

# Ski Touring

# INDIA'S Kullu Valley

C.R.Spooner



First published in September 2002 by Alpine Touring Publishing and World Ski Tours Melbourne, Australia email: alpinetouring@iprimus.com.au www.alpinetouring.com



Copyright (C) 2002 C.R.Spooner

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher.

Printed by McPherson's Printing Group, Maryborough

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: Spooner, C. R., 1970-Ski touring India's Kullu Valley Bibliography Includes index ISBN 0 9581086 09

- 1. Cross-country skiing-India-Kulu Valley-Guidebooks.
- 2. Kulu Valley (India) Guidebooks. I. Title.

915 4520452

Cover and text design, all maps, illustrations and typesetting by C.R.Spooner. All photographs by C.R.Spooner with the exception of page 2, 15, 22, 62, 67, 91, 100, 110, 138 and 153 which were taken by C.Beach.



C.R.Spooner was born and raised in Melbourne, and discovered ski touring in his mid teenage years in Australia's snowy mountains. He has since travelled extensively throughout the world in search of deep snow or epic descents in New Zealand, Canada, USA, France, Argentina and of course, India. After years spent skiing, surfing or working in outdoor gear stores, he now owns and operates Alpine Touring Publishing from his home in Melbourne. This is his first book.

# CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION 7

BRIEF HISTORY 10
GEOGRAPHY 12
FLORA 12
FAUNA 13
WEATHER 14
WHEN TO GO 15
AVALANCHES 19
ACCESS 20
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK 22

# TOURS 25 SOLANG VALLEY 27

- 1. Patalsu 33
- 2. The Stairmaster 35
- 3. Tisra Peak 36
- 4. Lower Friendship Peak 38
- 5. Beas Kund 40
- 6. Taintu La 42
- 7. Shagara Peak 43
- 8. Gokinchar 45
- 9. Palchan Chute 46
- 10. Solang Ski Hill 47

# THE ROHTANG VALLEY 49

- 11. Garmatoo 54
- 12. Gulaba Peak 55
- 13. Marhi Nala Chute 58
- 14. Bhundarli 59
- 15. Rohtang Chute 61
- 16. Rohtang Ri 62
- 17. Munsiary 64
- 18. Dashaur Peak 66
- 19. Shela Sar 69
- 20. Marhi Choti 71

# MANALSU VALLEY & MANALI ENVIRONS 73

- 21. Khanpari Dhar 78
- 22. Manalsu Valley 80
- 23. Bhrigu Peak 82

# **HAMPTA VALLEY 85**

- 24. Prini Peak 88
- 25. Upper Sythen 90
- 26. Hampta Pass 92
- 27. Jabri Valley 94
- 28. Saraswati 96
- 29. Penguri 97
- 30. The Westends 99
- 31. Amber Chute 100

# **JAGATSUKH VALLEY 101**

- 32. Seri 104
- 33. Chhika Chute 106

- 34. Shirguntungu 108
- 35. Pashchim Pahar 109
- 36. Taina Cirque 110
- 37. Deo Tibba 112
- 38. Kala Valley 113

## OTHER VALLEYS 115

- 39. Chandrakhani Pass 118
- 40. Phojal Valley 120
- 41. Baragran Crest 122
- 42. Pakhnoj Valley 124

# PREPARATIONS 125

FITNESS 126 PERMITS 127 MONEY 128 PORTERS 129 SECURITY 130 HEALTH 130 **DEHYDRATION 134** ALTITUDE 134 PROBLEMS OF HIGH ALTITUDE 135 ACCLIMATISATION 137 SELF-SUFFICIENCY 138 WHAT TO PACK 138 HIRING, PURCHASING AND GENERAL MAINTENANCE 144 FOOD 145 ILLICIT DRUGS 145 THINGS TO DO WHEN NOT SKIING 146 SKI TRAVERSES 149 OTHER EPIC ADVENTURES 150

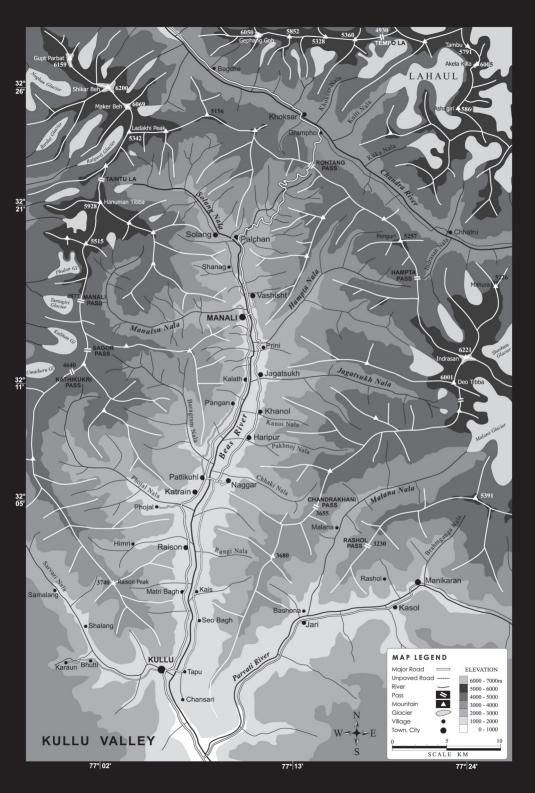
FOREIGN EMBASSIES IN DELHI 152 SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 153

## INDEX 156

INDEX OF TOURS BY RATINGS 158







# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 'The Valley of the Gods', the treasure of the Indian Himalaya. Located approximately 500 km north of Delhi, in the peaceful state of Himachal Pradesh, the Kullu Valley offers some of the world's finest ski touring. Abundant snowfalls, dramatic high altitude terrain, moderate weather and phenomenally easy access, make the 'Kullu' the perfect destination for ski and snowboarding adventurers. It is a magnificent valley, featuring 20,000 ft high summits, temples and hot springs, curries and shawls, and miles of incredible ski terrain.

It is strange to think of India as a skiing nation, and yet it contains a large portion of the mightiest of mountain ranges - the Himalayas. Storms coming from as far away as the Arabian Sea and the Mediterranean pound the Himalayas from November till March. Some of the greatest snowfalls occur in the Kullu Valley, which due to its continental climate, provides light, deep powder throughout winter. Spring is also an exceptional time for ski touring, with warm days and velvet spring snow on one of the deepest snowpacks in the country. The mountains above Manali, the northern town of the Kullu, are as spectacular as they are extensive, some soaring to over 6000 metres. It is little wonder then, that this picturesque, 80 km-long valley is the centerpiece of Himalayan ski touring.

Of course, the Kullu Valley is not just an exceptional ski experience, but also a rich cultural experience in a mystical and exotic land. During winter, locals spend their time spinning wool and living life at a leisurely pace, and it appears as though very little has changed since centuries ago. Religious beliefs. traditions and superstitions still govern social conduct and order and with a history dating back over 2000 years, it makes for a holiday that is guaranteed to stimulate all the senses. The Kullu Valley is also a politically stable area and isn't affected by Indian border conflicts with Pakistan or China

In stark contrast to the flat, sunscorched plains to the south, this part of India is undeniably beautiful; terraces of apple and apricot orchards line the Beas River, thick forests of cedar, oak and fir cover most of the lower mountainsides and quaint, rural Himalayan villages are ringed by rugged snowy peaks. Whether it is shopping for woollen handicrafts at the Manali Bazaar, exploring a Tibetan gompa or hiking beside a cascading mountain stream, there is enough to see and do in the Kullu Valley to keep anyone entertained. It's well worth travelling half way across the world for.



The higher peaks of the Shirguntungu region and the Upper Kalo Valley.

#### **BRIFF HISTORY**

The history of the Kullu Valley resembles that of the rest of Northern India, which is complex and voluminous. From 1500 B.C. onwards. Aryan and Mongoloid people filtered into the northern regions of India from Central Asia and Afghanistan. These people were some of the earliest settlers in valleys such as Kinnaur, Lahaul, Spiti and Kullu, Alexander the Great reached the Beas River (south of the Kullu) in 327 B.C., but under threat of mutiny by his army, returned to Babylon. Greek coins from that period have been found throughout the region, and some historians suggest that soldiers from Alexander's Army originally settled villages like Malana, north of the Parvati Valley.

References to the Kullu Valley appear in the Hindu's sacred texts such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which were written during the first millennium B.C. The ancient name of the Kullu Valley was 'Kulantapitha', meaning 'the end of the habitable world', a reference to the division between the verdant Kullu and the stark contrast of Lahaul. The later term 'Kuluta' occurs in Sanskrit literature including the Puranas and was used for 2000 years.

The first written history of the Kullu Valley dates back to the 1st Century A.D., when Behangamini Pal settled the valley. For the most part of the next 1500 years, the Pal Rajas ruled the Kullu, firstly from Jagatsukh, and then from Naggar, after overthrowing the Thakurs of Spiti. During this period, the Pal Rajas fought many battles with the Thakurs and Ranas. The rise of the Sikhs during the 17th Century ended the rule of the Thakurs, and the new King, Raja Jagat Singh, moved the capital from Naggar to its current site of Sultanpur, or what is now called Kullu.

Stairmaster's lower slopes provide fine skiing with views of Hanuman Tibba (in the clouds) and Beas Kund.

Merging of the Shimla Hill States formed the Himachal Pradesh state in 1948; however, the Kullu district was not included within its border. The partition of the Punjab in 1966, forced hill states such as the Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti to be added to Himachal Pradesh, which gained full statehood in 1971.

European history of the Kullu Valley probably begins in 1631 when two Jesuit missionaries, Francisco de Azevedo and John de Oliviera, journeyed from Tsaparang to Leh to help save the recently baptised King. From Leh, both men were the first Europeans to cross the Rohtang Pass and to encounter the Kullu Valley, on their way home to Agra.

The first British travellers to visit the Kullu Valley were W. Moorcroft and G. Trebeck, who, on their way to Ladakh in 1820, wrote descriptions of Kullu, including the source of the Beas River. As India came under British administration during the early 1800's, a slow, gradual trickle of officers and their families made the long trek from Shimla,



crossing the Jalori Pass, into the Kullu Valley. The British formed the 'Kulu' subdivision in Naggar in 1846 when they replaced the Sikhs.

Word guickly spread of the virtues of the Kullu Valley, such as the wonderful scenery, bounteous hunting grounds and temperate climate. During the 50 years from 1875 - 1925, the British settled the valley with zealous force. The favourable weather gave rise to apple, plum and apricot orchards and the rivers were stocked with trout. Life must have been ideal for the early European settlers, but the peace and isolation of the Kullu Valley was quickly eroded in 1927, with the opening of the Mandi to Larji Gorge Road. Before then, only foot or horse traffic could enter the valley. With the influx of motorized traffic, tourists poured into the Kullu and many British families sold up and moved back to England.

The final major change to European settlement in the Kullu Valley was of course India's independence in 1947. Even today, after more than 50 years of democratic Indian rule, many English elements remain, including hotels and estates, miles of apple orchards, and the English language, which is widely spoken.

The first pair of skis brought to India was in 1912, by a British army surveyor named Kenneth Mason The few British who did ski, did so on short slopes in Kashmir, most commonly on the 3494 m Pir Pinjal Pass, south of Srinagar. The peaks in this region were the first to be mapped and subsequently, climbed, although Indian surveyors and climbers had visited these mountains much earlier. During World War II a skiing centre was established (with help from the recently formed Ski Club of India. in Gulmarg, Kashmir) as a physical training station for British and American officers. At this time, skiing in India was enjoyed by only a rare few, and considered more a novelty than a serious pursuit. The primary focus for westerners during the post war period was on mountaineering, as it still is today. Much of the heavy focus on mountaineering should be attributed to the 1928 formation of the Himalayan Club, in Delhi. But it was these climbers, many of whom resided in ski towns back home, who brought the seeds for ski touring to the Indian Himalaya, and eventually to the Kullu Vallev.

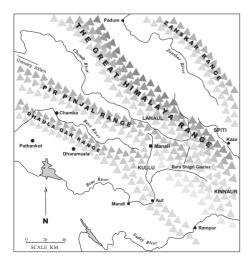
The origin of Kullu ski touring therefore comes from two different sources - army related personnel, who used skis to cross the Rohtang Pass in winter and the occasional but enterprising climbers, who



Humayun's Tomb in Delhi is another fine example of 16th century Mughal architecture. used skis for pleasure and exploration whilst occupying a tent at some snowy base camp. It was these Europeans, North Americans, Australians and New Zealanders who introduced to the world through stories and photos - images of colossal ski terrain and a land of abundant snowfalls in the Kullu Valley.

#### **GEOGRAPHY**

The primary ski terrain of the Kullu Valley occupies an area of roughly 120 km<sup>2</sup>, at the northern end of the Beas River The valley begins at the junction of the Sainj Valley near Aut, and extends 80 km to the north to the final crest of the Pir Pinial Range. Almost all of the skiing is contained within the Pir Pinjal (the Middle Himalaya), with the major pass in the region being the fabled Rohtang Pass. The Pir Pinjal Range extends from Gulmarg in Kashmir, to where it collides with the Great Himalava in the Bara Shigri region, 20km east of Manali. In the high, northwest corner of the Kullu. the Dhaula Dhar Range also collides with the Pir Pinjal. The higher, more glaciated



Great Himalaya, runs directly to the north, across the Chandra River, and separates the barren, rocky slopes of Lahaul from the lush, forested mountainsides of the Kullu. The Great Himalaya forms Spiti to the east of the Kullu - a high, mountainous region between India and Tibet. The highest peak in the area is Gya (6794 m), located to the northeast of Kaza in Spiti. It is this unique collision of great mountain ranges intersected by one north/south facing, 80 km long valley that makes the Kullu such a diverse and convenient ski touring destination.

#### **FLORA**

One of the highlights of the Kullu Valley and indeed all of the Indian Himalaya is walking through its distinctive and varied flora. The sights and smells of a healthy Kullu forest reveal species that will both wonder and amaze.

Vegetation in this part of the Western Himalaya has its origins principally in China, with an abundance of localized conifers and hardwoods. The Kullu region is home to trees such as magnolia (Magnolia campbellii), laurel (Laurus nobilis) Himalayan pine (Pinus radiata) and blue pine (Pinus wiallichiana). Apple and apricot orchards flourish in the warmer, flatter regions of the Beas Valley, but as you hike to higher ground, groves of walnut and chestnut trees can be found, as well as the prolific Himalayan cedar. The deodar cedar (Cedrus deodara) is the primary species in the forest reserves, both immediately north and south of Manali, and covers much of the terrain between 1800 - 2400 m. Above this altitude, common trees include the birch (Betula utilis), spruce (Pinea smithiana), hemlock (Tsuga chinensis), yew (Taxus baccata), cypress

(Cupressus torulosa) and Himalayan Fir (Abies spectabilis). One tree of exceptional note is the evergreen oak (Quercus semecarpifolia), which is the dominant tree on higher, southern exposures, particularly the forests along the Beas Kund Range. This Himalayan species of oak has a broad (often spiky) green/yellow coloured leaf, in direct contrast with the fine needles of the conifers.

The prodigious rhododendron (*Rhododendron arboreum*) marks the 2700 – 3300 m region, while procumbent forms can be found at higher elevations. Rhododendrons are a source of both aggravation and amazement. Their dazzling display of spring/summer flowering often hides their relentless capacity to entangle your pack and skis. Other shrubs you may encounter include juniper and willow. Due to snow covering the ground above 3500 m, the ski tourer rarely experiences the wildflowers that bloom throughout the Kullu Valley. Some of the species include white columbine, drumstick primrose, forget-meknots and Kashmir purple geraniums.

#### **FAUNA**

Although you may see the odd shepherd carrying a rifle under his arm, the only large creature you are likely to encounter will be of the domestic kind. It would have been a different scenario before the British Administration 100 years ago, but since then, much of the natural fauna of the Kullu Valley has been eradicated. Even in 1934, C.G. Bruce, one of the founders of Kullu climbing, noted that the days of confronting wild game were 'few and far between'. Prized hunting trophies included black and brown bear, ibex, bharal sheep. markhor and Himalayan thar.

Temporary food stalls line the upper field at Solang.

Forest habitats have since been converted to agricultural land, making way for the state's main economy agriculture. Many animal species have fallen prev to domestic animals and local farmers, while the demand for firewood and higher grazing pastures has pushed many wild animals to the remoter regions of Spiti and Lahaul. Winter sees little wildlife compared to spring or summer, but sightings still occur, particularly on southern aspects. The two most likely groups of animals to be encountered are monkeys and birds. The langur monkey, with its long limbs and black face can live in the snow. The common rhesus macaque is smaller than the langur, has a brown, or ruddy colour and is often seen playing around temples and grassy fields.

Some of the smaller animals are far more common in winter than their larger counterparts. Often their presence is felt through their tracks in the snow. Animals such hares, marmots, pikas, foxes, martens and weasels are generally inquisitive of human campsites, but rarely wander above treeline in winter. The elusive and very rare snow leopard is rumoured to inhabit parts of the Kullu Valley, but sightings in the wild are extraordinarily difficult and are more likely to occur in remote valleys in Spiti, I ahaul and I adakh

The birds of the Kullu Valley seem to be the only animals that have remained diverse and plentiful. Many rely on crops



for food but there are also birds of prey. Some of the more common mountain species are quails, pheasants, partridges, finches, thrushes, ravens, crows, snow pigeons, harriers and the common Indian myna. The spectacular golden eagle and the lammergeyer, a large vulture, can also be sighted above the treeline or circling the thermals above the valley. There are many more species, both endemic and migratory to the Himalaya, that to give the impression that you are not entirely alone.

#### **WEATHER**

Several major and minor weather forces influence the Kullu Valley, the most notable being the SW Asiatic Monsoon, the Jet Stream and cyclonic western disturbances. Other factors such as the NE Asiatic Monsoon and localized elements all play a role in the unique, continental climate of the Kullu.

The juxtaposition of the Indian Ocean and the Asian landmass gives rise to the monsoons, which are the single most dominant weather force in the Western Himalaya, including the Kullu Valley.

During the summer months, from May to September, the Indian continent becomes

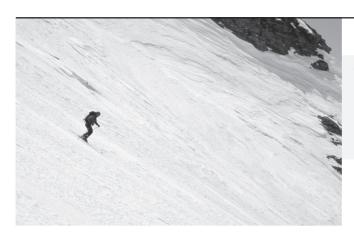
super heated, and as the warm air rises, a huge low-pressure trough is formed in the north of the country.

C.Beach on the scree staircase to the summit of Dashaur Peak. The heat of spring transforms what is normally a spooky ridge, into a rock and tussock, snow-free hike. Moisture-laden winds, originating from the SE trades of the southern Indian Ocean, cross the equator and shift south-westerly toward the pole and the axis of rotation. This SW Monsoon typically arrives on schedule, first to Southern India, and then proceeds northwards, filling the gap left by the ascending air. The first storms to burst over the Kullu Valley typically arrive in late June, with the full brunt of the monsoon falling in July through to September. The anticlockwise rotation of the low-pressure produces a strong westerly wind, and during summer, this is the predominant airflow from Kashmir to Nepal.

