



*Spiti Valley*  
2021







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## Introduction

This picture book is a record of a ten-day journey into the Himalayas by four of us – Kapil, Maruti, Saurabh & me.

Kapil, Maruti and me are friends from engineering college and have been undertaking trips to various places along with two other friends from college, Dilip and Ramani. We have been doing these trips for several years -- visiting various places of natural beauty such as the Sikkim mountains, Dharamshala, Nilgiris, and Coorg. We use these trips to reconnect, exchange notes and catch up on our life journeys, while experiencing the best of nature that our beloved country has to offer.

This year due to various reasons only the three of us accompanied by our friend Saurabh Chatterjee, could make the trip in October. Saurabh is an accomplished photographer, adventure traveller and photography coach.

We started our journey from Chandigarh to the upper reaches of Spiti Valley, which involved driving from Chandigarh to Chail via Shimla and then Thanedar. From there we followed the river Sutlej to Khab Sangam - the point of confluence with Spiti River. Then we followed the Spiti River till Kaza, stopping on the way at various places – from amazing landscapes to ancient monasteries. The days were warm with the sharp sun and the night's cold.

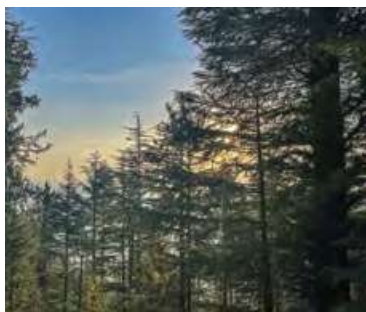
Saurabh's superb planning and organization made our trip memorable. His experience with travelling, expeditions through the mountains for many years and contacts along the route made our trip effortless and comfortable. Our chauffeur Pankaj, who is mature way beyond his age of 22 years, helped make the trip stress free and safe.

We all came back highly inspired and moved by the Himalayas; the spectacular landscapes; the gentle, kind people of the hills & their resilience.

This book is a pictorial depiction of our journey to Spiti. We consider ourselves extremely lucky to have experienced the mighty Himalayas and wanted to share our views with friends and family through this travelogue. We hope more people will be inspired to take up travel and experience these magnificent places.

The photographs are mostly from Prasad and Saurabh.

# OUR ITINERARY



## Day 1

2-October

Arrive in Chandigarh,  
drive to Kufri - 4hrs  
25mins 141kms



## Day 2

3-October

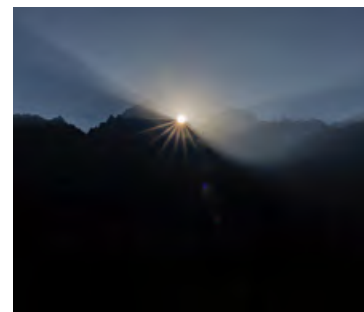
Chail to Thanedar  
2 hours 61kms



## Day 3

4-October

Thanedar to Kalpa  
4 hours 152km



## Day 4

5-October

Kalpa to Nako  
3 hours 109kms



## Day 5

6-October

Nako, Tabo - Dhankar -  
Kaza  
4 hours 140kms



#### Day 6

7-October

Kaza (Key) Hikkim, Komic,  
Hikkim, Langza  
63kms 2 hours



#### Day 7

8-October

Kaza Gue Tabo  
60kms 3 hours



#### Day 8

9-October

Tabo to Rampur  
247kms 6.5 hours



#### Day 9

10-October

Rampur to Kufri  
3 hours 113kms



#### Day 10

11-October

Kufri to Chandigarh  
Airport  
4 hours 136kms

# Day 1

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3<sup>rd</sup> October 21, Sunday

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You can drive to Spiti in Himachal Pradesh from Chandigarh via Manali or Shimla. While the new Atal Tunnel under the Rohtang Pass is surely an experience to drive through, we chose to travel via Shimla. Having landed in Chandigarh on a bright afternoon, we ate a late lunch and headed into the hills. The drive of roughly 120km took us about four hours, passing through Panchkula, Solan and Chail to reach Shimla.

It was distressing to see the scale of construction in the hills. Many ugly multi storeyed buildings have come up or are in various stages of construction. The situation got worse as we neared Shimla. Shimla has become much larger and a whole lot uglier. We crossed Shimla and Chail to reach our hotel in Kufri.

*Sunrise during our  
morning walk at Kufri.*





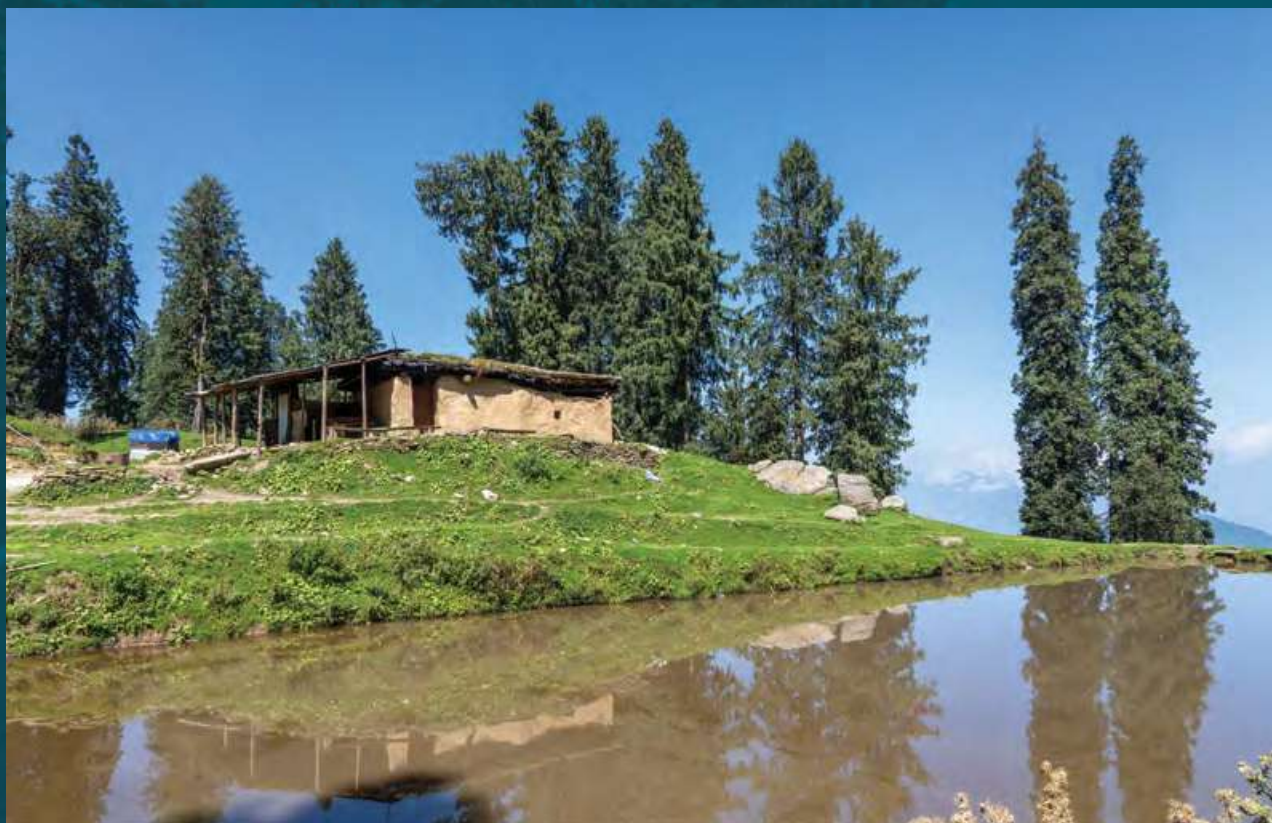
# Day 2

4<sup>th</sup> October 21, Monday

We started the day with an invigorating walk in the hills. We walked for some time on the road and then trekked down the hill on a steep path. The steep climb, while returning, took the wind out of me but it was a very pleasant walk with great views of the mighty mountains.

