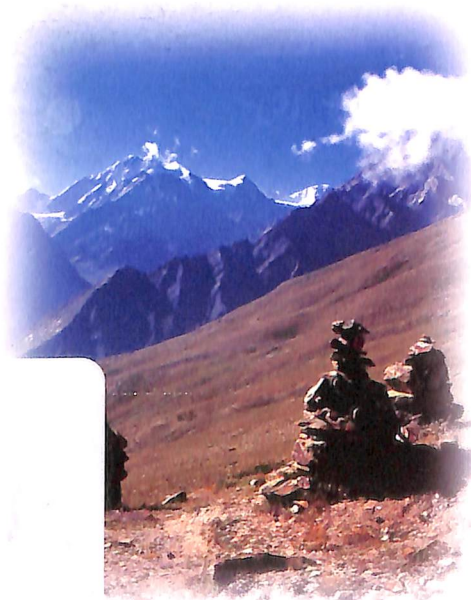


SECOND REVISED EDITION

EXPLORING KINNAUR & SPITI IN THE TRANS-HIMALAYA

Deepak Sanan & Dhanu Swadi



Trek routes with maps & pictures

INDUS

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KINNAUR AND SPITI
IN THE TRANS-HIMALAYA

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DEEPAK SANAN
DHANU SWADI



INDUS
PUBLISHING COMPANY

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION



Kinnaur and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh are not the everyday traveller's meat but there are a sufficient number of the cognoscenti to warrant this second edition. The book has been extensively updated to take into account the developments since it was first written, specially in terms of new roads and rest houses. New pictures in a new format will, it is hoped, convey better the beauty of the region. Most important, the paperback edition is a response to a frequently expressed wish by prospective travellers looking for material on Kinnaur and Spiti in bookshops.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Kinnaur and Spiti are two of the most fascinating regions of India fringing the Tibetan plateau. The general state of knowledge about these regions, occupying the northeastern quarter of Himachal Pradesh, can at best be described as scanty. Their geographical inaccessibility has resulted in their attracting the sporadic attention of only the most tenacious of travellers. The proximity to the frontier resulted in the two regions being categorized as restricted areas in the 1950s, and the mystique of the forbidden has added to the aura of the unknown. For anyone who has heard of Kinnaur and Spiti the need for a new book on the area may seem to be confronting one on every turn in the road but the manner in which this one began was largely fortuitous.

It was a fine June evening in Kalpa in 1991. Our friends Vikram Malhotra, his wife Rekha and Sanjiv Saith were visiting us. After dinner, conversation turned to the high cost of living and the meagre salaries paid to civil servants. As the full moon rose over the Kinner Kailash, bathing the mountains with a silvery glow, it was Vikram who suggested a book on the area as our road to fortune. To aficionados of these remote lands, any such effort had the hallmark of a bestseller and after five years in the region we seemed tailor made to write the book on Kinnaur and Spiti.

It seemed exciting and easy enough at the time. But it took years of toil and many long walks, between a constant stream of welcome guests, two attention-grabbing children, the daily routine of bread earning and other distractions, to complete the writing. Then we were brought up short by hard-headed publishers. Who's heard of Kinnaur and Spiti? Who wants to go there? (except your friends, who must be touched in the head, anyway). Finally, Mr. M.L. Gidwani of Indus Publishing Co. who is definitely touched by the Himalaya, has brought the book to light.

As in most acknowledgements we must note that the number of persons whom we need to thank is endless. But truly it encompasses legions. It is twelve years since we first passed through Kinnaur and lived in Spiti. There are people in everyone of the 200 odd hamlets and villages of Kinnaur and Spiti who have at sometime extended their unstinted hospitality to us, who have helped fill information gaps and opened our eyes to both the visual feast and the splendour of heart which characterize the region and its inhabitants.

