

Road Trip to Lahaul and Spiti Valley

Overview

Difficulty Level: Easy

Best season: May to October

Region: Himachal Pradesh

Total distance: 1800

Temperature: 5^o C to 15^o C

Altitude: 4270 Mtrs

Short Itinerary:

Day 1: Drive from Chandigarh to Narkand-Rampur-Sarahan (275 Kms 8 to 9 hrs) without detours. Night stay in hotel at Sarahan.

Day 2: Drive from Sarahan to Sangla (80 Kms 3 to 4 hrs without detours), Overnight stay in hotel at Sangla.

Day 3: Drive from Sangla to Nako (145 Kms 4 to 5 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Nako

Day 4: Drive from Nako to Kaza via Sumdo, Tabo, Dhankar (111 Kms 3 to 4 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Kaza.

Day 5: Drive from Kaza-Kibber-Kaza(41 Kms, 2 to 3 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Kaza.

Day 6: Drive from Kaza to Batal (87 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs) and then drive to Chandratal camping site(12 Kms), Overnight camping at Chandratal.

Day 7 : Drive from Chandrataal to Manali via Batal and Rohtang pass (126 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Manali.

Day 8 : Drive from Manali to Chandigarh(309 Kms, 7 to 8 hrs)

Day 1: Drive from Chandigarh to Narkand-Rampur-Sarahan (275 Kms 8 to 9 hrs) without detours.

Night stay in hotel at Sarahan.

The drive from Chandigarh to Sarahan begins climbing up to Kufri where we can take a short break to enjoy the spectacular panorama of the mountain ranges on the other side. From here we will proceed along the dense forested highway passing the towns of Fagu and Theog (famous for their apple orchards) as we gradually start descending towards the river side town of Rampur that lies on the banks of the Sutlej, flowing on our left.

At Rampur we can stop for lunch and enjoy the views of the barren, stark mountains across the gushing ice cold river. Rampur is a town that has grown of late due to the dam projects that have sprouted up in the vicinity and is a fairly busy town. It is famous for its temples and also for its handicraft centre. The old town of Rampur used to be a vital cog in the Indo-Tibet trade route and was the capital of the Bushahr kingdom that traces its origins back to kings who are said to have descended from Lord Krishna. As you enter Rampur town, you will notice a lot of ancient wooden buildings that give a glimpse of the rich history of the town.

Places of interest :

Temples : The town has a number of temples with their unique ancient Himachali stone architecture and beautiful slate roofs. Worth a visit are the Raghunath Temple, the Narsingh Temple, the Dumgir Budh temple and the Ayodhya Temple.

The Padam Palace: The magnificent palatial residence of the Vir Bhadra Singh, the current chief minister of Himachal Pradesh who hails from the lineage of Bushahr rulers and is currently the reigning prince of the dynasty. The palace open to visitors, is a delightful mix of traditional Himachali and colonial style architecture and lies just off the bus stand.

Day 2: Drive from Sarahan to Sangla (80 Kms 3 to 4 hrs without detours), Overnight stay in hotel at Sangla.

In the morning we will drive up early to a vantage point high above the town where you get a brilliant panorama of the snow capped peaks across the Sutlej, bathed in the early morning sunrise. After sunrise, we drive back down to the town square from where we will visit the magnificent Rajmahal and marvel at the beautiful complex that houses apple orchards and lovely pine trees amid sprawling wooden colonial structures. The buildings are open to visitors to visit and walk around on the outside, and occasionally to step into the balconies and terraces but you will not be allowed inside the rooms that are locked with ancient centuries old locks and chains! For lovers of art and architecture, these locks are also quite unique and a rarity by themselves! The most impressive structure is the Shrikhand House that enjoys a wonderful view of the Shrikhand Mahadev range.

After the palace visit, we will grab breakfast and start our journey to Sangla in Baspa valley.