We started after breakfast towards the village of Thanedar. About 15 km before Thanedar, we took a detour to a temple on Hatu peak. We walked a bit uphill. Lovely meadows, great rock formations and a quaint temple made the detour lovely. The road to the temple was very narrow with steep slopes. It was a scary drive but our skilful driver, Pankaj navigated with great skill and precision. We then drove to our destination Thanedar. After a late lunch we walked into the village and beyond to witness some lovely views of the apple orchards, valleys and the river Sutlej. The village was quaint with friendly people, cute children and buzzing with the post apple harvest activities. The school in the village was nicely designed and very well maintained.

*A small water body on the way to Hatu peak*





*The vistas from Hatu peak*





*The Hatu maa temple at Hatu peak built in typical Himachali style with wood and slate roof*



*The views from Hatu peak.  
There were some unusual rock  
formations*







*A graffiti by volunteers / collaborators of Himalayan Grove Collective, an organization which strives to make areas around Kotgarh vibrant*

*A tree formation at Thanedar*



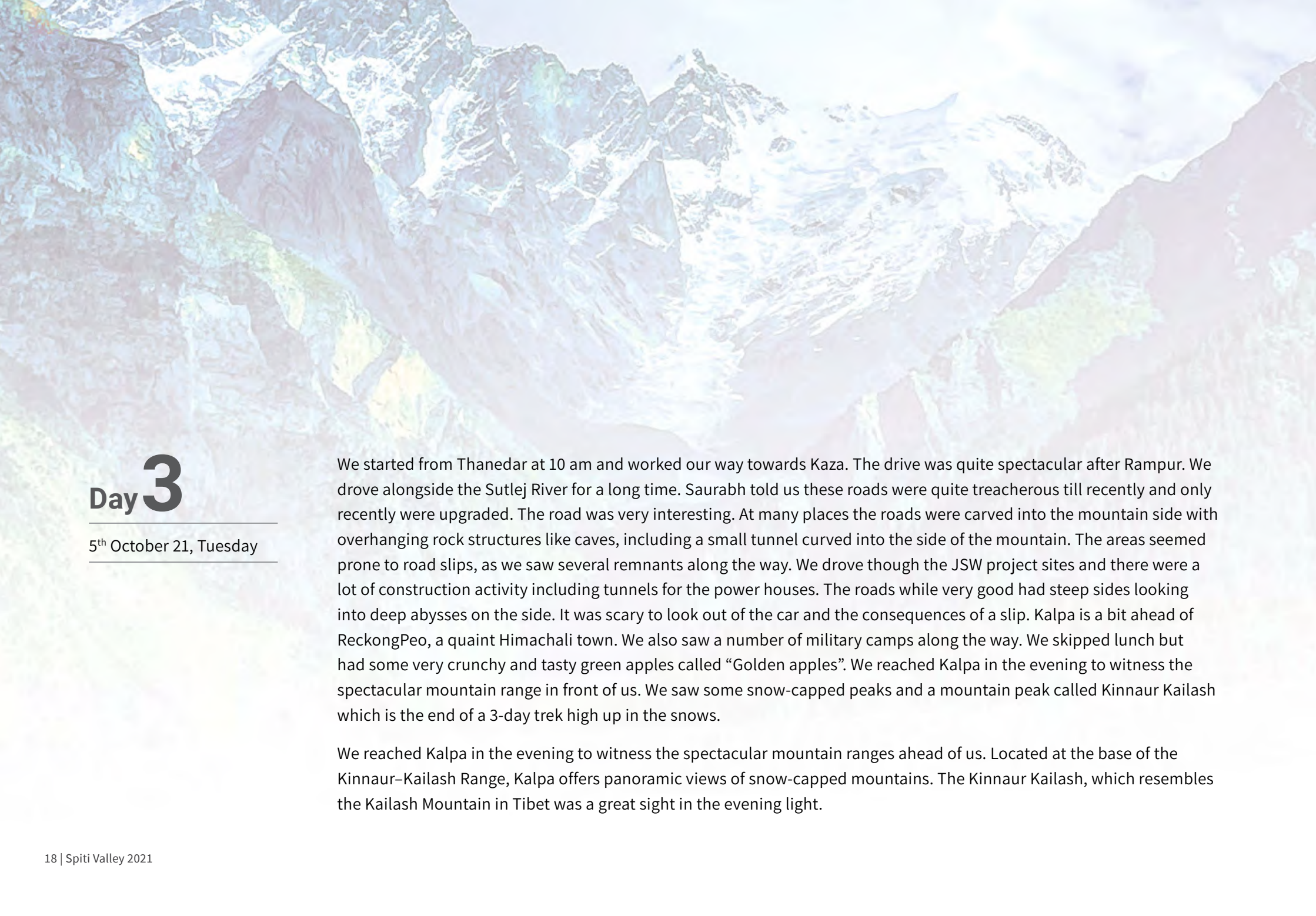
*A child from Thanedar*





*An evening at Thanedar. The hills were lit up by the houses dotted on the slopes*

◀ *Sunset in Thanedar through the  
nets protecting the apple trees*



## Day 3

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5<sup>th</sup> October 21, Tuesday

