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Vol. 2, Issue 12 ■ June 2003 ■ Rs. 50

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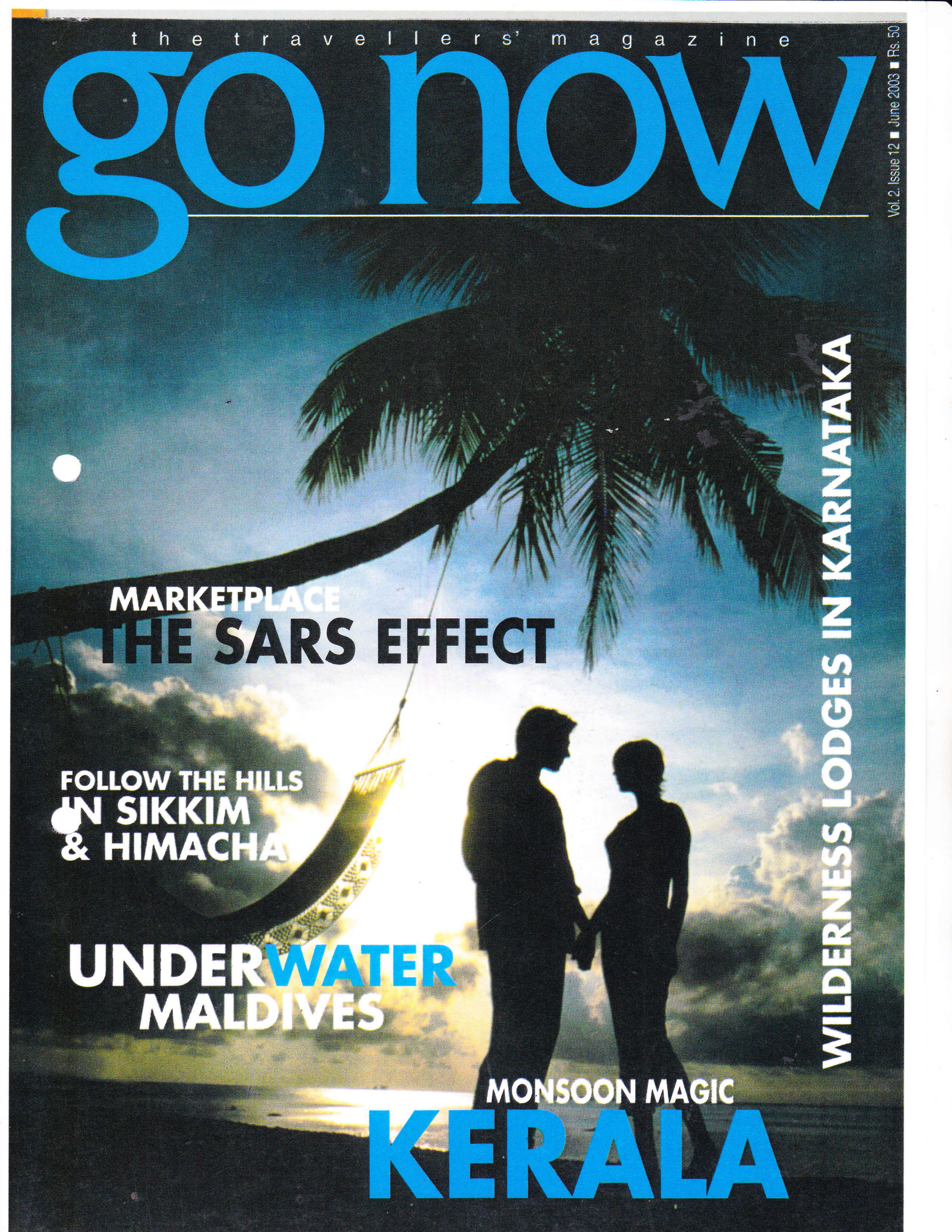
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# Moonwalking in HIMACHAL



**A journey of discovery to a region of immense beauty and spirituality**

by RITA SAWHNEY

For many years, a mystical aura surrounded the Himachali regions of Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti. Isolated for a long time from the rest of the country due to the lack of a road network, the region has just recently been opened to tourists who now venture through its treacherous terrain to find nirvana on its lunar landscape which is a stark contrast with the verdant peaks of the rest of the state.

