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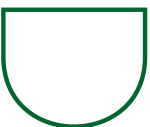


Sarah Jane Dias and
Anuj Singh Duhan at the
Athirapally Falls in Kerala



BEING LOCAL IN DHARAMSALA

Abhishek Madhukar visited this hill town
a decade ago and decided to make it his home. He shares his
favourites. Photographs by **Crookes and Jackson**



haramsala," my mother says, when well-meaning relatives ask her where I am. Some frown, unsure if they should ask. Eventually they do: "But where does he live?"

My chosen abode is nestled in the foothills above the Kangra Valley, surrounded by the Dhaulidhar Mountains in the Outer Himalayas. It's a tiny north Indian hill town, crossed by car in 30 minutes. And the name literally means "a place of shelter" — traditionally for those on a religious or spiritual quest. A place of rest, respite and refuge.

For me, Dharamsala would not be what it is today without the presence of one man who arrived in the early 1960s seeking refuge. Today, Tibet's 14th Dalai Lama is the lodestar

"It's the warmth of the shepherds and the Old Monk toddlers by the fire that warm Dharamsala's chilly winter nights"

bringing year-round tourism to this hill. His image is framed on the walls of every shop and café, whether it's run by Indians or Tibetans. His "palace", whose appearance hardly justifies the term, is typical of the region, with its corrugated green roof and yellow stone and cement walls featuring beautiful wood and glasswork. Next door, the Tsuglakhang Temple is a simply built yellow structure, with open courtyards and utilitarian halls housing Sakya mun Buddha's gilded statue along with Padmasambhava and Avalokiteshvara — the Buddha of Compassion, whose reincarnation the Dalai Lama is believed to be. The region, surrounded by pine and deodar forests, overlooks the distant houses in the valley below.

The stamp of Tibet's endangered culture is imprinted on the hillside: strings of multicoloured prayer flags flutter between trees, on monasteries, across motorbike handlebars. Brocade-mounted paintings of deities beckon from shop windows. Prayer bells and

recorded Buddhist chants compete with the car horns of tourists along the narrow streets of McLeod Ganj, a congested neighbourhood easily covered on foot in about an hour.

Half a century of Tibetans taking shelter in this dharamsala has transformed it into Little Lhasa. The entire region is home to other communities, such as Russians and Israelis, making it a global melting pot: varied languages, cultures and pursuits.

Some of the elders in this enterprising exiled community escaped from Tibet in the wake of the Dalai Lama in early 1959. Jawaharlal Nehru offered Tibet's young ruler help in setting up infrastructure here. One resident, Nanzur Nowrojee, whose great-grandfather opened Dharamsala's first general store in 1860, invited the Dalai Lama along with his followers to the hill town and helped them settle in. The shop still stands, locked, almost

an aberration to its surroundings, on McLeod Ganj's main square, though a small outlet within the entrance continues to sell English language newspapers and soft drinks.

That legacy of warmth, openness and hospitality, that intimacy and that helpfulness of people is what keeps me going here: be it Sanju the taxi driver who helps me out when I'm stranded at 2am or Anil Sharma, the second-generation shop owner who sells cigarettes on the main square of McLeod Ganj, who saves the day when I'm out of cash and need to entertain friends for dinner. He provides money and cigarettes; in return, I give him advice on his love life. Friends beep their horns or wave at you; even stop mid-road to chat until the traffic cop comes screaming, albeit followed by a smile. It's the friendliness of the shepherds from the Gaddi tribe, the humility and camaraderie of my Tibetan friends, along with Old Monk toddlers by the fire, that warms the chilly winter nights.

But how did I get here, you ask.