The upper level Jet Stream, a rapid moving, high altitude (9,000-16,000 m) air current lies to the north of the Himalaya in the summer months and has little to no effect on Kullu weather during summer, although its effects are marked in winter.

The weather patterns for the Kullu Valley are almost fully reversed by the commencement of winter and are of far more relevance to the visiting skier. The deep low-pressure trough is now south of the Equator, spread over Northern Australia. Much of the Asian landmass (notably China and Tibet) becomes increasingly colder and therefore produces a shallow high-pressure system of icy, dry, dense air. As the land cools with the decrease in temperature, dense air funnels downwards into the interior of the high pressure, and is forced





Wind-sculptured packed powder is a familiar sight on the Rohtang Ri, particularly during spring. C. Spooner begins the long descent into the valley.

outwards in a clockwise direction forming the NE Monsoon. The Eastern Himalava forms a barrier to the NE air stream. protecting the entire northern portion of India from rain. Its influence, however, is felt in several more subtle ways. The dominant high pressure over China forces the jet stream south of the Himalaya and at times, directly above the Kullu Valley. This west to east airflow can help draw cyclonic disturbances quickly across the Punjab towards the Kullu. In fact, the jet stream's impact upon snowfall in this region is often severe, pulling in storm after storm. The Kullu Valley relies on these western disturbances for most of its snowfall. They can originate as far away as the Mediterranean or Iran, but typically, the biggest storms are associated with cold fronts from the SW, laden with moisture from the Arabian Sea. As the front first collides with the Dhaula Dhar Range, it is cooled and lifted, and then it suddenly encounters the higher Pir Pinjal Range, where it drops the majority of its moisture as snow.

Winds in the alpine are strangely mild, compared to the much of the Himalaya, as the Kullu's unique geography often shields the prevailing flow. Of note are the daily valley winds, which are more pronounced during the early morning and throughout spring. Most valleys in the Kullu, especially those closest to Lahaul, experience the

settling of bitter cold air during the night. This air is drawn out during the day into the warmer, southern regions, creating a southerly, or downwards flow. Clouds and mist are often caught in this cycle of air movement. Clouds and mist can be seen pouring into the valleys around the late afternoon and dusk, where they settle. During the morning they gradually rise with the warming air to produce high-level cloud in the early afternoon.

# WHEN TO GO BEST SKI TOURING CONDITIONS

In a typical year in the Kullu Valley, the first significant snowfalls occur in October November. With daytime temperatures well above freezing at all but the highest elevations, most recent snow quickly melts with minor accumulations on the tallest peaks. Although it is possible to find skiable sections on the glaciers above Beas Kund or at the head of the Jabri Valley, only the most die-hard would try. It isn't until January, when the valley temperature regularly drops below freezing and snow accumulates, that decent skiing becomes attainable. As with other mountain ranges

of the world, early season skiing can often be dangerous, with shallow snow pack being notoriously avalanche prone, and inadequately covering obstacles and crevasses.

In the past it was easy to generalize about snowfall in the Kullu Valley. The staff at the Snow and Avalanche Study Establishment at Bahang (5 km N of Manali), claim that 5 m (197") of snowfall is the annual average at 3000 m, with greater accumulations at 4000 m. However, recent years have seen unusually high variation, from 2 m (79") to 7 m (276") in annual accumulation at Dhundi (2840 m). North facing, leeward, upper level slopes of the most northern latitude, usually receive the highest snow accumulations.

On a personal note, the Rohtang Pass (3978 m) had a 4 m base in April 1996 (end of a big snow year), while at the same time in 1999 (poor snow year), the base was 3 m in exactly the same location. Even during years of drought and where the snowline exceeds 3000 m, accumulations are still high in certain locations.

looks magnificent. Usually, a mix of rain and snow falls in the streets of Manali in December, a time for most ski tourers to lament that any expedition is at least a month away.

January is generally considered to be the best month for winter snow conditions as it averages the coldest temperatures with Manali's average minimum being 2°C. When big storms arrive, the quality of snow rivals anything found in North America or Europe with light, deep powder. The snowline should extend to the valley floor (2100 m), slightly above Manali, while closer to Kullu the snowline should be considerably higher (2500 m). Despite all the epic snow conditions in January, however, there is very little touring being accomplished. Huge dumps of snow (80-100 cm in 24 hours is possible) immediately equate to high avalanche activity and physically exhausting touring conditions. Breaking trail during winter months is an endurance test like no

December is commonly a volatile month for weather, with heavy snowfalls and strong winds, and offers few ski touring possibilities. Skiing can still be achieved, but generally it is confined to small hikes close to the valley and rarely up into the alpine. The beginner's poma lift at Solang can begin operation during the Christmas period, if there is enough base to cover the slopes of the upper field. In a big season, the hills around both Manali and Vashisht can have a blanket of snow and although this is rarely skiable, it sure



Winter snow conditions can range from boot to thigh deep powder, with a blissfully low moisture content. In the heart of the Jagatsukh Valley, C.Beach finds everything to her liking.

other, A 4-hour climb in firm, spring conditions can easily take 8 hours with a foot of new snow on the ground. The unremitting roar of avalanches and icefalls fills the lower valleys. and is a constant reminder to stay alert. The ski tourer can plan on spending many down days in the valley, awaiting large storm systems to pass and then further days of waiting for the snowpack to stabilize. Prini based, 'Himachal Heli Skiing' begins business in January to take advantage of the best snow conditions and the lowest snow levels. Under the cover of snow mountain towns adopt a different but appealing character and give rise to Manali's reputation as the 'Chamonix' of the Himalayas. Numbers of visitors and travellers are remarkably low and many shops are closed until late March.

Ski touring tends to be confined to lower elevations, particularly around the treeline where the skiing is fantastic. It can simply be too dangerous and fatiguing to climb into the alpine and with the weather being predictably bad, venturing too far away from base may prove foolish.

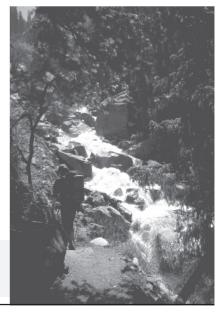
February is very similar to January but with a typically deeper snowpack and slightly higher precipitation levels. Temperatures are a few degrees warmer than January, but one still must wear thermals to bed in towns like Vashisht and Solang, Manali may receive one or two short periods of snowfall, but it is much more likely to rain, with the snowline at 2500 m or higher. The rains can last for days and even weeks; catch a bus ride to Solang (which can be 10°C cooler), however, and you will be in a world of fresh snow. Tours into the alpine can be accomplished (the Jagatsukh or Rohtang Valleys for example) but the threat of avalanches confines many ski tourers to the short, forested slopes above Solang or Sethan.

**March** sees a huge shift in climatic and general snow conditions, with temperatures rising

Any more pleasant and we would have brought deck chairs and beers! The Jagatsukh Nala tumbles by on a warm afternoon.

dramatically and the freeze/thaw cycle beginning in the later stages of the month Interestingly March experiences the highest precipitation averages for the winter months but most snowfalls are confined to the alpine. Early March is much like a warmer version of January or February which can produce enormous ice shields on southern slopes. Davtime temperatures in Manali average a maximum of 21°C and a chilly 6°C minimum. March is a fantastic time to be in the Kullu Valley. If you only had one month to visit, it should be scheduled for March You can walk the streets of Manali in a short sleeved shirt and many businesses are opening for the first time since November

Spring comes quickly to the Kullu Valley, and other southern ranges of the Himalaya. However, winter weather can strike at any time and it is not uncommon for week-long periods of heavy snowfall and frigid temperatures to arise in April and occasionally, in





Snake charmers on the hot streets of Delhi attempt to rouse some cobras from their perpetual state of lethargy.

May. Springtime is the best time for ski touring in India because the weather and snow conditions are far more predictable and reliable than in winter. Avalanche activity is at its lowest and the wet (corn) snow makes for fast skinning and booting. Air temperatures in the valley are truly superb, particularly in the sub-alpine towns providing many hours of blissful lounging and watching the days grow longer. When rain does come to towns like Manali (snowing at higher elevations), it often lingers for a few, miserable days and is quickly followed by a long period of warm, clear weather.

Thousands of Indians and foreigners stream into the Kullu during spring - some on pilgrimages, some on honeymoons and probably most to escape the southern heat Northern India experiences its hottest months in May and June and Delhi averages 41°C (106°F). Looking south from the peaks above Manali, you realise that the rest of the country is baking under the hottest sun. This coincides with some of the best months for ski touring. A hot wind from the plains creeps up into the mountains by mid March and dust particles are deposited onto the snow, giving the white surface a shaded or brown colouration. A close inspection of the snow reveals it to be clustered grains and interspersed with fine dust and tiny, living organisms. April is typically one of the prime Kullu ski touring months, but the quality depends entirely on the season. During normal and generous snow years. April is the ideal month for touring, offering safe travel conditions and pleasant weather. But arrive on a poor snow year with the snow line hovering well over 3000 m and conditions seem more suited to paragliding than skiing. Although no matter how mediocre the snow conditions appear, there is always quality skiing to be achieved in April, particularly if you are willing to walk. The Indian Army begins cutting the road into the Rohtang Valley and during drought years, they come very close to reaching the Pass by the end of the month. Daytime temperatures in Manali warm to a balmy 27°C average maximum and a 10°C overnight minimum. The snowpack is close to its maximum depth as very little melting has occurred at higher elevations. During the latter half of April, several of the higher peaks offer opportunities for a summit descent, especially in low snow years and when the larger avalanches have already released.

May can be an absolute gem or a disappointment, depending on the season. During an average Kullu snow season, May is a great time for ski touring, and is the best month for high altitude conquests. Access to most peaks is fast and uncomplicated and the highway into Lahaul, over the Rohtang Pass should be close to

opening, if not already open, for traffic. The skiing revolves around predictable corn snow, which can range from rotten and atrociously suncupped, to velvet, hissing goodness that sprays up like a fan on every turn.

Watch the barometer to gauge impending low-pressure systems, or take a guess. The chances of receiving four days of clear, sunny skies are excellent. Avalanches can, and still do occur during May, but they are typically wet slab types that should be predictable. South to east facing chutes can often release in hot afternoons, especially under the weight of a skier. Manali's average maximum temperature is 30°C, and the minimum is 13°C. Precipitation is normally a third of that of April.

June will never be a popular month for Kullu ski touring, as summer begins its dominance over the local climate. The snowline can rise to 4000 m and it becomes difficult finding worthwhile ski descents. Skiing is still achievable above the valley, but is confined to small drifts around the Rohtang Pass, or the rare descent of the highest peaks, such as Deo Tibba (6001 m). Other high altitude locations in India, like Ladakh, Spiti, Kinnaur or the lofty mountains of Uttarakhand are reaching their prime during June, and are often the focus for ski mountaineering endeavours. The Rohtang Pass is the centre of Kullu Vallev ski touring activity throughout June, with Dhaba stalls lining the road, and tourists flooding the Pass in their hundreds, bringing industry and merriment to an otherwise bleak environment

Rain is to be expected throughout the valley, although it often falls as wet snowflakes at the Pass. Regardless of how quickly the skiing conditions deteriorate, the cooler temperatures in the Kullu are still preferable to the stifling heat over the rest of India.

The months from **July** through to **September** are the time of monsoon rains and are a dismal, or rather pointless period for ski touring. Precipitation amounts slightly eclipse those of the winter months, with the greatest

falls occurring in August. Recent years (except 2001, which saw heavy rains) have seen uncharacteristically light monsoons in the Kullu Valley, and indeed throughout India, at this time of year. It seems as though India hasn't escaped the global trend of warmer and less predictable weather patterns.

#### **AVALANCHES**

The Kullu Valley experiences a continental climate, with the closest oceanic influence over 1200 km away Typically, high-pressure ridges are quickly followed by fast-moving, low pressure troughs. This type of weather pattern can produce a shallow snowpack with a strong temperature gradient and weak lavers can remain deeply buried for long periods. Evaluating the snow stability in the Pir Pinial Range is certainly a challenging and often daunting procedure. The ski tourer needs to rely entirely on his/her own observations and assessments to decide where and when to ski

The primary concern in snowpack analysis in the Kullu Valley tends to involve depth hoar (ground level faceted snow), which accounts for most human-triggered releases. Although the snowpack can change dramatically from one slope to another, and the enormous relief of the Himalaya accentuates this, depth hoar is typically found in thin snowpack areas such as windblown aspects. Conditions are generally better in deep snowpack areas like the Rohtang Pass, or during warmer air temperature periods, like those found in spring, when the snowpack contains a weak temperature gradient. In many cases, it can seem

futile to perform a stability test, as it will only provide an indication for a small section of a massive ski run. Detailed snowpack analysis is worthwhile for suspect slopes, but on a 2500 m (8200 ft) vertical descent, where every part of it appears a potential hazard, a ski tourer must rely more on terrain selection and safe skiing techniques. Stability tests should still be routinely performed: the best ones for the Kullu being cornice drops. rutschblock tests, compression tests and iumping on test slopes.

An individual's 'feel' for snow stability is highly prized in India. Factors such as steepness. the effects of wind and sun, snowfall, vegetation or signs of previous avalanches. all provide critical information that can aid in an assessment. The largest, and arguably most frequent, avalanches in the world occur in the Himalayas. At first glance, some avalanche paths appear to be glaciers. running the full length of a valley, up to several kilometres in length, and it is not uncommon to sight evidence of grade 4 and 5 avalanches. There have been many avalanche fatalities in this region, including a heli-skiing guide. The entire region is a high avalanche zone - this will probably be selfevident when you arrive and see how regular and gigantic the avalanches are.

All the necessary factors contributing to snow instability are prominent in the Kullu. The

Himalayas are exceptionally steep, with many slopes between 35° - 45° degrees.

There is also a large variation in snow and weather conditions. Big dumps of cold powder followed by warm, sunny weather are common. Wind loading is widespread, while in the alpine region. there is insufficient vegetation to anchor the snowpack. A typical, mid-winter snowpack can reveal several, weakly bonded lavers with a medium to strong temperature gradient. Anytime there is a snowfall, there is avalanche activity. Fortunately, 4 out of 5 avalanches occur during or just after a storm, so touring at this time can be prudently avoided. Avalanches are more predictable during the spring, but often just as severe. Only those experienced and competent in travelling in avalanche prone terrain should consider ski touring in the Kullu.

#### **ACCESS**

Due to the mountainous nature of the Himachal Pradesh state, bus travel is the most popular way to access the Kullu Valley. Train travel is simply unavailable with the closest stations being at either Shimla or Chandigarh, For skiers with limited time and substantial funds, the daily flight from Delhi to Bhuntar (10 km south of Kullu) is an excellent choice. Jagson Airlines and Archana Airways both depart from Delhi's domestic

> terminal and charge around \$160 US for a one-way fare, although it is worth noting that the luggage restriction is 10 kg and skis must travel by Tickets can purchased at the terminal or

Tent-bound at the Rohtang Pass, spent reading, eating and patiently waiting for the avalanche danger to subside. at their offices in Delhi, and from travel agencies in Kullu.

#### Interstate Buses

For most of us, the simplest and cheapest option is to board a bus and endure the tedious, but scenic trip from Delhi. This 14-18 hour journey usually departs Janpath around 6 pm., and arrives in Manali around mid-morning. Tickets can easily be purchased from a number of bus tour operators on Janpath or in Pahargani. Despite the claims of tour operators, there is only one class of bus on this route, with each tour company reserving seats from the same bus. Haggling should achieve a satisfactory price. Expect to pay between 300 and 400 Rs for a one-way fare. Buses travel via Chandigarh before climbing into the Himalayas, with stops for a late dinner and an early breakfast. Buses also leave regularly from Shimla, which is serviced by small-gauged railway. Dharamsala and Pathankot have bus links to Manali which run via Mandi

Leaving Manali to Delhi is even simpler as there are so many buses leaving in the late afternoon, that a ticket can usually be purchased only hours earlier, from any one of the tour companies operating on the Mall or from a side road.

Prices are generally fixed between them. Delhi bound buses terminate in a small side alley opposite the Kashmiri Gate Bus Terminal to the north of Old Delhi. Beware of the police search as you exit Manali.

#### Local Buses

Local buses leave from the main bus station in Manali for most villages in the Kullu Valley. Buses leave for Solang at 8am, 2pm and 4pm and charge around 8 Rs. Due to a flood in October 1995, the highway between Manali and Solang is crumbling away in places and the risk of falling into the Beas River or the Solang Nala is far more frightening and palpable than most hazards encountered in the mountains. There are hourly services to Jagatsukh and Naggar and even more frequent buses to Kullu. The bus station is often congested and thoroughly confusing. None of the bus routes are marked in English. The only method of locating the bus you are after is to harass anyone and everyone. Otherwise, a taxi or auto-rickshaw is always available from the northern end of The Mall. A taxi to Solang will cost around 250 Rs and to Jagatsukh will be 100 Rs. Depending on snow levels, the road above Palchan to Solang can be covered from December to February necessitating a walk from Palchan. Once you cross the bridge there is a walking track

Barbeques and tyretoboggan rides, Indianstyle. When the Rohtang Highway is open, for a few rupees, a bus can carry you to the commotion of Marhi Nala.



that leads quickly to Solang. Taxis for the Rohtang Valley originate from either Palchan or Manali. If you are staying in Solang, the owner of the hotel can arrange a time and price for this service. Buses eventually leave from Manali, to Khoksar (Lahaul), over the Rohtang Pass, but this service is only available in mid - late summer, when the highway is thoroughly cleared.

#### HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Local shepherds, who have walked the valleys and passes of the Kullu for over a thousand years, have created most of the routes that ski tourers use. Some of the tours described in this book follow ancient trade routes, where inhabitants of Lahaul and beyond have searched for food and income. Other routes are purely ours - the skiers, and they are forever changing creations, governed by snow formations and only appealing to us.

Trails of all descriptions proliferate in the Kullu Valley and this is both a burden and a blessing. Some lead like a perfectly manufactured staircase to superlative skiing, whilst others will alarmingly disappear or will terminate at the base of a monster cliff face. The route descriptions contained in this book are intended to be a guide only - the aim is to inspire and aid an ascent, and not to replace personal judgement or to ignore current conditions.

Each tour is divided into two separate sections. The first part is a condensed summary of each tour, including its vital statistics, a subjective overview of optimum time required, and a rating. The intention here is to provide an instant synopsis, which can hopefully assist in the formation of a plan of potential tours.



C.R. Spooner preparing his bed in readiness for a 3 am start on Penguri, Hampta Valley.

The second part is a more detailed description of the common ascent route, including brief snippets of advice where appropriate and the most likely descent routes for the more advanced skier.

