully furnished but are overpriced and smell a bit like mothballs.

Dragon Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Old Kaza; ₹ 60-200) Near the top end of the bazaar, the Dragon has an outdoor terrace where you can enjoy the usual *momos*, pizza and Chinese. Don't believe they've got chicken until you see it.

Sachin Kunga Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Old Kaza; Mains ₹60-150) In the heart of the bazaar, this upstairs restaurant does the typical travellers' menu a little bit better than

some other places around town. Its bright pink walls nudge the mood in a cheery direction.

As well as the hotel restaurants, there are several traveller-friendly restaurants in the old bazaar.

i Information

There is nowhere to change money, but there is a new State Bank of India ATM in the bazaar. The couple of internet cafes in the bazaar charge ₹80/hour. The post office is just below the gompa in New Kaza. Inner line permits for travel to Kinnaur are easy to arrange – see the boxed text, opposite.

Ecosphere (☎222724; www.spiticosphere.com) Arranges village homestays, tours and volunteer opportunities in Spitian villages. See the boxed text, p342.

Spiti Holiday Adventure (☎222711; www.spitiholidayadventure.com; Main Bazaar) Organises all-inclusive mountain treks from two to nine days for around ₹2500 per person per day, as well as jeep safaris and monastery tours.

i Getting There & Away

BUS The bus station is at the bottom of the old town, just off the main road or reached on foot through the bazaar. There are buses to Manali (₹230, 10 hours) at 4.30am and 7am. For Keylong, change at Gramphu (₹155, eight hours). A bus leaves for Rekong Peo (₹255, 12 hours) at 7.30am, passing through Sichling (for Dhankar; ₹30, one hour) and Tabo (₹55, two hours). There's a second Tabo bus at 2pm.

There's a single daily bus to Kibber (₹25, 50 minutes) via Ki (₹20, 30 minutes) at 5pm, but it doesn't return until 8.30am, making a taxi the sensible way to visit these spots unless you want spend the night at one of them.

For the Pin Valley, buses to Mud (₹60, two hours) leave at 4pm.

TAXI The local taxi union is based a few metres from the bus stand, or you can make arrangements at your hotel. Fixed rates include Tabo (₹1200, 1½ hours), Keylong (₹6000, seven hours), Manali (₹6000, nine hours) and Rekong Peo (₹5000, 10 hours). Day trips include Ki and Kibber (₹900 return) and Dhankar and the Pin Valley (one way/return ₹900/1200). A seat in a shared jeep to Manali is usually easy to arrange, but not so easy going the other way; enquire at the taxi stand and turn up early.

KI

On the road up to the village of Kibber, about 12km from Kaza, the tiny village of Ki is dominated by the whitewashed buildings of **Ki Gompa** (☉6am-7pm). Set atop a 4116m-high hillock, this is the largest gompa in Spiti and the views from the top are ex-

remely photogenic. Around 300 monks, including many students from surrounding villages, live here. An atmospheric *puja* is held in the new prayer hall every morning at around 7am (8am in winter). On request, the monks will open up the original medieval prayer rooms, full of *thangkhas*, Buddhist texts printed on cloth, and the bed slept in by the Dalai Lama on his visits in 1960 and 2000. Dance masks are brought out for the annual **Ki chaam** festival (June/July) and again in February/March for **Losar**.

The monks offer some basic four-bed **rooms** (☎01906-262201; dm without bathroom ₹150); the price includes meals and cold water.

KIBBER

(☎01906)

A further 8km above Ki, this charming village of traditional whitewashed homes was once a stop on the overland salt trade. Catch your breath because at 4205m, Kibber once laid claim to being the highest village in the world with a drivable road and electricity, but tiny Gada village, a few hundred metres higher up the gorge, now has both power and a road – and the title belongs to a Tibetan village anyway. The surrounding snow-covered landscape is incredibly beautiful and desolate and you can walk to other, roadless, villages along the edge of the gorge that are even more remote.

The villagers are friendly but passing tour groups have created a small 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. Most have bucket hot water (for ₹10 to ₹15) and most close down for the winter in early October.

Norling Home Stay GUESTHOUSE \$
(r without/with bathroom ₹ 200/300) At the far end of the village, rooms in this traditional whitewashed home are easily the best in town – clean, light and airy. Those with private bath have geysers.