We will now be driving along rough roads that hang precariously to the mountain's edge with rockfall warning signs prompting nervous glances up the steep mountain sides. This is rightly regarded as one of the most treacherous roads in the Himalayas and needs to be negotiated with caution. Watch out for an interesting feature along the way where an arch is cut out of the sheer rock face to accommodate the road under it, making it look like a massive self suspended rock arch cantilevered uncomfortably above the road! A small shrine to the presiding deity is held in high esteem as being the divine force that keeps this impossible geometry stable!

From here on, you can see the denuded hillsides made barren due to the alteration of the course of the river, thanks to the number of dams that have been built here. The most prominent among them is at Karcham where the road forks, with the right arm leading onto Sangla, Rakchham and then Chhitkul (the last roadhead on the Indo-Tibet route). We can stop here a while and stretch our legs while marveling at the engineering marvel of the dam which is formed here. The power plant goes upto 7-8 storeys underground in the opposite mountain while below you can see the excess water gushing out of the thick pipes with enough force to cause a spray that reaches all the way up to the road!.

We will continue our journey to Sangla now. Sangla is the administrative headquarters and has some amazing treks up the rugged mountainsides upto Rupin Pass on one side and on the other side is the remarkable Kamru Fort complex with its ancient settlement and the incredible multi storeyed intricately carved wooden watchtower style Kamakhya Temple perched high on top. You can also hike on down to the Baspa river bank where you can enjoy angling at the trout farm or just relaxing on the meadow, taking in the sights.

Sangla is famous for its golden Kinnauri apples and high quality potatoes. It is also famous for its incredible wooden architecture, of which the Kamru Fort is a must-see as also the intricately carved Devi temple at Chhitkul, the last village on the Indo-Tibetan border. The old Indo-Tibetan highway also passes through Sangla and connects to the main National highway 22 at Karcham.

Culture and Myths – The beautiful green colored patterned cap is the identity of the Kinnauri people and its design indicates the wearer's social standing. The most interesting aspect of the Kinnauris is their origin with one of the theories linking them as descendants of Alexander, while a second theory suggests that they are ancient Iranians who crossed over and decided to carry on living here. There is also another myth that believes they are descendants of the Pandavas (Mahabharat) who are attributed with supernatural powers.

Day 3: Drive from Sangla to Nako (145 Kms 4 to 5 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Nako

We will start early in the morning and head off to Karcham to reach NH-22 for our destination journey to Nako. From Karcham we drive on towards the town of Reckong Peo which is a bustling town and is the main supply town for the Spiti region. We will halt here for breakfast and then carry on along the river banks of Sutlej towards Nako. You will notice the mountainside starting to look barren as we gradually climb higher. We will pass by a few small hamlets inhabited by the local Kinnauris with their beautiful traditional dresses and equally inviting houses perched precariously. At the village of Khab, we come across the confluence of the river Sutlej and the Spiti that joins in from the left. From here we will turn left to follow the Spiti river.

(The road that leads straight goes up to the Tibet border and the famous Shipki la Pass that was the ancient pass where traders would cross over into Tibet. From Khab, if you look right up the mountain top, you will be able to see the pass in the distance. You can also see the highest peak in Himachal Pradesh from here, the Reo Purgyal)

As we turn left, the transformation is complete with the mountainsides now absolutely barren with scree slopes and fantastic ridge and canyon relief that characterize the cold desert that is the Spiti valley. We will proceed along the road as it doubles up and dodges around, snaking its way up the mountainside, all the while following the Spiti river which can be seen flowing below us on the left.

We finally reach the small town of Nako at 3900 metres altitude and will check in for the night but not before exploring the amazing lanes of the village. (We will cover the monastery and the beautiful Nako lake tomorrow morning before departure)

The village of Nako is a quaint and beautiful arrangement of small houses linked by narrow alleys that merge and bifurcate every few metres to make an interesting maze to wander through!

Watch out for almost a millennium old ancient stone inscriptions and relics as you walk through.

