

Warmth in a cold desert

The Spiti Valley of Himachal Pradesh

13 APRIL 2024, ASHISH KOTHARI



Confluence of Pin and Spiti rivers, accessible from Kaza or Kibber @ Shrishtee Bajpai

Light snow began falling as we approached the town of Kaza, about 3200 metres above sea level in the Spiti valley of Himachal Pradesh state in the Indian Himalayas. It was already dark when we reached our homestay and were welcomed with warmth, both human and that emanating from a wood-fired stove. As we settled in for the night, we wondered if the snow would continue in the night.

The next morning, we got our answer, and how. Outside our window, the landscape was pure white, with only portions of house rooftops and electricity poles sticking out. It had snowed a foot and a half! Rather late in the winter, as it was already early March; but for the residents, a huge blessing as they'd not seen so much snow in many years, and water shortage, less grass in pastures, and many other consequences were very worrying.

We were in one of India's 'trans-Himalayan' landscapes, beyond the great mountains that form the Himalayas, extending up to the Tibetan plateau. My colleague Shrishtee Bajpai and I were visiting to conduct a case study on the traditional governance system and its current relevance (after having finished a [similar study in Ladakh](#), also part of India's trans-Himalayan region). But while there, we also wanted to partake in the famed homestay experience of Spiti.

Spiti (a term meaning 'middle land'), has a cold desert ecosystem, and most of its precipitation comes down as snow. Its landscape is jagged, hilly, and (for un-surefooted people like us), treacherous, with broad, cultivable valleys in some parts. Its unique biodiversity includes Snow leopards, Ibex, Blue sheep, Red fox, and several bird and plant species adapted to the cold. Also uniquely adapted are human Spitiens, having lived in the valley carved out by the Spiti River and its tributaries for several hundred years. While pastoralism, agriculture and trade have been the mainstays of the local economy, in recent times a tourism boom has provided new and diversified livelihood options. But with it have also come the inevitable adverse consequences: ecological destruction by unregulated construction of roads and hotels, increasing pollution by vehicles, garbage, cultural influences, and more. There is an urgent need to look for alternatives to unregulated, unsustainable tourism.

This is where homestays have become crucial. Pioneered by the Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust in Ladakh and now spread across the Himalayas, in theory, these benefit both the local hosts (livelihoods relating to hosting, catering, craft and other product sales, nature guiding, as also connections with outsiders) and visitors (a more authentic experience including local food, cultural elements, and social relations). We were keen to see how the theory was working out in practice.

Of snow leopards and warm hospitality

Though we got stuck in Kaza for 3 days – nearly incessant snowfall had blocked roads on both sides – we did manage to get to the village of Kibber, well over 4000 msl, our main fieldwork site. Here, our homestay experience was significantly enhanced by the beauty of the landscape, and the wildlife – including the iconic Snow leopard!

About 15 years ago, Kibber initiated homestays with the intention of combining nature and culture as a different experience for tourists. In these years, tourism from the rest of India and different parts of the world has increased, both due to better road connectivity and to myriad attractions of the region. He said that while in winter the primary attraction is the leopards, especially as "here we can see them at eye level; there are more in Ladakh but harder to see", visitors also come for the spectacular landscape, birds, winter Spiti cultural events like festivals, local food, and to experience their way of living. The practice has become popular, with about 46 homestays in the 80 households in Kibber. At the divisional town that acts as a base for Kibber and surrounds, Kaza, there are also a range of homestays and other accommodation facilities that have come up of late. This has been a good source of revenue and alternative income generation for families, and in a season in which there is not much agricultural or animal husbandry activity. Importantly, many young people have stayed back in the village because of these opportunities, rather than migrate out in search of jobs.

"We learnt about homestays and their management on a trip to Uttarakhand", said Tanzin Thinley, a homestay owner and a worker with the [Nature Conservation Foundation](#). "And then friends from Bangalore encouraged us, helped publicise us, and slowly we started getting tourists. They also advised us that many visitors will want to stay in traditional houses, not new cement-concrete ones; some people in the village who have converted to these are now regretting, as they are too cold and they get body-aches!" Thinley's house, where he has added a floor for visitors, retains the look and feel of the lovely, functional stone-mud architecture Spiti is famous for. Mercifully, most of Kibber has retained these, unlike in Kaza where 'modern' influence has brought in a lot of new, inappropriate construction that sticks out like sore thumbs.

Kibber's homestays range from a couple to 7-8 rooms. The Thinley Home Stay has four, all simply but comfortably furnished, all with either the traditional 'bukhari' (wood-fired heaters placed in the centre of the room) or (less commonly) 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! This was a pleasant surprise, for we had reached when Spiti was already into its 4th day of power breakdown, with no internet, and no phone connection, due to the unusually heavy snowfall in early March. Also very comforting was a series of wildlife pictures in the rooms and corridors, including some astounding ones of Snow leopards that made us hungry to see one!

