

Stone walls mark the boundaries of green pea fields in Chitkul, the last inhabited village in Kinnaur, before the Indo-China border.

Apples, Pea Pods, & Black Bears

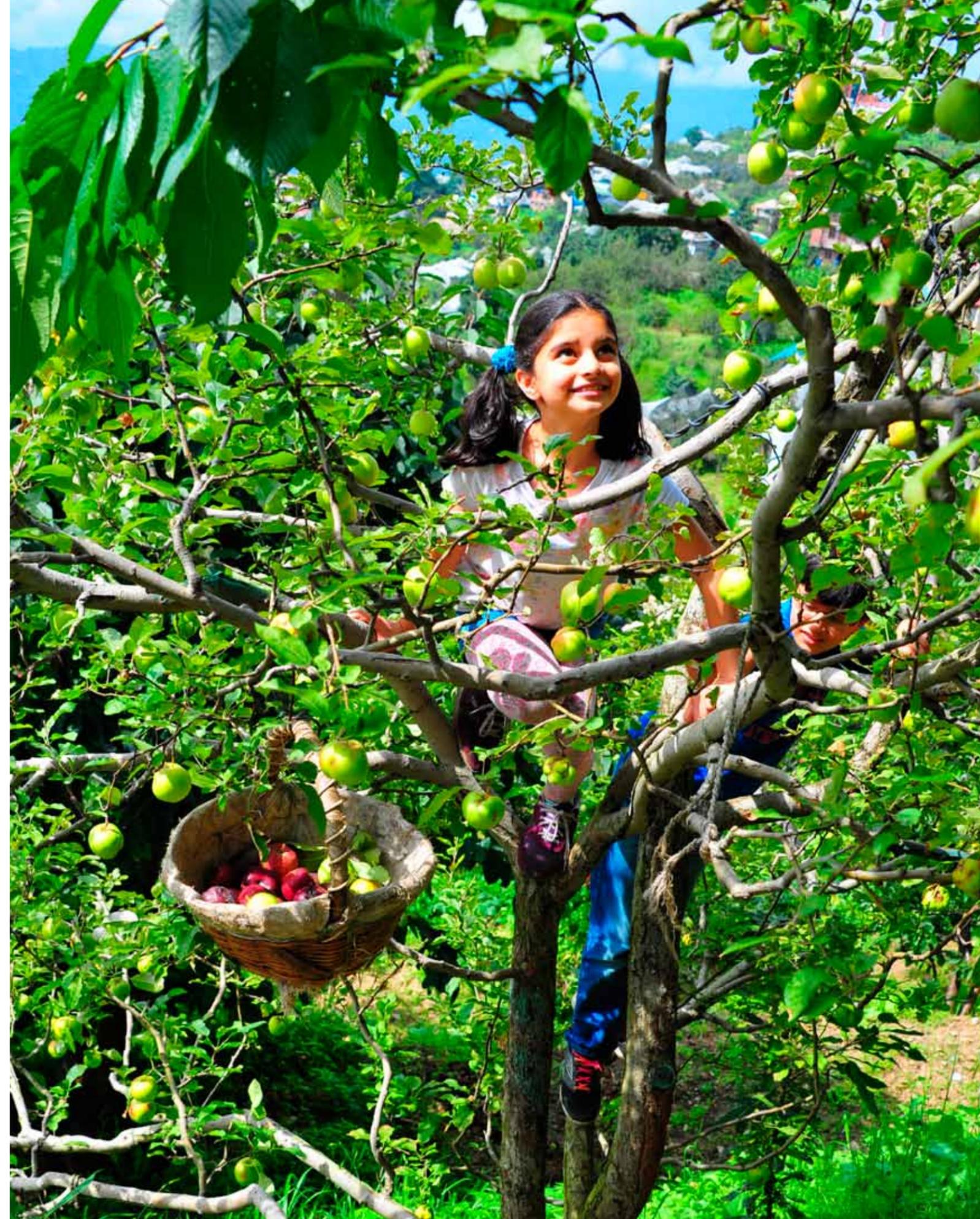
YOUNG COMPANIONS OPEN UP NEW VISTAS
FOR A ROAD TRIP JUNKIE

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

For years, I regaled my cousin's children, who live in the U.K., with tales about the marvels of the Himalayas. From the umpteen drives I have taken along the Chandigarh–Shimla–Thanedar–Sangla circuit in Himachal Pradesh, I would describe to eight-year-old Friya and eleven-year-old Zahan the wonder of the snow-capped Himalayas. Finally, last summer, I was able to plan a road trip for them and their parents through what I consider one of the most beautiful, most accessible mountainous areas of the country.