Serkong Guesthouse GUESTHOUSE \$
(☎226222; r without bathroom ₹150-200) Rooms here are neat and clean, and the bohemian front terrace has couches and old photos of Spiti.

Norling Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎226242; r without bathroom ₹250-350) On the road into the village, this friendly place has

SUSTAINABLE SPITI

While tourism brings money and development to remote rural areas like Spiti, it can also do unintentional damage to fragile cultures and ecosystems. Recognising this, a number of villages here are partnering with Ecosphere, a Kaza-based NGO, to create a home-grown sustainable tourism industry.

Homestays (per night ₹500, including meals) have been set up in six villages, five of which are linked into a week-long trekking route called the Homestay Trail. Visitors get a taste of authentic Spitian life, sleeping in traditional whitewashed houses and eating homecooked food. From the villages, wildlife-watching hikes offer a chance of spotting the Spitian wolf – the world's oldest wolf species; scenic bliss is guaranteed. Trained guides (per day ₹600), which are recommended but not required, translate and explain about the culture and the land.

Part of the homestay fee supports the host family; part of it is deposited into a village fund and used for something that benefits the community as whole – like restoring the local Buddhist monastery, which is the heart of their cultural life. If you can spare two weeks or more, you can volunteer on ecofriendly projects, like building greenhouses used as solar home-heating systems, which reduce fuelwood consumption and cut soot emissions that settle on nearby glaciers and speed their melting.

For more information on Spitian homestays, treks, volunteer opportunities and grassroots environmental initiatives, visit Ecosphere's website (www.spitiecosphere.com) or drop by their office in Old Kaza's bazaar (☎222724). Refill your bottle with filtered water while you're there.

the best restaurant in town, but rooms look like they're coming apart at the seams.

DHANKAR

Southeast of Kaza, the snaking Spiti River merges with the Pin River, creating a single ribbon of grey 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 ₹25; 8am-6pm) hangs on the edge of a cliff, wedged surreally between rocky pinnacles above the village. 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** (admission ₹25; ☉8am-6pm) with costumes, instruments, old saddles and Buddhist devotional objects. In November, Dhankar monks celebrate the **Guktor Festival** 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 Hwy. You can stay at a terrific **guest-house** (dm ₹150, r ₹300-700) at the monastery, where most of the red-carpeted rooms have walls of windows with picture-postcard views. Food in the restaurant is fresh and tasty, and can be taken on a terrace with mesmerising vistas.

Buses from Kaza to Tabo pass through Sichling (₹25, one hour) or you can do a day trip by taxi from Kaza for ₹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.

The road to the Pin Valley branches off the Kaza-Tabo Hwy 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** (admission ₹25; ☀️10am-6pm) with ethnological and religious displays and plain, clean **rooms** (r without bathroom ₹250).

Southwest of Gulling, **Sagnam** marks the turn-off to the village of **Mud**, trailhead for the trek over the Pin-Parvati Pass and an increasingly popular hang-out for the Israeli backpacker crowd. There are some scenic day hikes around the valley and a handful of cheap guesthouses by the main road, as well as the modern **PWD Resthouse** (r without bathroom ₹200-300), below the hospital.

Buses run daily from Kaza to Mud (₹50, two hours), stopping in Gulling (₹30, 1¼ hours) and Sagnam (₹38, 1½ hours). Taxis in Kaza charge ₹900 to Sagnam and ₹1500 to Mud.

TABO

☎️01906

About 47km east of Kaza, tiny 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 village is completely dominated by **Tabo Gompa** (admission by donation; 6am-10pm), a World Heritage Site preserving some of the finest Indo-Tibetan art in the world. Founded in AD 996, the gompa's fantastically adorned sanctuaries, which are generally open from 9am to 5pm, were painted by some of the best Buddhist muralists of the era. Beyond the intricate *malas* and scenes of gods and demons, the moody chambers are graced with life-size stucco statues of bodhisattvas and detailed wood carvings. The modern gompa outside the ancient compound has a well-attended morning *puja* at 6.30am, and the monastery guesthouse contains a **Buddhist library** (admission free; ☀️10-noon & 2-4pm Jun-Sep) and a small **religious museum** (admission ₹20, camera/video ₹25/50; ☀️8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat).