Both in Spiti and Kinnaur, our memories of Panma Chhetan and his family are special. Chhetan cooked for us and walked with us and helped run our house with a quiet efficiency it has seldom known again. He brought little known facts to light and his ability to remember minor details converted arduous walks into luxury treks. His wizardry with endless quantities of cabbage, in a 17,500 foot base camp on the Chango glacier, will always be part of the memories of a particular expedition. Sher Singh's phlegmatic bravado, skidding on the iciest of roads worming through the narrowest of passages, jolting over boulder-strewn surfaces even as rocks crashed around us or snow slid ominously down the hillsides, are not the only reason to remember the years he spent driving us around Spiti and Kinnaur. He made Chango a second home for us and we still get to eat the finest apples in India, every year.

Tshering, forever murmuring the sacred *mantra* as he turned the rosary beads, was another companion on many Spiti walks. Tandup and Paldan, two dear 'Pintus' who died so young, we will treasure for their ready smiles and disarming manner. Even as we approached the Pin-Bhaba pass, our esteemed 'guides' informed us that they had never been this high up the Pin valley. Geshe La at Tabo monastery has, with his warmth and healing touch, brightened many a bleak day and cured at least one horrendously painful toothache. Achho Punchok Rai's father, Dorje Chhering, was in his lifetime, a font of so much information, on routes, life-style and so important in Spiti's aridity, on water sources. Rinchen Tandup in Losar and Tandup Cherring in Sagnam have over the years, both kept in touch and assisted in many small ways. Nono, who discovered many facets of his homeland in our company is another long term link with Spiti.

By the time we lived in Kinnaur we had both our children and Gian didi, another good friend lost to us before her time, helped keep our sanity and at moments, it seemed, even our marriage together.

Sujata was a genuine good Samaritan. Her ingenuity and vast circle of friends were invaluable in many ways, from securing domestic help to procuring vegetables in short supply. Her unflagging good humour and bon homie, even in the face of severe personal adversity when she lost her husband, was a source of strength to us whenever things were down. Amar Singh was our financial comptroller, inscrutably monitoring our doings and dexterously steering us away from the edge of financial ruin and other indiscretions. Rajman Singh, was our security guard who officially looked out for bear on lonely walks, expedited clearance at road blocks and relayed messages over the wireless. But his solicitude and personal care extended far beyond the call of duty. His limitless energy and agility were a constant source of amazement. One particular incident stands out when at the end of a fatiguing day, in knee-deep snow and in pitch darkness, he coaxed us up steep slopes even as he carried a large supply of fuel and provisions on his back.

Rajinder Negi, Khem Singh Negi, D.C. Negi, P.L. Negi, R.L. Negi and other Kinnaura colleagues provided much local insight in the course of long conversations and many walks together. Across the length of Kinnaur, Ganga Singh in Chaura, Baldev in Shorang, Joginder Singh in Sangla, Rattan Manjari in Ribba, Munishasan in Sunnam, Devi Ram in Namgia are other names which spring readily to mind. To many other faces, it is difficult to put names today but their context is still vivid in memory.

In actually ensuring the book moved beyond notebook jottings, the earliest contributions were from Sanjiv and Rizvi who first entered it on the computer. Later Gopal Jain spent many hours on the maps. Eberhard Fischer responded with alacrity and enormous generosity to a request for a few photographs. Yusuf and Ganeve similarly set apart a stock of pictures for our use. Deborah Klimburg-Salter agreed readily to being quoted extensively. Harish Kapadia made available the entire collection of Himalayan Club Journals to glean information on the region. Radhika Singh gave invaluable help with choosing the photographs and scanning them. Chetan Singh read the first draft and reassured us it was worth publishing. Christian Luczanits helped correct the sections on history and religion in prodigious detail. Mr. T.S. Negi, former speaker of the Himachal Pradesh Vidhan Sabha, was kind enough to correct some factual details and write many complimentary remarks about the manuscript. Rukmani Bakht devoted many

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hours at short notice to the editing. Sanjay Suhail contributed endless mandays on the computer in giving shape to the manuscript, stoically carrying out garbled and often contrary instructions. Apart from their specific contribution, all these friends have been a constant source of encouragement.

We would like to dedicate this book to our families and friends; to all those who share our feelings for Kinnaur and Spiti and specially to Vikram and Rekha who started it all and to John Bissel who we had hoped to take up to Kinnaur some day.