Inaccessible to most and home to scores of Buddhist viharas, our destination, Tabo lies in the Spiti district and is famous for its ancient monastery that was the venue of the *kalachakra* ceremony in 1996, when the Dalai Lama graced the occasion and meditated with thousands on its arid, rugged slopes.

Our journey started at the foothills of the Shivalik range, where the cable car negotiated its perilous path up

the steep mountain. At 5,000 ft, we dined at Timber Trail Heights; a canopy of stars above and the mesmerising brilliance of the lights in the towns below for company.

As we drove up the wide road to the capital of Himachal Pradesh, Shimla, high mountains greeted us as we drove through throngs of people. Some coolies hailed us to carry our luggage, others to lead us to a hotel. As the city is overcrowded, we drove on to Mashobhara and Naldhera, the two new hot spots, the latter known for its golf course. The chalets in Naldhera are a stone's throw from the golf course and we found ourselves in a mountain retreat with log huts and a cosy ambience.

An early morning tee-off at the famous golf course, where Lord Curzon also played, and a hearty breakfast and we were all ready



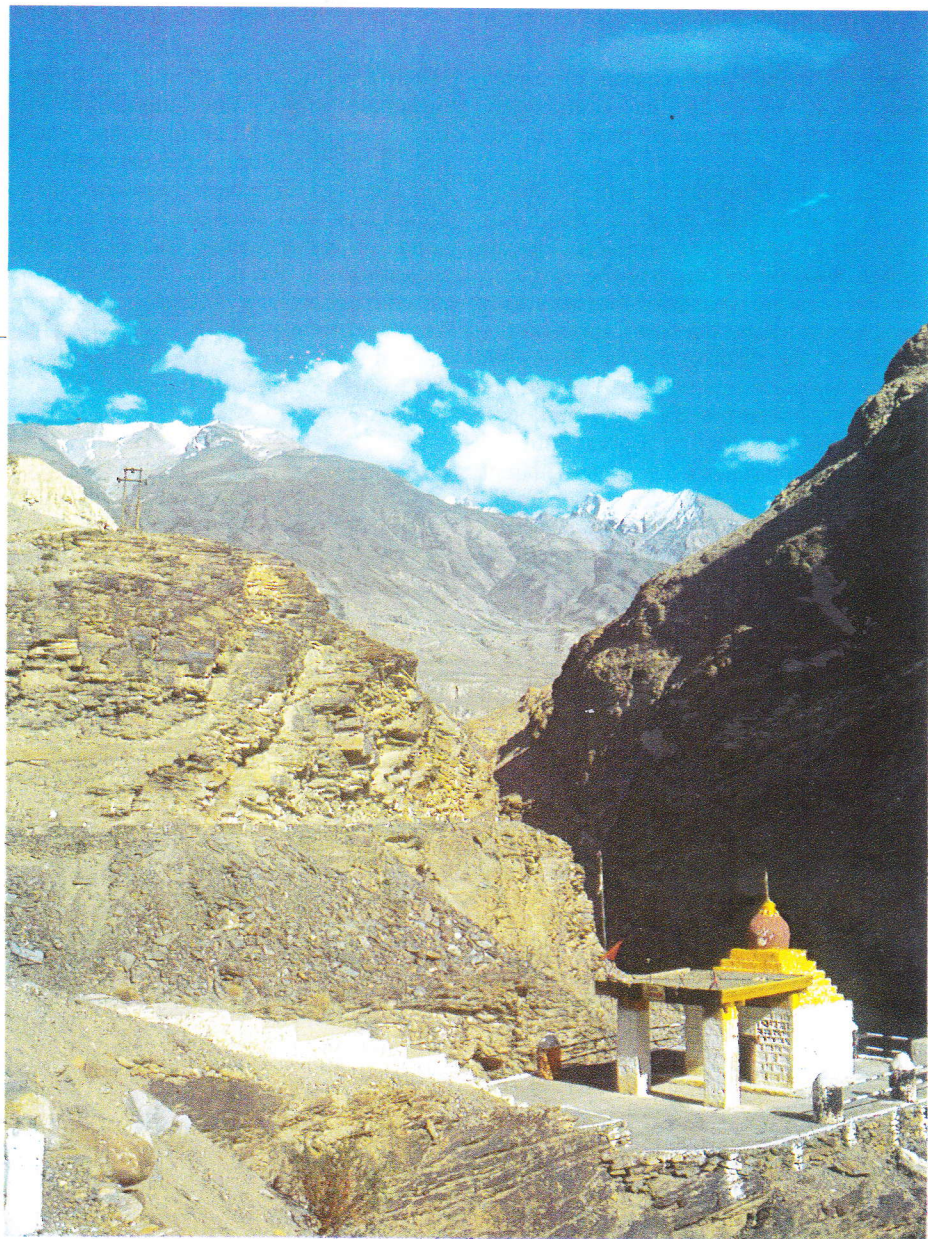
(Right)  
With freckles of green over a weather  
beaten face, Spiti is a cold desert. Chortens  
dot the landscape