Unfortunately, many of these narratives are based on my own transient memory and relative emotional state. This book was never aimed to be a step-by-step instruction manual on ski touring in the Kullu Valley, although at times it may appear that way. Please make up your own mind and only allow this book to point you in the right direction.

#### Start

The most common or popular embarkation point. All distances and measurements begin from this point.

#### Elevation

The highest and lowest altitudes encountered on each tour. Several tours contain a (+) plus sign after the highest elevation, indicating that it is possible to climb higher and gain more vertical.

#### Vertical

The anticipated maximum vertical drop or skiable length on each tour. This number is based on the prime month(s) for each respective tour and can change according to current snow levels.

#### **Distance**

The walking distance in kilometres from the starting point to the highest elevation. This measurement includes only *the ascent*, and excludes the return segment or further exploration.

#### **Duration**

The typical time period for the entire tour, including full ascent and descent, based on a moderate pace and clear weather.

#### Difficulty

The sum difficulty of both the approach and skiing sections. This takes into account route finding, steepness of terrain, distance, exhaustion levels and objective hazards such as avalanches, rockfall, and rock and ice climbing obstacles. The system I have employed uses terms that ski resorts use to grade runs, with the



simple distinction that we are grading *ski* touring proficiency, and not merely a descent. All ratings are based on fine weather and easy snow conditions.

Novice – Low angled slopes that require good snow camping skills, but little technical skiing ability. Tours can be completed on light, 3-pin gear where basic parallel or telemark turns will suffice. Ability to recognize and avoid dangerous terrain is a prerequisite.

Intermediate — Slopes ranging from 15-35° are likely to be encountered. Ability to handle steep snow climbing and high altitude camping is required. You must have good knowledge of self-arrest technique and evaluation of avalanche hazard. Skiing/snowboarding skill level should be such that you are able to easily handle an advanced or black-diamond run at local ski resort and have an ability to manage poor snow conditions.

Advanced — Longer, more brutal approaches with more technical difficulties encountered and difficult route finding. Slopes range from 20 - 45° with minor terrain obstacles. Ability to implement emergency bivouacs and advanced self-rescue is a must. An excellent knowledge of avalanche hazard evaluation is vital as well as familiarity with glacial travel and mountaineering techniques. A high level of skiing/snowboarding ability is required, particularly on wild snow, as is the capacity to quickly recover from severe physical and mental exhaustion

Extreme – The realm of elite ski mountaineering. Slopes are consistently 30 - 50+°, where a fall could be injurious to health or fatal. Supreme knowledge of avalanche evaluation, rock and icefall danger and mixed climbing technique is

Over five hours to climb, 30 minutes to ski. C.Beach is about to discover if it was worth it. Patalsu.



essential. Even the approach is life threatening and the skier must be comfortable with altitude and severe exposure. Expert skiing/snowboarding is required in all conditions and it is assumed that rope and climbing gear is carried on every tour.

Perfect April conditions. B.Mead sucking in the O's, with a 6000 ft ski descent about to begin. Deo Tibba is the highest point at right.

#### **Aspect**

The predominant direction of skiable slopes for each tour. This will provide information on potential avalanche hazard as well as snow conditions. Some tours will have several, distinct aspects (e.g. N-W-S).

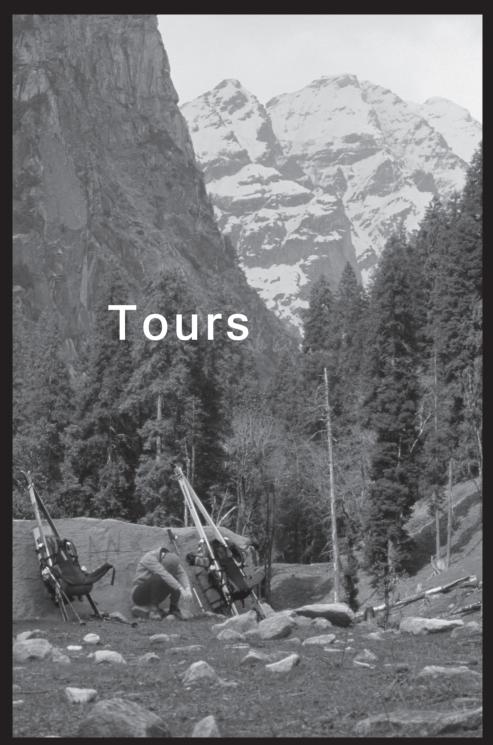
#### **Best Months**

A suggested time frame when touring conditions will be at a peak. This is based on depth of snow cover, most favourable snow conditions, and ease of approach. Of course, the best month can change from year to year, whilst other considerations, such as avalanche hazard and weather, will also influence the viability of a suggested start.

#### Ratings

A completely subjective ranking, based on the my own and my touring partners, personal opinions. Rating ski tours is a lot like rating music — it's a matter of taste, and therefore should never be taken as definitive.

*	Poor. Not worth the effort.
**	Fair. Minor appeal.
***	Good. Definitely worth the grunt.
****	Excellent. Great aesthetics and skiing.
****	Classic. Not to be missed.

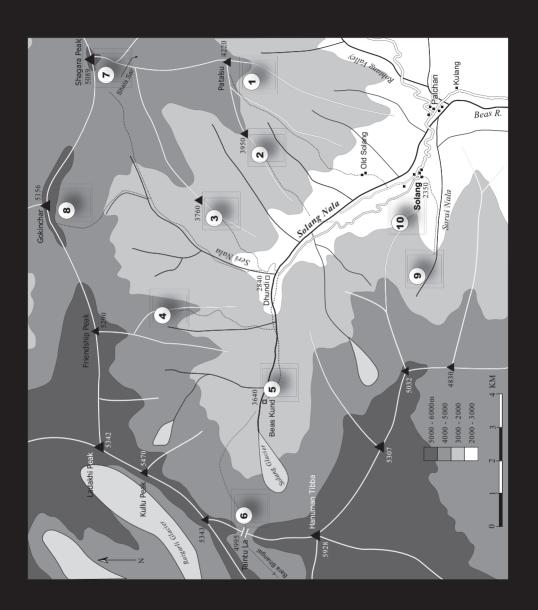




Streaking across Palalsu towards The Stairmaster.

# MAP LEGEND **Major Road Pass** ..... Jeep Track Glacier **Walking Trail Camping Area Minor Path Building** River City, Village Ridge Ski Tour Mountain \* all heights in metres To convert metres to feet, multiply be 3.28





# **SOLANG VALLEY**

The Solang Valley region is possibly the highlight of skiing in the Kullu Valley and one of the single greatest locations for Himalayan ski touring. It is a land of dramatic peaks and enormous relief, with at least nine 5000 m+ peaks crowning the perimeter, most of which offer some skiable face. Several of the high peaks provide the most stunning and worthwhile descents to be found anywhere, and, for the obsessive peak-bagger, there is no better place to base yourself.

The alpine terrain above the Solang Nala is gigantic, the views are spectacular, and if it is a first descent that you're after, or you crave some high altitude powder skiing, then the Solang Valley should be your primary destination. Where the Solang Valley truly eclipses the other valleys in the Kullu, however, is its ease of access. Tours such as the outstanding Patalsu can be reached within a morning from a hotel room in Solang, whilst higher, more challenging tours further up the valley can be reached within a day's walk. Most of the skiing takes place on the northern side of Solang Nala, where the vertical is long and dramatic, although winter avalanches are a constant threat. Touring in this valley is normally a spring affair the south facing bowls and faces become deliciously soft and pleasurable and the snowpack stabilizes.

The peaceful village of Solang guards the entrance to the Solang Valley and is 13 km NW of Manali. The valley narrows considerably once past Palchan and for the next 13 km to Beas Kund, is bordered on both sides by towering peaks and ridgelines. The true source of the mighty Beas River can be found above Beas Kund in the eternal waters of the Solang Glacier. Evidence of past glaciations abounds in the Solang Valley. The village of Solang

itself, rests on a once-glacial lake and profuse moraine covers the valley's lower slopes.

Solang is also home to the only permanent ski lift in Kullu Valley, a short, 200 m long poma on the upper field, but this is more of token than of any skiing value. Otherwise, the valley is typically rural Himalayan - tranquil with a few livelier periods around the holidays.

In the late 1980's to mid 90's, the Solang Valley received national attention from a different source other than skiing. The Indian government had chosen a site 8 km, NW of Solang, as the location where a tunnel would be built underneath the Pir Pinjal Range into Lahaul, eliminating the need to clear the problematic Rohtang road after every winter. Roadwork soon began on the Solang to Dhundi stretch, and a bridge was erected to cross the Solang Nala in 1986, which was recently destroyed by floods. It appears that the tunnel project has since been abandoned.

#### **ACCESS**

The bumpy road from Manali to Palchan follows the right (E) side of the Beas River. Major flooding of the Beas during the monsoons, has destroyed sections of the road, and at the Tibetan refugee village of Bahang (5 km), you will see numerous improvised roadworks. After Bahang, the road switchbacks high on the right bank, passing spectacular waterfalls and large rock cliffs that are climbable in summer. The paved road from Manali runs through Palchan, passes the turn-off to the Rohtang Pass, and winds its way up to Solang. The distance from Palchan to Solang is 3 km,

and for a short section next to the Solang Nala, the road is only one lane wide - the rest of the road having crumbled 50 feet into the river. It seems as if it is just a matter of time before the entire road follows the same fate.

In spring, there is a manned gate at the entrance to Solang, prohibiting most private vehicles from entering. The gate is lifted for the local bus, which makes a complicated 3-point turn near the hotels. The road doesn't end at the hotels, but continues on in a wide arc to the base of the upper field (ski lift).

In winter, the road is buried under snow and you will have to walk from Palchan. Skiers visiting Solang during the winter months must follow the well-trodden track from Palchan across the bridge and up a short-cut to the village. At Solang there are two tracks that continue further up the valley, both on the southern side of the valley. The lower originates next to the Friendship Hotel and follows the bank of the Solang Nala for 3 km. where it ends at a large field beside the river. The higher track leaves next to the ski lift on the upper field and continues to Dhundi

#### **TOWNS**

#### **Palchan**

Palchan is the largest settlement north of Manali, located at the junction of the Solang and Rohtang Valleys. Buildings line the highway for over a km as it weaves along the northern bank of the Beas River. Because Palchan is spread so thinly along the highway, it lacks a central core and feels like a thoroughfare. Palchan

offers a larger variety of food and supplies than Solang, and it is the place to go if you wish to hire a winter coat and boots, or to arrange a taxi for the Rohtang. There is also a local school, an interesting irrigation network, and, if you look closely behind the initial facade, you will gain a glimpse into the history of this small town. Many of the business owners and operators in Solang live in and commute from Palchan, where there is a feeling of greater prosperity. Much of the town depends on servicing the busloads of tourists that descend upon Palchan on their way to the snow. Buses leave for Solang at 7.45 am, 1.45 pm and 3.45 pm. For Manali they depart at 9.15 am, 3.15 pm and 5.15 pm, although these times can change depending on the season and road conditions. The walk from Palchan to Solang is splendid, as is the hike up to the Kothi Gorge.



Solang under snow, with the forested slopes of Garmatoo across the valley.

#### Solang

The village of Solang is only 13 km northwest of Manali, but feels like a completely different world. Where Manali can be noisy, chaotic and bursting with tourists, Solang is relaxed and serene, enclosed by the beauty and charm of the Himalayas. The village is small, consisting of only a dozen buildings, including a few basic hotels, several dhabas, a liquor store and the odd shack that hires out fake furs and boots for the tourists.

Solang experiences a high season (full occupancies) in June and July, and there is also a short, busy period in December, especially around Christmas. In mid-winter, when Solang has an excellent snow cover and the buses can't make the journey, the village resembles a tiny, secluded European hamlet, where skiing appears to be the only activity. Solang is the focus for skiing in the Kullu Valley and with the demise in popularity of Gulmarg in Kashmir, is one of the main skiing centres in India. There are regular ski races with teams competing from other Himalayan towns and many of the past champions are from Solang and Palchan. Solang is the closest thing India has to a ski town, and all this for a 200 m long, poma lift, servicing a short, beginners slope. The lift has difficulty in operating for more than a few days in a row and is quick to close around early March, or when the snow disappears.

The scene transforms in spring, when there is a slight resurgence in the number of visitors, all coming to experience the sun and snow. The road is cleared to the upper field, allowing food stalls and rapidly erected restaurants to take advantage of the influx of customers. Indians from all over the country come to Solang to touch the snow, often for the first and only times in their lives. When the snow has completely melted, and spring ski touring is in its prime, the circus leaves for Rohtang where there will be snow for another 2 months.

Solang is a wonderful place to be based when in the Kullu Valley, and in my opinion, it rates at the top of the list. Perfect slopes rise from just outside the door and there is no hellish bushwhacking or backbreaking march to contend with. Glistening peaks and interesting side valleys surround the main valley, and should keep the avid ski tourer amused for an entire season. It is not just the awesome ski touring, however, that warrants a prolonged stay. It is also a mix of peaceful living and the interaction with locals that makes Solang such a special place.

Buses depart from the main bus terminal in Manali at 8 am, 2 pm and 4 pm, and leave Solang from outside the Friendship Hotel at 9 am, 3 pm and 5 pm. The 40-minute trip cost 8 Rs in 2001.

Solang is a tiny village and is entirely at the whims of the tourist trade. Most questhouses close up during the slow. quiet months and only re-open when there is a booking from a large group. The best accommodation in the village can be found at the Friendship Hotel and at the Patalsu Hotel directly behind. Rooms with two beds, a wood stove and excellent views cost 150 Rs per night. Basic meals can be ordered from the dining areas in both hotels. Across the road from the Friendship and with commanding views of the valley is the Raju Paying Guest House, which has larger rooms, charging 200 Rs for a double and 300 Rs for rooms that sleep four. Their downstairs restaurant has recently been renovated and now serves the best, but most expensive, food in Solang. The Iceland and Snow Nest Guest Houses are further down towards the river and have also received praise. The large building on the southern side of the upper field is a hostel, operated by the Department of Mountaineering and Allied Sports from Manali. Although the building sleeps 80 people, they reserve all accommodation for their own customers. You can hire basic ski and snowboarding equipment from this building in winter.

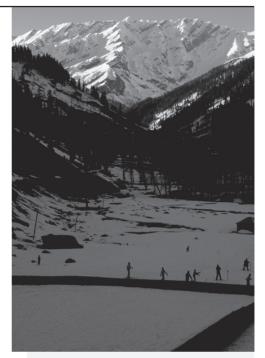
The poorly done chow mein is available everywhere in Solang, as is chocolate or an egg roll, but that is about the extent of available supplies. Preparing food for a tour unfortunately requires a trip to Manali, a journey back into a world of activity and commotion.

#### Solang Village

On the lower bank of Patalsu, across the river from Solang is the fascinating. rural village of Old Solang, or Solang Village. Enormous wooden houses with slate courtyards distinguish this village, which was established centuries before the present day site of Solang, Although it offers a rare glimpse into life of an agrarian. Himalayan village, the inhabitants of Old Solang do not take kindly to intruders. Skiers, who must walk through the paved corridors to access Patalsu, often get the feeling of being an undesirable amongst the taciturn locals. The apparent opulence of the village may be due to the prolific cultivation of marijuana in the area. It is a 40-minute walk to the village from Solang.

#### Dhundi

Dhundi is a group of tents owned by the Indian Army, lined out on a field close to the junction of the Solang and Seri Rivers. The army's involvement with this area is probably strategic, with the Pir Pinjal tunnel proposed to enter a short way up the Seri Nala from the junction. The smashed bridge over the Solang Nala is testament to not only the seriousness of the tunnel project, but also the Himalaya's staggering rates of erosion. The camp is unoccupied in



A portable rope-tow is erected for the children of Solang. Friendship Peak catches the last rays of sun.

winter, but receives Army visitors during summer and the trekking season. From May onwards, when the ground is dry, groups on organised treks occupy the flat fields at the base of Dhundi, on walks to Beas Kund.

#### **BRIEF HISTORY**

Indian shepherds have used the Taintu La (Pass) between the Chamba and Solang Valleys for centuries. British exploration of the Solang Valley probably began as far back as the 1850's, with the first settlers, but excursions would have been cursory compared to the later, more extensive exploration at the turn of the century. Hunting would have inspired Europeans to search the upper reaches of the Solang and Seri Valleys, but due to the high, fortress-like walls of the

A warm spring day spent dodging the occassional slide on the slow push to Beas Kund.

Pir Pinjal, the pass into the Chamba Valley wasn't a favourable route. The Himalayan Red Bear once lived in the Seri Nala Valley and this would have no doubt attracted the British hunter.

The founder of Kullu climbing, Colonel C.G. Bruce, climbed and explored in the Solang Valley in 1912, with Swiss guide Heinrich Fuhrer. The pair summited the crown jewel, Hanuman Tibba (5932 m), during this period, naming the peak 'Solang Weisshorn' after its resemblance to a peak in the Alps. Beas Kund was used as the base camp for early mountaineering expeditions in the area, with peaks such as Shikar Beh (6201 m) climbed in 1955 and Makar Beh (6070 m) climbed in 1965.

#### 1. Patalsu

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2270 - 4220 m

Vertical: 1650 m
Distance: 6 km
Duration: 5 - 8 hours
Difficulty: Intermediate
Exposure: S/SW face
Best conditions: Feb - Mar

Rating: ★★★★

Guarding the head of the Kullu Valley and easily seen from Manali, rises the beautiful peak of Patalsu. It dominates the skyline whilst at Solang, rising sharply through forests of oak and pine, before bursting onto a massive treeless slope that continues uninterrupted to the summit. If you had to ski only one peak in the



Kullu it would be Patalsu. The access is direct and immediate, the views are breathtaking and the skiing is superlative for the entire distance. Patalsu fits into the absolutely must-do category.

Some skiers may wish to break the tour of Patalsu into two days by camping overnight just below the treeline (3080 m). This seems unnecessary as an early start and a small pack can mean an ascent in just a few hours for the fast ski tourer

Leave Solang on a clear night at around 3 or 4 am to make best use of hard snow conditions and cooler temperatures. Follow the walking path that leads down through the boulders to a makeshift bridge on the way to the old village of Solang. This section is often the most time consuming as negotiating slick river boulders and then avalanche debris whilst wearing ski boots and a head torch can be tricky. Once you have found the path that rises to the old village. follow it as it winds between the grand houses, then turns to the left (west) for a further two hundred metres. It is often easiest to kick steps up the obvious ridgeline now in front of you, as this small section is guite steep. Once the pitch has mellowed slightly, take the skis off your pack and click in for the largest part of the tour. Make your way up staying close to the ridge, which gradually steers to your left. The sun should now be lighting the sky providing incredible views of Hanuman Tibba (5996 m) and southwards towards Delhi. Continue rising steeply through a forest of Himalayan Oak, although veering slightly left through the steepest part of the trees

before it abruptly ends in a vast alpine face. If you climb a few hundred metres more you should be able to view the summit and, more importantly, the prominent ridge dissecting the entire slope. The easiest and most hassle-free route is to hug the left side of this ridge, which will take you high up the mountain. before it is time to start attempting switchbacks above the steep open face of the mountain proper. This route avoids the most avalanche prone slopes (the right or east side) and always maintains a steady elevation gain. The actual summit is located to the far right of the upper slopes and sits along a gnarly ridgeline that falls vertically towards the Rohtang. Pay attention to the firmness of the snow on the ascent, which will provide a valuable indication on snow quality for the descent. The optimum conditions are when the upper mountain is still quite hard (not icy) but not so soft that the lower mountain has turned rotten from the heat of the sun. During spring, this will usually mean a descent between 9 and 10 o'clock - so don't spend too much time admiring the view.