It was on day 3 of the Kibber visit when, at -5 degrees, we stepped out to look for Snow leopards. Paths and fields were covered in 2 feet of snow. Walking in it was quite a workout for our legs, and at an altitude of 4200 metres, for our lungs. Thinley had promised to show us the iconic cat, a promise one of us fervently hoped was fulfilled for otherwise he had resolved to go on fast!

As we walked and half-slipped down a slope, we were already a bit nostalgic about the warmth of the homestay we had just left behind. Looking pretty against the white landscape behind us, Kibber is one of the last villages on the traditional trade route to Ladakh and Tibet. Along with its nearby villages, Kibber is completely dependent on the snowmelt water from winter precipitation and glaciers, for its main crops, barley and black peas, and for the pastures its livestock population needs. Of late, snowfall has drastically reduced, a clear sign of climate change; this combined with new aspirations amongst its younger generations, has led it to search for additional sources of livelihood.

Our leopard quest was on the third day of reaching there. Before that, we had trudged through snow on a 3 km walk to the spectacular Chicham bridge, the highest in South Asia; once already tried getting a glimpse of the leopards with no success; encountered Ibex as close as 50 metres; done some exciting birding (not high diversity, but species hard to see elsewhere such as snow finches); visited the village monastery perched on a hill; admired the quiet beauty of the village; and befriended some local street dogs. Oh yes, and do the work we had gone for, a study of traditional governance in the region! In all of these, Thinley was our guide and mentor, displaying that all-rounder talent of being a host, cook, naturalist, traditional knowledge-holder, trekker and mountaineer that only a few possess. He was ably complemented by his partner Tanzin Kunzang, active in local women's cultural and other issues, an expert crafts person, also making sure we were fully taken care of at home.

Homestays with a difference

The Kaza experience was a bit different. A bustling settlement which houses the main government offices for Spiti, its major market, and many tourist establishments, Kaza does not have quite the laid-back atmosphere of Kibber. Though nowhere as near as picturesque and homely as Kibber, and a witness to more of the downsides of unregulated tourism, it has its own attractions. This includes a lovely, relatively new monastery, the Spiti river running like a black snake through a pure white expanse of banks, a thousand or so Yellowbilled choughs doing aerial acrobatics every morning and evening, and surrounding jagged hills. Here our hosts were a couple running the Fa-Ma Home Stay ("Fa stands for father, Ma for mother", owners Kalzang Uma and Thuktan Chhopal explained shyly to us). Located opposite the Kaza Gompa (a lovely monastery built recently but in the old style), the homestay exteriors are nothing to write home about (there is a 3rd floor under construction, to add to the 4 rooms already available to guests), but the interiors are tasteful, comfortable, and spacious. Here too, there was a bukhar in the room, but in addition, to counter the sub-zero temperatures at night, there was an electric blanket heated up just before night-time.

At both the Kaza and Kibber homestays, we were asked if we preferred local cuisine or standard dal-chawal-paneer (lentils-rice-cottage cheese) 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, momos and 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! Food was always served in their cosy kitchen, with the delightful company of their son Nima, at first reserved but then warming up to us when we had a noisy game of Uno.

Thinley told us that many foreigners and Indians do ask for local dishes, but since barley can be heavy, simple rice and lentils are also always available. Chai and coffee are also readily served, white or black, sugary or sugarless; and salt tea if requested.

Back to day 3. As we got closer to where the big cats had been sighted on previous days, levels of excitement were mounting. A couple of trackers from the village, who were keeping an eye out so they could then bring down tourists, said that the pair of leopards seen earlier were not spotted today. We tried not to be disappointed; Thinley meanwhile told us to wait at a point and disappeared down the slope. Ten minutes later, we heard a whistle; one of the trackers told us that was likely Thinley calling us. We hurried towards him, and his excited face told us all we wanted to know. Quickly he took us to a vantage point from where, looking down, we saw a large round object; we thought it was just a rock, till we looked through my binoculars. No rock – it was two Snow leopards tightly curled around each other!

We settled on an outcrop just about 60 metres above the cats and waited for them to wake up. The pair was a brother-sister, just out of cubhood, their mother having left or perhaps died. An hour's vigil paid off, as they slowly moved, stretched, got up, did some pirouetting, and then disappeared around a bend into a hollow in the hill. By then it had started snowing, so while it was tempting to wait more for them to come out, we headed back up the hill to the warmth of the homestay.