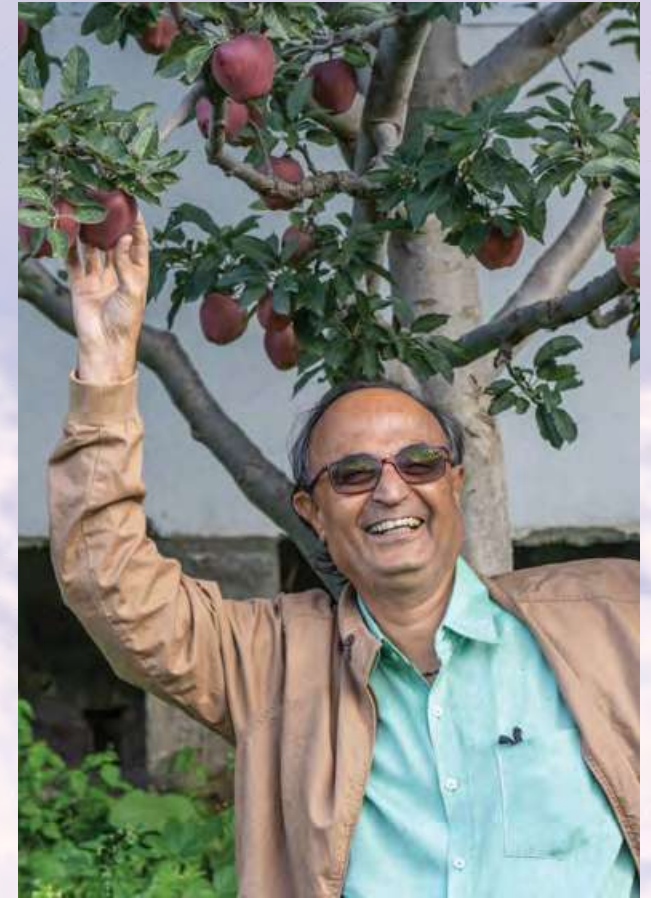
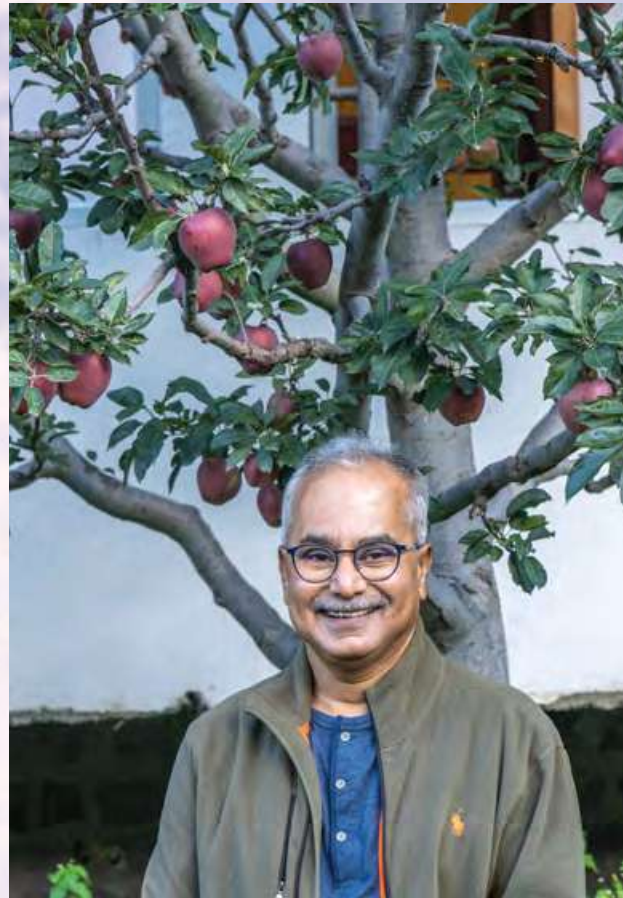
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We started from Thanedar at 10 am and worked our way towards Kaza. The drive was quite spectacular after Rampur. We drove alongside the Sutlej River for a long time. Saurabh told us these roads were quite treacherous till recently and only recently were upgraded. The road was very interesting. At many places the roads were carved into the mountain side with overhanging rock structures like caves, including a small tunnel curved into the side of the mountain. The areas seemed prone to road slips, as we saw several remnants along the way. We drove through the JSW project sites and there were a lot of construction activity including tunnels for the power houses. The roads while very good had steep sides looking into deep abysses on the side. It was scary to look out of the car and the consequences of a slip. Kalpa is a bit ahead of ReckongPeo, a quaint Himachali town. We also saw a number of military camps along the way. We skipped lunch but had some very crunchy and tasty green apples called “Golden apples”. We reached Kalpa in the evening to witness the spectacular mountain range in front of us. We saw some snow-capped peaks and a mountain peak called Kinnaur Kailash which is the end of a 3-day trek high up in the snows.

We reached Kalpa in the evening to witness the spectacular mountain ranges ahead of us. Located at the base of the Kinnaur–Kailash Range, Kalpa offers panoramic views of snow-capped mountains. The Kinnaur Kailash, which resembles the Kailash Mountain in Tibet was a great sight in the evening light.



*The snow-capped Kinner Kailash range from Kalpa*



*The snow-capped Kinner Kailash  
range from Kalpa* ►



*Road to Kinnaur Valley*



*Landscapes around  
Kinnaur*





*Sunrise at Kalpa from behind the Kinner Kailash range*



*The first rays of light fall on Kalpa village*



*A layer of clouds  
envelopes Kalpa village  
early morning*



*The Milky Way as seen from Kalpa*



# Day 4

6<sup>th</sup> October 21, Wednesday

We woke up to the glorious views of the mighty Himalayas lit up the sun rays from behind. The Kalpa sunrise will remain etched in our minds. The Kinnaur-Kailash mountains were aglow with sunlight. We photographed the dramatic views and started off the day. There was a jungle park close by, so we took a long invigorating walk into the wild. A hearty breakfast later, we were off to Nako.

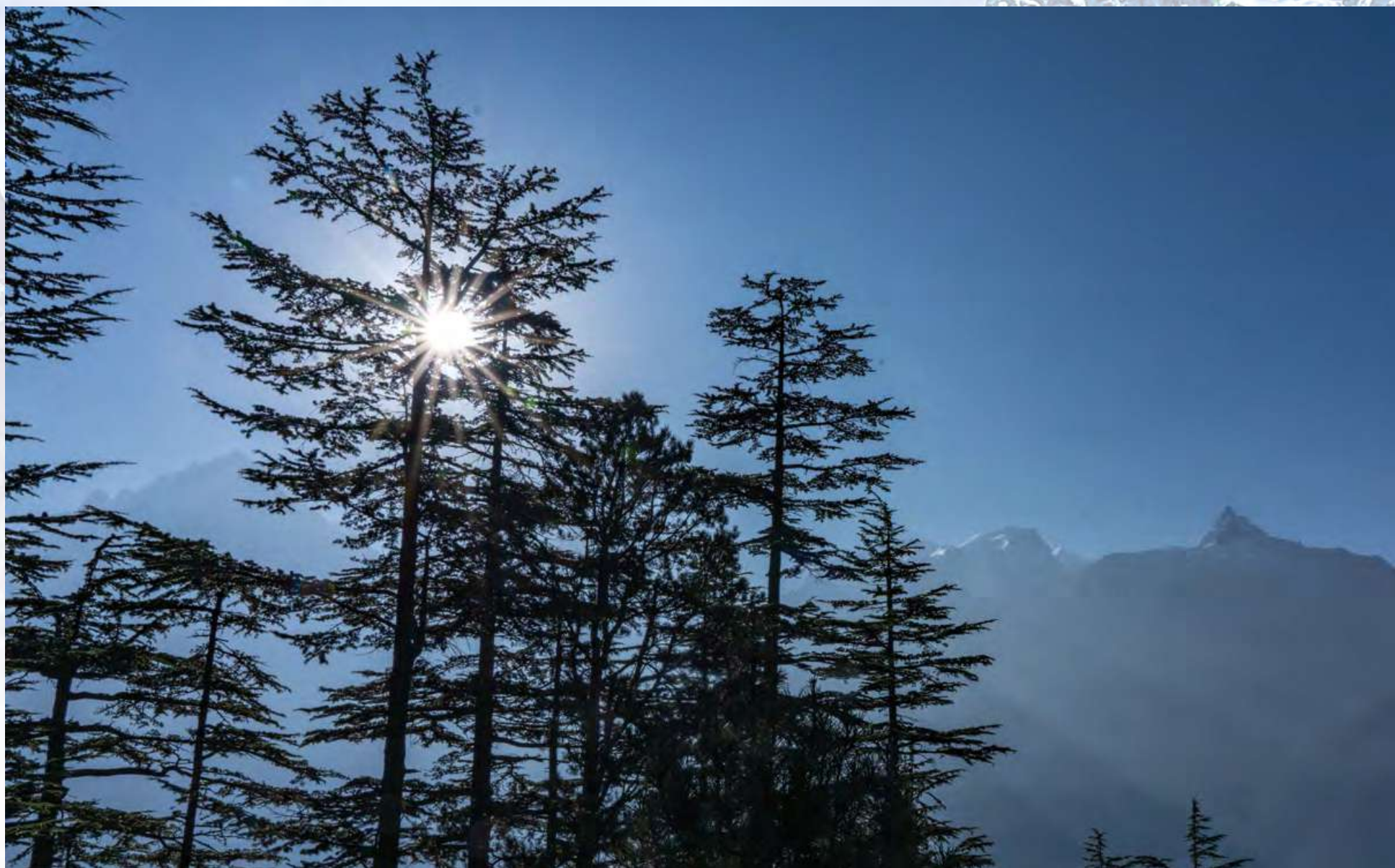
This drive of about 100-odd kilometres to Nako was quite dramatic, as the scenery morphed from lush and dewy to rugged and barren. We travelled along the Sutlej and soon arrived at its confluence with the Spiti river. The sparkling turquoise waters of the Spiti stood out in stark contrast to its desert-like surroundings.

