

A Journey to the Cold Desert

- Gobind Sagar Bhardwaj

Glinting snow capped peaks, lush green forests of deodar, giggling streams, winding roads interspersed by frothy cascades; this idyllic pastoral scenery of hills beckon thousands of nature lovers. But beyond these picturesque tourist destinations of Himachal Pradesh lies the less visited cold desert of Spiti valley of Lahoul-Spiti district. This valley of virgin beauty amasses an incredible treasure of biological diversity and cultural heritage.



Spiti valley is a hidden paradise on earth.

I was lucky to discover this wonderland along with my wife and friend Anurag with his family. We started from Simla on 13th of May, 2007 and reached Kalpa after a tiresome, nine hours journey along the river Sutlej. Kalpa is a small satellite town of Recong Peo, the district headquarters of Kinnaur. Kalpa entices tourists for the panoramic view of Kinner Kailash of Mighty Himalayas and apple orchards. Recong Peo is the gateway to the cold desert area of Kinnaur district and Spiti valley. Our next destination was Puh, a small town, which is the starting point of the cold desert. This bushy habitat nests a variety of high altitude birds like chukar, pied wheatear, white capped bunting, rock bunting and grandala.

From Puh, we headed towards Chango, our next destination. River Sutlej was accompanying us all the way long until we ascended up to visit a small village called Nako situated at a height of more than 11,000 feet and surrounded by snow covered peaks of Himalayas. A small lake and a Bhuddhist Gompa add to the scenic beauty of this village which is really rejuvenating after a cumbersome journey through tough and bumpy drive. Chango is another beautiful village on the bank of river Sutlej, with few apple orchards on its both sides making it a lush green oasis in that cold desert. In Chango along the road side planting was also done with willow species. Some of the young plants were covered with jute bags. When asked from a local villager, I was informed that these bags protect the plants from being girdling off by the donkeys. Otherwise the plants will die due to debarking.

*After a night halt at Chango, we started to Tabo early in the morning. On the way at Samdo, there was confluence of two rivers, Parchhu and Spiti, forming the famous river Sutlej. After few kilometers of hair-raising stretch, we finally entered the wide, open and beautiful Spiti valley. The scenic beauty of the valley was enchantingly engrossing and we never knew when we reached Tabo. This small town is famous for its historic monastery, which is more than 1,000 years old and has a complex of nine ancient temples in its premises. Besides this old monastery, there is natural cave shrine, which has old murals and thus is also called Ajanta of Himalayas. One more thing that makes Tabo special is the Bharal or Blue Sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*). I was very lucky to meet the Range Officer at Tabo, who told me about the sightings of blue sheep in Lari area of Tabo. This wild sheep can be seen in groups on the barren south-west slopes. On the same evening, we went to Lari area. It was a matter of chance to see those sheep. Luckily, we spotted the group far away from the road. But photographing them was really a great challenge; as we had to ascend more than 400 meters steep slippery slope unobtrusively; avoiding any sort of disturbance to the peacefully grazing herd of around 21 sheep. Slowly and gradually, I and my friend started trekking but in few minutes, perhaps due to meager oxygen in the air our lungs got exhausted. The camera with the heavy lens was again a burden on me and I was very much worried for it in that risky trek. When I was hardly 8 to 9 feet away from the destination point, I was completely exhausted and a time came when I was out of breath. Somehow, with great difficulty I reached the point and found a space to lie down and gasp. Perhaps it took more than 10 minutes for my breath to normalize. With shaking hands I grasped the camera and monopod and took position behind a rock. The group was still there busy in grazing some of the plants. Now, they were in the range of my lens. I tried to take some shots but panting and shaking hands still hindered. I again lied down for another five minutes. When fully recharged and comfortable, I took shots of this beautiful animal and descended down that steep slope. Descending down was equally difficult. When I reached rest house I was wondering, for just photographing that animal, how enthusiastically, I risked my life to that extent.*



Bharal or Blue Sheep is an attraction of Spiti.

*Next morning, we started towards Kungri in Pin Valley National Park. Our way was blocked by the flocks of goats and sheep many times; coursing on the road, making it difficult to cross their herd. Finally, we reached Atargu, where there is confluence of Pin and Spiti Rivers. From here, we entered the buffer zone of Pin Valley National Park and proceeded towards Kungri. On the way, we could see a number of small glaciers being washed by the foaming water of river Pin. We were entranced by the beauty of nature and moving very slowly, suddenly, I spotted a herd of Asiatic Ibex (*Capra ibex*) on a bouldary slope. It was a celebration time for all of us, as we were the few lucky ones, who might have encountered this wild goat so closely. After about half an hour, we started off for Kungri, which is located on the bank of the river Pin. It is a small village known for a monastery and is the base for trekking and exploring the Pin Valley. The next day, we once again got a chance to see Ibex hardly ten meters away from us. We visited many places adjoining to this high altitude national park, including the last village, Mudh at an altitude of 4,100 meters. This village is famous for its Choumurthy horses, an exotic breed of horses usually brought from Tibet.*

The trip to Spiti valley is a photographer delight, where one can photograph vivid creations of nature, be it plants, animals or natural scenic beauty. To sum it up this area is a hidden paradise on earth. Contact: gsbhardwaj@wii.gov.in