



AMIDST SPITI'S TOWERING PEAKS AND BARREN LANDSCAPES, THESE HUMBLE ABODES SERVE AS BRIDGES BETWEEN CULTURES, FOSTERING MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS AND UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

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AT HOME IN

SPITI



Clockwise from left:
A room in Fa-Ma Home Stay in Kaza;
Thinley Home Stay hosts Tenzin Thinley and Tenzin Kunzang;
View of the Kaza Monastery from the Fa-Ma Home Stay

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AT MINUS FIVE DEGREES, WE STEPPED out to look for snow leopards. It had been snowing for the last few days—the paths and fields were covered in two feet of snow. It was quite a workout for our legs, and at an altitude of 4,200 metres, for our lungs. We were in Spiti, a term meaning "middle land," a trans-Himalayan landscape between Tibet and the rest of India. Our guide was Taznin Thinley, a homestay owner and a worker with the Nature Conservation Foundation—he had promised to show us the iconic cat, a promise we fervently hoped was fulfilled, for, otherwise, he had resolved to go on fast.

Spiti, part of Himachal Pradesh, has a cold desert ecosystem, with most of its precipitation coming down as snow. Its landscape is jagged, hilly, and treacherous, with broad, cultivable valleys in some parts. Its unique biodiversity includes snow leopards, ibex, blue sheep, red foxes, and several bird and plant species adapted to the cold.

COMBINING NATURE AND CULTURE

As we walked and half-slipped down a slope, we were already nostalgic about the warmth of the home we had just left behind. It was the Thinley Home Stay in the village of Kibber, one of the last villages on the traditional trade route to Ladakh and Tibet. While walking, Thinley mentioned that about 15 years ago, Kibber initiated homestays to combine nature and culture as a tourist experience.

In recent years, tourism from the rest of India and different parts of the world has increased due to better road connectivity and the region's myriad attractions. This has resulted in about 46 homestays in the 80 households in Kibber. Furthermore, numerous homestays and accommodations have emerged in the divisional town serving Kibber and nearby areas, offering



a valuable source of income for families, particularly during agricultural lulls. This has encouraged local youth to remain in the village, pursuing these opportunities instead of migrating for employment.

"We learnt about homestays and their management on a trip to Uttarakhand," said Thinley. "Then friends from Bangalore encouraged us, helped publicise us, and slowly, we started getting tourists. They also advised us that many visitors want to stay in traditional houses, not new cement-concrete ones." Thinley's house, where he has added a floor for visitors, retains the look and feel of the functional stone-mud architecture for which Spiti is famous.

Kibber's homestays typically have two to eight rooms. The Thinley Home Stay has four, simply but comfortably furnished, all with either the traditional *bukhari* (wood-fired

heaters placed in the centre of the room) or the less common electric heaters. On the first night we reached, piles of *razais* and blankets were offered to us, as well as hot water bags, and that night's sleep was about as snug as one could want.

GOING LOCAL

Before Kibber, we were in Kaza, a bustling settlement, which houses the main government offices for Spiti, its major market, and many tourist establishments. While nowhere as near as picturesque and homely as Kibber, it had its attractions, including a relatively new monastery, the Spiti river running like a black snake through a pure white expanse of banks, a thousand or so Yellowbilled *choughs* (a bird from the crow family) doing aerial acrobatics every morning and evening. Here, our hosts were a couple—

Kalzang Uma and Thuktan Chhopal—running the Fa-Ma Home Stay (*Fa* stands for father, *Ma* for mother). Located opposite the Kaza Gompa, the homestay exteriors are nothing to write home about (there is a third floor under construction to add to the four rooms already available to guests), but the interiors are tasteful, comfortable, and spacious.

At both the Kaza and Kibber homestays, we were asked if we preferred local cuisine or standard dal-chawal-paneer kind of food. The former consisted of the region's typical thukpa soup with vegetables and barley or wheat dumplings, fermented khambir roti (bread) and samba (barley malt) for breakfast, momos, black pea curry, and the like.

Our Fa-Ma hosts even prepared a lip-smacking Kullu region dish, siddu, momo-like dumplings with crushed walnut, garlic, onion, local ghee, and spices, and a curry made

of purple potatoes that turned black when cooked. Thinley told us that many foreigners and Indians ask for local dishes, but since barley can be heavy, simple rice-lentils are always available.

Chai and coffee are also readily served, white or black, sugary or sugarless, and salt tea if requested.

PRIORITISING ECOLOGY

Despite the huge potential for income generation, Kibber residents are aware of the possibility of tourism going beyond the region's carrying capacity. They are discussing norms and rules, and Thinley and others have formed a Kibber Sustainable Tourism Association to enforce these. "Money is not everything; if our biodiversity is destroyed or the environment is polluted by excessive tourism, then it is counter-productive," he said.

This sense of ecological and social responsibility is hardly prevalent in much of the tourism enterprise in the Himalayas; it is not clear how much it permeates even the homestay initiative. There is an explosion of premises calling themselves "homestay"—we saw such boards in virtually every settlement from Spiti through Kinnaur to Shimla. Some looked like standard lodges rather than rooms in someone's home.

The homestay programme, first initiated in Ladakh, was born from a simple concept: merge the aspiration for improved incomes with showcasing local life to visitors while preserving the environment and culture vital to tourists and the community. As we left Himachal Pradesh, we hoped that such a sense would enter every such enterprise—and beyond that, in the tourism sector as a whole. ►OT



Clockwise from left: A snow leopard pair in Kibber; View of snow-carpeted Kaza from the roof of Fa-Ma Home Stay; Fa-Ma Home Stay hosts Kulzang Uma and Thuktan Chhopal with son Nima

