

Scaling the heights

Despite the rugged terrain and inhospitable climate, life thrives in Spiti

SPITI HIMACHAL PRADESH



GETTING THERE
The distance from Manali to Spiti is a little over 200 km from Manali. You can take a bus or a jeep. The journey takes 8 to 12 hours. This road is only open from May to October. The distance from Shimla to Spiti is around 420 km. It can be covered in around 20 hours by bus or 16 hours by jeep. The journey is arduous and best broken up by a stop in Rekong Peo.



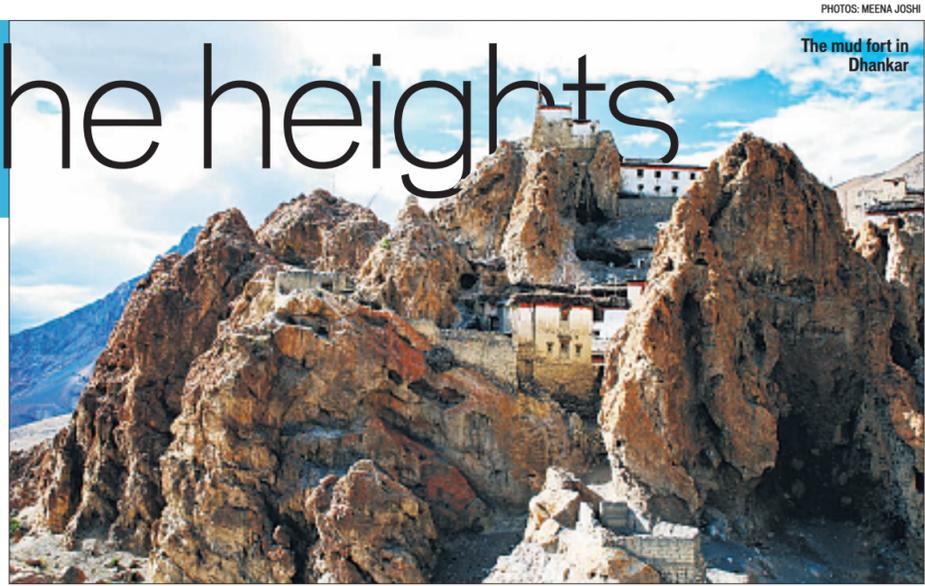
Yaks atop Ballangri village

reader writer

Meera Joshi

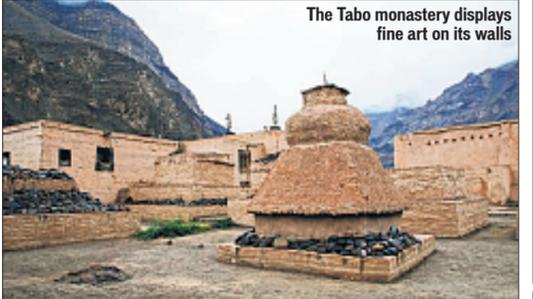
Reaching the remote Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh is an adventure by itself. An hour and a half's ride from Manali takes us to Marhi. The winding road up from Marhi makes it imperative to take pit stops to revive the body and soul. So we take a break at Chattru on the banks of the swirling Chandra River for refreshing lemon tea. The tea steels us adequately for a bumpy ride over dry riverbeds and gushing streams. A steep ascent thereafter lands us at Kunzum La at 14,931 ft. We stop by three immense *chortens* (Buddhist monuments) and tie a *khata* (or a Tibetan scarf) for a safe trip. The road goes downhill from here, clinging to the mountain-side on one hand and a wide open valley on the other. The terrain is barren and weather-beaten, the monotony broken once in a while by farms of barley and peas.