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Guesthouses in Tabo are clustered around the gompa, or strung out along the main road.

Tashi Khangsar Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎️94188-17761; vaneetrana23@gmail.com; r/tent site from ₹300/200) The light and inviting rooms here surround a lawn where tables sit shaded beneath a large parachute canopy. There's a small lending library, a good res-

taurant, a flat grassy area for tent camping, and a relaxed vibe, all adding up to a solid value.

Zion Cafe

HOTEL \$

(meals ₹40-70) Spitian and Tibetan specialties are done well at this mellow place, with a well-windowed dining room and small outdoor terrace. Four comfortable rooms are also available here (₹300 for a double).

Millennium Monastery Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(☎️223315; dm ₹50, r with/without bathroom from ₹400/250) Run by the monastery, this ageing but popular place has decent rooms around a bright 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.

Dewachen Retreat

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎️233301; www.banjaracamps.com; r from ₹2800; ☀️May-Oct) Tabo's most upmarket accommodation rents its tasteful rooms to passing travellers when it isn't booked out by groups. It also has a good restaurant that's open to nonguests.

📍 Getting There & Away

At the time of writing, the road was open from Tabo through to Rekong Peo, with the odd landslide or other random event holding up traffic. There are buses to Kaza (₹45, two hours) at around 9am and 4pm, which may actually depart an hour earlier or a few hours later, if at all. There's a daily bus to Rekong Peo (₹200, nine hours) at 9am, going through Nako (₹80, four hours) but since this originates in Kaza it can be overfull. Taxis charge ₹1250 to Kaza (1½ hours), ₹2000 to Nako (three hours) and ₹5000 to Rekong Peo (nine hours).

TABO TO REKONG PEO

One of India's scariest but most sublime mountain roads, the Tabo-Rekong Peo Hwy in Kinnaur is an adventure. In theory, this highway is open year-round, providing the only winter access to the Spiti Valley; however, the Sutlej River frequently floods, washing away parts of the precarious road, and snowfalls can occasionally cut off this route in winter, so it's worth checking if 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 because they form part of the Spiti circuit.

From Tabo, the road follows the narrowing Spiti Valley, passing villages full of apple orchards, before soaring over the ridge into the valley of the Sutlej River. If you're on a bus, this may well be the most dangerous and knee-trembling road in India – even die-hard travellers have been known to gulp and ponder the possibility of an afterlife as the bus skids around hairpin bends with millimetres to spare. The views of the Spiti River flashing hundreds of metres below and the road ahead zigzagging across the mountainside are mesmerising. Views are best – but scariest – from the right side window seats.

Overnight stops used to be forbidden, but travellers now have fourteen days to complete the trip. The first permit checkpoint is at **Sumdo**. Just before that, if you've got your own transport, look for the turn-off to **Giu**, a village where you can see the mummified remains of a Buddhist monk who died over 500 years ago. The mummy still has hair and fingernails and, according to local lore, spurted blood when unearthed by the shovels of an ITBP construction crew in 2004.

Beyond **Sumdo**, the main highway starts its ascent into the hills at **Chango**, which has several Buddhist temples.

The first settlement with accommodation is **Nako**, an other-timely village of stone and mud-brick houses and a popular stop for motorcyclists. Even if you're on the bus, this is a great place to break the journey and a gem of a destination in itself. The village

is centred on a small sacred lake, behind which rise towering rock-strewn mountains criss-crossed by trails to high stupas, an old monastery and ridges with commanding vistas – it's perfect terrain for short or extended day hikes. In town, you'll find the 11th-century buildings of **Nako Gompa**, containing some fine Tabo-style murals and sculptures. The whole scene is a sweet first or final glimpse of Spiti.

There are several simple guesthouses offering rooms for around ₹200-500, or there's the posher **Reo Purgil Hotel** (☎01785-236339; d ₹500-800). Better still is the bright **Lake View Guest House** (r ₹400-500), a short walk through the village overlooking the lake.

The final stage of the journey passes through greener country in the narrow gorge of the Sutlej River. The village of **Puh** marks the official crossing into Kinnaur and there are two colourful gompas belonging to the Drukpa sect.

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 starting 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.

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