

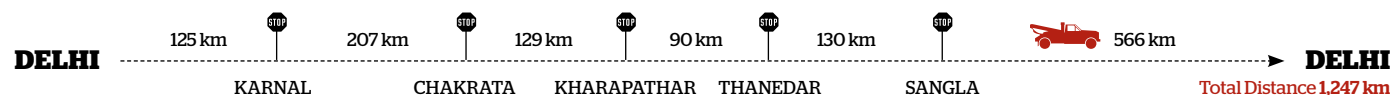
HIGHLAND TOUR

# Chills and thrills in the Himalayas

BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



*Driving in the snow can be challenging, so if you're planning a road trip during December to February, make sure you're well-prepared.*



Will it snow?" I ran into the main lounge of my hotel in Chakrata and asked the clerk. He was so surprised that he dropped soup on his white sweater. "Sorry sir, snowfall only in January," he said. It was mid-November. We'd outrun the fog that shrouds Delhi and neighbouring Haryana at Karnal. At Pipli, we turned off National Highway 1 to take the back road through Himachal Pradesh. We drove past Paonta Sahib to spend the night in Chakrata, a little-known hill station in Uttarakhand. We were on our way to Kinnaur, but wanted to skip the mayhem of Shimla and head to Thanedar via Theog.

It was a little late in the year to go to Sangla—the main village in Kinnaur Valley—but we were in search of winter chills and wonderful views. Snow would have been a bonus but, as the clerk had pointed out, we were two months too early.

The next morning, we drove past the little town of Hatkoti. Taking a break by the Pabbar River, we struck up a conversation with a villager fishing on the bank. "The peaks look unusually white for this time of the year," he said, gesturing towards the Dhauladhar range. He breathed in deeply, adding, "I can smell snow."

Of course, we thought he had lovingly rolled and inhaled some of the shrubbery that grows wild in Himachal because the snow, as we knew, was two months away. We bid him goodbye and pointed the car towards Kharapathar on the Hatkoti-Theog road. Our night halt was at the Giri Ganga Resort. When I threw open the curtains next morning, I got a happy shock. The villager's nose had been right: The world

was white. My excited shout woke the hotel advisor who suggested we delay our start until a few buses and cars had driven past, breaking the icy surface and making the road less slippery.

Though we did as he suggested, driving in the snow was exciting by itself. Any sudden acceleration could make the car slide; corners had to be taken slowly; the brake applied gently. Imagine there's an egg between your foot and the pedals, and your life relies on that egg not breaking—that's what it was like.

We reached Thanedar, also a whitewashed winter wonderland, and spent the night at Banjara's Orchard Retreat, run by my friend Prakash Thakur. Fortified with a breakfast of porridge and homemade jam, we set off for Sangla. The freak snowfall was already melting into slush and the going was smooth. Sangla, when we arrived, seemed to be in a time-warp, still dazzlingly dressed in the colours of late autumn. The temperature hovered around 10°C. In a few weeks, with the first of the winter snows, it would dip below zero. But for now, the days were pleasant. The crisp morning mountain air fuelled our energy for long walks and the cool evenings made sitting by the campfire cosier. Located by the Bapsa River, the camp offers stunning views but instead of satiating us, they whetted our appetite for more. So we drove on to Chitkul, a village 20 kilometres from the camp at the very head of the Baspa Valley, on roads cut through steep mountain sides past fabulous panoramas.

That's the great thing about the Himalayas—more of the same never gets boring.

RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



*Woven from sheep's wool, Kinnauri shawls have earthy colours and very intricate geometric designs that have religious or mythological significance.*



*The village of Chitkul, on the bank of the Bapsa River, is the last point that one can travel to before the Tibet-India border.*

**OVERVIEW**

This route starts in New Delhi and travels up the Grand Trunk Road (or NHI) until Pipli in Haryana where it turns right and takes an anti-clockwise loop, passing through Uttarakhand before entering Himachal Pradesh. The road is four-lane and smooth on NHI and then varies from two-lane single highways to narrow single lanes cut into the mountains.

**ROUTE**

The first halt is **Chakrata**, a cantonment town with fine views. The best place to stay here is **Hotel Snow View**, which is just about okay. Don't miss the walk down the valley to the magnificent **Tiger Falls**. You can swim in the pool at the bottom but be warned the water is usually icy cold.

**Hatkoti** is a three-hour drive from Chakrata along SH1, via Arkot. This little village on the banks of the **Pabbar River** is at the junction of SH1 and SH10. Follow the latter to **Kharapathar** via Jubbal, which was a princely state and still has a **grand old palace**. Kharapathar is a good place to break the journey because of the comfortable **HPTDC Giri Ganga Resort**. SH10 meets NH22, which is the Shimla-Rampur-Sumdo road (or the Hindustan-Tibet Road)

at Theog. The route then goes along to **Narkanda** and then off it on MDR15 (Major District Road) towards Thanedar, which is 90 km/3 hours) from Kharapathar. Here there is the **Kotgarh Church**, the first church in North India, and the **Tani Jubbar Lake**. The staff at **Banjara Orchard Retreat, Thanedar**, can guide you on a couple of very good walks. **Sangla** is 135km/6 hours from Thanedar on NH22 and then off it at **Karchham**. The road from Karchham is quite unnerving as it is as narrow as a ramp model's waist. A must-do walk is the one from Banjara Camp to **Rakchham**, a 6-km trek through forests of birch and pine.

Keep in mind that in the hills the distances may seem short but it takes far longer to traverse them. Plan for extra time.

DAYS: 8



AVIL RM/INDIAPICTURE (WEAVING MAN), RISHAD SAAM MEHTA (KOTGARH), FREDRIK RENANDER/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (SONU CAFE)