Ski directly off the summit heading south down the main alpine face, making effortless turns in the most perfect spring corn. New snow can make Patalsu а daunting proposition, as it is a prime avalanche terrain and many slides are visible throughout the winter months. The slides. often witnessed from Solang. can be gigantic. As you descend, observe the ridge that you climbed and the steep sided wall that divides the slope you're on, and that of the ascent route. You should notice a gap or easy opening on this wall just above the level of treeline that will allow you to put in a delicate traverse to reach your skin track. The traverse back into the trees is very important as the main Patalsu face leads into a deep drainage that eventually turns to cliffs. Follow the route of vour ascent through the gladed oak forest, which undulates and weaves through varied terrain, while always aiming for the fields above Old Solang.

The final ski to the village is fantastic and will probably have you 'hooting' in delight. In winter you should be able to ski right to the valley floor, but in spring the run usually terminates in the fields above the old village. It is a ½ hour walk back to Solang, where with a beer in hand, you can look back and admire your tracks.

Patalsu's stunning SW face.

#### 2. The Stairmaster

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2300 - 3950 m

Vertical: 1100 m Distance: 8 km Duration: 1 - 2 days

Difficulty: Intermediate - Advanced

Exposure: S-SW face
Best conditions: Jan - Mar

Rating: ★★★

The Stairmaster has all the attributes of a classic ski mountain but is unfortunately overshadowed by its more exalted neighbour Patalsu. The Stairmaster offers great skiing and a consistent and sustained fall-line, with several open passages to the bottom.



Powder junkies will also prize the south face as being one of the few safe havens for freshies after a long storm cycle. The one drawback of Stairmaster is the initial slope above the Solang Nala, which can often be too rocky and densely vegetated to allow an easy access or a complete ski descent. Avalanches do occur on the south face, but they are generally contained to a few obvious pitches.

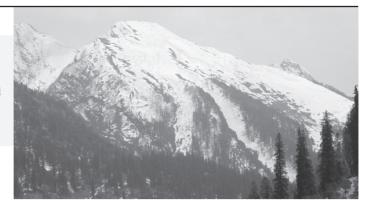
There are two similar ascent routes for the Stairmaster but they are accessed via different approaches. The first and quickest depends on a thick snow cover in the valley. From Solang, it follows the lower jeep track winds past the Solang Power House, along the banks of the river. Three km past Solang, the track disappears and you must negotiate the boulders of the south bank for a further 1 km before the river is safe

enough to cross. Once past the river, the route ascends a steep, wooded slope between a small stream and an angled cliff face. At 2800 m, the route is open enough to begin skinning, although it is a steep and convoluted path. Once through the thick oak forest, the long south ridge should be obvious, and this provides the line of ascent.

The other option is to take the upper jeep track from Solang to Dhundi and to break away towards the river when the Barang Valley is first encountered. Follow the small river down to the intersection with the Solang Nala. cross appropriate and climb the rubble/ scree path directly into the trees. Crossing the river for either route is problematic at the best of times, and is nearly impossible when the boulders are glazed with ice (which is common on winter mornings).

Kiwi ripper B.Mead all alone on Patalsu's breathtaking SW face.

The Stairmater showing the effects of a warmer than usual spring, but still dishing up great skiing for at least another month.



The only option appears to be removing shoes and socks and launching into a rapid dash to the opposite bank. The climbing is steep on the lower slopes and doesn't allow any skinning until 2900 m, where a small plateau is reached. There are 2 - 3 short, intense sections above the plateau that eventually lead to a prominent ridge running directly to the summit slopes.

Stairmaster can be climbed from Solang to the summit in 6 hours if the conditions are fast. It is also just as likely to take between 8 - 10 hours if there is ice or heavy crust. Some skiers may wish to break the tour into 2 days, with an overnight camp around the 3000 m elevation. A single-day attempt should begin around 4 - 5 am, which would aim for a 10 am – noon descent. On a warm day in spring, the snow can be too soft and slushy by 11 am so plan accordingly.

Although the Stairmaster appears to be an isolated summit from the jeep track, it is actually a SW ridge off the Patalsu crest. The SW face presents several good options for descents with a range of interesting fall lines. The steeper pitches drop off west into a large, snowy valley with good, sustained verticals. This valley rarely connects to the Solang Nala, although a descent may be achievable in high snow years. The main line of Stairmaster is the central S-SW

face which requires a traverse to skier's left (SE) when approaching the treeline. This line is reliant on decent snow coverage, but if you happen to catch this face in powder, it may very well be the highlight of your trip. In spring or during times of a shallow snowpack, downclimb the scree slopes above the river for the descent.

# 3. Tisra Peak

Start: Dhundi 2840 m Elevations: 2780 - 3760 m

Vertical: 950 m Distance: 3 km Duration: 3 hours

Difficulty: Intermediate - Advanced

**Exposure**: W face & chutes **Best conditions**: Jan - Mar

Rating: ★★★

Tisra is the 3rd in the series of ridges between Solang and Dhundi, made up by Stairmaster and Patalsu, which drop to the south off the Beas Kund Range. The western aspects contain some incredible lines and gorgeous topography, but all are steep and thoroughly exposed. Due to its severity, Tisra is destined to remain a springtime mission. Winter is just too frightening, and although there are undoubtedly safe powder lines, most of

the west face is prime avalanche terrain. The stable conditions of spring, however, transform the mountain into a tantalizing and achievable proposition.

Boarders and skiers searching for steeps may wish to make Tisra Peak their ultimate destination from Solang, but for most others in the vicinity, Tisra will be a side adventure. Either way, a campsite below Dhundi is mandatory. Although Dhundi affords great views of the west face, it will require you to cross a fast flowing river, usually on a cold and dark morning. It is much more advisable to set camp on the eastern bank of the Seri Nala, where you can begin climbing immediately. With perceptive route finding, skinning is possible from start to finish.

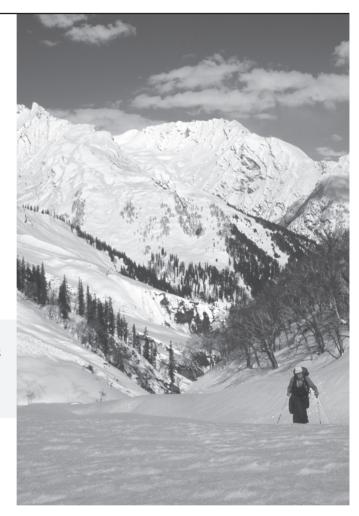
Begin by climbing into the trees a few hundred metres up stream from the broken bridge on the Solang Nala. Traverse northwards whilst gaining elevation, although it will be obvious that many switchbacks are required. The pine forest gives way to an open field with patches of birch still present on the upper slopes. If you have skinned left (N) enough, you will notice a prominent cliff band to the upper right. You want to be to the left of this band. Aim towards the centre of the slope, cutting your line to the right of the main strand of trees. Once past the birch. veer left (north) again and traverse underneath the high cliffs. The cliff band diminishes as you gain elevation revealing a steep snowy slope, often crowned by a large cornice. Climbing up close to this cornice is the crux of the ascent which is often a little intimidating. Follow the indistinct ramp, which mellows slightly and heads toward a bulging knoll in the distance. This protrusion is not the summit but may be the finishing point for some tourers wishing to ski one of the steepest, most classic lines on the mountain. You can still access this slope from higher on the ridge, so turn to the right, and traverse across a SE facing slope. You will drop slightly into a small depression before rising again onto a few steeper rolls, then onto an exposed ridge, terminating in a

high point with incredible views. To the east of the ridge is a huge cliff above a wild, glacial valley with the serrated ridgeline of the Stairmaster behind. The great looking ski slopes of the west face are misleading; they soon turn to steep, Chugach-like slopes. This area is only skiable if you are certain that the slope will not slide

The top of Tisra Peak is amongst the most scenic locations in the Kullu, with Hanuman Tibba piercing the sky directly across the valley and a dozen other enticing peaks within easy reach. In spring, the quality of the snow on the west face deteriorates rapidly after midday, becoming too soft and grabby, so make tracks from the summit before this occurs. Most tourers will find the optimum line by backtracking along the ascent route, as far as the prominent bulge. Once you are past this sub peak, you can drop down to a gorgeous ramp and finish with a beautiful, steep face above the Seri Nala. Less proficient skiers will enjoy staying close to the skin track for the entire descent, which also presents opportunities for open turns on marginally flatter terrain. An ascent of Tisra Peak, however, is really for skiers and boarders who love the feeling of brushing a steep slope with a hand on every turn.

The northern section of the west face is a mix of 40 – 50° dicey slopes, interspersed with crumbling cliff bands. These slopes are definitely to be avoided in dubious conditions. Ski from the high point down the first open pitch and then drop off to the side to gain this steeper section. One of the classic lines breaks hard right down onto an uninterrupted face. Other great lines can be accessed by skiing left from the high point towards a large gully and either dropping immediately, or circling around the west side of the obvious bulge and gaining the steep face beneath it. Pick your way

carefully through the lower section and gain the banks of the Seri Nala. Depending on current snow conditions, following the river is either an easy route back to Dhundi, or a hideous procession of collapsing snow bridges and gurgling sinkholes



B.Mead nearing Beas Kund, with the enticing Tisra Peak and The Stairmaster both caked in snow, further down the valley.

## 4. Lower Friendship Peak

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2350 - 4355 m

Vertical: 1400 m Distance: 14 km Duration: 2 - 3 days Difficulty: Intermediate Exposure: S face

Best conditions: Feb - Apr

Rating: ★★★★

The tour of the shorter, east shoulder of Friendship Peak is one of the finest in the Kullu Valley. The south face is concealed by Friendship's gigantic rock face until you are directly beneath it. An overnight camp is necessary at the base, which is 2 km past Dhundi and can be reached in under 4 hours from Solang. The setting and ambience is superb with rock and icefalls across the valley providing endless entertainment. Friendship Peak received its name after a joint Indian/French expedition, who

were the first to summit. The other name for the peak, 'Shitidhar', appears on most maps.

Begin the tour by following the major vehicle track departing from the upper field of Solang to Dhundi. The road winds for 7 km. crossing several gullies and streams to the junction of the Seri Nala. Cross the Solang Nala onto the northern bank and pass under the small Army camp of Dhundi. The skinning is fast and straightforward up the narrowing valley, and there are some great views of Beas Kund and the Taintu La at the head of the valley. From Dhundi to the base of the south face of Friendship is only 2 km, with Hanuman Tibba's gnarly north face commanding most of the view. Friendship Peak's impressive south face is another 1 km up the Solang Valley and offers the true route to the summit (5289 m). An excellent campsite is just above the valley on a protruding tongue of snow, home to a few birch trees and protective snow banks. In spring, be sure to pack all food away as the crows here are voracious thieves.

The following day, depart camp as early as possible, as by midmorning, the south face becomes unbearably hot and too oppressive for climbing. Aim to be at the top, ready for the descent by 10 am. Surprisingly, the crux of the climb occurs within a few hundred metres from camp, as a short,

The enormous skiing potential of the upper Solang Valley, in this case the southern flanks of Friendship (Shitidhar) and Ladakhi Peaks.

steep headwall must be climbed to access the main face. Follow the central gully until a slight weakness is encountered, which will allow you to set a steep boot-pack to gain a prominent shelf. A fall here would be frightening, but above this the skinning is relatively easy, with only a few sections requiring difficult switchbacks. The slope rises in elevation, and is characterized by the complete lack of trees and by a series of interesting steps. Make your way gradually towards the right-hand ridge, and follow this for another km, until you can't skin any further. By this stage you will be 2 km above the valley, on an exposed ridge with nothing but thin air to the east and one almighty run beneath your skis.

The south face has significant avalanche potential in winter, particularly on the upper section, and even in spring, it could experience slushy, afternoon slides. With a stable snowpack and calm winds, however, you will be rewarded with one of the most delightful runs you can experience anywhere.



#### Side Excursion

Directly opposite the base of Friendship Peak is a fun and deceptively long (250 m vertical) north facing slope, beneath the fluted walls of Hanuman Tibba. Expect to take at least 2 hours to complete this tour, which is an enjoyable and gratifying way to spend the afternoon. If you can avoid being crushed by an avalanche or icefall from above, it is a great location to score easy powder turns whilst killing time in camp.

The sublime south face of Lower Friendship Peak, one of the tastiest morsels to be found. In powder or corn, it is 6000 feet of pure bliss. The steeper slopes across the valley are part of Hanuman Tibba's giant north face.



## 5. Beas Kund

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2350 - 3640 m

Vertical: 800 m Distance: 13 km Duration: 2+ days Difficulty: Novice Exposure: E face

Best conditions: Jan - Mar

Rating: ★★★★

The source of the Solang Nala and Beas River is a large alpine plateau hemmed in by a ring of 5000-6000 m peaks, of which Hanuman Tibba is the tallest. The Beas Kund refers to the well-positioned lake that in summer is frequented by hundreds of people on organized trekking tours. In winter and spring, the scene is noticeably different. The lake is buried under a deep snowpack and there is not a sole to be seen. The tour to Beas Kund is an excellent introduction to Indian ski touring. The terrain is not difficult or particularly dangerous, the alpine setting is just phenomenal, and the ski descent back to Dhundi provides enough mileage for a decent leg burn.

The tour to Beas Kund will suit almost any level of skier, although skiers using lighter touring equipment will certainly find it even more appealing. There are a several enjoyable descents immediately below the lake, but for most ski tourers, a tour to Beas Kund is more about exploration and admiring the view, rather than quality ski descents. There are a opportunities for the advanced ski tourer seeking a



The slope opposite the campsite on Lower Friendship Peak, beneath Hanuman Tibba's towering north face. It is longer than it looks.

challenge, such as the formidable Taintu La and Ladakhi Peak's wild, southern aspects. But Beas Kund is more than just a ski tour, it is has the most spectacular mountains at its doorstep and is one of the least complicated tours in the entire Kullu Valley. For these reasons, it becomes many ski tourers' first, and sometimes their only Indian ski experience.

Beas Kund can be reached in a single day, but this requires a laborious 5 - 7 hours of skinning. Otherwise, break the day with an overnight camp below Dhundi. The top road from Solang to Dhundi is 7 km long and takes between 2 - 3 hours to travel. It is a further 6 km to Beas Kund, but this is completed at a much slower pace. The easiest route follows the northern bank of the Solang Nala for 3 km, past the southern face of Lower Friendship Peak and then crosses to the left (S) side of the river. Climb

the steep embankment above the river, through the birch trees onto the open fields below Hanuman Tibba. There are some obvious gullies rising above the valley and these allow easy skinning. The steep moraine banks of Beas Kund should easily be seen ahead, the route finding is uncomplicated and pleasant over undulating terrain. The final push to the lake is the most demanding part of the tour, requiring several exhaustive switchbacks across a series of steep ridges to gain the upper bench.

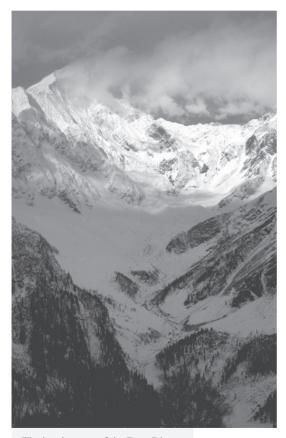
The lake's position is found in the small depression to the right (N) of the plateau, but can be well hidden under a deep snowpack. Place camp on any of the minor rises and sit back and enjoy the view. The foot of the Solang Glacier is a short 30-minute climb away, while the base of the Taintu Pass's grand chute is to the upper right (WNW). There is enough to see and do in this area to at least warrant a second nights stay, even if this means watching the numerous vagaries of Hanuman Tibba's north face.

When it is time to leave, walk out towards the southern side of the plateau and drop into a lovely, steep pitch heading towards Dhundi, which should be close to the ascent route. This slope can hold excellent powder in winter and in spring there can be days of soft, lovely, windblown snow. Depending on the snow cover, it is possible to ski down past Dhundi, offering a vertical descent of 800 m. Stay on the upper road to Solang, and with a decent snow coverage, you can skate off some of the distance.

## **Side Excursion**

Advanced ski tourers can find interesting, long descents on the southern aspects between Ladakhi and Friendship Peak. Head northeast from Beas Kund into one of the tight gullies that accesses this enormous terrain. The safest approaches follow exposed ridgelines, with Friendship

Peak's capacious south ridge offering the best route. The Shitidhar Glacier occupies the central face, while to the northwest, the tumbling Ladakhi Glacier is located. There appears to be dramatic, skiable lines available from just below Ladakhi Peak's (5345 m) upper slopes, running beside the glacier, but it is doubtful whether anyone has attempted a descent in this region.



The headwaters of the Beas River - the Upper Solang Valley. High winds are a common sight on the summit of Hanuman Tibba.

## 6. Taintu La

**Start**: Beas Kund 3640 m **Elevations**: 3640 - 4995 m

Vertical: 1300 m
Distance: 3 km
Duration: 3 - 4 hours
Difficulty: Advanced
Exposure: E chute

Best conditions: Mar - Apr

Rating : ★★★

This gnarly and somewhat daunting gateway to the Chamba Valley is not only a spectacular alpine pass, but also contains two dramatic, connected chutes. Snow conditions are often far from optimum with much of the descent being wind affected and avalanche prone. However, the aesthetics are first class and the final long chute down onto the Beas Kund has the potential to be magnificent.

For centuries, the Gaddi shepherds of the Chamba Valley have found the Taintu La a difficult pass to negotiate, even in the driest of summers. This pass, high above the Solang Valley, is challenging in anyone's book. From Beas Kund, as you are eveing up the gigantic headwall between Hanuman Tibba and Kullu Peak, you will notice a sharp cleft to the right of centre, the lowest part of the saddle. The Solang Glacier occupies the left section at the base of the headwall, its curving moraine path forming the lake or Kund. From camp, cross high and to the right of the moraine aiming for the off fall-line chute. Front pointing up the chute should only be attempted in stable conditions and crampons are



B.Mead on Shagara Peak's gorgeous SW face. The summit is the central hump at the far back. Booting up the left bowl is the usual approach.

usually required. The chute narrows on both sides and continues at 35° for 400 vertical metres. The top of the chute opens to reveal an exposed. steeper face with several small gullies and snowy ribs running the length of the slope. The views back down the Solang Valley are fabulous. but if there is any ice around, you'll be wishing you had never left camp. Climb this unnerving face towards the final steep chute that will lead to the pass. This 40-degree chute ascends to the left (S) slightly, before opening on the final pitch to the pass. From the Taintu La, the equally impressive peaks of the Bara Bhangal Range to the west are appreciated for the first time. Step into bindings and push back into the chute for the spectacular descent down to the Beas Kund.