The houses in Nako are lower than ground level with low ceilings (only about 5 feet) in order to conserve the heat inside. For the same reason, the entry doorways are small and quaint and a tall person can probably feel like Gulliver among the Lilliputs, bending down and entering the houses!. They believe that the bad souls don't bend. So to enter their houses you need to bend a little to prove that you are one among the good souls. The houses are made of mud and stone and store fire wood up on the roof. Every house has a front yard for pet animals that is bounded by piled up rocks and of course the

ubiquitous prayer wheels and flags. All in all, the village and their houses are an amazing experience to be cherished as we retire for the night.

Day 4: Drive from Nako to Kaza via Sumdo, Tabo, Dhankar (111 Kms 3 to 4 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Kaza.

In the early morning, we will proceed to visit the Nako lake, surrounded by willow and poplar trees. It may be small but makes for a picturesque setting in these rugged, dusty mountains. We will then proceed to the monastic complex that is located along the western edge of the town. The complex looks like a simple cluster of low height beige grey stone and intricately carved wooden structures from the outside but on the inside the structures boast of a rich colourful heritage including the original clay sculptures, murals and ceiling panels. The largest (and also oldest) structure is called the Translator's Temple, while the Small White temple looks decrepit but is worth a visit because of its remarkably intricate carved wooden door frame that depicts the life of Lord Buddha.

After visiting the monastery, we will begin our journey towards Tabo via Sumdo.

We will take the high road that skirts past Malling nallah in order to make good time since we will be visiting the village of Gue today. The road winds up and down along the mountain, sometimes dipping almost to the level of the Spiti and then rising again. After a couple of hours of driving through the canyon like mountains, we arrive at Sumdo where we need to stop at the Army check-post for a routine check. This is necessitated by our proximity to the Tibet border town of Kaurik that lies 18 kms from here along the road that leads to the right. The region is out of bounds for civilians and requires a special permit to visit.

After moving further ahead from here, we will turn along a narrow rough lane that leads right and to the village of Gue, where the naturally preserved 600 yr old mummified body of the monk Sangha Tenzin, can be seen, seated in deep meditation. The story goes that when his village was plagued by an infestation of scorpions, he decided to cease eating and slowly starve himself to self-mummification (a practice still followed by a sect in Japan) After he had been mummified naturally and his spirit left his body, it is said that a rainbow appeared in the sky and a kaleidoscope of butterflies appeared in place of the scorpions, who forever disappeared.

From Gue we will drive back and rejoin the highway and drive on further to reach Tabo in the afternoon. Tabo is a bigger town as compared to Nako and lies in a low valley just a few hundred feet above the river.

It has a school, a big hostel, a horticulture college, a health clinic, a Himachal Tourism guest house and the most famous of them all – the 1000 year old Tabo monastery. It is surrounded on all sides by barren mountains of varying shades of brown with snow caps at the very top. If you look carefully at the mountainsides, you can see a number of caves carved into the mountain faces above the village. These are used by the monks for meditation and we can spend the evening hiking up to the caves to explore them, especially the assembly hall cave with faded paintings carved on the rock face.

We will have lunch in the afternoon and then will visit the 1000 yr old Tabo monastery. This is regarded as being the oldest continuously operating Buddhist complex and is a treasure trove of ancient and rare scriptures, relics, frescoes, extensive, stunning murals and thangkas. (Tabo has also earned the moniker of being the “Ajanta of the North” due to its exquisite murals and paintings) The thick mud walls encircling the complex and the dry climate have helped preserve the monastery much better than any other. Parts of the old monastery were destroyed in the massive earthquake of 1975 after which a new monastery was constructed, following which a Kaalachakra was held here by the Dalai Lama in 1983. The monastery now has 9 temples, 4 decorated stupas and a number of cave shrines.

The main temple walls are covered with vividly coloured paintings from the 15th century and very large life like statues along the walls. The main hall also has clay images and full size busts of Gods and demons along the rear wall along with the 108 Holy Scriptures displayed in the main hall. Another interesting structure is the Golden Temple that was once supposed to have been covered with gold! There are also a number of ancient stupas and chortens in the temple precinct. A visit to the complex takes at least a couple of hours and we will request a lama to accompany us and give background information on the shrines and the paintings as well as the rare scriptures stored here.