We resumed our journey along the Spiti passing by fascinating landscapes. There was a lot of road construction being executed by the Border Roads Organisation. After a four-hour drive, we reached Nako and checked into our camp tents, each of which were named after a Himalayan peak. After some sandwiches and rest, we set out exploring the village

The Nako village is built around a small beautiful lake. Many of the old houses were built in traditional style. The lanes were around 5 ft. wide. We saw an old Buddhist monastery and a new one being built. One of the ancient structures was housing some relics. The village has history dating back from the 11th century. The village was clean in its own way. Some new houses and home stays being built in modern ways do clash with the architecture of the ancient village.

There were many donkeys and cows around making a variety of sounds. The donkey braying was very loud but amusingly musical. The cows mooing and the donkeys braying from the village and around us was quite an experience. We photographed some children who were delightful. Post dinner we took some pictures of the Milky Way in the night skies. The tents were uncomfortably cold and the donkeys were braying throughout. We heard donkey braying sound after decades but it was musical in its own way.

After dinner, we settled outside our tents to gaze at the stars and the grand Milky Way streaked across the night sky. Nako Lake twinkled with its reflection, and despite the bone-chilling cold, we could not resist shooting the stars. Saurabh, our guide says, “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes.” As an ardent traveller, he is well-used to harsh weather. He maintains that it’s a state of mind. Unfortunately, I struggled to sleep because of how chilly it was, and the braying donkeys didn’t help. To get comfortable, we got hot water bottles placed in our beds, which helped us keep warm.



*Sunrays through the pine trees at Kalpa during our morning walk*



*The ubiquitous apple trees  
at Kalpa*



*Landscapes in Spiti Valley*



*The greenery starts disappearing leaving the mountains barren*

*Nako lake with the trees in  
fall colours* ►



*View of Nako village*



Nako Lake



Nako Lake



*Donkeys are still used as beasts of burden in Nako village*



◀ *Nako lake with the trees in fall colours*

*An elderly woman at Nako village passes through a lane of old houses. Unfortunately, these old house stone houses are being replaced by brick and mortar buildings changing the rustic look of the place*



*People of Nako village - a happy child after receiving toffees we brought for them*



*Kapil and our driver Pankaj take a break at Nako village*





*People of Nako village, warm,  
friendly and innocent*



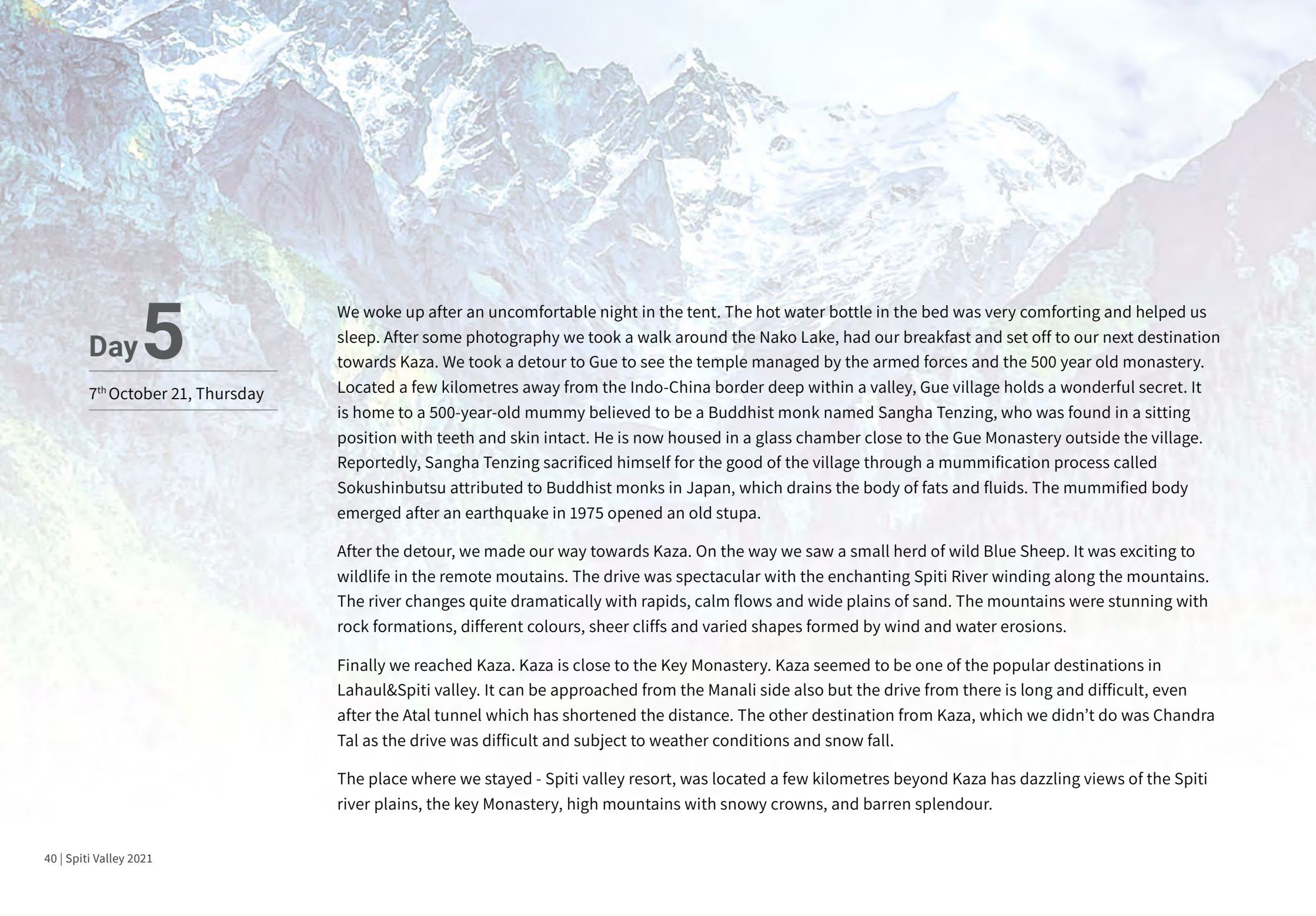




*View of Nako village*

*Milky Way at Nako lake. Its quite  
challenging photographing the night skies in  
the bone chilling weather. ►*