(Facing page)  
Bhimakali Temple in Sarahan is a truly  
resplendent example of local architecture  
and superb views. Sarahan is also one of  
the entry points to Kinnaur

(Below)  
The people of the area are given to  
celebrations and rituals

to hit the road. The view is breathtaking as we drove through the cherry and apple orchards of Narkanda. The road winds down to the town of Rampur on the turbulent banks of the Satluj and verdant terraced fields. Rampur, capital of the erstwhile Bushahr State, is best known for the age-old Lavi fair that is held every winter when thousands flock to this town. Feverish activity and trading takes place here at that time with people coming from neighbouring villages to barter wool, woollen goods, dry fruits, and even horses!

We paused for lunch at the Satluj Café where every attempt at conversation was thwarted due to the roar of the Satluj below. A couple of hours later we ascended a side road, a diversion towards Sarahan.



RITA SAWHNEY

Sarahan, steeped in legend and famous for its Bhimakali Temple complex, is regarded as one of the 51 sacred *shakti peeths* of India. We climbed past flowering jacaranda and silver oak trees and apricot orchards. Dozens of rivulets of melting snow criss-cross the road and tiny waterfalls feed the lush fields. The alpine scenery of Sarahan reminded us of Switzerland. Looming over the town, a forest of deodar trees line slopes that are carpeted by wild flowers and medicinal herbs, in the distance trees of birch encircle the Bashal Peak. Surrounded by snow-clad peaks and dominating the village is the famous Bhimakali Temple. The temple is a

combination of Hindu and Buddhist architecture and is sacred to both communities. Here, human sacrifice was once prevalent, though now only goats are offered to the deity. The temple's unusual structure and wealth of carvings have made it a resplendent example of 'Indo-Tibetan' architecture. Deep down in the valley flows the Satluj and the permanent snows of the Shrikhand-Mahadev peak make the distant backdrop.

Many treks use Sarahan as a base as this is also the gateway to Kinnaur. We trudged up to the aviary where rare birds, like the multicoloured

Stacks of wood, neatly stored on the roofs is the only fuel for warmth as well as cooking. Hot and weary after the trek, We eased ourselves into the hammocks strategically hung near shady groves lulled by the steady, constant roar of the river



tragopan, monal and khaleej pheasants strut side by side in competition. Birdwatching consumed most of our time here.

Taking the bifurcation from Karcham, we drove alongside a gurgling stream to a bewitching valley of rugged beauty, Sangla. Snowbound most of the year, and remote, we were welcomed into luxurious tents set up by the Banjara Camps on the banks of the raging Baspa River. At Sangla, we were treated to an absolutely unique experience of the great outdoors, coupled with the luxury of great gourmet fare and clean toilets! I discovered a latent talent for the guitar, while the others willed Time to stand still, counting the stars while lolling in hammocks. A bar-beque under starry skies, the sound of the river in the background and good company, all helped to make it a memorable experience.

A packed lunch the next morning, and we set off for Chitkul, which, at 11000 ft, is the last village on the Indo-Tibetan trade route. Here, on the banks of a thunder-strewn river, we relished the

lunch and made an attempt to fish for mountain trout. Rhododendrons and birch trees grow all around here. Found only at high altitudes, the extraordinary fine layers of birch bark, renowned for its suppleness and strength, were used for some of India's most ancient writings including the Vedas and the Ramayana. At the village, a buffalo was being sacrificed to appease the Gods. I walked back to the safari with a queasy feeling as drums proclaimed the conclusion of the ritual.

The next day started with a walk through the nearby village of Batseri. We strolled down cobbled streets investigating the quaint dwellings of the local villagers. Stacks of wood, neatly stored on the roofs is the only fuel used for warmth as well as cooking. Hot and weary after the trek, we eased ourselves into the hammocks strategically hung near shady groves and listened to the steady, constant roar of the river.