Nope, I didn't quit a corporate job in a big city and move here harbouring illusions of finding an idyllic home and a life in the hills, though I was admittedly tired — of being constantly on the move and trying to make more money. I was tired of my personal life and of having to be aggressive in order to survive. Tenzin Tsundue, my friend from Mumbai University, where we studied literature and philosophy, is now a writer, poet and an activist for Tibet's freedom. One winter evening, he called to say he was in Delhi and would be leaving for Dharamsala, inviting me to join him. The next thing I knew

I was at the Inter-State Bus Terminus and, although Tsundue's bus had left, I hopped on the last roadways bus for the overnight journey and never returned. As I started getting work as a freelance writer and photographer, I found that the hills grew on me; I learnt to live

with their seasons and soon preferred them to the moods of any city.

Though the town was named centuries before its world-famous refugee moved in, his presence added more meaning to the place it has grown into — a magnet for spiritual seekers, especially for seekers of Buddhism. At 81, the Dalai Lama is an avid traveller, globe-trotting for at least six months a year, meeting people from everywhere, spreading his universal message of kindness and compassion. In turn, travellers flock to Dharamsala seeking wisdom and peace, working their way up the path to enlightenment.

But it's not just a place for spiritual-seekers; the region has a lot to offer tourists as well. Those who stay longer than a weekend should head out to some of the nearby towns and villages and sighsue. Recently, I, too, made a trip around my decade-old home, and met city folks who like me have made the beautiful region theirs. From Palampur to Ganehar, everything I saw has reinforced my decision to stay. →



Above: a monk at the Dalai Lama Temple. Below: tea pickers at the Wah Estate. Previous pages: on the drive from Billing to Palampur



"The town was named years before its world-famous refugee

moved in. His presence added more meaning to the place"

Monks performing the Lamé dance
at the Nashi Jong Monastery
near Palampur



From left: a tea shop in Dharankot; pottery in Andretta



Near Dharamsala

Quaint, semi-urban Palampur, with its government offices and shopping centres, is deceptive. Drive out and you find yourself surrounded by lush, sloping tea gardens with the snowy Dhaulidhar range in the background. I stayed at the **Wah Tea Estate**, run by the Prakash family for three generations. Surya and Upasana Prakash have opened their mountain home to travellers. The Lodge at Wah is spread out beside the tea estate. Surya conducts excellent tea tours, walking his guests through the gardens and factory, elaborating on the process of production and ending with a premium tea-tasting session. Another highlight was my visit to **Fishi Long** monastery, a small community of Tibetan settlers with a focus on art and craft. My next stop was the artists' village of **Andretta**, a short drive from Palampur. There I met the legendary potter and artist, Mansimran Singh, known to the locals as Mini. In his late 70s, Mini had his mane of silver hair tied back, and with his turbulent beard, deep gaze and ebullient personality,

he seemed youthfully energetic as he told me, "You don't make a pot, a pot makes itself." He described how one should not impose on the clay, but let it evolve and come into its own. One of his craftsmen, Milap Chaud, who left his clerical job in the city and has been with Mini for 23 years, gave me a quick session to try my hand, starting with centering the clay. He seemed meditative as he worked one foot on the wheel and his hands on the clay. The beautiful terracotta crockery and decorative pieces, glazed in pastel greens and blues and earthy browns, sat on the shelves of the studio, tempting travellers despite the fact that they are breakable.

From pottery to paragliding, the next stop on my trip was **Bir**, a small town an hour's drive from Palampur. The panoramic mountain views around Bir, dotted with multicoloured paragliders floating across deep blue skies, make it a perfect photo stop even if you're not an adventure enthusiast. This is considered one of the best spots in the world for this sport, even though a mishap can mean days of searching

on foot by rescue teams over daunting terrain. "But it's completely safe, even safer than riding a motorcycle on an empty street," claimed Jyoti Prakash Thakur, my instructor, as I looked at him, utterly unconvinced.

Young Thakur is an expert paraglider who holds the national record for the fastest tandem flight—from Billing to Dhanamsala and back in five hours. He has been trained by Gupreet Dhillon, a pioneer in the sport. Thakur belongs to a family of shepherds and is from a rural hamlet called Bada Bhangal, which is a three-day trek from Bir.

