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Destination Himachal: Of momos, domesticated yaks and conducted tours

by Veena Gokhale

I had a superior attitude towards conducted tours even as I watched my parents enjoy many of them to destinations in India and abroad. They were decidedly not for an individualist and adventurer like myself, I decided. But this was back in the era when words like “burnt out” were applied to badly done toast rather than fatigued humans. Older and fussier, I decided this summer to book myself on a 12-day tour to Shimla-Kulu-Manali with Anubhav Travel. I wished to retain the pleasures of travel while handing the bother over to someone else.

The Bombay-Delhi second-class train journey on the Frontier Mail was rendered tolerable by an afternoon shower. Not everyone chose this option. Some people opted for the Rajdhani, others flew and yet others forked out for the Second AC.

It was evening when we arrived in Delhi on 26th June to be immediately ushered to luxury buses which took us to a hot and welcome dhaba meal at Murthal, 50 km from sweltering Delhi. I fell asleep on the bus and woke the next morning to a magical view of mountain slopes, valleys and a steep, curving road.

I had heard nothing but bad things about Shimla. It was reputed to be overcrowded, with too many buildings and too few trees. I have come away however with a favourable impression. I think the location of our hotel - the Woodrina Tourist Complex - 8 km away from the main city, with a beautiful valley view and the opportunity to meander along a mountain path, bordered with wild flowers, while inhaling pine-scented air - had everything to do with this.

Shimla's spacious mall, with its European style buildings and a dominating statue of Indira Gandhi praising the virtues of Himachal, is worth a visit. The Naldera Golf course which comprises of spindly trees on muddy-brown slopes is worth a miss. In any case the golf course is closed to the general public. Worth sampling is the scenery from unspoilt Fagu, an hour's drive from Shimla. The place is apparently named after a Chinese trader who was passing through and chose to settle in the area.

It might be really worth visiting Shimla next year when it celebrates its golden jubilee with a three-month summer celebration highlighting important political events

that took place here around the time of independence, variously reviving the city's history.

One regret I have is that our tour operators were not particularly well informed. Arun Bhatt, the founder of Anubhav Travels, is intimately acquainted with this region and we gained from his expertise in Manali, where he met up with the tour. Anubhav Travels should put their tour operators through a course on the history and culture of the region.

After spending two nights in Shimla, it was time to go to Manali. I expected to be bored enroute. Being tied to a bus seat, however comfortable, from morning to evening, is not much fun. I was in for a surprise. By afternoon the picturesque Beas river had become our travelling companion flowing through a kaleidoscopic landscape of deep gorges, green and yellow farmland and villages clinging cheerfully to steep hillsides.

I realised what a rare pleasure it is today to see a river that is clean, in India, its fast-flowing water flecked with sparkling white foam. The Beas often flowed past huge boulders and beautiful rocks in a range of colours - pink, rust, grey and green. Our first glimpses of snow-clad peaks in the late afternoon generated considerable excitement in the bus.

At Manali, we stayed at Hotel Highland, a short walk from the busy mall where I drank buttery Tibetan tea, refreshingly salty instead of predictably sugary. Mr. Bhatt introduced us to another Tibetan specialty - the mouth-watering momo - essentially modaks with a savoury, Chinese flavoured vegetable filling.

Manali is charming with its lush greenery, breathtaking views, salubrious climate, beautiful parks which you chance upon as you walk around the city, and just plain good vibes! Dispense with the inevitable shopping as fast as you can, then go to Old Manali with its winding paths, old houses, handicraft shops and way-cool cafes with names like Moonrise. This is a Goa-style hangout - laidback, bohemian, frequented by foreigners - where you can get a tattoo, buy a tank top or spend a pleasant hour sipping mint tea, nibbling at a huge piece of lemon cake at an outdoor cafe, gazing at yet another conglomerate of gorgeous rose bushes, while letting some meditative New Age music wash over you.

On my walk I encountered a family picking cherries from their garden. Snot-nosed kids in patched-up clothes, their cheeks nearly as red as the fruit, grabbed and devoured the cherries that fell to the ground. I promptly bought some and took them to the riverside park where I went for my daily nature meditation.

Manali even has a great bookshop - The Bookworm - behind the main bus terminus where I was given a sticker which said 'Free Tibet - Chinese go home' along

with my purchase. For history there are the colourful yet tranquil Tibetan monasteries, an elegant wood and glass temple dedicated to Manu, the Indian equivalent of Adam, and the Hidimba temple, the only one in the country, I am willing to bet, dedicated to a rakshash! Married to Bhim, mother of Ghatothkatch, Hidimba devoted her later life to penance. It is for her wisdom that she has been elevated to the status of a goddess. A short walk from this simple temple, with its beautifully carved wooden frame, is a tall Deodar tree to which are nailed knives, swords, metal cutouts of animal figures and pieces of cloth. Here, the locals worship Ghatothkatch, sometimes sacrificing a goat to win his favours.

Frolicking in the snow near Rohtang Pass is one of the highpoints of the tour. Since I live in Toronto I am blasé about snow now and felt largely indifferent to the mela-like ambience that prevailed at the slopes, with tea stalls and touts and thousands of people lolling about in the snow. But it must be a thrill for anyone experiencing snow for the first time.

Here, as elsewhere in the Himachal, you can go on yak rides. It is dreadful to see the yak, a creature that looks like a massive, powerful, woolly bull, and whom I have always associated with the mysterious yeti, so humbled. It's one thing to use yak's milk and wool, or even for the locals to use it as a beast of burden. But yak rides are just too undignified and kitschy and should be outlawed!

Kulu was dirty and unappetizing after Manali. But our trip to Manikarn from here was very pleasant. A large and important Gurudwara is built around the famous hot springs here. It is fun to sit and dangle your feet in a tank of water which nature has heated to a perfect temperature. As the legend goes, Shiv and Parvati were picnicking at this spot when Parvati lost her pearl earring. Shiv summoned Shesh Nag to retrieve the jewel. The mighty snake emerged from the depths of the river with a 100 pearls. But Parvati complained that her pearl was not among them. Angered by her behaviour, Shiv stamped this foot causing hot water to gush out of the earth. Hence the name Manikarn - pearl in the ear.

There were 90-odd people on our tour, all in an expansive holiday mood! I would wander off on my own when I wanted to and avail of the chance to socialise when I felt so inclined. I enjoyed hanging out at times with the giggly teenage girls – more fun than their parents for sure! And we were very well fed all through. If you're wondering about the price tag, it was Rs 7250. I have now decided that conducted tours are all right after you've turned 35.

Explanation of Hindi words and cultural references

Dhaba – roadside eateries

Rakshash – demon

Mela - a fair

Bhim – one of the five pandavas in the Hindu epic “Mahabharat”

Shiv – the third God of the Hindu trinity – the destroyer. Parvati is his wife and mother of the much-loved Ganesh

Modak – a dumpling like sweet supposed to be favoured by Lord Ganesh.