After seeing the monastery we will proceed straight to Kaza which is around 45 Kms from Tabo and takes about 1.5 hrs.

(If time permits we can drive up to Dhankar although that may require an extra day or two and we have to stay in Lalung. The roads winds along following the bank of the Spiti river flanked by mountains of fantastic eerie relief, carved by the wind and glaciers. As we get closer to Dhankar, we can see the stunning monastery nestled amid the spur of steep brown cliffs overlooking the confluence of the Spiti and the Pin rivers below, with grey snow capped mountains forming a forbidding backdrop. The monastery is in the usual Tibetan style and ascends in a series of steps following the profile of the mountain, that makes it look as if it is a part of the terrain rather than being built form. This is a typical feature of the monasteries in the Spiti and the Ladakh regions and it is quite an experience to visit the

monastery and walk through the various platform like levels interconnected by steps cut in the mountainside. We will spend some time exploring this wonderful monastery and the small museum within its precinct.

Above this monastery lie the ruins of the Dhankar Fort which we will visit next. The views from up here are even better than from the monastery and reveal windswept and eroded pinnacles of rock rising steeply up the mountainsides.

We can begin an hour long trek up into the mountains that lie above Dhankar village. The trail leads us to a rarely visited little gem nestled high up – the Dhankar Tso (Dhankar lake) The view of the twin snow peaks of the Manirang (approx 6600 metres) dominate the view across the valley and leave you awe struck.

After spending a bit of time here, we will trek back down to the vehicle and continue our journey to Lalung. We will check in at Lalung in the evening and if time permits, shall go to visit the famous Lalung Monastery today itself.

The Lalung monastery is famous for its unique three cornered statue of Lord Buddha, constructed in such a manner to symbolize the Lord looking in all directions. The founder of most of the major monasteries in the region, Rinchen Zangpo, is said to have planted a willow tree here and instructed the village to build a monastery if the tree survived. The ancient tree still survives and is visible outside the monastery gates!).

Please let us know in advance if you are keen in making the above detour.

Day 5: Drive from Kaza-Kibber-Kaza(41 Kms, 2 to 3 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Kaza.

From Kaza, we will climb up the winding road (one of the highest motorable roads in the world) to the small village of Langza that is perched precariously on the mountainside above Kaza at 4250 metres. The road leads further up the mountain to the top which is a plateau with a sparse meadow that serves as grazing grounds. We will then proceed to visit an ancient Buddhist shrine in this village. While in the village you cannot fail to be impressed by the stunning view of the perfectly pyramidal peak inescapable, hanging high behind the village – the famous Chau Chau Kang Nilda.

There is an interesting folk tale regarding the pea. It is said that a handsome married man of the village charmed the fairy Chau Chau kang Nilda with his lute, but was warned by the fairy to never mention her name. Once in a drunken stupor he unfortunately mentioned her name and the very next day was afflicted by boils that marred his beauty. When he went to search for the fairy, and played his lute for

her, she did not appear. Everytime he tried to get higher up the mountain, the weather would get nasty to prevent him from meeting her while she nursed her broken heart. It is said that the weather changes even now when anyone tries to climb the peak... myth or reality? Only those attempting to summit the peak will know!

Then we will proceed to the remarkable Key monastery that is the finest example of the monastery architecture of the region with the entire complex nestled in and following the contours of a sharp pyramidal spur that stands out like a rugged cone rising up from the river banks. The various squat halls hang precariously, embedded into the mud walls and eroded rock with connecting passages and tunnels looking like an incredible organic beehive like structure that seems to have evolved along with the barren landscape. The monastery is the biggest in the Spiti region and is a training centre for the lamas of the region. The walls of the many chambers of the monastery are decorated with beautiful full length murals and paintings, and boasts of an excellent collection of ancient manuscripts.