Along with Dhillon, he runs a team of paragliders who offer tandem trips for the uninitiated. He also competes in international events all over the world. "I may have grown wings now, but I am still a shepherd," he said, "and so is every other paraglider here." Satisfied with the warm confidence I prepared myself for the upcoming flight but the weather turned blustery. Pointing to the clouds behind the mountains, he suggested I give up the thought of jumping off the cliff. Ever the good shepherd, he clearly took care of →



Above: diners at Morgan's Place, an Italian eatery in Dharankot. Below: Hotel Eagle's Nest in McLeod Ganj



"I soon learnt to live with the seasonal moods of the hills

and began to prefer them to the moods of any city"



A man walking his horses towards Round

his tourist flock and was concerned for its safety.

Unable to take flight and ravenous, I drove towards **Gurehar**, a hamlet populated with Gaddi tribesmen who divide their time between herding sheep and farming. I met Indo-German Frank Schlichmann, an artist and curator of art events, at his café, **Atables**, where he announced, “I will make some simple lunch while you go and take a walk around the village!”

Schlichmann has adopted this village, and every three years, he invites contemporary Indian artists to come here and create art, be it painting the walls, working on an installation with villagers, or getting the village children to make films and screen them at the ‘1-Rupce Cinema’, an open-air impromptu theatre. He told me about the project he’s currently working on. *In the Woods*. Stated for June, it will see creators exhibit their artwork in the woods above the village. He’s a great conversationalist and an amazing chef, able to dish up everything from Asian chicken and vegetable skewers to spaghetti, in a location where ingredients must be either homegrown or sourced all the way from Delhi.

He has tales to tell of his Bengali mother, a “dharma buddy,” as her friends would call her, and her connection to Buddhism as a possible explanation for his own bond with Gurehar. Like Thakur and Mini and Milap Chand, like the displaced Tibetans of Dharamsala and semi-nomadic Gaddi shepherd tribes, he is a transient, “alien resident, a foreigner, of sorts, to the region.

If I think about it, I realise that perhaps it is precisely this, living with these people who have, consciously or unconsciously, chosen Dharamsala and its surroundings to settle in, that has made it easier for me to belong to this unique hill town that I only made my home 10 years ago.

Which brings me to the question that often comes up during my explorations – “Where are you from?” And while I’m still figuring that out, what I can say is that Dharamsala is, in a way, that refuge from the world that many of us often seek, but only a few are lucky enough to find. And that is what makes this region so special. 📍

Dharamsala and around

Explore art at the Norbulingka Institute

A haven for Tibetan artists and their ancient (and dying) art and culture, the institute trains new arrivals from Tibet in the preservation of

traditional art forms. The large complex houses a temple, a doll museum, garden café, guesthouse and boutique. Its artists’

workshops, open to visitors, are ideal to watch skilled sculptors, thangka artists, applique workers, wood carvers, carpenters,

metal craftsmen and statue-makers in action. (www.norbulingka.org)

Visit Thakchen Chöling Temple complex

This complex is the hub of Tibetan spiritual activity in Dharamsala. It comprises the Main Temple (also called the Dalai Lama’s

temple), a gompa (Nyangyal monastery), the Dalai Lama’s residence, a bookshop and museum. Mornings and evenings are the best times to visit: this is when most Tibetans come to pray. Monks,

nuns, locals and other visitors rotate the brass and copper prayer wheels, heavily inscribed and filled with Tibetan mantras.

Join the Lingkhor or Kora perambulation

Follow the Tibetans on a spiritual journey as they circumambulate the 2km path around the Dalai Lama’s temple and residence at sunrise and sunset. This ritual is known as taking a lingkhor, a Tibetan holy walk. You’ll be joined by Buddhist devotees as they chant

prayers and rotate rosaries and prayer wheels while walking. The colourful prayer flags and beautifully painted stupas are a

photographer’s dream. **Visit the museums** The Tibet Museum (www.tibetmuseum.org)

showcases heart-rending images and stories from the Chinese occupation of Tibet. For something more

cheerful, head to Kangra Art Museum (Near Kowali Bazaar) to see displays of paintings, art and artefacts from the valley.