Sangla Valley is full of stunning sights, from forests of towering pines to fields of pink wildflowers by the Bapsa River; Apple orchards (facing page), introduced to the region over a century ago, cover the slopes around Thanedar and Kotgarh.



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The joys of hiking in the Sangla Valley include a gift of apricots fresh off the tree from a farmer, spotting different kinds of wild mushrooms and bushes of vibrant flowers.

Our first overnight stop from Chandigarh was Thanedar, a little village 80 kilometres northeast of Shimla, where Red Delicious and Golden Delicious apples were first grown in India, in the 1920s. The hotel we were staying at looked out at the Sutlej Valley, thousands of feet below, and had an oblique view of the white peaks of the Kinner Kailash range thousands of feet above. Spread below the resort are their apple orchards, which, despite 14 years of travelling through the region, I had never visited.

That changed a few minutes after we had checked in. Sharmaji, the major-domo of the retreat who, in my long acquaintance with him, has never once lost his composure, came rushing into my log hut, all flustered. “Sir,” he said, “the children have made friends with the fruit pickers and are high up an apple tree. I am worried that they might fall.”

We went down to the orchard quickly, and sure enough, the kids were perched atop a flimsy apple tree. Zahan studiously dropped ripe apples into a basket as instructed, while Friya comfortably lounged on a branch, crunching a ripe one. A shy girl in her twenties was showing them how to determine whether the fruit was ripe and ready to be plucked. I had never even met the pickers, though I had often been here during the harvest; Friya and Zahan had charmed them within ten minutes of our arrival.

The same kind of thing happened during a walk along the ridge that runs from Thanedar to the next village of Kotgarh. On my previous strolls along this ridge, I always focused on views of the mountains. With the kids, it was so refreshingly different that it felt as if I was doing this walk for the first time. They delighted in

the beetles and billy goats we came across, and followed a stream rushing across a road to the waterfall that was feeding it. Zahan had read that the Himalayas are known for black bears, and he investigated every rustle in the shrubbery with enthusiasm and trepidation. Often this yielded a grazing cow.

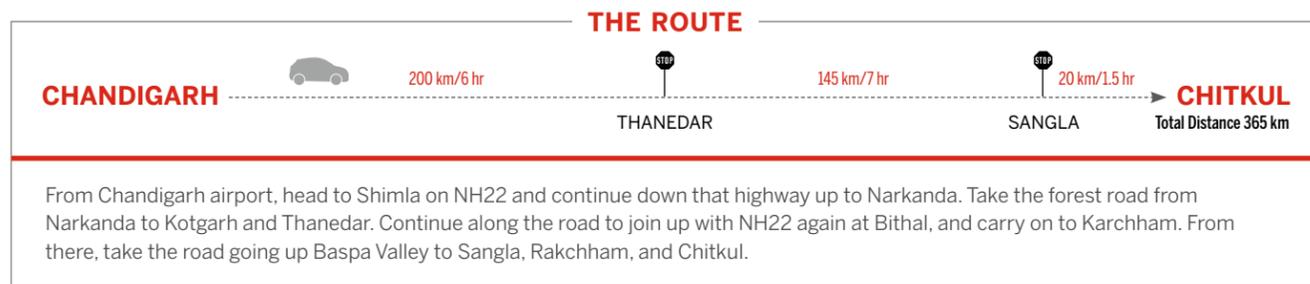
We were just one day into the trip, but I already had an amused and slightly anxious sense that it was the kids who were showing me the wonders of the mountains rather than the other way around. Because of their enthusiasm to explore every nook and cranny along the walk, we stumbled upon grassy knolls behind waterfalls, and picnic spots besides gurgling streams that I never knew existed, despite treading this path often. One such foray brought us to a lovely natural swimming hole, which unfortunately was just too cold to swim in at that time of year.

The next day we drove through the Kinnaur region towards Sangla, a village in the Baspa Valley. A large part of the road goes along the muddy Sutlej River. I had learned to expect questions from the young crew in the car, and sure enough one popped up: “Why is the river brown?” I explained that the colour was due to the hydroelectric projects built on the river. The answer would have satisfied an adult, but it opened a floodgate of questions from the kids about how water can generate electricity. It was a fun mental workout for me to try and give them answers that they could understand. I had to draw on my elementary education, my engineering background, and my language skills to explain to these inquisitive young minds how the potential energy of running water is harnessed to create the



Sangla (top) sits pretty in the valley, surrounded by tall peaks. In late August flowers bloom, frothy Baspa River is in full flow, and days are cloudless. Once you reach Sangla, the car is only useful for getting to the trailhead to begin another day of hiking through the Baspa Valley (bottom).





electric energy we need to run our industries, homes, and lives.