# 7. Shagara Peak

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2350 - 5089 m

Vertical: 2200 m
Distance: 16 km
Duration: 3 days
Difficulty: Intermediate
Exposure: SW face

Best conditions: Mar - Apr

Rating: ★★★★

One of the highlights of the Solang Valley and possibly the most attainable and satisfying peak over 5000 m. The route follows a northern tributary of the Solang Nala called the Seri Nala, which in springtime is often filled with a daunting 5 km long avalanche path. This makes skinning awkward and complicates route finding. Shagara Peak is never seen until you pass through a huge, rock walled alley, 6 km past Dhundi, with Gokinchar (5156 m) towering to the immediate north. Skinning is possible until the final steep pitch to the summit, where simple boot packing will do. The

northern slopes of Shagara and in fact the entire ridge linking it with Gokinchar, drop away into immense cliffs providing breathtaking views of the Chandra Valley and the mountains of Lahaul. The descent takes a gorgeous, plumb line, beginning with a broad, alpine face, followed by mellow cruising terrain that rolls and weaves for 8 km all the way to Dhundi.

The upper Seri Nala is a springtime tour, as the magnitude of avalanche debris will surely convince anyone against winter travel. Follow the upper ieep track to Dhundi, crossing the collapsed bridge over the Solang Nala. The track here now becomes confusing with two tracks branching on the northern bank. The right track switchbacks high on the lower slopes of Tisra Peak, while the other cuts low and to the left. like it is heading towards Dhundi. Follow this lower track briefly, until it breaks west towards the Seri Nala Remain on the eastern bank until you are forced to the western side, staying close to the river which may needed to be crossed several times from bank to bank. As the canvon opens, the first of the avalanche debris will be encountered. Stav to the right and work your way through. Place camp whenever you feel tired, which could be 2 - 3 km past Dhundi. The next day, continue up the avalanche path, which is very wide by now, heading in the direction of the huge rock towers at the valley's end. Climbing through the gap can be exciting and arduous as the walls make one serious drainpipe. The gully continues for several hundred metres.

The views of Hanuman Tibba are a feature on Shagara.

gradually widening but not relenting in its gradient, but if you stay to the left, you can skin the entire length. Proceed past the rock gap for a further km where the gully flattens and opens to a wide glacial valley. Turn to the north as soon as the valley opens and climb high up the first visible ridge. Steer gradually to the left. towards a series of small, deep hollows on the lower face of Shagara Peak. The summit slopes and ridges should be clearly visible, as is the ascent route, which follows the weaknesses to the left. The second, deep gully is the preferred location for the Camp Two. There is ample running water dripping from the small rock walls and the deep hollow affords excellent protection from the wind

An early start is vital for the final day, as a climb of 1000 m vertical is required and rarefied air makes progress slow and exhausting. Leave tent, sleeping gear, stove etc., packed up and ready to be retrieved from camp after a summit bid. Veer to the left once out of the hollow onto



large alpine slopes. The summit's short, steeper slopes are presented and will require a delicate boot-pack in the icy conditions of the morning. Resume skinning northwards towards the upper mountain, laving a traverse from the left (W) of the slope towards the centre of the southwest bowl. The summit is only a few hundred metres away but is too step for skinning. The wind is normally fierce along the Pir Pinial Crest, causing a crust to form on the extreme upper slopes. A large cornice can also form on the mountain's north side, so avoid getting to close to the edge. Do not be fooled by the crust at the summit, the skiing will typically be soft and perfect by 10 am. A ski descent of 2200 m vertical can be made with only a brief pause at Camp Two to collect gear left behind. Follow the route of ascent, staying to the skier's left of the avalanche path, skiing all the way past Dhundi to the bridge. Follow the upper (jeep) track for the long hike back to Solang.

### Side Excursion

As you are skinning easterly up the upper section of Seri Nala, past the gorge. look to the northern lines of Tisra Peak and its long north-facing backside. Although other, much higher slopes in the region dwarf these slopes by comparison, they often appear to provide superb snow conditions, particularly when everywhere else is the usual slopfest. There is even the prospect of cold, dry powder. In the future, skiers may climb these slopes and ski the southerly faces into the wide, snowy valley between Tisra Peak and Stairmaster, for an alternative route back into the Solang Valley.

## 8. Gokinchar

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2350 - 5156 m

Vertical: 2250 m Distance: 15 km Duration: 3 - 4 days

Difficulty: Advanced - Extreme

Exposure: S face

Best conditions: Apr - May

Rating: ★★

Towering like a huge, white sentinel above the Seri Nala Valley, the dramatic south face of Gokinchar beckons only the seriously adventurous to sample its hidden delights. There is nothing about the ascent or descent that is simple or leisurely. The climb up is a long, awkward grunt, the summit ridgeline is a deadly knife-edge, and the ski down is will unsettle even the most seasoned pro. Despite all the unpleasantness, Gokinchar can still be a rewarding tour. The scenery is spectacular and the challenge of a remote 5000+ m peak will certainly make for a memorable expedition.

As a rule, Gokinchar is usually only skiable for a few weeks a year, and more often than not, it requires a prodigious snow year to make a tour successful, or at least worthwhile. The short window of opportunity is a common trait shared by many of the high peaks of the Kullu Valley. and typically, when one peak is prime to ski, so too are most of its neighbours. Recognizing the right conditions for an ascent/descent of Gokinchar involves studying the snow and weather conditions, and being confident that the snowpack is stable and that clear weather will prevail. But with a perfect spring day and a few tools for climbing steep snow, Gokinchar's south face affords a thrilling ski descent, with some of the best views in the Kullu.

Beginning from the junction of the Seri Nala and Solang Nala, hug the east bank below Tisra Peak and climb into the narrowing river valley. Gokinchar can be seen as soon as you pass the



Gokinchar (far back) at the head of the Seri Valley.

major restriction. The route up the Seri Nala is dependant on snow levels to form the appropriate banks to climb. It will also dictate the state of the snow bridges, which aid the ascent. If it has been a great winter for snow, the Seri Nala is usually filled with kilometres of avalanche debris, which regularly spill off the south faces of Frienship Peak, Gokinchar and Shagara Peak. Work your way up the right side of the valley, past the Munghri Nala intersection on the left (W) to where a suitable campsite can be established. Camp 1 (3900 m) can be reached in a 5 hours of moderate touring from Solang.

An early start is necessary for the next day to enable you to reach Camp 2 and avoid the oppressive heat of the afternoon. The valley splits 2 km further ahead underneath the large cliff wall, with the Seri Nala turning to the right (NE), and a smaller, unnamed valley branching to the left (NW), towards the open slopes of Gokinchar. Climb up this smaller river valley, which is tight and complex at the beginning but with a deep snowpack it isn't too difficult. Keep skinning high into this valley, past the main south face towards a safe platform around 4200 m. The next (summit) day sees more of the same. continuation of the traverse underneath Gokinchar's wild south face, aiming for a shortened headwall west of the summit. In the cold, dark hours of the morning, the snow can be too firm and intimidating for skinning. particularly on the steeper sections of the lower traverse, therefore it may be wiser to put crampons on at this stage. Continue across the slope switchbacking until the terrain requires front pointing as its means of ascent. Work your way onto the summit ridge and then further upwards to the summit. The summit slopes are typically severely wind affected and characterized by a vast cornice for much of the lee side Stav well clear of the edge, as it is one insane drop down the north face into the Chandra Valley. Ski down the steep (35) - 40°) face, all the way back to Camp 2 where most of your gear should be waiting. Scarv but sweet.

## 9. Palchan Chute

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2350m - 2850 m

Vertical: 250+ m
Distance: 5 km
Duration: 4 - 5 hours
Difficulty: Intermediate
Exposure: E chute

Best conditions: Jan - Mar

Rating: ★★

Palchan Chute is the deep, broad captures skiers' that imaginations on the walk up to Solang from Palchan. Unfortunately, its appearance is far more seductive than it is to ski, although it sure beats playing another game of cards in a smoky hotel room in Solang. Huge, ominous rock faces drain any snowfall above the Sarai Nala and channel it down this chute creating sometimes ualv. runneled. avalanche path. The upper section of the chute can hold decent snow conditions, whereas the lower is often a maze of avalanche debris. In good snow years, a second chute

forks off to the right and appears to be linked to the summit ridge. If this is true, this second chute could offer a vertical descent of almost 2000 m, making it the most prized, certainly gnarliest chute in the range.

Another early start from Solang, with the head torch lighting the way and usually a dog or two to keep you company. The Palchan Chute requires a morning assault, as the threat of avalanches in the afternoon is far too obvious. Follow the concreted path leading from the hotels to the Solang Ski Field. Rather than turning towards the lift and the Dhundi Road, follow the smaller, walking path that yeers southeast towards the Sarai Nala. The footpath ends shortly (this area is used for tourists to practice skiing after the snow has left Solang Field) and you will have to negotiate your way gradually upwards and to the south. If you started before sunrise, this area can be frustratingly slow as boulders litter the ground in the millions. Once vou've crossed the many gullies and sighted the river, follow the right side (N) closely as it rounds a large bend to reveal the main chute. The approach beside the river is the most time consuming and awkward, but as soon you've entered the chute and on familiar ground, a fast boot pack can be made. Climb for 400 - 500 m, after which time a second chute diverges to the right and a choice has to be made about which chute to follow. The main chute steepens and narrows and continues upwards for another 100 m before being it becomes too steep and rocky to ski. Climb up close to the rock, chisel out a platform and begin the descent

The second chute is a far more serious proposition. This chute is a long, steep, sliver of snow and appears to link with the summit ridge (4500 m). I don't imagine anyone has attempted this descent, which would require advanced



Palchan Chute, no doubt full of avalanche debris.

technical skiing and climbing skills. Late February or March is probably the optimum period for contemplating such a mission, with the hope of finding fresh snow.

The main Palchan Chute can be an enjoyable descent, for the mere fact that it gets you outside. The upper section contains sweet skiing, with steep turns down a rock-lined passageway. The lower gully and apron is often a strange encounter in death-cookie land but with any luck, a mongrel dog may still be waiting, its tail waging and with misguided love in its eyes. Sometimes, this is reward enough.

# 10. Solang Ski Hill

Start: Solang 2350 m Elevations: 2400 - 2700 m

Vertical: 250 m Distance: 1 - 2 km Duration: ½ - 2 hours Difficulty: Novice

**Exposure :** NE face, chute **Best conditions :** Jan - Feb

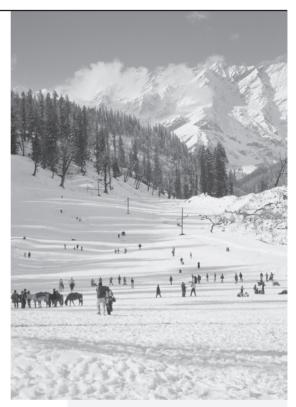
Rating : ★★

The Solang Ski Hill refers to the forested ridgeline directly behind the poma lift on the top field of Solang. Adventurous young Indians have climbed these slopes since skiing first came to the valley.

Nowadays, there is always a boot track the day after a storm, but it is more likely to have been made by a foreigner than a local. The best skiing lies at the top of the ridge, and drops northerly into more complex terrain. Skiers will find a choice of open glades and rollovers, and at the farthest end. wide. entertaining chute. Solang Ski Hill is the perfect remedy for those foul weather days or for day skiers who don't wish to venture far

As soon as a decent skiable base exists in Solang, which in a good season could mean December, this hill, an actual continuation of a ridgeline of Point 4880, can host ski descents. During periods of fresh snowfall, skinning is obviously easier than booting, although with the number of snowboarders in recent winters, it is more sociable to hike.

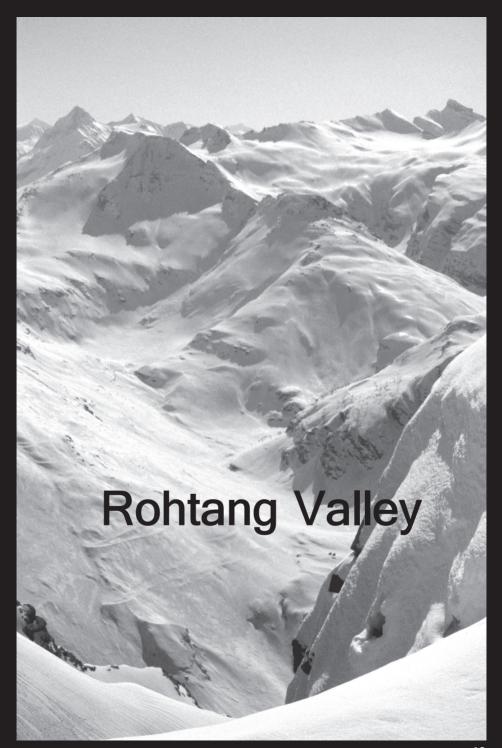
Begin from the main, upper field amongst the food stalls and Indian snow players. Climb up from directly to the left of the poma line, following the fall line. The first 100 m of vertical are moderately steep, with a few gullies and forested ribs to negotiate. Most boot tracks take a meandering approach up the slope and progress towards wherever the best snow has been In some years, this has included a south facing avalanche chute that attracts the most sun. Normally though, it is a case of continuing high into the forested slopes, which soon give way to a large, open field. You can either follow this field by veering more to the left and achieve a shorter

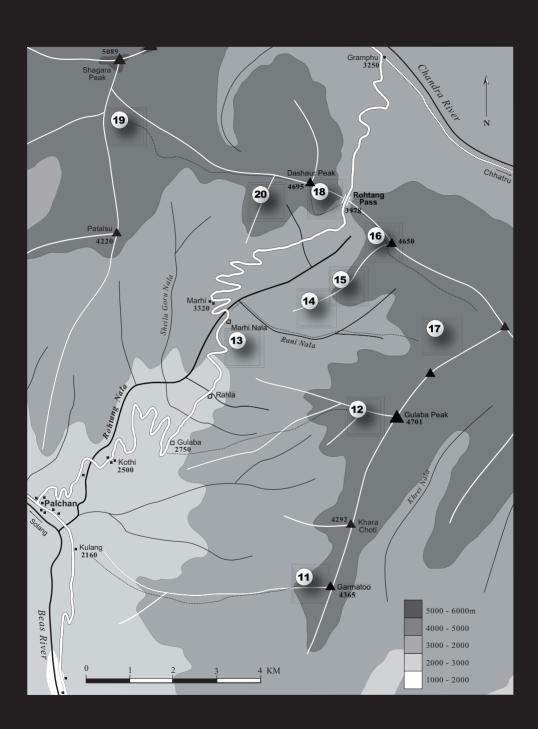


The upper field at Solang, with short Poma lift (at right). A fun winter's day in the sun.

ski, or continue on in the same direction towards the few clusters of trees on the steeper slopes above. Once through the trees, a wide, clear corridor, and obvious ridgeline is encountered. The corridor leads towards the main chute, tucked further away to the west. The ridge can be scaled for the maximum descent or aim for the main chute, which provides the best skiing but also the furthest distance from Solang. All other skiable routes follow a north to northeast direction and terminate on the Dhundi Road, and with a long skate back. In seasons of poor coverage, paddock fences will interrupt many northern lines.

Most skiers and boarders, however, chose a point on the ridgeline closest to Solang and ski next to the ascent line, which offers a pleasant run back onto the main field. This option can be completed in almost half the time it takes to climb and ski the far main chute.





# THE ROHTANG VALLEY

Extending from Palchan at its base, to the broad saddle of the Rohtang Pass at a fraction under 4000 m, the Rohtang Valley is a region of deep snow, moderate verticals and breathtaking views. Highway 21 winds for 41 km from Palchan to the Pass and is a remarkable feat of human engineering. But what is even more astonishing is the annual and rather unenviable task of clearing a drivable path through to Lahaul, a job undertaken every April to June by the Indian Army. This important highway link between Himachal Pradesh and the northern states differentiates the Rohtang from other valleys in the Kullu. There is no hellish bushwhacking to contend with and no massive elevation gain required. Time it correctly and you can be driven to the snowline and not see a grassy meadow in a week

Rohtang translates as 'death plain' in Tibetan and indeed marks the grave where over seventy coolies (workers) perished in a sudden blizzard after returning from Lahaul in 1862. Even on a warm, clear spring day, the Pass can quickly turn inhospitable in a matter of minutes. Cold, northerly winds from Lahaul funnel through the Pass to fill the gap left by the rising warm air of the hot, southern plains. Protection from this endless cycle can be found on the slopes around Marhi Nala, and behind ridges and cliffs on several of the tours

From February to September, or as soon as Kothi opens for traffic, the road up to the Rohtang Pass becomes one of the Kullu's prime tourist destinations. Excitable Indians are able to touch snow for the very first time, some coming from as far away as Chennai or Kolkata. Travel agencies in Manali advertising 'snowpoint' tours cater for this market, while shops hiring

everything from toboggans and rubber boots to fur coats, do a prolific trade in the sub-alpine villages and particularly up on the snow. The congregation of food stalls and snow related services follows the snowline as it gradually rises and brings a human element into a region that seems to be more suited to intrepid ski tourers.

Although Palchan lies at the base of the Rohtang Valley, the Beas River branches 1 km further south, just below the Whispering Rocks Resort. The true source of the Beas originates from the Solang Glacier, above Beas Kund, but most maps wrongfully indicate that the Beas commences with the melting snows located at the Rohtang Pass. Most peaks in the area lie between 4000 - 5000 m, with no glaciation, which is perhaps why the Rohtang Valley is such a magnet for all types of snow lovers.

### **ACCESS**

The main Rohtang Highway rises above Palchan in a series of rock-laid, hairpin corners. It follows the deep Kothi Gorge for most of its length, and then crosses to the eastern bank for the short climb to Kothi. The road rarely relents in its ability to switchback in its 9 km climb to Gulaba. Gulaba (2750 m) is nothing more than a control gate, established by the Indian Army to regulate who proceeds further towards the Pass It is the first time since Kothi that the road becomes level and straight, and therefore serves as a highpoint for snow goers during most of the spring. The highway begins its gradual rise after Gulaba, continuing northwards across a lightly forested mountain flank. Rahla, 5 km further on, is a non-descript point where a small stream flows underneath the road from a minor rock face above. The beautiful Rahla Falls are not those that cascade down near the road, but rather the spectacular ribbons of spray that stream of Patalsu's east side and produce the 'rainbow' mist.