Spiritual nourishment
Kaza, the district headquarters of the Spiti Valley, sits by the Spiti River, below imposing cliffs. I head to the old part of the town with its narrow alleyways and squat homes made of pressed mud and wood. At Ecosphere Spiti, an NGO, I learn of the medicinal properties of seabuck-

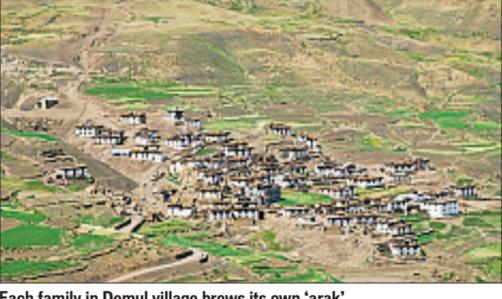


PHOTOS: MEENA JOSHI
The mud fort in Dhankar

thorn, a wild berry valued for centuries by the peoples of these hills. *Tsering*, an infusion prepared by soaking dried seabuckthorn in hot water, is tangy and refreshing. On the way to the ancient monastery of Tabo, the mountains loom large in hues of beige, russet and blue. Unlike other Buddhist monasteries that stand perched on almost inaccessible rock faces, Tabo was built with the intent of being easily accessible for devotees. Founded by Yeshe-ö in the 10th Century, enclosed within a walled enclave and expanded over the next seven decades, its mud and timber temples and *stupas* have beautifully withstood the vagaries of time. Tsug-lag-khang is the largest and oldest temple, and the only one open to the public today. Its walls display the work of the finest Tibetan and Indian artists of that time. It's soon prayer time and the hall fills up. As I sit among the faithful, the chanting no more than a low hum, I am transported to another age and time. Demul is perhaps the greenest village in Spiti. Its bright, whitewashed homes, fields and pastures paint a picture of tranquility. We munch on Tibetan flatbread daubed with yak butter, and dip into *tsampa* — roast-easily accessible for devotees. Each family in Demul also brews its own 'arak', the local alcoholic brew, and zealously guards its recipe. We stay in the home of Sonam Chaddon, who greets us with a large bowl of steaming *thupka* (Tibetan noodle soup). It is bitterly cold outside, but I am ready to take it on. I don't want to miss the sky, an indigo canvas lit by a million stars. Meena is a reader of HT Pullouts



The Tabo monastery displays fine art on its walls



Each family in Demul village brews its own 'arak'

The riches of a desert country

reader writer



MARRAKECH, MOROCCO
CHAITALI PATEL

The Sahara may be in Morocco's backyard but the country bursts with life. From bustling markets to stunning mosques, you'll find it all here



GETTING THERE
Most major airlines fly directly to Morocco or connect via other destinations in Europe, Asia or Africa. Jet Airways flies directly to Menara (Marrakech), while Air France-KLM connects via Paris.

Morocco, located on the north-western tip of the African continent feels like Europe and the Middle East rolled into one. When you're there, it's hard to tell that you are in Africa. Morocco is often described as one of the greatest shows on Earth. During our trip, the country fitted this description completely. Our two-week journey started from Casablanca, considered a city of romance. The actual city of Casa, as it is commonly known, is very different from this popular notion. But it is a city with soul and that's what makes it special.

Majestic mosques...
In Casa, the majestic Atlantic Ocean provides a beautiful backdrop to the stunning Hassan II Mosque, the third largest mosque in the world mosques in Mecca and Medina. This mosque, the brain-child of the late King Hassan II, is undoubtedly a masterpiece of modern Moroccan architecture. Built entirely of material sourced from across Morocco, except for the chandeliers and a small quantity of white marble that came from Italy, this structure will take your breath away. At dusk this ochre-coloured building turns to gold and looks as if it is emerging out of the ocean. The mosque can seat 25,000 worshippers inside. If you include the open area surrounding the structure, then an astounding 80,000 worshippers can pray together.

...and bustling markets
A three hour train ride from Casa will take you to Fes — a still living medieval city that was once the capital of Morocco. Once inside the majestic gates, we were transported to another era. There are 9,000-odd alleyways that crisscross the city and stalls that sell everything you can imagine. With rows of butchers, vegetable and fruit vendors, olive sellers, sellers of natural medicines and magic potions, leather tanneries and

numerous old *riads* (traditional Moroccan houses), Fes will overwhelm your senses. But the city of *souqs* (markets) is Morocco. The main square, Djemma El Fna, comes alive as the sun sets. Rows of twinkling lights, smoke from the open ovens, delicious smells and Gnawa music will pull you towards the square no matter where you are. From snail soup to camel meat, almost all local Moroccan food can be found here. The square stays alive way past midnight as shoppers tired from their daylong bargaining join the locals to unwind. Marrakech is also the city of gardens. You'll find traditional Moroccan rose gardens lining the famous Koutoubia mosque and the colourful and mysterious Jardin Marjorelle, created by the French artist Jacques Marjorelle.