## Day 5

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7<sup>th</sup> October 21, Thursday

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We woke up after an uncomfortable night in the tent. The hot water bottle in the bed was very comforting and helped us sleep. After some photography we took a walk around the Nako Lake, had our breakfast and set off to our next destination towards Kaza. We took a detour to Gue to see the temple managed by the armed forces and the 500 year old monastery. Located a few kilometres away from the Indo-China border deep within a valley, Gue village holds a wonderful secret. It is home to a 500-year-old mummy believed to be a Buddhist monk named Sangha Tenzing, who was found in a sitting position with teeth and skin intact. He is now housed in a glass chamber close to the Gue Monastery outside the village. Reportedly, Sangha Tenzing sacrificed himself for the good of the village through a mummification process called Sokushinbutsu attributed to Buddhist monks in Japan, which drains the body of fats and fluids. The mummified body emerged after an earthquake in 1975 opened an old stupa.

After the detour, we made our way towards Kaza. On the way we saw a small herd of wild Blue Sheep. It was exciting to wildlife in the remote mountains. The drive was spectacular with the enchanting Spiti River winding along the mountains. The river changes quite dramatically with rapids, calm flows and wide plains of sand. The mountains were stunning with rock formations, different colours, sheer cliffs and varied shapes formed by wind and water erosions.

Finally we reached Kaza. Kaza is close to the Key Monastery. Kaza seemed to be one of the popular destinations in Lahaul&Spiti valley. It can be approached from the Manali side also but the drive from there is long and difficult, even after the Atal tunnel which has shortened the distance. The other destination from Kaza, which we didn't do was Chandra Tal as the drive was difficult and subject to weather conditions and snow fall.

The place where we stayed - Spiti valley resort, was located a few kilometres beyond Kaza has dazzling views of the Spiti river plains, the key Monastery, high mountains with snowy crowns, and barren splendour.



*Morning at Nako*





*The rugged landscapes on our way  
from Nako to Tabo, to the heart of  
Spiti valley*









*On the banks of Spiti river*

*More landscapes from Spiti valley*





*Hemitragus jemlahicus* (Himalayan Tahr)



*The meandering Spiti river  
en route to Tabo*





*The meandering Spiti river en route to Tabo*





*A small village located on the other side of the Spiti river*



*The temple at Gue in the mountains with the fall colours in the foreground. This place is very close to the China border and is guarded by the Indian Army*



*The 500 year old mummy in  
Gue village*



# Day 6 & 7

8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> October 21, Friday & Saturday

Spiti is a cold desert that has similar terrain, climate and culture to Tibet and Ladakh. The high altitudes aren't for everyone and it is advisable to be prepared for the discomfort. Allow your body to cope with the altitudes with sound sleep and taking it slow — be careful not to exert yourself much and be well hydrated. Physicians can recommend suitable medications to help with altitude sickness,

The famous Key Monastery is close to Kaza, and we began our day with a visit. The gompa is comprised of a large monastery complex and a school, and known for its collection of ancient murals and weapons, rare thangkas (Tibetan Buddhist scroll paintings depicting Buddhist deities or mandalas), and musical instruments like trumpets, cymbals and drums. The largest monastery in Spiti Valley, Key is also a training centre for lamas.

We had a wonderful time interacting with monks and students. When Kapil asked the children, “Who plays chess?”, every kid raised their hand! We had limited chess sets to hand out, we finally gave all of them to the teacher. The monks were very kind, warm and welcoming, always smiling.

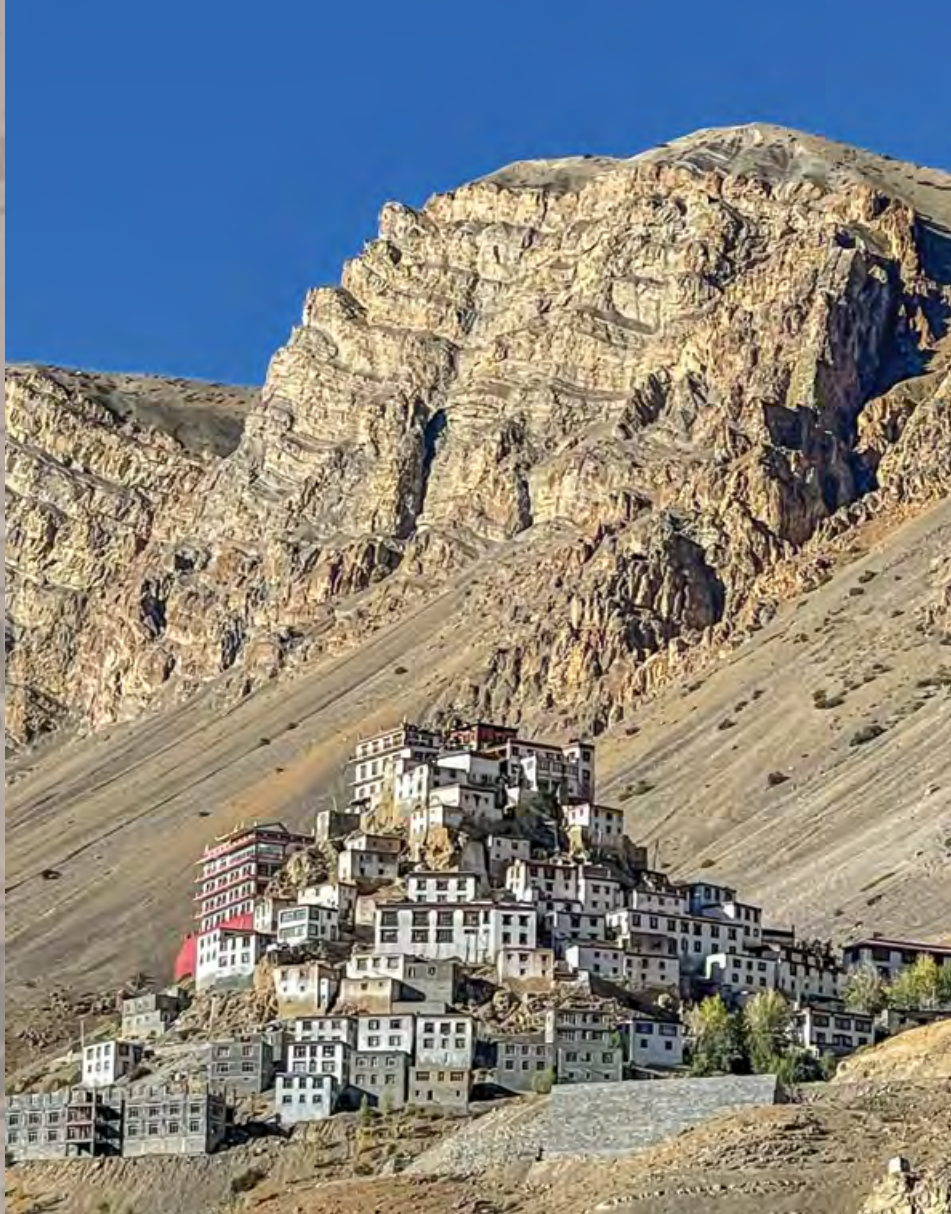
From Key Monastery, we made our way up to Kibber, famous for the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary and a favourite winter spot for snow leopard sightings. On the way, we crossed Chicham Bridge built across a very deep gorge over a tributary joining the Spiti river. It is reportedly Asia's highest suspension bridge, which links the villages of Chicham and Kibber. The height is staggering given that it's built over a gorge that's about 1,000 feet deep.