The Rohtang Valley narrows above Rahla, where the lower western ridges of Gulaba Peak push the highway into a rocky constriction. The road begins its high, switchbacking climb, and then proceeds along the flatter banks of the Beas, in an area known as Marhi Nala. The road crosses the Beas at Marhi Nala for the final time, and climbs the western bank up to Marhi.

Marhi is 10 km past Rahla and was originally an Indian Army camp. Nowadays, it is a small collection of snowbound buildings that open for the brief summer trade. Marhi sits on a tongue of land above the steepest section of the valley and in summer, there is a wild staircase chiseled down to the lower valley Marhi sits at 3320 m and is 12 km short of the Pass. The road winds its way across the base of Marhi Choti in a series of wide switchbacks gradually turns more northwards towards the broad expanse of the Rohtang Pass (3978) m). The snow levels on this portion of highway are some of the deepest in the Kullu. It is common, in fact. to encounter 4 m high snow banks in early spring. The road crosses the Pass underneath Dashaur Peak, a small sign marking the top, and then continues downwards towards Gramphu, 11 km away.

Local buses begin making the journey up to the Rohtang Pass and into Lahaul, when the road is well and truly cleared of snow, which is usually in June. Before then, only Kothi has bus services, and that too is problematic. There are usually 2 scheduled buses departing from Palchan, in the morning and mid afternoon, but the service isn't reliable until April. The fare from Palchan is 3 Rs. A 4WD taxi is the surest way to access the tours up the Rohtang Valley. Drivers from Palchan will know the current road information but charge excessively for the ride. Marhi is normally 600 Rs from Solang, while closer to the Pass can be 800 Rs, while the Pass itself will be 1000 Rs. All travel past Gulaba must be before 8 am.

### **TOWNS**

### Kulang

Not technically in the Rohtang Valley, this tiny settlement is 2 km south of Palchan on the main highway. It is the starting location for tours up to Garmatoo, and can be reached by a Manali to Solang bus.

#### Kothi

Kothi is a quiet, small village at the foot of the Rohtang Valley, and 5 km north of Palchan. It previously served as a rest spot for travellers on their way to the Pass, but now services the tourist trade who pour into Kothi by the busload. There was no accommodation in the village during the winter of 2001, although there is a PWD Rest House for summer use. There is a beer store and several average dhabas, where you can spend a lovely afternoon soaking in the warmth of the sun and admiring the views. A short distance below the village is the Kothi Gorge, a deep chasm made by the Beas River. The chasm is over 60 m deep in spots and just a few metres wide.

#### Gulaba

Gulaba is an Indian Army checkpoint and comprises a few tents and a tin shack. During spring, army personnel only allow taxis to pass through the checkpoint before 8 am, so if you are planning to be ferried higher, make sure your

trip begins with an early start. Prepare to pay for the privilege of disturbing the guard: a 50 or 100 Rs note is the usual bribe.

#### Marhi Nala

On the eastern bank of the Beas, below the village of Marhi, is a broad, open field known as Marhi Nala. There are no buildings- it is just a site where industrious Indians transform the short slopes above the river into a mini adventure zone. When 4WD taxis can make the journey, food stalls assemble in a line, ski hire equipment can be hauled in and tourists spend their day playing in the snow. Several great tours originate from here, including the eye-catching Marhi Chute, which rises directly above the field.

### Marhi

The only building worth noting in Marhi is the emergency shelter, which is available to ski tourers with bookings. The WHMI use the shelter for accommodation during the 2 - 3 months it takes to clear the road. The shelter is not free, but payment usually includes dinner. Enquiries and bookings can be made at Solang or Palchan. There are half a dozen other buildings dotting this bleak village, but

they only open during the warmer months of summer.

### The Pass

The wide, open and relatively low Rohtang Pass crosses the Pir Pinial Range, linking the fertile Kullu Valley with the desolate Lahaul, and has given rise to the phrase, 'end of the habitable world' For centuries the Pass has been a critical trade route between Ladakh. Tibet and Central Asia. Even during the depths of winter, on a clear day, there will be a stream of people crossing the pass from Lahaul, many of whom will develop frostbite along the journey. Views of the Great Himalaya dominate the northern skyline, particularly the mighty Gephan peaks. The Pass is surrounded by an abundant variety of great descents, most within an easy day's walk. It is doubtful that you will find any other place in the Kullu Valley more bountiful and satisfying.

> The epicentre of late spring ski touring the incredible Rohtang Pass. Featuring the Highway, Rohtang Ri and Chute, and finally, far off Munsiary.



### 11. Garmatoo

**Start**: Kulang 2160 m **Elevations**: 2160 - 4365 m

Vertical: 1100 m
Distance: 7 km
Duration: 3+ days
Difficulty: Intermediate
Exposure: SW/W/NW faces
Best conditions: Feb - Apr

Rating: ★★★★

This immense alpine arena of skiable peaks and vast bowls is an absolute highlight of Kullu Valley ski touring. Access from Kulang is quick and relatively painless and with a well-stocked base camp above treeline, the ardent ski tourer will find enough perfect slopes to be entertained for a week. In large snow years, classic descents of up to 2000 m are possible, under typically safe avalanche conditions. The majority of terrain will suit an intermediate standard, however there are still dozens of steep lines and long, exposed ridges to amuse any level of ripper.

The convoluted ridges and vallevs above Palchan and Kulang tempt the serious ski tourer from the moment they arrive in Solang. With clear skies it is impossible to avoid the immense terrain across the valley. Unfortunately, many of the best lines lie above a deep, impenetrable drainage with high, rock walls and are covered in dense forest. The line of ascent and descent bypasses this steep, twisted knot and follows an arcing ridge that accesses the excellent ski slopes below Garmatoo (4365 m) and Khara Choti (4292 m), a craggier summit to the north. This vast region offers numerous lines, ranging from the short and intense - to long cruisers, with an often mild to low avalanche hazard

The tour begins from the tiny village of Kulang, 1 km south of Palchan (below the bridge before Whispering Rocks). You can either scramble up the embankment directly after the bridge or climb through the village itself, it doesn't matter so long

The delectable skiing landscape south of Gulaba Peak. Khara Choti is the craggy rise in the upper centre.



as you connect with the obvious ridgeline above the village and rising to the southeast. Make your way up onto the ridge and follow it all the way until it collides with the broad, gladed crest running to the east. Continue skinning through several attractive forest glades, aiming for the right (S) side of the ridge.

A great campsite can be found at the 3100 m elevation. in the protection of mature trees. The following day, break trail up the long ridge towards Garmatoo, although the skinning will become noticeably harder. At around the 3400 m mark, the ridge narrows into a rocky spine. A gap below the cliffs is presented on the southern side of the ridge. Traverse low. above the trees, but below the rock bands. As soon as the crux is passed, proceed back onto the ridge by way of a steep switchback. There is a short, exposed snowy ramp to climb, and then a high traverse, still on the south side and by this stage, it is well clear of the treeline. The ridge continues on to Garmatoo, the large bulbous summit a further 1 km away. More impressive ski slopes exist on the drainage to the north, where everything to the south flows towards Bhrigu Lake and Vashisht. Drop north into the valley between Garmatoo and Khara Choti, where a spectacular alpine camp can be established in the lee of some minor gullies. A large group could place a wellstocked base camp here, where at least 5 skiable summits can be quickly reached.

You can tour in a number of directions to the south or north of camp. The best and longest fall lines begin from the south ridge of Khara Choti. From close to the summit, descents of up to 1000 vertical metres can be achieved. Other notable runs commence north of camp along the high ridge leading to Gulaba Peak, several kilometres away. The northern Garmatoo drainage is characterized by long and glorious runs, which follow a succession of steps and ramps, and ends in a steep



Sunset over Garmatoo, as seen from Solang

drop into the river. Skin back up for another run or traverse up and around to camp for an afternoon of languid relaxation. Other fine, extended runs begin from the steep, summit face of Garmatoo and drop either N or S off the ridgeline into progressively steeper fall lines. Skiers and boarders looking for an extra challenge will find several beautiful, committing chutes amongst the peaks of Khara Choti as well as a steep tongue protruding from the central face.

It appears that the only dilemma facing ski tourers in the Garmatoo region, is choosing which line to ski, there are simply far too many. Follow the line of ascent back to Kulang, which during a big snow year is skiable almost all the way to the valley floor.

## 12. Gulaba Peak

**Start**: Gulaba 2750 m **Elevations**: 2500 – 4650 m

Vertical: 2000 m Distance: 6 km Duration: 1 - 4 days

Difficulty: Novice - Intermediate

Exposure: SW-W face
Best conditions: Feb - Apr

Rating: ★★★★

The Gulaba Peak area is a land of striking peaks and sinuous mountain

faces and is quickly gaining a reputation as the perfect introduction to Kullu Vallev ski touring. As soon as the Rohtang Highway is free of snow past Kothi, generally to Gulaba, then every Indian with a connection to a taxi will try and persuade you into a day trip to this region - and with good The reason. access phenomenally quick and simple and the skiing is positively sublime.

The Upper Gulaba environs make for an excellent day trip for all snow enthusiasts, but do require a high snow line to be achievable. In fact, the optimum conditions are when the snow line extends to Kothi at 2500 m but is shallow enough to have allowed clearing of the road to Gulaba, a further 200 m higher. A dawn, 4WD taxi ride will cost between 400 - 500 Rs. from Solang, which is where most skiers begin. Decide on whether you wish to be picked up from Kothi at a return time of 3 pm, or throw caution





Carving the slush below Gulaba Peak.

to the wind and gamble on a bus arriving. Otherwise it is a long walk back to Solang.

Insist on being taxied as high as possible, 500 Rs. is an extravagant price tag in India but most drivers will retreat at the first signs of snow and therefore need coaxing to take you as high as the road will allow. There is no point being driven any further than the Gulaba checkpoint, the high point after several kilometres of bumpy switchbacks. Begin skinning directly from the road, scaling the initial embankment. The fall line is steep at first and covered in loosely spaced conifers. After 45 - 60 minutes of touring. you will approach a sloping gully on your left (N) that appears to drop away to the NW. Stay above this deep gully by traversing high, but keep in close contact for the quickest ascent. Birch trees mark the treeline, while the slope gradually steepens and climbs a high ramp. Once on top of the flat expanse above the ramp, you will be welcomed by a panorama of irresistible descents. The impressive fall line of Dashaur Peak rises above the Rohtang, and to the north and south there is not a single ski track to be seen. The two choices presented to the day skier are to either climb the prominent tongue of snow on the left ridge or to traverse around, underneath the ridge, into a higher

Gulaba Peak in its entirety. It is amongst the most popular spring tours, particularly with the aid of a morning taxi ride. Palchan is at bottom right.



B.Mead powering towards Gulaba Peak and feasting on the skiing potential to the south.

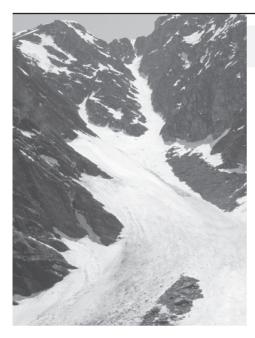
valley and strive for a greater vertical descent. If you decide on the left, most obvious face, you will skin towards the dominant ridgeline at least an hour away. The longer you follow the ridge, the greater the elevation, although not every shot provides quality fall line. High cliffs mark the northern side of the ridge, which prevents any easy access into the enormous Munsiary region. By mid to late afternoon, the slopes will be soft from the sun and a warm breeze, and there will be deep trenches left after every turn.

The right (E) facing valley provides a longer run but takes at least 2 - 4 hours to reach deserving terrain. Gulaba Peak (4701 m), plus several other sub peaks are reached via this route, although Gulaba itself requires an extra day to complete a descent. Skin across broken terrain to reach a long cwmlike valley heading to the east. Follow this valley for an hour as it narrows and passes slopes leading to the south. Hidden at the end of the valley is a twisting headwall between several minor spires. Climb the slope to its highest point (4600 m), which is usually over a final windblown ridge. Views of Deo Tibba and Indrasan are superb, while the descent back down the valley is more admirable for its length, than its excellence.

When both descent routes contact the flat ramp above the treeline, it is important to

stay left of the skin trail and not drop into the Gulaba fall line. Continue along this ramp, which opens to the SW into some nice open gullies with gentle gradients. As soon as the gullies terminate, break hard left (S) and traverse for 300 m. until vou encounter some more consistent fall line. Keep on descending through forested glades and gradually drift left (S). If you have aimed it well, and the snow allows it, you can descend through unbroken terrain onto sparse fields below Kothi and achieve 1700+ m of wicked skiing. In lean years, it is possible to aim above the cliffs of Kothi and downclimb next to one of the little streams that arise during periods of warmer weather. This will deposit you right on top of Kothi, where you can spend the afternoon sipping beer in the sun and reminisce on the 6000 ft of perfect corn skiing you've iust annihilated.

Of course, the Upper Gulaba area is a worthy, almost compulsory overnight mission or multi-day base camp. Set camp deep into the snow at or above the prominent ramp (3600 m). There are fantastic day excursions above and below camp; the most outstanding is to the immediate north, where a near perfect line follows the broad ridge for an 800+ m descent. In winter, when the highway doesn't extend beyond Gulaba, a traverse



Short and sun-baked, but not too mangy. The Marhi Nala Chute.

# 13. Marhi Nala Chute

Start: Marhi Nala 3180 m Elevations: 3180 - 3400+ m

Vertical: 220+ m
Distance: 1 km
Duration: 1 hour
Difficulty: Intermediate
Exposure: W chute
Best conditions: Feb - Apr

Rating: ★★

can be made into Marhi Nala, for one of several outstanding tours in the Upper Rohtang Valley.

There are several quality descents south of the Gulaba Ridge, which all drop into a steep and heinous drainage. The key for any of these lines is to be able to climb back up onto the Gulaba Ridge - the only feasible route down. If you attempt to descend into this drainage all the way to Palchan, bring 100 m of rope and a full climbing rack to extract yourself from the impending gorge. There are two locations where you can drop into the southern drainage and return via the same path, but both require decent snow cover to fill the rocky ramps. Once you are into the SW/S terrain, traverse high and around the upper face where you will notice the route to Gulaba Peak (4701 m) and the incredible descent from the southern crest. A magnificent concave slope drops from this crest towards Palchan. The views are breathtaking and the run is a classic, but make sure you pull out of the fall line before it becomes too steep and you can still climb back to the Gulaba Ridge, thus avoiding the chasm below.

Rising above the Marhi Nala is a stunning, dark, narrow gully that offers a roller coaster of a ride. Chute lovers will be pleasantly surprised to find an extended ramp above the chute, providing an additional 300 m of good, albeit tame, skiing. The favourite line for most skiers begins from a side chute that connects with the main chute in the upper section, and then continues down a rock-lined passage at around 40°, before finishing in a wide apron above the Beas River.

Although this chute is short by Himalayan standards, its seduction lies in the fact that it is supremely accessible, and is almost compulsory skiing from a campsite in the Marhi area. Snow stays long and deep inside the chute, often into June, but the lower apron is more exposed to sun and by mid May,there is often more rock than snow. Another point of concern is the chute's potential to slide. There is heavy wind loading on the upper slopes and while it may not be life threatening, it can produce a nasty scare.

Booting up the chute is the only option, which will also provide much needed feedback on current snow conditions. The

chute divides just below halfway, offering a shorter ascent on the left, and the straighter, but narrower, main line. Continue upwards, avoiding the side chute, for 200 m where there is another prominent chute on the left.

Depending on the snow levels you will have two options. The first is to continue climbing the main chute, which splits a high, rock wall down the centre. This tight choke usually requires decent snow coverage to make this skiable and even then, there is no room for turning. The other, milder approach is to follow the upper left chute that climbs to the upper plateau in a less intimidating manner. Once you have reached the flat bench above the chute vou can either turn around and ski what you've just climbed, or attach skins and continue further across a gentle, rolling tongue of snow. After 1 km of skinning, the ramp becomes too narrow to continue with steep sides dropping off to the north and south. The skiing back towards the chute is on mushy, sun-baked snow, providing a pleasant warm-up before the constrictions of the chute.

## 14. Bhundarli

Start: Marhi Nala 3180 m Elevations: 3180 - 4210 m

Vertical: 900 m
Distance: 3 km
Duration: 4 hours
Difficulty: Intermediate
Exposure: SW-S-SE
Best conditions: Jan - Mar

Rating: ★★★★

Although shorter than the Rohtang Ri, Bhundarli is in many ways, a more satisfying ski tour. The vertical is greater and several lines are overwhelmingly exquisite. The ascent is relatively straightforward with a choice at the top of three classic descents. In huge snow years, it can be skinned to just below the summit. Avalanche potential on all descent routes is high, although the sweeping

Rohtang Pass (centre right), Dashaur Peak (centre left) and Bhundarli's south face (lower right).



southeast face is the safest option. It is wise to save this tasty morsel for those predictable days.

If you are beginning this tour from Marhi Nala or Marhi itself, which is generally the way, the ascent route is the same for both. Follow the Beas River northwards to the intersection with the Rani Nala, 1 km further up the valley. The ease of skinning along the Beas will be determined on the height of the snow banks. Obviously, during winter months, the coverage will be at its greatest and route finding is far quicker than in spring, when the banks can be exposed to dirt and rock. The left bank appears to offer the path of least resistance.

Once you reach the Rani Nala and the entrance to the Munsiary area, cross the river to the northern bank. The slopes of Bhundarli rise directly above. Climb the prominent SW ridge towards the summit, with the steep south bowl to your right (E). There is one small cliff section on the lower part of the ridge, but this can be bypassed by swinging wide to the right. The ridge narrows as it joins the broad, SE face, but route finding is still

relatively uncomplicated. With the steep south bowl beneath you and vast expanse of the upper SE face rising above, continue northwards toward the rocky summit slopes.

Steep, rocky cliffs block access to the summit, although in large snow years there is often a ramp leading to a high cornice. Directly below is the moderately pitched SE face, which offers the safest descent and the best retreat during days of high instability. To skiers right of this face, close to the ascent route is the tantalizing south face, which drops 700 m into the Rani Valley. The descent is one of the best in the Rohtang area. It is steep, but not terrifying, and is a climactic event on a sunny day with good snow. To the skier's far right, dropping westerly from the highpoint, in the direction of Dashaur Peak, is the magnificent SW face - a natural born thriller. The SW descent is one of the best in the Rohtang Valley (if it doesn't rip to the ground) and leads to the flats below Rohtang Chute's lower apron.

The Bhundarli area is certainly worthy of more than just a single day's attention, and in winter, is often a better and quicker alternative than the Rohtang.



The Indian Army clearing the highway, which can be several metres deep at the Pass. Rohtang Chute centre.