September is perhaps the best season in Kinnaur. As the rains end, autumn

sends fiery colours racing through the trees. The festival of flowers, 'Phulech', provides tourists an opportunity to discover these remarkable people and their beautiful land as they come out in droves to scour the hillsides for flowers to offer to the local deity. Dressed in all their finery, they lose themselves in a spate of revelry – singing, dancing and feasting.

We left Sangla with a heavy heart, driving through deep narrow gorges with sheer cliffs rising hundreds of feet on both sides as the turbulent river kept us company. The 33 kilometres climb to Kalpa past Recong Peo, where we picked up some intricately woven Kinnauri shawls, was covered well within two hours. The holy peak of Kinner Kailash looms over the little town, the *parikrama* of which is done by many devotees. At Kalpa, we indulged in all things associated with hill stations: long walks, sunset watching and curling up with a good book.

It was now time to move into the interior to fathom the mystery of

We climbed past flowering jacaranda and silver oak trees and apricot orchards. Dozens of rivulets of melting snow criss-cross the road and tiny waterfalls feed the lush fields





## FastFacts

### Getting there

Sarahan is 175 km northeast from Shimla and the route taken by the writer takes 6 hours. You could stay at the Shrikhand Mahadev Himachal Tourism complex if you don't want to drive all out all the way. From Sarahan, it is a 99-km drive to the south to Sangla and is only a few kilometres north to Chitkul. From Chitkul, it is a 33 km climb up till Kalpa and from here it is another 140 km till Tabo. Driving time would vary with speed as well as the number of pit stops one would take along the way.



(Above)  
Tabo. Our  
windswept  
destination

(Left)  
The basins of  
Kinnaur hold  
orchards, fields and  
picturesque  
hamlets. Kinnaur  
also holds two of  
the world's great  
mountain ranges,  
the Zaskar and the  
Greater Himalaya  
(Facing page)  
The confluence of  
the Chandra and  
Bhaga rivers at  
Tandi, Lahaul

Spiti. We were told at Powari to tank up and fill all the jerry cans we could lay our hands on as there are no gas stations till Kaza. A breathtaking waterfall, lay ahead at the bend after which the terrain started changing. Green, verdant hills transformed into shades of sienna. This ecologically fragile area remained locked behind formidable mountain barriers and was only connected by treacherous passes and narrow paths till the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) stepped in. At Khab, the waters of the Spiti unite with the Satluj, and here is where we climbed up to Chango, at 12,071 ft. Surprisingly, even at this altitude, we were clad only in T-shirts as the climate here is of a desert-like contrast – hot sunny days and blisteringly cold nights. We drove up some arid land, desolate and barren, the

monotony broken only by a few willow and poplar trees. The Spiti River, at the base of the Kumzam range brims with melting snow, sometimes at road level and suddenly thousands of feet below, as we ascended higher and higher. Pink roses grow on deceptive thorny bushes and fall apart at the first touch, accessible only to mountain goats.

Isolated for centuries, Spiti has an introvert culture and life is focused around its several monasteries. The ubiquitous Mani stones, prayer flags and chortens testify this. We felt the haunting and unforgettable presence of serenity in the starkness of this town.

Spiti is beyond the reach of the monsoon with tan slopes sweeping down to the river-bed, contrasting with the azure sky. Tiny stupas built on hills,

convey the spiritual sentiments of the people. Villages that seem inaccessible and unapproachable, appeared on mountain peaks in the distance. We were nearing our journey's end and we noticed that the hills of Tabo had been swept into uneven ridges by harsh winds and the melting snow. We saw many small hamlets in remote areas surviving the vagaries of nature.

Tabo, at an altitude of 10,065 ft is a wind swept, weather beaten town, but along the road, groves of poplar and willows stand tall lending some colour to the bleak landscape. The sacred shrines, here are some of the most revered in Buddhism. In the sacred gompa lie some of the best art treasures of the world. We entered the anteroom and stepped gingerly into the main heart of the gompa, held speechless by the stucco images on the walls. Extending from one corner to the other were images of the Taras, Dolmas, Avalokateshawara, and Padma-sambhava. Over a cup of hot butter tea with the head lama, I learnt that Tabo's murals and stucco images have earned it the sobriquet of 'Ajanta of the Himalayas'. We marvelled and watched. With white scarves of blessings around our necks and reverence in our hearts, we took the revered Lama's leave.

We left Tabo with a feeling of other worldliness, a feeling of having being cleansed by Nature and the natural. The purity of our surroundings had touched us. ♦