After having completed our exploration through the monastery, we will proceed to Kibber where we will head off to try our luck spotting the elusive wildlife of the region. We will clamber up the mountain at the back of the village heading off towards the villages of Gete and Tashigang. This route is well known as being frequented by the wildlife of the region such as the blue sheep, ibex and the rare snow leopard. In fact, this location is probably the best chance of spotting the snow leopard since it boasts of the maximum average sightings, perhaps due to easy availability of prey for the leopard.

We will end the day by returning to Kaza.(If time permits one can think of making a visit to remote Chicham village. The village is not very far from Kibber but is on the other side of a canyon gorge that is approximately 110 metres deep! This makes it virtually inaccessible with the only means of entry being via a local "cable car" or trolley that creaks across the gorge as it slowly makes its way to the other side. We will drive up to the gorge by the rugged road after which we will undertake the adventurous journey across the flimsy "cable car(if time permits)" (more like a crate actually!)

The village itself is very small with only around a 100 inhabitants and due to the largely undisturbed environs, We will have breakfast here and then go for a few short hikes in order to spot the elusive wildlife of the region. After spending some time exploring and talking to the locals, we will return back to Kaza via Kibber.

Day 6: Drive from Kaza to Batal (87 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs) and then drive to Chandratal camping site(12 Kms), Overnight camping at Chandratal.

Early morning we begin the next phase of our trip as we head off upwards towards Batal via Kunzum La. Kunzum Pass is the high altitude pass (15,060 feet) that connects the Spiti Valley to Lahaul and Kullu valleys. We will halt at the top to enjoy the spectacular view of the white peaks on both sides with the Chandra Bhaga(CB) range of peaks stealing the show with their mighty hanging glaciers bang in front toward the North. During summer, you will see lovely yellow wildflowers along the grassy slopes leading down from the pass. There is also a shrine here where all the local drivers stop to seek blessings on the further onward journey...and for good reason, since the roads of Spiti valley are known to be rough and pretty dangerous!

We will now move on down the pass onwards towards our next stop – Batal which lies at the banks of the Chandra River that gushes like an unstoppable beast and has probably the most dangerous rapids of the region. We will have our lunch at the very famous “Chandra Dhaba” that is run by the genial brave heart couple simply known as Chacha and Chachi (uncle / aunt) They have been instrumental in saving numerous lives during whiteouts and landslides that occur so frequently in the region and have received national and state commendations for their deeds of bravery.

Batal is famous for its wild, blustery high altitude winds as it lies in a channel between the mountain ranges cut by the flow of the river, creating a barren valley with rounded multi coloured boulders and pebbles of all sizes. You can get some stunning views of the mountain ranges lying off in the Kullu region as well as the Lahaul region from here. Some of the most prominent peaks visible from here are the Papsura (White Sail) and Dharamsura. Completing the ring are the CB (Chandra Bhaga peaks) that tower over the camp. The camp site is also famous for spectacular star gazing since there is very little light pollution here, being far away from civilization!

After a bit of rest, we can go walk up the ridge just behind the dhaba(small restaurant), till the top where we can get an amazing glimpse of the road leading away to Kunzum La on the right while on the left, you can see the awe inspiring ice fall of the CB 13 peak almost at touching distance! Below you from the ridge you can see a greenish tarn (glacial lake) that reminds you that the rocks you are standing on are actually moraines, hiding a glacier beneath them!

We return to dhaba in the late afternoon and then immediately proceed to Chandrataal camping site where we will set up our camp for the night halt. This is a rough track with a few ups and downs and with stunning sweeping vistas typical of the Spiti region that you know to expect, yet take your breath away. On the left we will see the fast flowing Chandra river that spreads out in a swathe below with white sand and rock banks and a number of islands in the middle. After a while of driving along the

rough road, you will come to an extremely rough patch where the water gushes down the glacier above, onto the road, bouncing off the large boulders. We need to get off here so the vehicle can carefully drive across the rocks, while we tie up our shoes and wade across the ice cold water!

