

Lifestyle | Travel

Friday, April 12, 2019

up for. The hill resort of Manali in the north, nestled amid towering ranges, has emerged as the hub for adventure sports in the region, but a string of smaller settlements have bloomed as centers for specific thrills and spills.

Set off on the trails

Himachal Pradesh's scenic mountain trails offer everything from easy day hikes to arduous multi-day expeditions. A good start for beginners is the three-day Beas Kund trek starting from the Solang Valley, 14 km due north from Manali. As you meander through grasslands and dense forests along the rivulet that feeds the Beas River, you can pluck wild strawberries and meet friendly villagers in remote mountain settlements, before reaching your goal, the shimmering Beas Kund lake, nestled at 3,800 meters amid mountain peaks. And all along this two- to three-day ascent, you'll bask in front of gorgeous views of snow-capped ranges such as Hanuman Tibba and the Pir Pinjal range.

To witness two contrasting faces of Himachal Pradesh, consider the more challenging five-day trek to the Hampta Pass, a corridor between the green Kullu valley and the barren high-altitude deserts of Lahaul and Spiti. Starting from Jobra, about two hours northeast of Manali, the trail climbs through pastures of grazing sheep and mules and pretty meadows dotted with pink and yellow flowers, before climbing over icy streams and tongues of glacier to make a steep final ascent to the pass, perched at 4260 meters.

The views out over the desolate yet pristine landscape of western Spiti spread out beneath you makes every step taken to reach this lofty vantage point seem worthwhile. If you still have stamina after the slog to the pass, continue north for an extra day to Spiti's lone east-west highway, and take a three-hour vehicle ride to the moon-shaped Chandratol Lake. Only accessible when the roads are clear of snow, its shimmering blue waters present a spectacular contrast to the white of the snow and the muddy brown of the mountains.

Practicalities: The best time for treks is from May to June and September to October, and numerous companies in Manali can arrange guides, porters and equipment. Himalayan Extreme Centre, Himalayan Caravan and Himalayan Yeti are well-regarded operators.

Come fly Himachal Pradesh's spectacular skies

The slightly nondescript town of Bir (just south of Billing in the Kangra Valley) arrived on the global map after it hosted the paragliding world cup in 2015. Today, travelers flock here to soar over the Dhauladhar range from the launch site near Billing, poised at 2400m above sea level, putting Himachal Pradesh firmly on the global paragliding map. In winter, the panoramic views of the glittering, snow-capped peaks are truly magnificent and even in summer, when cloud or haze can obscure the peaks, the verdant Kangra Valley spreads out below like a blanket.

Practicalities: Pilots from the Billing Paragliding Association are experienced and even first-timers will have no problems. Tandem flights, with a pilot and passenger, last for 30 minutes, while solo flights for experienced paragliders can go on for much longer, roaming as far afield as Manali or Dharamsala. Bir does not have great hotel options, so either pitch a tent at a local campsite, or stay in Dharamsala or McLeod Ganj, a two-hour bus ride away.

Skiing Himachal Pradesh's powdered slopes

In winter, Himachal Pradesh gets blanketed in thick snow and the foothills of the Himalaya become one of India's favorite playgrounds for ski enthusiasts. The Solang Valley above Manali has some of the most accessible slopes, but infrastructure is not great. There's one cable car that takes you up 800m to the top of the valley but the slopes are not well groomed.

More accomplished (and deep-pocketed skiers) can opt for heli-skiing on virgin powder on the flanks of some of the state's highest mountains. Northwest of Manali, Hanuman Tibba (5982m) offers stunning slopes at around 4300m, reached via a short helicopter ride that affords breath-taking views from mid-air. Next thing you know, you'll be dropping out on smooth, powder-covered slopes and whizzing from giddy heights in blissful peace and isolation - truly exhilarating!

Practicalities: Heli-ski operators run trips from Manali, but weather conditions have to be ideal for helicopters to fly and for the slopes to be stable and safe. You may be disappointed if the wind is not exactly right. Allow time for cancellations (there's plenty else to do in the area) and make sure you go with a professional operator such as Himalayan Heli Adventures.

The Himalaya on two wheels

Traversing Himachal Pradesh's high altitude roads is thrilling even in a bus. On a motorcycle, it becomes a serious adrenaline



rush - particularly if you pit your wheels against the 3978m Rohtang La, the most famous pass on the epic mountain road journey from Manali to Leh, the mountain-ringed capital of Ladakh.

Motorcycle hire companies in Manali rent out classic Enfield motorcycles for experienced bikers, and motorcycle tour agencies arrange guided Enfield tours for less confident riders who prefer some company as they cross five mountain passes and many a hairpin bend on the two day crossing to Ladakh. Rudimentary tented camps offer overnight beds to break the journey, or you can stop in Keylong, the capital of Lahaul.

Along the 490km route, you'll have desolate peaks and glaciers, pristine lakes and ancient Buddhist monasteries perched on stark, wind-scoured mountain slopes for company. And you'll have to scramble across some of the world's highest mountain passes, each wrapped in multi-coloured prayer flags by passing Buddhist devotees.

Should you have thighs of steel, mountain biking from Manali to Leh takes 9 to 10 days, camping along the route. An easier way to experience Himachal Pradesh's gravity-defying downhill slopes is on one of the many mountain bike trails around Manali.

Operators such as Himalayan Bike Bar can rent you sturdy wheels and help arrange transport to the top of the trails and a pick-up at the bottom.

Practicalities: Based in Manali, Himalayan Inder Motors has a long history of renting motorcycles for trips over the Rohtang La. If you'd rather have the comfort of a guide, Motorcycle Expeditions, Hardev Motors and Himalayan Raiders all run trips from Manali.

Start early from Manali to traverse the first obstacle along the road - the Rohtang La can get gridlocked with traffic by late morning (even mountain passes can have traffic snarls in India!). And take it slowly to give your body time to acclimatize. The road climbs to a height where altitude sickness can be an issue. Prime time for road trips is mid-June to mid-October; at other times, the road can be snowed under and closed to traffic.

Wet and wild in the Kullu Valley

If you can tear your eyes from the tall mountains on all sides for a moment, the rivers churning down from the Himalaya offer plenty of rafting rough and tumble. Himachal