# 15. Rohtang Chute

Start: Rohtang Pass 3978 m Elevations: 3740 – 4190 m

Vertical: 550 m Distance: 3 km Duration: 1 day

**Difficulty**: Intermediate **Exposure**: NW chute **Best conditions**: Feb - Apr

Rating: ★★★★

This stunning rock-lined chute is possibly the most delightful skiable chute in the range, and is certainly the most accessible. Due to its NW aspect, and its high granite gneiss walls, the Rohtang Chute will hold snow throughout the driest of springs and, sometimes, even into July. It is a plumb line, a stunning, steep chute with plenty of room to move, followed by a wide, carvable apron. The chute makes a great day outing from either Rohtang Pass or a campsite at the Marhi Nala.

The key to making the Rohtang Chute a fast tour is to maintain a high elevation immediately after leaving Rohtang Pass. Skating is often required to keep above the initial rock outcrops that pepper the lower slopes of Rohtang Ri's SW face. If you follow the natural tendency of the drainage and get caught in the rocks, the terrain will force you downhill and you will have to access the chute from the base. Keep high at the beginning and simply traverse above the rocks for about a mile and enter the chute at its mid-section where a snowy platform will deposit you directly inside. Boot up the middle (hopefully it won't be icy) and proceed to the top.

Due to high winds that generate up the chute, you will probably have to build a platform to get into your skis as a sheer drop develops into Munsiary to the east (there is no access). There is little chance of entering the chute from the ridgeline to the north - it is a minimum 40-foot air onto a 35° hardpack landing. Sparrows and finches nest in the crags above the chute, and the feeling is atmospheric. Although the chute ends after 500+ m of prime aesthetics, the lower apron extends for another 300m vertical of fun, wide, open skiing with hardly a rock in sight.

If camping on the banks of Marhi Nala, proceed up the banks of the Beas River, starting on the left (W) side and eventually crossing to the right. Heading northwards for 2 km, the valley widens and develops into a series of large steps. The ascent of the apron below the chute is steep and exhausting, requiring many switchbacks. Boot up from where it becomes too steep to skin



The most stunning chute in the Kullu Valley, the irresistible Rohtang Chute.

# 16. Rohtang Ri

**Start**: Rohtang Pass 3978 m **Elevations**: 3800 – 4650 m

Vertical: 700+ m Distance: 3 km Duration: 3 - 5 hours

**Difficulty:** Intermediate - Advanced **Exposure:** (1) W face (2) SW face (3) N face

Best conditions: Feb - May

Rating: ★★★

The Rohtang Ri is the archetypical skier's mountain. It comprises several superb descents, with a choice of different aspects along an extensive, well-featured ridge. The close proximity to the Pass and the extra deep snowpack of the area has made the Rohtang Ri a popular ski touring destination. Quality powder skiing can be found throughout winter, although the steep upper slopes often produce nasty avalanche conditions. Spring is a far safer option and sun-baked aspects like the SW chutes, or the vast, treeless north face, become an attainable highlight.

The Rohtang Ri almost gives the impression that it is a lone mountain with a high, corniced summit, instead of being a long, curving ridgeline that begins near Rohtang Chute and continues towards Indira Kila (4940 m) to the east. The principal skiing area is the dominant west face, which falls directly to the highway. There are several open bowls plus many

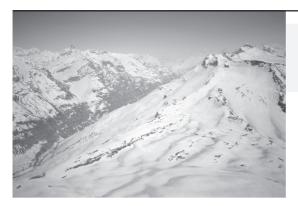


interesting ribs and delicate lines on a headwall that beg to be skied. On the southern part of the ridge, facing the Marhi Nala, are the numerous rocklined chutes of the steeper SW face. And finally, to the direct north of the highest point, is the enormous north face, a complex alpine slope that descends nearly 5000 ft into the Chandra River

(1) West Face. A fantastic preserver of snow, the popular west face is known as the prime ski touring location in late May and June, and is rarely visited during the colder winter months. This has much to do with the Rohtang Pass being a rather inhospitable place during January and February. It is exceptionally cold at 4000 m and there is a bitter wind blowing almost every day. The west face is prone to windcrust and even on a warm spring day, the upper slopes may not soften until close to midday. The face can be divided into three main areas - a lower NW bowl, a high W bowl, and higher still, the upper headwall (the crux). Although both bowls are susceptible to big rippers. the prime avalanche concern is the upper headwall. Springtime can see a safe bonding of the snowpack, but during winter considerable analysis is required before any ascent.

Beginning from a campsite at the Pass, tour to the top of the NW bowl. This should take about an hour with basic route finding. As you are climbing, observe the upper headwall and the steep ramps that lead to the summit ridge. A combination of skinning and booting up the headwall is required to access the final ramps, which are more achievable on the left (N) side of the cornice. Keep close to

Skiing Rohtang Ri's west face.



the bluffs on the left and avoid the centre of the slope, which is obviously the most dangerous. In hard snow conditions, crampons may be required, but otherwise it is steep front pointing up the final NW ramp to the summit ridge. A spectacular 360° view rewards a summit push, as well as access to the most appealing lines. Choose an entry into the headwall and either descend the NW bowl for 600 m of great skiing or take the skier's left and hit the W bowl for a 700+ m run

(2) Southwest Face. The quality of skiing on this more exposed aspect depends largely on snow levels. During a low snow year, the chutes may be too rocky to ski, or alternatively, may be too dangerous under deep snow conditions. If there is enough snow in spring to connect top to bottom, then these tight gullies on this sunny face are a worthy treat. Access is via the summit ridge, which can be ascended on both sides of the headwall or via the extreme southern side of the SW face. The best lines are on skier's right (N); being the straightest and most consistent. The main couloir



The deceptively simple north face of Rohtang Ri. Could this 4500 ft descent to Gramphu be the Kullu's ultimate prize?

narrows to 3 m in the middle section, but widens at its base and spills out to mellow cruising slopes, all the way to Marhi Nala (3180 m). Wait until the chutes have adequately softened and this becomes a lovely way to spend the day.

(3) North Face. Although this outstanding tour is not technically in the Kullu Valley (instead Lahaul's Chandra Vallev), it is accessed via the Rohtang, and is just too incredible to be missed out. Could this rarely skied face be the single greatest, springtime ski run? Well that must depend on your criteria, but it would definitely rate amongst the top few. There are many longer, wilder and even more ascetically striking runs in the valley, but Rohtang Ri's north face is immaculately consistent and its protected aspect ensures excellent snow conditions

During spring, when other slopes are melting under the hot Indian sky, the north face will be dishing up perfect corn well into July, with over 1300 m of joyous vertical. The tour is an all-day affair, requiring an early start (8 am if you wish to return to the Pass for dinner). If your intention is to explore the Chandra Valley and some of the sites of Lahaul, you will still have to leave early to catch a westbound bus from Khoksar. In the prime months of

Catching some rays in between runs on Rohtang Ri.

March to May, an early start will mean hard, fast skinning with zero snow penetration. It can be different in the winter, when powder can blanket Rohtang Ri, but fresh snow on this face immediately translates to serious avalanche danger, and therefore digging a pit is an essential requirement.

Climb Rohtang Ri, heading for the northern, corniced entry. The final 30 minutes of the ascent involves front pointing up the steep ramps that gain the summit ridge. It is not necessary to summit Rohtang Ri, in fact, it is wiser to stop on the steep slopes before the cornice if conditions appear dangerous. The crux is this final section, and failing to summit will mean missing the superb panoramic view. Only proceed further if you have clear weather. This is the golden rule, as there are 200m high cliff bands on the north face and good visibility is a priority. Wherever you start your descent, either from the summit, or high on the NW ridge, you must be able to determine the location of the perilous cliffs. There are several completely sustained pitches down the northern bowl - the only way to discover them is through luck or thorough investigation.

Skiing the top half of the north face can be unnerving, or it can be incredibly euphoric, depending on the line, but all that subsides for the lower half, which is just plain awesome. There are still a few lingering cliff bands for concern, all close to the middle of the bowl, but either side is wide, free and open, the skier's left being the wiser choice. The angle of the face doesn't relent, close

to 30° from start to finish, with a clear view of the Chandra River Before the slope drops away steeply into the river, break hard left (west) to aim for the buildings of Gramphu, and the Lahaul road. Gramphy Village (3200 m) is virtually deserted in winter, due to the frigid temperatures and isolation. People from Lahaul begin to start using Gramphu more in spring, when they are crossing the Pass on foot for supplies. The Indian Army can be found clearing the snow from the road from March onwards although it never opens for traffic before May, normally June. Strange as it seems, you could probably hitch a ride back up to the Rohtang from Gramphu, but only in the months of June or July. Car shuffles in the Himalavas!

For the rest of us, it is a long slog back on skins. Expect to take between 3 - 5 hours. Use the telephone line, the road outline or your common judgment to find the quickest path.

## 17. Munsiary

Start: Marhi Nala 3180 m Elevations: 3180 – 4600 m

Vertical: 1400 m Distance: 7 km Duration: 2+ days

Difficulty: Novice - Intermediate

**Exposure**: N-W-S faces **Best conditions**: Jan - Apr

Rating: ★★★★

To the east of the Rohtang lies a broad, alpine basin, rimmed on three sides by deep, snowy ridges and several prominent bluffs and spires. There are enough benches, ramps, chutes and

A range of entry points exist into Munsiary, but all involve an increase in the heart rate.



The lovely Munsiary region. There is no better place to set camp for a week.

bowls in Munsiary to cater for all levels of ability. It is an excellent snow catchment area and almost always skiable into June. Munsiary is one of the best locations in the Kullu Valley to pitch a tent for a few days and rack up vertical.

There are three different ways to access the two bowls that comprise the Munsiary region. The first and highest route involves those camping at the Rohtang Pass and requires climbing Rohtang Ri to the summit ridge. This is the most difficult of access routes and is rarely attempted. Once you have summited the highest northern point of Rohtang Ri (4650 m), locate the steep backside ramp that angles into Munsiary's upper bench. The ramp provides a skiable line with a southeastern aspect. Traverse along the bench for 2 km. past some minor peaks as it initially gains and then falls in elevation. Cross a small valley to the base of a broad, alpine peak which is adjacent to numerous quality ski runs. Although this route into Munsiary is the shortest of the three, the ascent of Rohtang Ri can be challenging in hard snow conditions and only worthwhile if the road to the Pass is open.

The second and third access routes into Munsiary both begin from inside the Rani Valley, below the south face of Bhundarli.

Fither one of these entries is the preferred route of ascent. From a campsite at Marhi Nala, follow the Beas River upstream for 1 km until it intersects with the Rani Nala, at which point turn right (E) and continue eastwards up the Rani Valley towards the resplendent alpine slopes. Within the first 500 m of the valley, a series of small crags blocks some of the valley, with an easy path around to the left (N). Traverse around these obstacles and regain the river as it winds beneath Bhundarli's lower slopes. The river soon turns northwards and marks the beginning of a long canyon, separating the Munsiary plateau with the eastern slopes of the Rohtang peaks. Several prominent chutes are presented on the right (E) of the river, which provide simple boot access to Munsiary's most southern bowl.

The third and final access point is further up the canyon with a similar ascent up a deep, snowy gully. The climbs aren't difficult, although they are all prone to sliding. Avoid slushy snow conditions in the afternoon. The furthest, most northern gullies access a different bowl than the chutes lower down. A minor ridgeline divides them. Either bowl makes a wonderful camping location



No matter from which angle you look at it,
Dashaur Peak is an adrenaline junkies delight.

with numerous choices for skiing. The chutes facing back into the canyon are just sublime, while there are also safe, open powder bowls and several steep pitches off several ridgelines in the area. The approach from Marhi will challenge the novice ski tourer, but once inside Munsiary, you will be delighted you made the effort.

### 18. Dashaur Peak

Start: Rohtang Pass 3978 m Elevations: 3978 – 4695 m

Vertical: 700+ m Distance: 3 km Duration: 4 - 6 hours

Difficulty: Intermediate - Advanced Exposure: (1) E face (2) N face (3) SW face (4) NW face

Best conditions: Feb - Apr

Rating : ★★★★

The monarch of the Rohtang Valley, this striking peak is a must-ski for any expert skier or boarder. As the most

recognizable point of reference in the area, Dashaur Peak beckons every ski tourer within 30 km to make turns down its numerous faces. It is an exciting mountain, with four multifarious aspects, most of which are steep and avalanche prone. Sometimes referred to as Pyramid Peak, Dashaur Peak commands your attention when you are in the Rohtang and is so close to the Pass that most descents can be completed within a few hours.

(1) East Face - With a campsite at the Pass, the chutes of the east face are the gem of the Rohtang area. In mid-winter, when the snow cover is at its deepest, the chutes aren't so clearly defined. By spring, however, there can be six or more to choose from. Memorize your line beforehand, as many of the chutes begin or end in cliffs. The chutes to skier's right (S) are generally the most continuous and sublime. To begin the ascent, cross the highway below the Pass, heading south.

Place a high traverse with the intention of reaching the SE ridge. This ridgeline is the safest and easiest line of ascent and is normally barren of snow the entire year. It can take an hour of skinning to gain the SE ridge. Once the ridge is reached, attach skis to your pack, throw on your hiking boots and proceed upwards over a mixture of dirt, tussock and a profusion of loose shale. The line of ascent is fairly obvious, always keeping the east face within reach. Slopes composed entirely of broken shale characterize the last third of the ridge and rockfall is an imminent danger. There is one significant cliff to negotiate - an unnerving 10-foot high obstruction that offers several weaknesses. Above the cliff band lies more shale but the gradient eases slightly and the summit is only 20 - 30 minutes away. The summit itself comprises several rocky outcrops, offering a superb 360° panorama. The peaks of Lahaul seem just a stone's throw away, proving an ideal location for lunch. Due to its sunny exposure, the east face can hold wild snow conditions such as suncups and rotten snow. Avoid skiing mid to late afternoon - midday is usually fine, although it depends more on the seasons and snow cover

To access the east face, you may have to backtrack 50 m and downclimb a short distance to gain the slope. The first headwall is steep, 45° fall-line skiing, with considerable sloughing. Skier's right contains the better lines. Entry into the chutes is via a short, delicate, 50° section, but once inside the chutes, the gradient lessens to 30° with the safety of a mellow apron below. Short, perfect S's, or fast, high-speed arcs that spray huge fantails of snow - whatever your fancy, the chutes of the east face can accommodate it all.



(2) North Face – The striking north face of Dashaur Peak (NNE proper) could challenge the north face of Rohtang Ri as the single greatest ski run in the Kullu Valley, as both have similar attributes. On Dashaur however, the tendency is to quit skiing when the gradient first flattens and therefore, the Rohtang Ri's north face is a longer descent.

To reach the summit, follow the directions for the SE ridge, as previously described. Most ski tourers will take between 2 and 3 hours to reach the summit from Rohtang Pass. Once the summit is gained, you must follow the small crags heading northwards for 100 metres, and arcing to the west. The best skiing commences at the end of the summit ridge. Before that. there are large cliff bands to contend with. The slope itself is so incredibly lovely that you will be giggling with delight. The overall shape of the run is slightly convex. beginning at a steep 45° through the top, rocky section, then remaining a consistent 40° for a good 600 m of vertical. The skier's left of the slope is the choice line. having the least amount of cliffs. There are a few rocks scattered throughout the slope, but most are usually buried until May. The wilder peaks of the Great Himalaya such as the 6050 m Gepang Goh is your backdrop, while miles below is the milky Chandra River.

Eventually, the Gramphu to Rohtang road will come into view on your right, and the slope plateaus. You have a choice to either end your run there and skin

Spring skiing in May on the Rohtang Pass.



back to the Pass, or to break further left and continue the descent to Gramphu. If you do decide to keep skiing, you will be rewarded with a further 500 m vertical of open, undulating terrain. The entire vertical descent to Gramphu is a whopping 1500 m, with only one major bench. The skin back to the Rohtang can take 4 hours.

One of the tastiest runs imaginable, the north face of Dashaur Peak, taken from Rohtang Ri.

(3) SW Face – This is the face you see from Kothi, Patalsu and the majority of other tours in the Kullu. Its striking uniformity, a near faultless slope whose only blemish is a horizontal rock band cutting across the face like a scar, 200 m

short of the summit, is its most salient quality. It is the most popular aspect to ski on Dashaur Peak, with most tourers beginning from Marhi. rather than the Rohtang. The SW face should be treated with respect however, as it slides frequently, particularly in mid-winter, Although you can access the slope from the easier west ridge, the common approach, and by far the quickest, is to climb the SE ridge. Memorize your line on the ascent, as this face has a habit of making every line appear fantastic from the top. There is another smaller rock outcrop at the top with usually only one path through. Below this the face drops away to a constant 40°, with either a few appetizing gullies to choose from, or a wide, open face. Everything leads to a central gully, often characterized by a broad avalanche path. Follow the path down, there is no other option: it will develop high rock walls as it progresses. If you are fortunate to ski this before mid April, you can follow the course of the central gully to where it intersects with the Beas River. This can provide a descent of over 1000 m. Marhi is a further 400 m vertical and can be reached

by keeping a high line to the skier's right and intersecting with the highway. Rohtang Pass is close to 2 hours of skinning above you.

Around May, dozers will have begun clearing the highway through the central gully. Three metre high snowbanks cut the central gully at the base of Dashaur Peak. This, combined with severe snow melting, can produce cliffs leading onto the road. Precise step cutting, rappelling or traversing high until you can find a weakness appears to be the only way onto the road.

(4) NW Face - Not so much a destination, and of all the aspects on this wonderful mountain, this is by far the least thrilling and visited. While being slightly unnecessary, it does however offer 300 - 400 m of safe vertical, with great snow conditions, and makes an excellent slope for yo-yoing. The NW face drains into a deep valley that leads northwards into the Chandra River, but beware of gigantic cliffs that make a fully skiable descent unlikely. This slope is only worthwhile if you have a campsite on the Pir Pinjal crest, west of Dashaur Peak and are looking for a variety of tours.

## 19. Shela Sar

Start: Rohtang Pass 3978 m Elevations: 3978 – 4210 m

Vertical: 600+ m
Distance: 6 km
Duration: 1 day

Difficulty: Intermediate

Exposure: SE

Best conditions: Mar - Apr

Rating: ★★★

C.Beach deciding to ski the steep east face of Dashaur Peak on a full stomach

This lake is a popular pilgrimage site in August, when many Hindus come to bathe in its healing waters. Fortunately for ski tourers, the lake is buried under snow for 4 - 5 months of the year and there isn't a single indication that a lake even exists. Shela Sar. Dashaur Lake, or Sarkund as it is often called, makes an interesting day trip from the Rohtang Pass or from Marhi, but its most alluring trait is its prime location for a base camp. Using the lake as a location for an extended stay, allows for exploration of the vast amount of ski terrain in the area which includes long. steep chutes, short powder stashes, and few summit objectives.