On the other side its not very long now before we reach the camp site which is located on a refreshingly green patch with wildflowers and hanging above it like a huge God is the massive CB 14 peak with its huge hanging glacier looking down at you.

This is probably one of the most scenic campsites in the Himalayan region and we will unpack to rest in the camp set up in nature's lap. This region gets extremely cold all throughout the year due to the whipping winds and its best to cover up well for the night!

Day 7 : Drive from Chandrataal to Manali via Batal and Rohtang pass (126 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Manali.

We will begin the day by making a visit to the eye feasting Chandrataal lake which is approximately 2 Kms from the camping site. The trekking stretch to the lake is a no vehicle zone in order to preserve the ecosystem, so we will have to slowly hike up the slopes till we reach the ridge line after which the trail drop down beyond for about a km more. Now the trail will rise again and will finally stop at the lip of a crater like depression from where you can see the magnificent Chandra Tal lake in all its glory below. The Lake has a pale emerald hue in the morning, with gentle waves lapping at the white sandy shores making it look like surreal like a Caribbean island suddenly transported into the mountains!

The lake is shaped like a crescent moon, hence the name "Chandra" which signifies the moon. We will head on down to the shore of the lake where you can wade in the crystal clear, chilled glacial water. You will see a narrow stream flowing away from the lake; this is the humble beginning of the mighty Chandra river that we saw gushing like an uncontrollable beast at batal!

(Please be careful not to venture out into the lake as it is said to be quite deep and dangerous, especially for non swimmers)

After returning back from the lake we wind up camp and drive towards Batal where we can seek some refreshments once again at the Chandra Dhaba. From Batal we will drive to Manali via Rohtang pass & Solang Valley.

As we keep climbing higher, it becomes obvious that we have finally exited the cold desert of Spiti, with the mountainsides green with meadows and wildflowers drained by a number of flowing streams

interspersed among them. Finally we come to the top of the climb at Rohtang Pass (13,050 feet) where we can stretch our legs a bit before moving on down the other side.

(It is worth knowing and indeed very interesting to know the genesis of the word Rohtang which in Tibetan local dialect means pile of corpses. This name was given due to number of people who lost their lives in the past due to bad weather while trying to cross the pass (elevation 3,978 m (13,050 ft).

Geographically Rohtang Pass is on the Pir Panjal Mountain Range of the Himalayas. Besides Lahaul and Spiti, Rohtang Pass also serves as the gateway to Pangi and the valley of Leh)

On the other side, the transformation is complete, lush green valleys and pine trees greet are a refreshing sight for the eyes used to the barren wastes of Spiti for so long! We will drive on through this visual ecstasy until we reach the turn off for Solang where we will drive right until we reach Solang valley where we will check in. After getting refreshed we will head over to the adventure sports location where if you wish we can make arrangements for para gliding and zorbing on the lush green, picturesque slopes of the valley, flanked by the Snow streaked Solang mountain range(not included in the package). During winters, the valley receives a generous helping of snow and turns into a popular ski resort with slopes suitable for skiers of all levels (from beginner to advanced) Other adventure sports such as rock climbing and rappelling can also be done here, and we will make necessary arrangements if informed in advance.

The cable car ropeway is available throughout the year to take guests to the top of the slopes while snow scooters can be tried out during winters and ATVs/quad bikes during summers. For those interested in treks, there are short 2-3 hour long treks to the Shiva temple or the waterfall close by and we can also arrange these on request.

Finally we will take rest at a hotel in Manali before leaving the God blessed region and returning to the plains.

Day 8 : Drive from Manali to Chandigarh(309 Kms, 7 to 8 hrs)

After having relaxed and toweled off, we finally bid goodbye, as we head off to Manali town.On entering Manali, we will have one final spot of sightseeing as we explore the famous Hadimba temple surrounded by the dark pines, and then move onto the Manu temple after which we drive back straight to Chandigarh.