

Himachal Pradesh



From forested valleys to mountain passes, and Buddhist monasteries to the Dalai Lama's residence, few Indian states match Himachal Pradesh for diversity and mind-blowing scenery.

Many regard this as India's premier mountain state: awesome but accessible, a place where you can trek for days over high-altitude passes but then relax with a beer at one of the busy traveller towns. The mighty peaks of the Dhauladhar, Pir Panjal and western Himalaya ranges rise above Himachal, providing a setting for a host of adventure activities. Many are drawn here purely for the Tibetan Buddhist culture and head straight to the traveller centre of McLeod Ganj, home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile.

Even before you reach the Himalaya you'll pass British-era hill stations, serene pine forests, endless apple orchards and beautiful valleys. Shimla is India's most enduring hill station, and further north is Kinnaur, the apple capital and eastern gateway to Spiti.

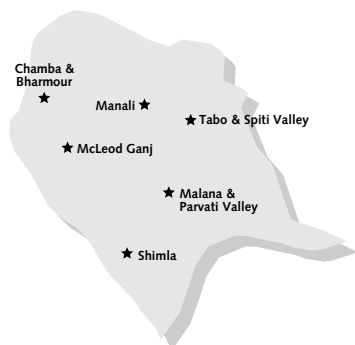
In central Himachal, Manali and the Kullu and Parvati Valleys are a base for hippies, honeymooners and thrill seekers. Across Himachal, the lower hills hold forts, temples and palaces.

Manali, famous in recent decades for its charas (marijuana) and backpacker/hippie scene, is the start of the main overland route to Ladakh. The Great Himalayan Circuit starts in Kashmir, slices through the mountain valleys of Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti to Kinnaur and ends in Shimla. Here, even the beaten track is a dirt road cut into the side of a mountain wall.

Travel around Himachal can be slow and arduous, but there are plenty of places to relax and enjoy the views. It's a wonderful place to be.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take the toy train up to **Shimla** (p334), and enjoy the Englishness of India's favourite hill station
- Accumulate karma credits by volunteering with the Tibetan refugees of **McLeod Ganj** (p369)
- Ski, trek, climb, paraglide, raft or zorb in the backpacker playground of **Manali** (p357), Himachal's adventure-sport capital
- Hang out in the **Parvati Valley** (p350) and trek to the mountain village of **Malana** (p350)
- Get off the tourist trail and visit centuries-old temples in little-visited **Chamba** (p386) and **Bharmour** (p388)
- Cross the spectacular mountain passes of Rhotang La and Kunzum La to **Tabo Monastery** (p395) and the incredibly remote **Spiti Valley** (p392)



FAST FACTS**Population** 6.1 million**Area** 55,673 sq km**Capital** Shimla**Main languages** Hindi, Pahari and Punjabi**When to go** May to June, September to early November (July to October in Lahaul and Spiti)**History**

Ancient trade routes dominate the history of Himachal Pradesh. Large parts of northern Himachal were conquered by Tibet in the 10th century, and Buddhist culture still dominates the mountain deserts of Lahaul and Spiti. The more accessible areas in the south of the state were divided up between a host of rajas, ranas and *thakurs* (noblemen), creating a patchwork of tiny states, with Kangra, Kullu and Chamba at the top.

Sikh rajas came to dominate the region by the early 19th century, signing treaties with the British to consolidate their power. The first Westerners to visit were Jesuit missionaries in search of the legendary kingdom of Prester John – a mythical Christian kingdom lost in the middle of Asia. Interestingly, there are several Aryan tribes in North India to this day, including the Kinnauris of eastern Himachal, most following a mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism.

During the 19th century the British started creating little bits of England in the hills of Shimla, Dalhousie and Dharamsala. Shimla later became the British Raj's summer capital, and narrow-gauge railways were pushed through to Shimla and the Kangra Valley. The British slowly extended their influence until most of the region was under the thrall of Shimla.

The state of Himachal Pradesh was formed after Independence in 1948, liberating many villages from the feudal system. In 1966 the districts administered from Punjab – including Kangra, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti – were added and full statehood was achieved in 1971. Initially neglected by central government, Himachal has reinvented itself as the powerhouse of India, with huge hydroelectric plants providing power for half the country.

Climate

The main seasons for visitors are May to July and September to early November – advance

reservations for accommodation are recommended at this time. During the monsoon the middle hills can be chilly and damp. Snow closes many mountainous areas from November to April, including the mountain valleys of Lahaul and Spiti and the Manali–Leh road – however, this is also the peak skiing season at the modest resorts near Manali and Shimla.

Information**PERMITS**

The border between India and Tibet is politically sensitive, and foreigners need an inner line permit to travel between Rekong Peo in Kinnaur and Tabo in Spiti. You can obtain the permit easily, with two passport photographs and photocopies of the identity and visa pages from your passport, in Shimla (see boxed text, p337), Kaza (see boxed text, p395) and Rekong Peo (p345).

Activities

Manali is India's adventure capital, with a host of wild summer and winter activities on offer – see boxed text, p362.

PARAGLIDING

The soaring thermals over the Himalayan foothills provide perfect conditions for paragliding, particularly at Solang Nullah (p367) and Billing (p383).

RAFTING

The Beas River near Kullu churns up some impressive white water for kayaking and rafting, best organised out of Manali – see boxed text, p362.

SKIING

From January to March, skiers and snowboarders congregate at Solang Nullah (p367) near Manali, and Narkanda (p342) near Shimla.

TREKKING

Himachal Pradesh is a trekkers' paradise, and dozens of agencies in Manali, McLeod Ganj and other towns offer organised treks to remote valleys and mountain passes. Daily rates for all-inclusive treks start at Rs2000 per person, including guides, tent, food and porters.

The main trekking season runs from May to October, but monsoon rains affect some