Walk to the Church of St John in the Wilderness

If the weekend tourist traffic isn’t choking up Cantonment Road, this pleasant 20-minute walk from McLeod Ganj is good enough reason to visit.

This isolated Protestant church, surrounded by centries, ancient deodars and rocky outcrops. Built in 1852 from local stone in the neo-Gothic style,

it has brass and stone memorial plaques on the interior walls, telling stories of the lives and deaths of military officers (and one

pioneering resident who was mauled to death by a Himalayan black bear).

Explore Dharamkot

About 3km north of McLeod Ganj, starting from the main square and heading up into the mountains, is the locale of the Gaddi shepherd community. While the main street offers more cafés, the surrounding area has lovely walking trails through unspoilt forest. Those looking for something beyond

the tourist circuit may like to attend a serious meditation workshop here. The Dharmia Sikhara

Himachal Vipassana Centre (www.sikhara-dharma.org) offers a 10-day course in meditation.

Tushita Meditation Centre (www.tushita.info), located in a lovely forest, is focused specifically on teaching Tibetan Mahayana

Buddhism, and offers a 10-day residential course as well as shorter, more relaxed programmes.

Both courses are free, but donations are welcomed.

Bite the adventure bullet

Bir-Billing is an excellent paragliding destination; visit between October and June for the best weather conditions (www.travelbiling.com, from ₹2,500). If you prefer being

on foot, Triund, at a height of 9,500ft, is a day’s hike away. It’s close to a small glacier and on the way to the base camp for Indratar Pass. The trick is to walk slowly but steadily, so you don’t lose energy early on.

Once you get into a pace that suits you, you’ll notice the colours around you get sharper. It is especially true in spring (March to May), with the rhododendrons in full bloom. Get there by evening to watch the sun set over the Kangra Valley below, the distant lights

on the ridge of McLeod Ganj twinkling like jewels. Plan your trek with Pink House Holidays (www.pinkhouse.in), who will provide accommodation for the night in Triund, food, equipment and English-speaking guides.



Above: Jyoti Prakash Thakur, a paragliding instructor in Bir. Below: a view of McLeod Ganj



Need to know: Dharamsala

STAY

Hotel Eagle's Nest Owned and efficiently managed by a welcoming and generous couple, Shelia and her partner, Bo, it's a 40-minute drive up from Dharamsala and a 10-minute walk through pristine forests. The property is surrounded by cedar, Himalayan oak, pines and

vermillion rhododendrons. (www.hoteleaglesnest.com; doubles from ₹12,000, inclusive of meals and some activities)

Chono House Operated by the Norbulingka Institute, this is the premier and most attractive choice for discerning travellers. Having hosted guests such as Richard Gere and Robert Thurman in the past, its 13 units are usually booked well in advance. (www.norbulingka.org; doubles from ₹4,950)

The Lodge at Wah Located an hour and a half to the east of Dharamsala, the property has a unique character, blending the modern and traditional. Constructed with smooth river-stones, local slate, pinewood and mud bricks, and kitted out with modern furnishings, it reflects the delightful traditional Kangra architecture. (www.theolddeewan.com; doubles from ₹9,000, inclusive of all meals, a tea tour and tea string)

The Aboom Hotel Hidden away in the little-known village of Gunher, within walking distance of Bir, is a quieter and more peaceful accommodation option than the paringling town's guest houses. The four rooms were restored by the host, Frank Schlichtham. They feature traditional Kangra village-style interiors, created using local materials, and modern amenities. (www.theaboomhotel.com; doubles from ₹4,000)

The Merge Considering its hidden-away location, this property appears like an eye-

popping mirage just down the path from The Pottery at Andretta artists' village near Palampur. It's got eclectic and tasteful décor with interesting curios and mirrors, and the host, Denis Harapp, will charm you with his stories. (www.miragelandia.com; doubles from ₹4,350)