True illumination
But a few days of taking in the mayhem of the *souqs* will leave you pining for some fresh air and quiet surroundings. It was at this juncture that we took off on a two-day trek to the Ourika Valley, part of the High Atlas mountain range. We spent the night at a local village up in the mountains. Our treat after the long climb, apart from the wonderful home cooked *tajine* and *couscous* was the fantastic, clear night sky, illuminated with thousands of stars. We followed this up with a visit to the Todra gorges — magnificent rock formations that change colour as the sun rises and sets. The last part of our journey was to the Great Sahara desert. An hour-long camel ride at sunset took us to our little campsite under the stars. They say that desert nights are spectacular. But sunrise is no less of a spectacle. As day breaks, the sand turns into a rich red. The silence and vastness of the desert calms and humbles you. Like everything else in Morocco, it makes you want to come back for more. Chaitali is a reader of HT Pullouts



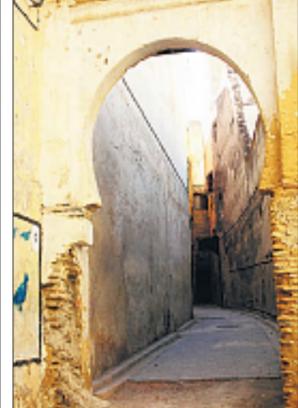
Djemma el Fna, a souq in Marrakech's ancient quarter bustles with vendors



The medieval city of Fes that was once the capital of Morocco



Jardin Marjorelle created by French artist Jacques Marjorelle



The alleyways of Fes

A meaty matter

Q&A inbox

Q Are there non-vegetarian restaurants in Pachmarhi in Madhya Pradesh? If yes, please let me know at the earliest as we are planning to go there next month.
Preeti, Nagpur
A We are aware of two places serving non-vegetarian food in this area. One hotel called Royal 52 is located in the main market. The food here was delicious. Another, the New Hotel, is run by the Forest Department. It is a simple hotel with

only the basic necessities. But the surroundings are very green. We also had a bonfire there. Though the hotel is little far from main market, it is where you can experience the real Pachmarhi.
Q I need information about direct and frequent buses from Hubli to Chikmagalur. What is the frequency of the buses and time taken? Also, what are the approximate fares?
Viral, Hyderabad
A Hubli is approximately 350 km from Chikmagalur. There are no deluxe or Volvo buses from Hubli to Chikmagalur. All buses going to Dharmasthala and Mangalore usu-

ally pass through Chikmagalur. The cost of a ticket is about Rs 125. A word of advice — take the intercity train between Hubli and Kadur for a quicker and more comfortable journey. Then take a bus from Kadur to Chikmagalur, which is just 40 km away.

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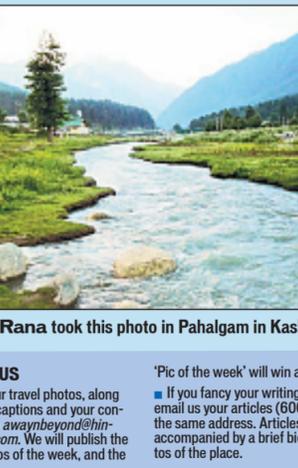
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Sky is the limit



Ninad Kothekar shot this photo near the Sindhudurg Fort in Malvan, Maharashtra

Sunil Walke sent us this photo of the Raigad Fort in the monsoon



Shailja Rana took this photo in Pahalgam in Kashmir

PIC OF THE WEEK
TALK TO US
Send us your travel photos, along with detailed captions and your contact details, to awaynbeyond@hindustantimes.com. We will publish the two best photos of the week, and the 'Pic of the week' will win a prize.
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