Homestays and conservations

Back on the roof of his homestay, [Thinley told us](#) that while the homestay programme was providing much-needed income to villagers, it was also serving another crucial purpose. "Earlier, people would resent the Snow leopard for killing our livestock, but now they know its importance for our livelihoods, now they welcome and honour it" said Thinley. He added that this is also because of awareness, livestock insurance, and crop guarding programmes by the Nature Conservation Foundation. 'Shen' (a local term for Snow leopard) as an enterprise to sustain local crafts and skills, including woollen products, has added to livelihood security. A designated area has also been freed of livestock grazing so that wildlife can thrive there. All this has also led to easier sighting of Snow leopards.

Despite the huge potential for income generation, Kibber residents are aware of the possibility of tourism going beyond the carrying capacity of the region. 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," said Thinley.

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 all the way to Shimla. Some of them looked like standard lodges rather than rooms in someone's home. The homestay programme began with a simple idea: combine the need and desire to earn better incomes with the possibility of giving visitors a glimpse of local society, and through this, sustaining the environment and culture that attracts visitors but is also the mainstay of the local communities. 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.

A shorter version of this article, co-written with Shrishtee Bajpai, has been published in [Outlook Traveller](#)

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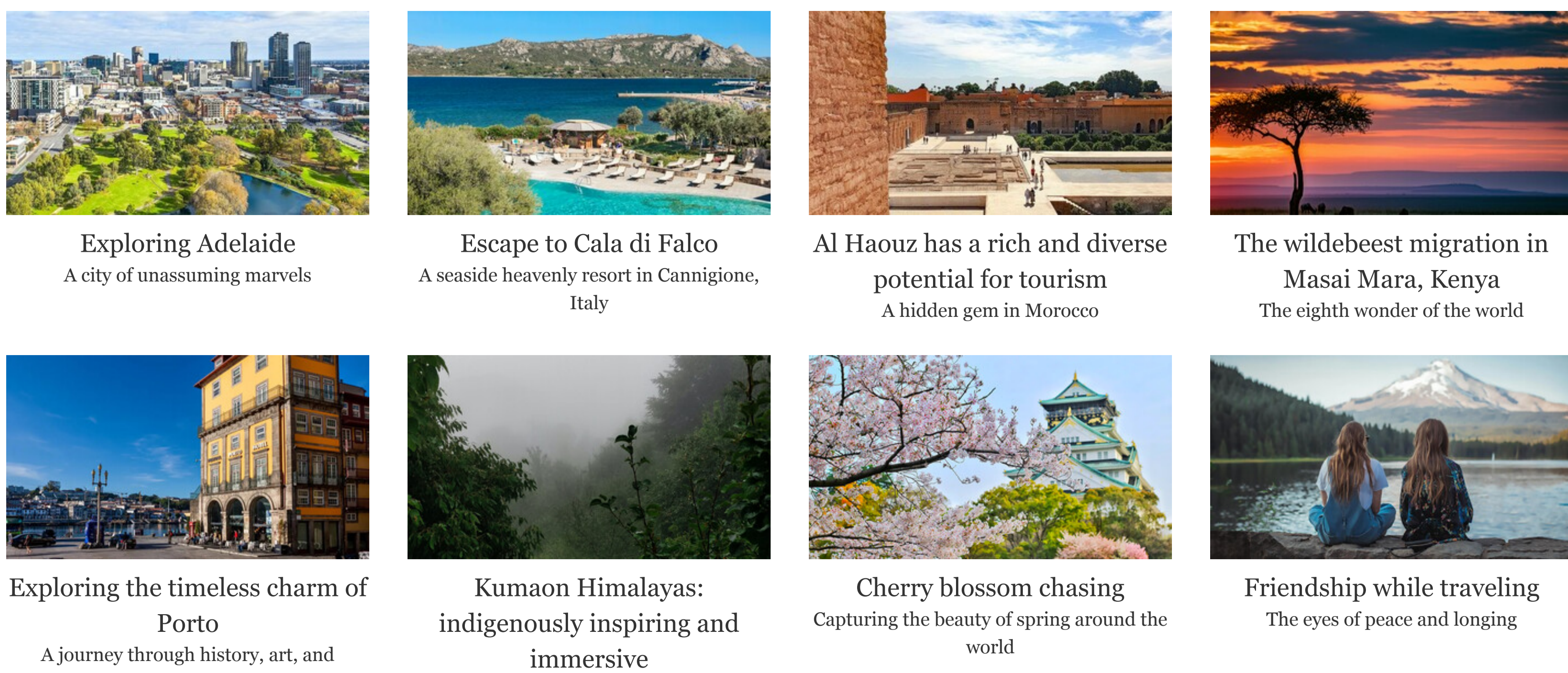
An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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