This also led to an interesting car conversation about how important the Himalayas are to India. I explained to them that these mountains are so much more than a pretty escape from the plains. They temper the climate of India, and the snowmelt from their mighty glaciers feeds rivers that are the lifeline for a population thousands of kilometres away. These perennial sentinels, standing tall over millennia, have made the Indian peninsula a safe haven. Their geography, I believe, is largely responsible for the multicultural fabric of India. The drive, which had started to feel monotonous on my last few trips, was enlivened by their points of view, unhindered by those modern-day maladies of correctness or cleverness.

Added to that was the warm glow of the unflinching trust they had vested in me. The last 30 kilometres to Sangla are a white-knuckle drive over incredibly narrow roads, rock walls on one side and sheer drops on the other. It is usually a stressful drive for me, not because of the width or the height of the road, but due to the nervousness of other passengers in the car. But Zahan and Friya had full confidence in my dexterity at the wheel. They gleefully pointed out birds, and snow peaks, keeping up their banter without any fear whatsoever of the car going over the side.

When we first saw our campsite in Sangla—set amongst fields of wildflowers by a green river—from the road above, the children were ecstatic. It was a sunny day and light danced off the snow peaks above. The rush of the raging Baspa River filled our ears. Zahan, who had visited places like this only in the adventure books that he likes to read, couldn't believe his eyes. That we were actually going to stay in tents, and that across the river were dense woods where bears and leopards roamed, sparked in him a tingling mixture of excitement and nervousness.

His openness about his feelings was infectious. Leopards and bears do live here, and though they almost never wander into camp, I had an eerie feeling that Zahan's desire to see one was so

earnest that some beast might just come knocking at our tent each night. For the first time, I laced up the flaps of my tent tightly each of the three nights of our stay. As we lay snug under the quilts, waiting to fall asleep, the children's ears would catch sounds like the snapping of a twig, or the soft bark of a jackal that mine didn't. Zahan would announce, "I think a bear's close by," and I would recheck the lacing of the tent's flap.

Unlike my previous visits to this valley, our four days in Sangla were marked by a sense of unlimited possibilities. Fuelled by fearlessness and surefootedness, the kids clambered up rocky hillsides, and wandered down untrammelled trails. They raced each other up huge rocks while I watched, a little worried, about what would happen if they put a foot in the wrong place.

Their curiosity also cut across linguistic barriers. On a walk in Chitkul, at the very head of the Baspa Valley, we came across local ladies harvesting green peas. Friya ran up to them to watch how they were plucking the pods off the plant, and started to help them. As a reward, one lady gave her as many pea pods as she could hold in the fold of her jacket. We snacked on the sweet, delicious kernels during the remainder of the walk.

Then, while on a walk on the wooded side of the valley, from Rakchham village to our camp, Zahan found a tree with a huge beehive. He wanted to knock out a bit of the honeycomb so that the smell might attract a bear. I explained to him that doing so would cause all hell to break loose, as the bees would hone in on us. His keenness to see some wildlife was so endearing and infectious, that by that point, all of us were earnestly wishing that we would come across a bear. Sadly, we didn't see any wild mammals, but our quest for them made for an unexpectedly interesting trip, which was enriched further by the children's inquisitiveness and constant chorus of "tell me why."

Their questions encouraged me to look at the Himalayas in a new light. I found myself looking up answers to some of the innocently posed questions and finding information that expanded my own knowledge about these magnificent mountains that I love. Zahan and Friya still sometimes message me from their mom's phone, to thank me and talk about what a good time they had. In fact, I have as much to thank them for. Some of my memories of this trip are about sharing the pure and simple delights of drinking water from a spring or blowing the seeds of a dandelion. I promise myself that one day I will show Zahan a bear. In India, in the wild. ●

Travel writer and photographer **RISHAD SAAM MEHTA** is the author of two books, the latest being *Fast Cars and Fidgety Feet* (Tranquebar, 2016).



1 It's an easy hike from Sangla to Rakchham village through a forest of oak. 2 Harvesting green peas was one of main firsts on this road trip. 3 At each pit stop the children couldn't wait to run out of the car to explore the surrounding slopes, find little bugs, wild flowers, or a small stream. 4 Befriending villagers at Hatu Peak near Narkanda, the children were happy to share their chocolates with them. 5 After a few days of hiking in the mountains, the children were experts at hopping across streams.