Next on the list was a visit to the world's highest motorable village, Komic, at over 15,000 feet. On the way we were lucky to see a herd of blue sheep, which we excitedly photographed. However, more excitement awaited us as we drove up. Near Langza Village, where a very large golden statue of Buddha overlooks the village, we first saw a couple of the critically endangered Himalayan vultures in the skies, and as we drove up, we saw what was a flock of about 30 of them resting on a mountain slope. Saurabh and I went closer, walking several kilometers across the fields, and spotted an even larger number — perhaps over 60 vultures — about half of which were noisily feeding on a carcass. We tried to capture their pictures but our lens was not up to the task given the distance, and the pictures were not as good as we hoped for.

We went up to Komic, drank their customary ginger-lemon-honey water, and visited the Tangyud Monastery. Built like a fortified castle, it stands on the edge of a deep canyon and stands out with deep ochre and mud walls. About four kilometres away is the village of Hikkim, which has the world's highest post office. We all wrote postcards and mailed them here. After a leisurely stroll, we drove back to our resort, continually in awe of the spectacular mountain views along the way. Tiny vein-like streams joined the Spiti river from different directions, making their way through the mountains and carving up deep gorges.



*The Key monastery during sunrise*



*Key monastery*

*Our resort at the base of Key Monastery*





◀ *Spiti river during sunset  
with the city of Kaza in  
the background*



*Key monastery at twilight*



*Patterns on the river bed of Spiti river from Key*



*The city of Kaza beside the Spiti river being engulfed by darkness as the sun sets down*

*Vistas from the top of Key  
monastery - the Spiti river with a  
small village in the background* ►





*Old and new buildings of the  
Key Monastery*





*Students at the Key Monastery School*





Young monks during their day off during a festival in Key. Like children everywhere, they enjoy leisure and sport ▶

We had a great time interacting with the children



The building of the Key Monastery





*Recreational activities of the monks at Key Monastery - football and volleyball*

*A young monk about to hit a sixer at Key Monastery*





*Three monks trying the new chess board we got for them*



*Inside the key monastery.  
This is an old picture when  
photography was allowed here*



A shepherdess returning home after a long day at work in Kibber village. This village, being a part of Kibber National park is popular for snow leopard sightings in winter



*Donkey used as a beast of burden at Hikkim village*

*A man peeping out of the window talking to someone*



*We at the newly constructed Chicham Bridge. Before the bridge, the villagers had to walk for several kilometres to reach the village*



*Snow-capped peaks near Kibber village*



*Chicham village, Spiti valley*



*Many villages are just a cluster of a few houses*







*We saw a group of Hemitragus jemlahicus (Himalayan Tahr) pass by, cross the road after coming quite close to us and negotiated a steep ledge*



◀ The village of Langza located at an altitude of 14500 feet is one of the remotest villages in India

*The statue of Buddha at Langza village*





*Langza Buddha statue with the Milky Way*

*A farmer goes back home with her hard  
earned harvest of wheat. They also grow  
black peas and barley* ►





*Landscape near Langza with farmers going in the foreground*



*Patterns formed from the field being ready for new crop*



*A flock of Himalayan Griffons (Himalayan Vulture) Gyps himalayensis near Langza village. It was our great luck to find this. We walked for quite a distance to reach a vantage point to watch them and take a few pictures. It is very rare to see these amazing raptors. This specie is listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List. This sighting made our tour special and added a bit of wildlife in the otherwise landscape centric tour*







*A flock of Himalayan Griffons (Himalayan Vulture) Gyps himalayensis near Langza village.*









*The Komic monastery*



Monks have some fun playing cricket at Komic village. Being the highest village in the world connected a motorable road (15027 feet above sea level), these monks make it the highest cricket ground in the world too!