DEEPAK SANAN

DHANU SWADI

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1

INTRODUCTION

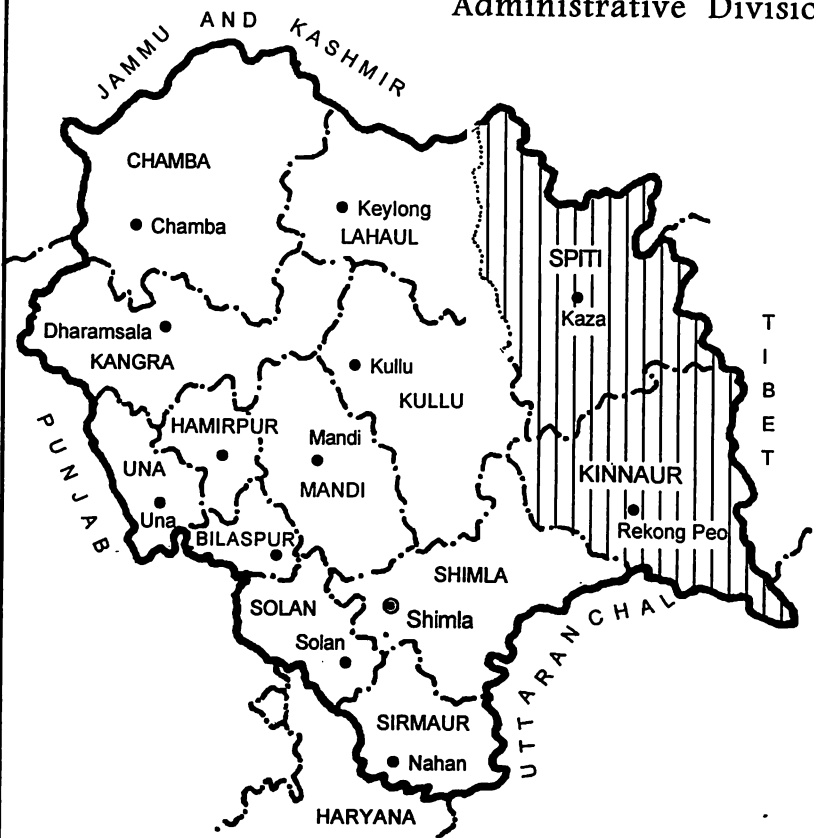


Strung out along part of India's western Himalayan frontier with Tibet, Kinnaur and Spiti have been open to outsiders for less than a decade. As yet, there are few stereotyped images of these areas in the public eye.

It is easy to borrow notions from neighbouring Ladakh though, for the arid zone of Spiti and upper Kinnaur. It can be a 'soul' journey for those affected by the 'mane walls', fluttering flags, prayer wheel-carrying monks, all beneath an ageless blue sky, in a primordial landscape. For those more physically charged, there is the prospect of thirst-filled walks to unexplored glacier valleys and scaling virgin 6000 metre (m) peaks. Lower down the river Satluj, the rest of Kinnaur awaits the chronicler with fresh images—festivals of joyous abandon and the Bacchanalian pleasures of wine, song and dance in upland pasture, village square or intimate household gathering, the shepherd flute in hand, tending his flocks amidst the heady scent of flower-bedecked meadows, the bright, open faces of women, dressed in elaborately woven shawls and the all enveloping, blanket-like *dorus* and the majestic sweep of the Kinner Kailash range, dominating the heart of Kinnaur.

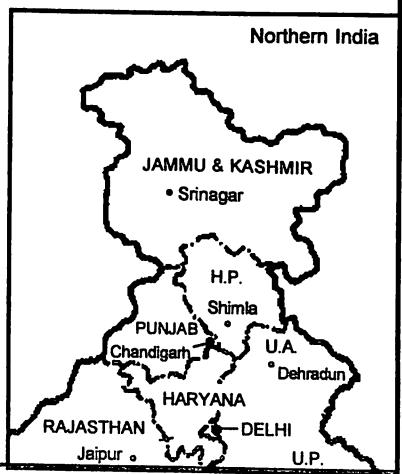
Kinnaur and Spiti are two regions of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Himachal literally means 'Abode of Snow' and the entire state is composed of mountainous terrain, beginning from the Shivalik foothills, and reaching up to the trans-Himalayan heights of the Zaskar range on the border with Ladakh and Tibet. Occupying 56,000 square kilometres (sq. km) of the Western Himalaya sandwiched between the states of Jammu & Kashmir and Uttaranchal, Himachal has received less attention from outsiders than its neighbouring hill regions. The