There is no simple route into the Shela Sar area from the Rohtang Pass, at least not when there is snow on the ground. In summer, there is probably a track running along the ridge from Dashaur Peak, but in winter and spring, this route is subject to cornice collapse and avalanches off the eastern side of Shagara Peak. The safest and quickest approach begins with a traverse of Dashaur Peak's lower slopes. Place a high traverse from the Pass towards Dashaur's

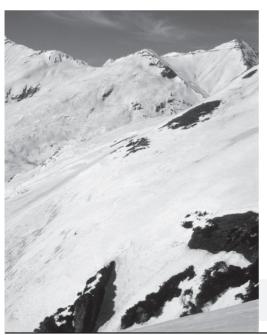
barren. SE ridge. Climb the ridge slightly to allow an easy ski traverse across to the opposite saddle. To avoid a major avalanche threat remove skins and ski across the Southwest face. Reattach skins, climb up to saddle and continue westwards along the obvious crest. After 500 m the crest becomes much steeper and impossible to skin up. Remove skins and place another high traverse across the southern face of the major ridgeline. while aiming for a large, deep gully 1km away. Once inside the gully, boot up the centre and to the left, to gain the snowy ridge above. From the ridge, Shela Sar is an easy 500 m away. Ski down to reach the open slopes rising up to the lake area. Shela Sar is enclosed by a large amphitheatre of cliff bands and pearly-white slopes. Either retrace your steps back to the Rohtang Pass or climb back to the closest ridge and drop down to the southeast for good skiing all the way to Marhi (3320 m).

Beware of cliffs - Dashaur Peak's west face. Shela Sar is the upper bowl to the left of the ridge.



The Shela Sar area makes a fantastic location for an extended tour. Establish a campsite away from the cliffs and steeper slopes and preferably not on top of the lake itself. The northern and eastern slopes of the amphitheatre provide superb, shorter descents that can easily occupy an entire day. The Pir Pinial crest to the north presents an opportunity to climb into the Seri Valley to the west for immediate access of Shagara Peak's classic south face. There are other elegant lines to the north and especially to the south, where there is a 900+ m descent into the precipitous drainage of the Sheila Goru Nala. All descents to the direct south require booting out. Two hundred metres to the south of Shela Sar, on the corner of the amphitheatre, are some delectable, steep chutes with a wide lower apron, while further back towards Marhi Choti, on the southern face of the Pir Pinial crest, is a collection of exposed, open faces. One long, stunning chute leads below and to the west of Marhi

While the thought of miles of steep, open powder fields may be almost irresistible to the advanced ski tourer, the Shela Sar region is a haven for cataclysmic size avalanches. Do not



venture out onto this terrain during a snowstorm, or even the day after, and in spring, take note if the slush hasn't frozen overnight.

## 20. Marhi Choti

**Start**: Marhi 3320 m **Elevations**: 3320 – 4285 m

Vertical: 960 m Distance: 4 km Duration: 1 day

Difficulty: Intermediate Exposure: S face

Best conditions: Jan - Mar

Rating: ★★★

The south face of Marhi Choti is highly visible and recognizable as you ascend the Rohtang Valley. It receives a tremendous amount of sun and is therefore one of the earliest peaks to lose its cover at that elevation. Despite the thinning snow, this peak offers a great tour with a choice of lines from the summit. The plumb line follows a gentler and safer route to the west of centre, with consistent skiing all the way down to Marhi.

The ascent of Marhi Choti can be commenced from either Marhi or a campsite at the Rohtang Pass. From the Pass, the easiest ascent route follows the traverse across the SW face (as mentioned in the Shela Sar tour) to the saddle between Marhi Choti and Dashaur Peak. The summit point is a 15-minute walk along an exposed ridge, with the complete ascent taking no longer than 3 hours.

Marhi Choti is the smaller peak in the centre. The south face is a magnificent ski.



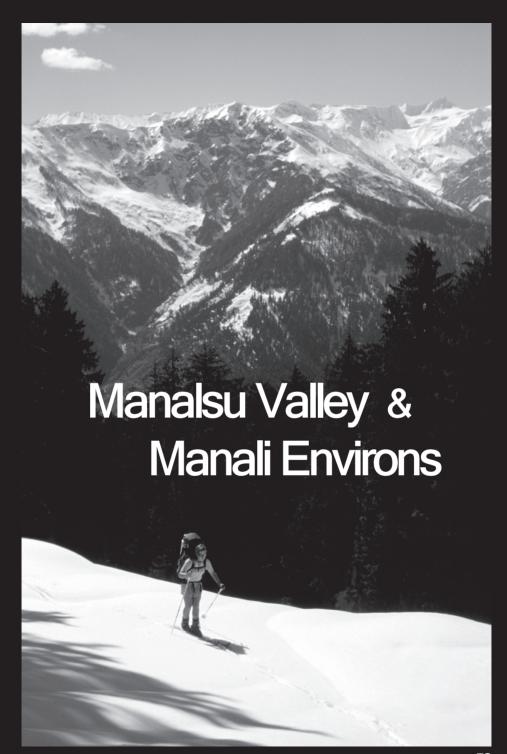
Gulaba Peak area, and the heinous drainage to the south, which prevents an easy exit from the excellent slopes above.

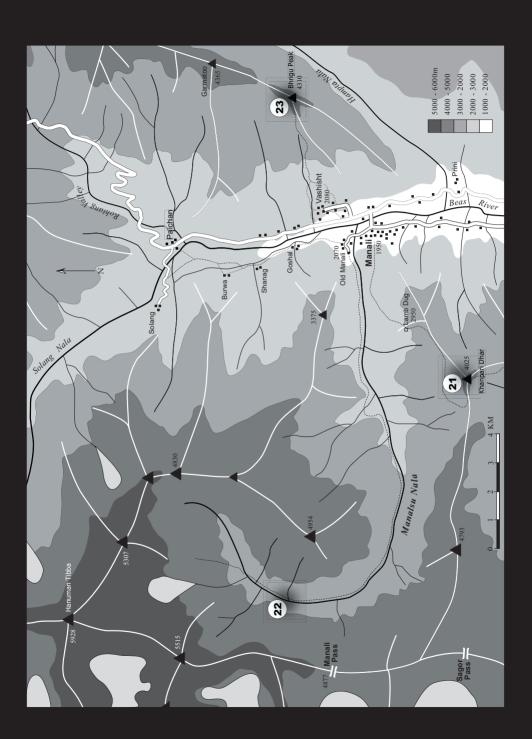
When ascending from Marhi, it is important to plan for optimum snow conditions, and to avoid the slushy afternoon snow. In firm, positive edge-holding snow of an early spring morning, you can skin to within 100 m of the summit ridge, with only a steep boot-pack required to gain the final slopes. The ascent is a struggle in icy conditions, or likewise, if the snow is rotten and edge setting is difficult.

During early and mid winter, before the highway has been cleared, a combination of skinning and booting will access the main, southern line, where an unbroken skin track can be started. The initial slopes above Marhi are steep and time consuming. so if this section of the highway has been cleared, it will be quicker to follow the road for a short distance. From the last corner of the road (before the highway cuts beneath Marhi Choti's SE face), climb the embankment and begin skinning slightly to the left of the main slope. A gradual switchbacking route can be placed in between natural obstacles towards the upper slopes. Once the skinning becomes

too steep and challenging, boot up the remaining slope to gain the summit ridge. The ridge narrows to the north and care must be taken not to trigger a collapse of the steep ESE face. The summit ridge is grasped at 4250 m, and the highpoint sits further north at 4285 m.

The two premier ski lines originate from the highest point. The shorter, more thrilling line of the uniform ESE face leads into a gully between Dashaur Peak and Marhi Choti, crosses the highway (which will hopefully be buried), and follows a dogleg apron across the flats, and then continues beside the Beas River. For a tamer, but longer and more varied descent. littered with numerous terrain features, drop into the broad south face. The skier's right of centre provides the most uninterrupted line, and if you can pass closely beside the corners of the highway, you can gain the full 960 m vertical to Marhi. Steeper shots exist to skier's left or straight off the ridge, but are unfortunately foreshortened by a series of switchbacks created by the highway. In January to early March, the Indian Army won't have vet reached Marhi and a full. unbroken descent can be achieved





# MANALSU VALLEY & MANALI ENVIRONS

The town of Manali is the central base of the Kullu Valley. Every visitor usually arrives and departs through Manali, and it is the main destination for supplies and entertainment. Although most ski tourers prefer staving in the quieter surrounding villagers of Old Manali. Dhungri or Vashisht. Manali still provides great accommodation, with several enjoyable hotels scattered behind its congested main street (The Mall). It is not surprising then that some skiers base themselves there for their entire trip, particularly with cheap winter rates. It certainly has the widest selection of restaurants accommodation shops communication facilities and other services, but not much in the way of convenient skiable mountains. For that we must travel to the neighbouring villages to the north and south, out of the range of walking distance. There are, however, two fine tours, which can be commenced exclusively from Manali, and one excellent tour from Vashisht. These tours are not as obvious as the dramatic peaks around Solang, or the rugged, snowy scenery above Jagatsukh, but with some meaningful endeavour and exertion you can find superb descents in a wild and rarely visited setting.

The Manalsu Nala separates the original settlement of Old Manali, to the north, from the bustling, newer settlement of Manali. The Manalsu Nala has formed a deep valley that travels westwards before turning to the north from where its headwaters begin, from the Manalsu Glacier, beneath Hanuman Tibba. Towering ridgelines border the valley on both sides, for almost its entire length and apart from some milder gradients located on the upper glaciers, the slopes above the valley are too precipitous to ski. Khanpari Dhar overlooks Manali and the Kullu Valley from a highpoint along the southern Manalsu crest - its north face

providing a rare but welcome descent amongst such formidable terrain.

Across the Beas River, on the eastern bank and a 3 km walk from Manali, sits the lovely village of Vashisht. Known for its hot springs and beautiful views, Vashisht also provides a moderate approach to the vast alpine ridges of the Bhrigu Range. Imagine spending a day chewing up powder turns in this magical, Himalayan setting — while beneath you, just a few hours walk away, are hot pools and an Indian village that are centuries old.

### **ACCESS**

Manali is the main hub for all travel in the northern Kullu Valley. The central bus station (yard) is a hive of activity from dawn till dusk. Most of the Interstate buses commence and terminate along The Mall, rather than the bus station, but all local buses can be located inside. Buses do not travel to Vashisht, as the road is too steep and only single-lane. Vashisht is a pleasant half-hour walk from Manali, or with gear, it is easier to hire an autorickshaw

#### **TOWNS**

#### Manali

Manali is a diverse and sprawling town and seems much larger than its estimated population of 5000. Situated at the northern end of the Kullu Valley at an elevation of approximately 2000 m, Manali's congenial atmosphere and beautiful location has helped create one of northern India's most sought after holiday destinations. Apple

orchards occupy the northern fields, with much of the town surrounded by large forest reserves of Himalayan cedar. Unfortunately, the main street, 'The Mall', detracts from Manali's charm - it is noisy, congested and full of touts. Still, it doesn't take much to escape the agitation - one can find peace almost immediately after stepping off the main road.

Manali experiences its high season during late spring and summer, with a brief period of popularity around Christmas and New Years. Winter temperatures are often cold, with nights regularly below freezing. It can rain or snow at almost any time, and there can be long periods without ever seeing the sun. There are few foreign tourists in town during the colder months, and many stores and restaurants are closed till spring. When the days grow warmer and the snow disappears from the nearby ridges, Manali's population explodes as travellers and nationals eager to escape the torturing heat of the plains, find relief in this mountain environment. Manali is currently one of the most sought after locations for honeymooning couples in

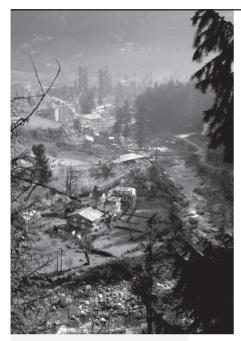
all of India. This enormous influx of tourists has given rise to recent over-development, and what was once a peaceful, alpine village is now a repository for mediocre hotels and hordes of sightseers. Very few of these people are here to ski however, and all it takes is a brief walk into the mountains to obtain a sense of remoteness.

Much of Manali's rise in popularity is attributed to the turmoil in Kashmir. Tourists have preferred the safety of the Kullu Valley and accordingly, there is a generous supply of accommodation. Near The Mall, two of the cheapest and friendliest lodgings can be found at the Sukhiran Guest House, opposite the bus station, and the Hotel Snow Drop, near the Tibetan Monastery.

Manali is more than just an accommodation base. There are many attractions to be found in the town itself, or within a short walk. Tourists are attracted to the many shopping possibilities, which include the Tibetan Markets (surrounding the Hotel Ibex).

'The Mall' - Manali's main street. From dawn till dusk it is an endless procession of taxis, auto-rickshaws, buses and trucks.





Old Manali and the Manalsu Nala as seen from the Log Huts.

numerous shawl retailers, jewelers, and other Indian arts and crafts. Manali also contains a large variety of eating establishments, ranging from cheap vegetarian dhabas and traditional sweet shops, to excellent restaurant dining. When the sun is out, and the skies are clear, Manali offers a wealth of excellent, short hikes. Whether it is a quick climb

up to the Hadimba Temple at Dhungri, or a gentler stroll along the banks of the Manalsu Nala, there is enough to see and do in Manali to combat any sense of boredom.

Vashisht and the Beas River. Manali is hidden behind the pine forest (centre left). Khanpari Dhar is the highest peak.

### Old Manali

The original site of Manali was a site around a ruined fortress on the northern bank of the Manalsu Nala called Manaligarh or more recently, Old Manali. There is a small road that forks to the left of Nehru Park at the top of the Mall, and climbs for 2 km to Old Manali. Turning left and climbing uphill after the bridge will find the cheapest accommodation. This is also the route to the Manu Temple, which is at the far northwest end. The route up the Manalsu Valley originates from here, while a lovely track to the villages of Goshal and Shanag weaves through the apple orchards on the west bank of the Beas River.

## Dhungri

Dhungri is a quiet, small settlement to the south of the Hadimba Temple, 2 km west of Manali. A rickshaw can be hired to climb the windy, uphill road, or it is an enjoyable walk through a cedar forest, accessed through the back streets of Manali. Several residences have been converted into guesthouses, but most of these close during winter when there is little demand for accommodation. Despite the climb required from Manali, Dhungri has wonderful views of the valley and particularly the peaks above Prini and Jagatsukh. The route to Lama Dug, high above the Manalsu Nala, begins from here.



#### Vashisht

Vashisht is an appealing village located 3 km from Manali, at the base of the Bhrigu massif and on the eastern side of the Beas River Vashisht's two most celebrated attributes are, without doubt. its hot springs and the view. The hot springs are divided into a large Turkishbath style complex, closer to Manali (currently closed) and the free public pools right in the centre of the village. Not everyone uses the hot pools, but you cannot avoid the stunning scenery. particularly from the rooftop cafes. There is a wide range of questhouses and hotels in Vashisht and they are all typically well priced. It makes a peaceful and relaxing comparison to Manali, as well as providing a fascinating glimpse into a rural, mountain culture. Due to its higher elevation (2050 m) and exposed position on a hillside, Vashisht is several degrees cooler than Manali, especially at night. Several enjoyable walking tracks begin from the village, including the route to Bhrigu Peak.

### **BRIEF HISTORY**

Before the British administration succeeded from Sikhs in 1846, Manali was only a tiny hamlet, where muleteers could obtain fodder for their animals before crossing the Rohtang Pass. The town developed gradually once the British settled the valley and began cultivating much of the land into a farming and sporting community. The original town was built below the remains of the Mandankot Fort, which was erected for a Kullu chief over 500 years ago. The name 'Manali' was adapted from Manu-Alaya, or home of Manu. Hindu legend has it that Manu stepped to earth after a great flood on the present day site of Old Manali.

## 21. Khanpari Dhar

Start: Manali 1900 m

**Elevations**: 1900m - 4025 m

Vertical: 700 m Distance: 10 km Duration: 2+ days

Difficulty: Intermediate - Advanced

Exposure: N/NW face
Best conditions: Jan - Mar

Rating : ★★★

The stunning Khanpari Dhar is the closest peak to Manali and receives significant attention from the rooftop cafes of Vashisht. Despite its salient proximity and exceptional views, Khanpari Dhar sees very few visitors. Most skiers are unaware of the steep, glorious N/NW face, which is the reason why you'd endure such an arduous ascent. The vertical may be small for such a long approach, and the wealth of precipitous slopes in the area is enough to unsettle the most confident ski tourer. The descent is incredible, however. and you'll walk away feeling like you've cheated death. This is a prized tour and demands more interest than is currently shown.

The broad, level band of snow that crosses the peak, 3/4 of the way up the mountain is, in fact, the line of ascent. This band is clearly viewed from Vashisht - it is just a matter of getting there. There is also the possibility of completing a full circuit of the Khanpari Dhar, beginning from Sangchar above Kalath, then ascending the south ridge to the summit and returning via the northern route. Most ski tourers will still prefer the quicker ascent from Manali and Lama Dug, where any bivouac gear can be retrieved on the return.

The well-marked track to Lama Dug begins from the main Dhungri Road, 500 m past the Hadimba Temple, at the end of the paved road. The road splits at this intersection, the left road heading south towards the *Freedom* 



Paying Guest House and the right track heading to Lama Dug. The route traverses high above Dhungri amongst apple orchards on a rock pathway that gradually leads into the Manalsu Valley. This maintains a steady climb for 2 km. The track narrows as it gains height and begins switchbacking up the steeper terrain far above the river.

At roughly 2650 m, you will encounter the first open fields of lower Lama Dug. The path ahead appears to lead in the direction of a large cliff wall, but if you turn left (S) into a small drainage, you can continue climbing towards the ridgeline above and find several other, open meadows. This area is known as Lama Dug, a pasture used by Manali based shepherds. The highest fields are around 2900 m and make an excellent campsite on flat ground.

Stable conditions are a prerequisite for the next day of touring. The route passes under several high avalanche and rockfall zones, so discretion is needed on days of risky snowpack or during hot weather.

From Lama Dug, continue on a southerly climb towards the upper northeast ridge of Khanpari Dhar. Wind your way through

Khanpari Dhar's north face. The line of ascent and retreat is the obvious scar cutting across the centre.

the open glades of the ridge until you reach the base of a broad, triangular slope at 3400 m. The next section involves a 2 km traverse of the mountain, from its NE ridge to the long west ridge. For most of the winter/spring period, this path is under snow and if a strong wind is blowing it can turn a moderately difficult section into a blinding, unsettling hellfest. Likewise on a pre-dawn start, if you encounter icy conditions there will be no point continuing - turn around and head back to camp.

The first part of the traverse is fast skinning under the steep northern face. Move quickly to avoid being splattered from above. The path quickly leads into a dark gully in the centre, which is possibly the crux of the climb. With soft conditions it is just a matter of putting a solid skin track across to the other side where the traverse mellows. Follow the enjoyable bench as it continues contouring around towards the west ridge.

Above the track is a delightful 35 - 40° face. Snowboarders or skiers wishing to front point, will probably find kicking steps up this face to be far quicker than the more common