*The Komic monastery*

*Hikkim Village, where the highest  
post office in the world is located* ►





*Kids of Hikkim village*

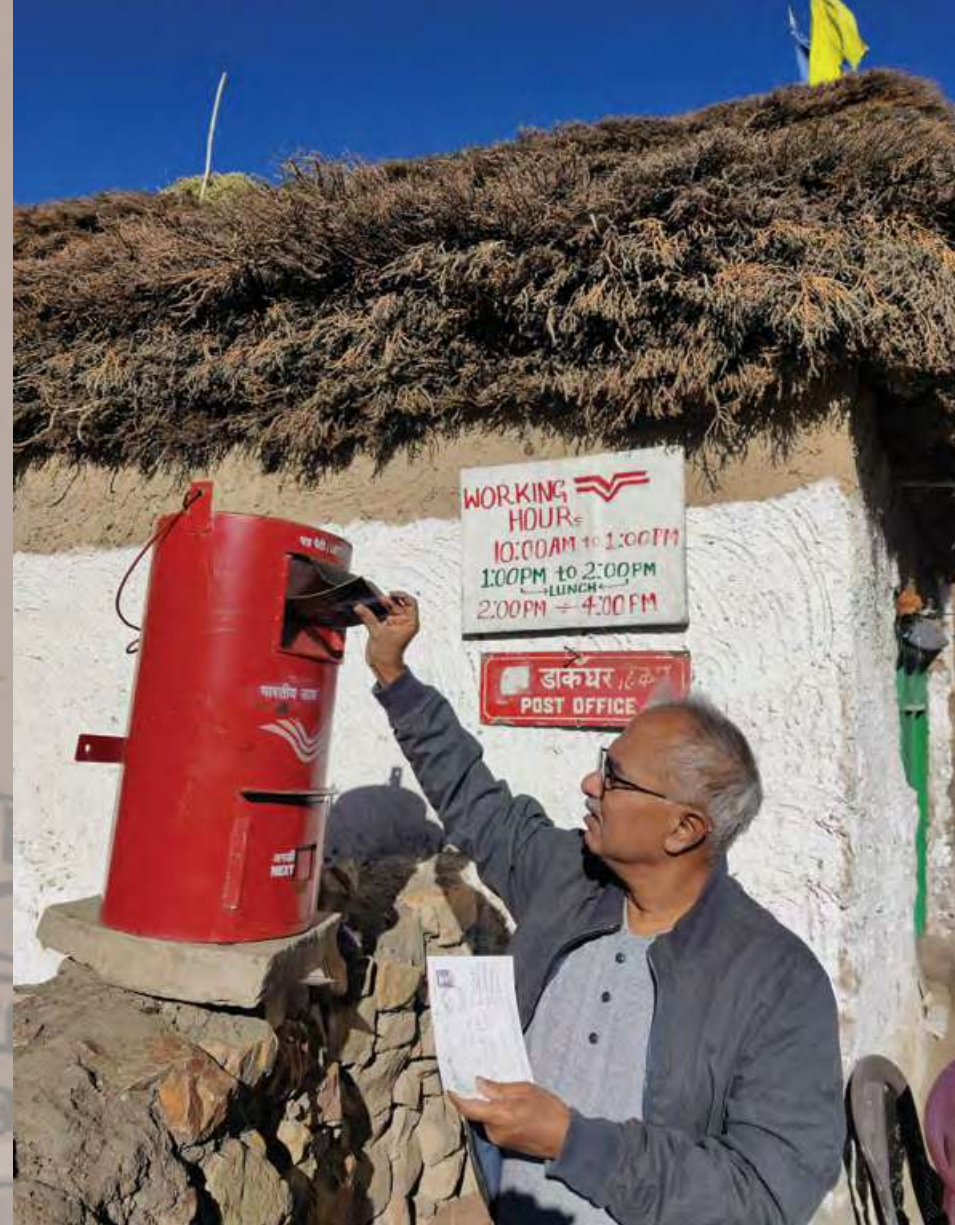




*Hikkim village, the highest post office in the world. Having very less population and not many outside the village, the post office is mostly used by the tourists to send a post cards to their loved ones. When not so busy, the post master, Rinchen Chhiring works in the fields especially during the harvest season when they need manpower*



*A kid with his donkey at Kibber village. Donkeys play a big role in moving stuff around*







*Amazing rock formations at Spiti shaped by the natural elements*

◀ Landscapes of Spiti. Beginning of October is the best time to see the fall colours



*Saurabh trying to explore a new way*

*Maruthi, Kapil and Saurabh during a morning walk at Key*

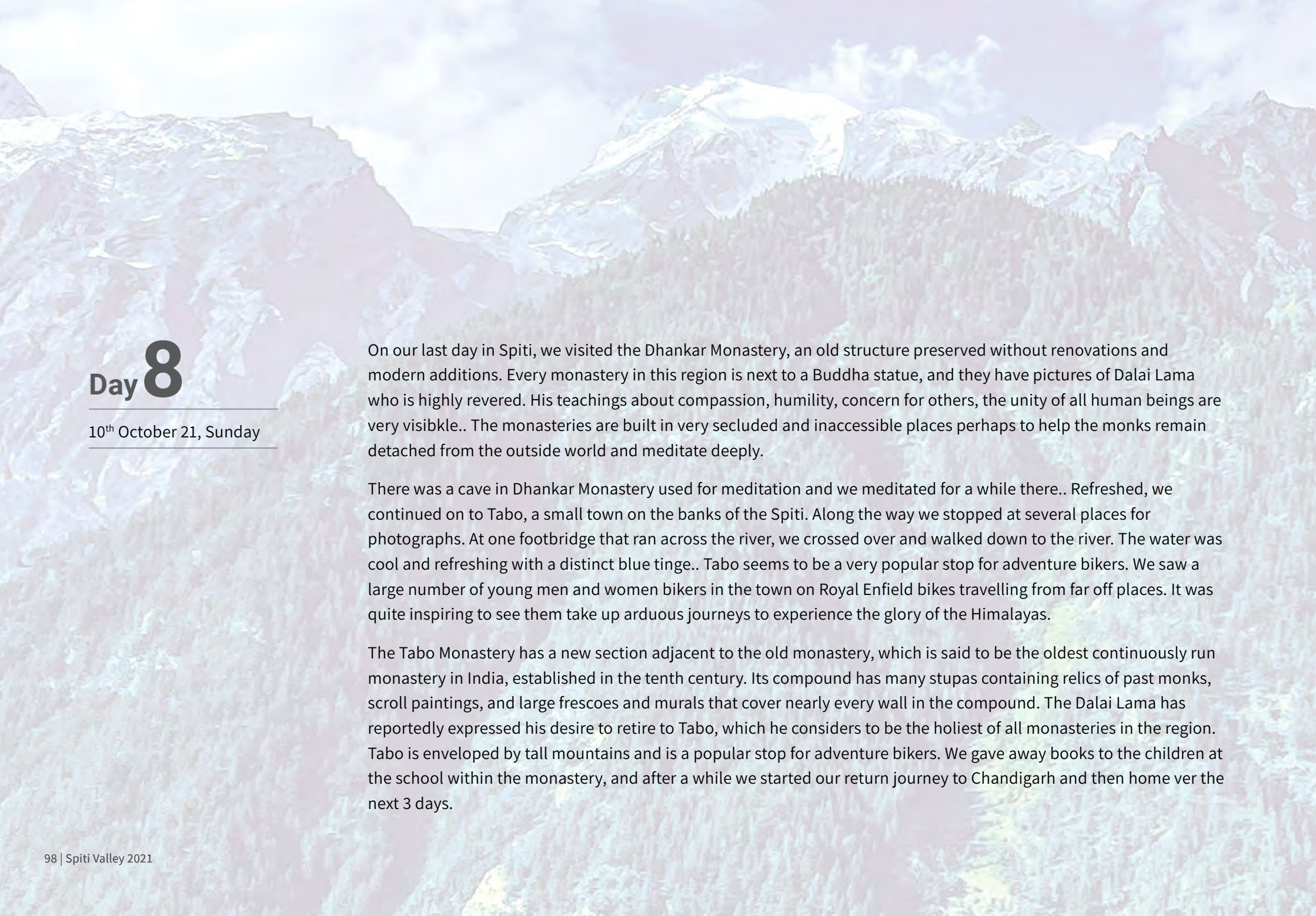






*It's amazing to see how a small stream turns into a larger river with the help of its tributaries.*

◀ *Here a small stream joins the river Spiti and contributes to its volume. The fall colours add to the beauty of the landscape*



## Day 8

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10<sup>th</sup> October 21, Sunday

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On our last day in Spiti, we visited the Dhankar Monastery, an old structure preserved without renovations and modern additions. Every monastery in this region is next to a Buddha statue, and they have pictures of Dalai Lama who is highly revered. His teachings about compassion, humility, concern for others, the unity of all human beings are very visible.. The monasteries are built in very secluded and inaccessible places perhaps to help the monks remain detached from the outside world and meditate deeply.

There was a cave in Dhankar Monastery used for meditation and we meditated for a while there.. Refreshed, we continued on to Tabo, a small town on the banks of the Spiti. Along the way we stopped at several places for photographs. At one footbridge that ran across the river, we crossed over and walked down to the river. The water was cool and refreshing with a distinct blue tinge.. Tabo seems to be a very popular stop for adventure bikers. We saw a large number of young men and women bikers in the town on Royal Enfield bikes travelling from far off places. It was quite inspiring to see them take up arduous journeys to experience the glory of the Himalayas.