HIMACHAL PRADESH Administrative Divisions



- State Capital
- District Headquarters

Map not to scale
Boundaries are approximate



vale of Kashmir has been eulogised for ages, making it a must for the traveller to India, and the religious shrines of the Uttaranchal hills have attracted pilgrim traffic for centuries. Himachal is in no way inferior in physical charm to its better known neighbours. The honest warmth and simplicity of its people stands out in marked contrast to the studied charm of the urban Kashmiri, dependent on tourist traffic for his livelihood.

Recent years have seen an increase in tourist attention to Himachal Pradesh. Traditionally tourist traffic has concentrated largely on Shimla and some pilgrim centres in the foothills. Shimla, still remembered as the summer capital of British India, continues to evoke curiosity and nostalgia. But new destinations have also emerged. The Kullu valley, the 'Valley of the Gods', first gained notice as the summer haven of the flower children. Today, Manali, at the upper end of the valley, is a well known resort town and the base for many established trekking routes. Dharamshala, in the Kangra valley, the headquarters in exile of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, attracts a regular stream of visitors. In the last few years, disturbances in Kashmir and the opening of the Manali-Leh road to foreigners has even focused attention on the more remote Lahaul valley, in the district of Lahaul and Spiti.

Lahaul and Spiti are geographically distinct regions. Lahaul, occupying the upper catchment of the Chandrabhaga (called the Chenab lower down), is divided from Spiti by an offshoot of the Greater Himalaya. This range heads south from the 4600 m Baralacha pass on the Manali-Leh highway and links up with the mountain chain dividing Lahaul and Spiti from Kullu district. While the snow-bound Rohtang pass cuts off Lahaul from the Kullu valley for over six months, the road over the Kunzum pass, linking Lahaul and Spiti, is open for barely four months every year. Spiti comprises mostly the catchment of the Spiti river, a tributary of the Satluj. The easier, year round access to Spiti is up the Satluj valley, from Shimla through the neighbouring district of Kinnaur.

Lahaul is an intermediate territory between Ladakh and the lower hills. Buddhism is the major religion in the areas closer to Ladakh and Spiti, while Hinduism holds sway down the Chandrabhaga. The attraction of local monasteries and the trekking routes to Zanskar and within Lahaul is amply realised and these are now well documented in tourist-related guidebooks. But Spiti and Kinnaur, both bordering Tibet, have been veiled. In the old days, difficulty of access inhibited

visitors. Only adventurous souls, able to endure a considerable degree of physical hardship, braved the routes up the Satluj and the Spiti valleys. Communications improved in the second half of the twentieth century but new, legal barriers on entry into Kinnaur and Spiti, were even more difficult to overcome.

Soon after India's Independence in 1947, Kinnaur and Spiti were declared restricted areas and entry by outsiders forbidden without permits. Foreigners could obtain such permission only from the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi. Permission, however, was seldom granted and over the years only a few individuals managed to display the necessary persistence and connections. Domestic tourists could get permits from the district authorities in adjoining districts but the verification requirements defeated most applicants. This situation has changed dramatically since mid-1992. Most of Spiti and Kinnaur have been brought out of the constraining limits of the restricted areas. These areas can now be visited, without any additional permits, by both foreign and domestic tourists. Visiting even the small area of Spiti and Kinnaur, still defined as restricted, is no longer difficult. Domestic tourists do not require permits at all and foreign tourists are freely granted transit permits for passage through this area and can even obtain permission to halt enroute. It is also no longer necessary to broach the bureaucratic citadels of Delhi for this purpose. Such permits are even granted by local authorities in Lahaul, Spiti and Kinnaur, apart from the neighbouring districts of Shimla and Kullu.