



Himachal Pradesh

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Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Chonor House (p327)
- ➔ Orchard Hut (p338)
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Best Off the Beaten Track

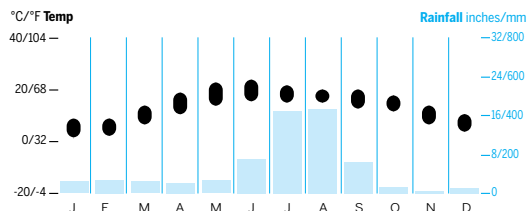
- ➔ Chitkul (p294)
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Why Go?

With spectacular snowy peaks and plunging river valleys, Himachal is India's outdoor adventure playground. From trekking and climbing to rafting, paragliding and skiing, if it can be done in the mountains, it can be done here. A convoluted topography of interlocking mountain chains also makes Himachal a spectacular place simply to explore, by bus, car, motorbike or jeep safari. Every pass crossing into a new valley brings you into a different world, with its own customs, gods and even language. Villages perched on staggering slopes enchant with fairy-tale architecture and their people's easygoing warmth. Hill stations appeal with holiday atmosphere and colonial echoes, while backpacker magnets lure with their blissed-out vibe and mountain beauty. Such is the variety of the Himachali jigsaw that in McLeod Ganj, the Dalai Lama's home-away-from-home, and in Lahaul and Spiti, with their centuries-old Buddhist cultures, you might even think you've stumbled into Tibet.

When to Go

Manali



May–Jun & mid-Sep–Oct Outside the monsoon season; perfect for trekking and other activities.

Mid-Jul–mid-Sep In the monsoon season visit Lahaul and Spiti, which stay dry.

Nov–Apr Great for skiers, but snow blocks the high passes to Lahaul and Spiti.

History

Ancient trade routes dominate the history of Himachal Pradesh. Large parts of northern Himachal came under Tibetan control in the 10th century, and Buddhist culture still dominates the mountain deserts of Lahaul and Spiti. The more accessible areas in the south and west were ruled by a host of rajas, ranas and *thakurs* (noblemen), creating a patchwork of tiny states, with Kangra, Kullu and Chamba the most important. Sikh rajas conquered large areas in the early 19th century, but lost them with the Anglo-Sikh Wars of the 1840s, which brought most of Himachal under British control.

The British started creating little bits of England in the hills of Shimla, Dalhousie and Dharamsala. In 1864 Shimla became the British Raj's summer capital, and narrow-gauge railways were later pushed through to Shimla and the Kangra Valley. The areas under direct British rule were administered as part of the Punjab, while Chamba and the southern princedoms remained nominally independent, known as the Punjab hill states. Himachal Pradesh was formed from these princely states after Independence, liberating many villages from the feudal system. In 1966 the districts administered from Punjab – principally Kangra, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti – were added, and full statehood was achieved in 1971. Initially neglected by central government, Himachal has been reinvented as the powerhouse of India, with huge hydroelectric plants providing power for half the country.

SLEEPING PRICE RANGES

Accommodation price ranges for this chapter:

\$ below ₹1200

\$\$ ₹1200 to ₹3500

\$\$\$ above ₹3500

SOUTHERN HIMACHAL PRADESH

As soon as you cross the state line from Haridwar the landscape starts to crinkle and fold in steep, forest-covered ridges – the foothills that herald the grand Himalayan ranges further north. The main travel destination in the south is Shimla, the former summer capital of British-ruled India. The official district website is <http://hpshimla.gov.in>.

Shimla

☑ 0177 / POP 170,000 / ELEV 2205M

Strung out along a 12km ridge, with steep forested hillsides falling away in all directions, the Himachal capital is a good appetite-whetter for the awe-inspiring mountain tracts of the state's interior. Shimla is one of India's most popular hill resorts, buzzing with a happy flow of Indian vacationers and full of echoes of its past role as the summer capital of British India. The long, winding main street, the Mall, runs east and west just below the spine of the

TOP STATE FESTIVALS

Losar (Tibetan New Year; ☼ late Jan, Feb or early March) Tibetans across Himachal, including in McLeod Ganj and Spiti, celebrate their New Year with processions, music, dancing and *chaams* (ritual masked dances by monks).

Minjar Festival (☼ Jul/Aug) A week of processions, music, dance and markets at Chamba.

Manimahesh Yatra (☼ Aug/Sep) Shaivites trek for three days to bathe in Manimahesh Lake near Bharmour, one of Shiva's mythical abodes.

Phulech Festival (☼ Sep/Oct) Villagers in Kalpa and throughout Kinnaur fill temple courtyards with flowers; oracles perform sacrifices and make predictions for the coming year.

Dussehra (☼ Oct) Intense and spectacular week-long celebration of the defeat of the demon Ravana, at Kullu.

International Himalayan Festival (☼ 10-11 Dec) Celebrating the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize, this McLeod Ganj festival features cultural performances by groups from all around the Himalaya.