The Tabo Monastery has a new section adjacent to the old monastery, which is said to be the oldest continuously run monastery in India, established in the tenth century. Its compound has many stupas containing relics of past monks, scroll paintings, and large frescoes and murals that cover nearly every wall in the compound. The Dalai Lama has reportedly expressed his desire to retire to Tabo, which he considers to be the holiest of all monasteries in the region. Tabo is enveloped by tall mountains and is a popular stop for adventure bikers. We gave away books to the children at the school within the monastery, and after a while we started our return journey to Chandigarh and then home over the next 3 days.

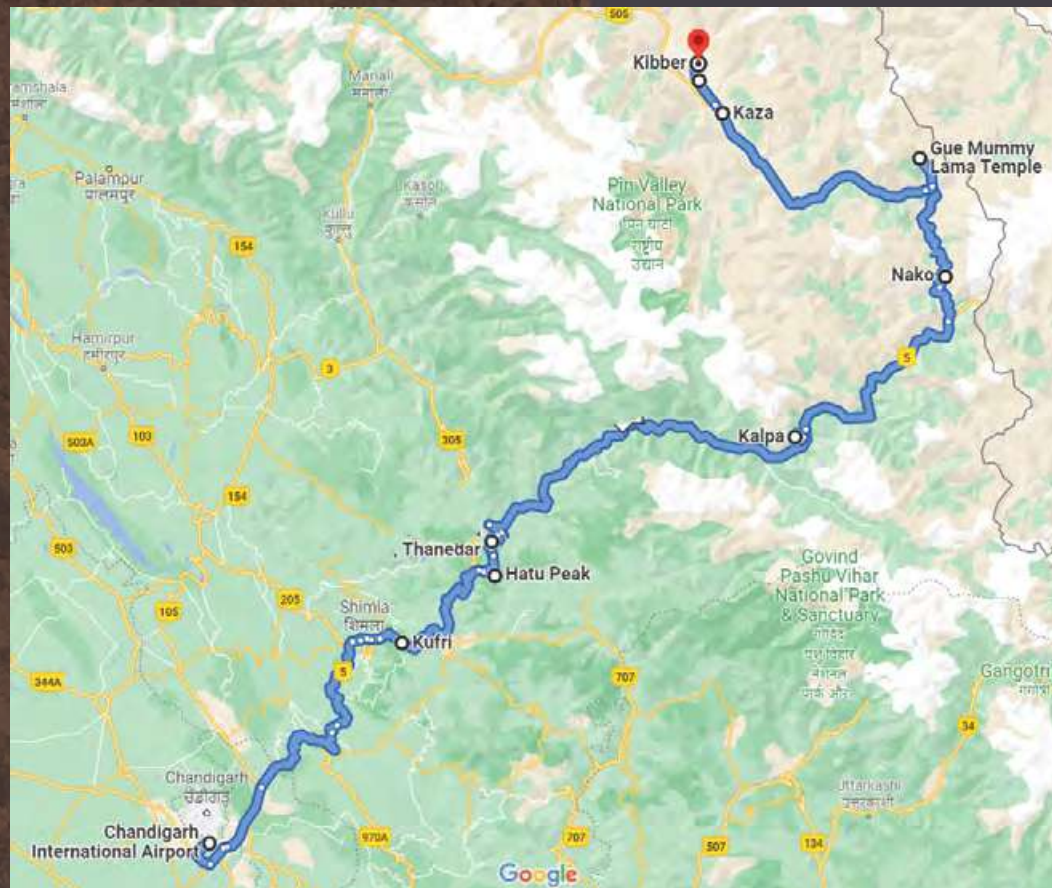


*The new part of the Dhankar Monastery with the properly manicured terrace farming in morning light*



*The 1000 year old Tabo monastery*







**G V Prasad** is Co-Chairman and MD of Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, the India headquartered integrated global pharmaceutical conglomerate. A Passionate wildlife and nature photographer, he views life as through a camera lens, switching from 'close ups to wide angles' as he puts it.

This is especially evinced in his interactions with people: "I have learnt to notice people's different dimensions and I prefer multi-dimensional people to uni-dimensional ones. The former have more to offer to the people around them because, the more diverse things you do, the richer you are in terms of experiences - he once said in an interview. Prasad is also an avid reader with a special interest in history and management literature, and a keen traveller.

Amidst the responsibilities of steering a global organisation, Prasad also finds the time to lend his knowledge and experience for larger causes.

- He serves on the boards of Indian School of Business (ISB), Ashoka University and Dr. Reddy's Institute of Life Sciences.
- He is involved with the activities of the World Wildlife Fund, AP and Telangana chapter, Wild Life Trust (WTI) of India and other conservation-oriented organizations.
- He is the Honorary Consul of the Kingdom of Belgium in Hyderabad and works towards promoting trade and commerce between India and Belgium
- He has been serving as the Chairman of CII National Committee on Pharmaceuticals since last consecutive years.

Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility are close to Prasad's heart and he has ensured the adoption of sustainable technologies and practices, thereby reducing the company's ecological footprint. He has been closely involved with a number of social sector organizations and higher education institutions and strives to foster responsible capitalism that views positive social impact as a primary goal.

He has also previously served on the Boards of educational institutions such as IIT Hyderabad and S V University, technology company Cyient and non-profit organization Acumen Fund.

**Saurabh** is the Founder and Chief Educator at SIA Photography.

His dream is to see India and to make every camera-owner a great photographer. He has been traveling and documenting the landscape, people, culture and festivals of our country for more than two decades.

After working in the IT industry for a decade, he chose to take teaching and traveling full time.

Through his Photowalks, Photo-Tours and Photography Classes he has shared his knowledge with more than 6000 photography enthusiasts across the world since 2011. He teaches photography in many colleges as a guest lecturer.

More than 500 of his works have been published in several national and international publications including the National Geographic Traveller India, Lonely Planet, Timeout Explorer (UK), The Times (London, UK), etc.

His pictures have been exhibited around the world, the latest one “Hyderabad in Bordeaux” in Bordeaux, France.

He has won several national and international Photography awards for his works.

Saurabh also works with several NGOs teaching photography to kids and exploring it as a career option. He has done some documentary projects for various organizations including National Innovation Foundation-India and UNICEF.

He can be contacted at [saurabh@siaphotography.in](mailto:saurabh@siaphotography.in)  
[Instagram.com/saurabhchatterje](https://www.instagram.com/saurabhchatterje)





## Conclusion

Our visit to Spiti valley and the upper ranges of the mighty Himalayas was inspirational in multiple ways. Those of us who are spiritually inclined found God's amazing creations as a reflection of a power beyond what we can describe. The naturalist in me found how destructive human activity is mislabelled as development. The relentless constructions around populated areas and the multi-story buildings in the fragile Himalayas at the lower levels contrasted with the peace and harmony of the upper reaches of the mountains. The garish and relentless consumption of the plains contrasted with the frugal village life and the peace and devotion of the monks in the monasteries. The wildlife that thrives in the hostile climate were an unexpected part of our experience. One came away with a hope that more of us humans see nature as something to preserve, experience and cherish and not to conquer, develop or alter. I hope this book in some way influences a few people to become guardians and champions of nature.