EAT

Hummingbird Restaurant Apart from standard Tibetan dishes like thenthuk and thukpa, Hummingbird serves possibly the best shabdalay (large, fried dumplings stuffed with meat and served with a soup of fresh veggies and tolu) that you'll find outside Tibet. (www.norbulingka.org)

Morgan's Place A popular Italian eatery in Dharamkha, it serves up probably the best pizzas in the area. (78329 78339)

Common Grounds Café It serves traditional Taiwanese, Chinese and Tibetan food in a cheerful, homely environment (there's even a small library with books on Tibet and China). Popular dishes include Cantonese wok-fried noodles and Hakka drunken chicken with shiitake mushrooms. An all-time favourite with regulars is the pork stew rice—a popular Taiwanese street food—and the green beans and black beans with mushrooms. (98161 55523)

Seven Hills of Dokkaebi It's not easy to find this Korean restaurant, but it's worth the effort. Dokkaebi's low lighting, fireplace and jazz music make it a great spot for a romantic evening. The extensive menu has a range of traditional Korean dishes that can be spiced to your taste. (98169 84199)

Hotel Tibet Now run by a Tibetan co-operative society, Hotel Tibet was once run by the Tibetan Government in Exile. Though the dishes are limited in

number, they are authentic. This is the only place in town to serve gyakho (chicken, mutton, eggs, tolu, pork, button mushrooms, seasonal vegetables and rice noodles served over a flaming hotpot with a clear soup), accompanied by steamed rice or tigtso (Tibetan bread). (0892 221 8874/80)

Lung Ta Located in a quieter part of town, this all-vegetarian eatery offers Instagram-worthy mountain views from its terrace, and charming floor seating inside. It has a daily special menu that includes hearty dishes such as Japanese rice onnelet with salad and batter-fried veggies in noodle soup. The chefs are former Tibetan political prisoners, who sing folk songs while they work. For desert, try their famous lemon curd squares. (0892 220 699)

Moon Peak Café This tiny, often crowded café has an outdoor space where you can enjoy the colours of the sunrise with your cheese omelettes and coffee. It's run by a local journalist and a photographer, and often has interesting exhibits on display inside. The menu also includes a good iced hibiscus tea, chicken sesame salad and open sandwiches, and breakfast is served through the day. The owner has recently opened the Moon Peak, Thal adjoining the café, which is worth a try. (www.moonpeak.org)

Ilkerati Books & Coffee The menu offers a combination of Mediterranean and other European fare (chick pastis, salads and quiches) plus an Indian thali. It brews its own coffee and bakes its own bread, and the focus is on local, organic produce. The staff here believes in the slow food movement, so this is a pleasant place to while away your time when you're in no rush to finish your meal and be somewhere. (85880 4610)

Woeser Bakery

This hole in the wall hides below a tiny shopping complex basement—it's a well-kept local secret. Things you must try are the almond tart, walnut tart, semolina cake and handmade, beaten coffee. Everything is baked fresh every day and popular items are sold out by evening. So get there early! (98570 55048)

SHOP

Jewels of Tibet This reliable jewellery store is run by the young, enterprising Yeshi Dolma, who is also a member of the Tibetan Parliament in exile. She sells a range of designs catering to different tastes, from traditional to contemporary. (01892 221240)

Nothing Arts Shop This well-designed store stocks quality Tibetan crafts and artefacts, and many of the pieces are made by the Norbulingka Institute's craftsmen. If you want to buy a thangka, there's a wide selection here and you can see the student painters at work. (www.norbulingka.org)

TCV Handicrafts Locals frequent this fixed price shop that stocks statues, ritual implements, curios, Tibetan garments and handicrafts. The profits go to the Tibetan Children's Village Handicrafts, which supports poor children and artists. (www.tcvcraft.org)

Andretta Pottery This is the only place in this region where you can buy from a wide selection of ceramics and pottery. Master artists and potters hand-craft unique terracotta glazed pottery at Andretta, and you can tour the workshops and see them at work. Take time to wander around this idyllic, unspoilt village, inhabited by many well-known Indian artists. (www.andrettapottery.com)



The Church of St John in the Wilderness