The Many Moods of Manali

Manali promises convenient beauty, whether as a final destination to escape for a quick weekend, or as a stopover to acclimatise for the higher Himalayas beyond. The key to its charm though, is which Manali you come seeking.

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It is a classic. The mountain town of Manali in Kullu Valley of Himachal Pradesh is often counted amongst the where’s where of Himalayan holiday destinations. But, even if you were to compare notes, there is one thing that distinguishes it from Shimla, Nainital, and Srinagar: the absence of a colonial hangover. The people of Manali have always preferred their own culture over anything brought by visitors. In fact, if you were to make a Bollywood star stand in the middle of Mall Road that forms the epicentre of town, chances are that the celebrity will have to go nudge the Kullu topi-clad locals for a moment of attention. Hrithik Roshan can go rafting in the Beas, Sunny Deol can buy groceries in Shanag, Jackie Shroff can chill in Old Manali, Deepika Padukone can sip chai in Barua, and directors can continue pretending that Rohtang Pass is Kashmir—Manali is not bothered.

What brings the residents of this town onto the streets, instead, are the melas—those colourful fairs that offer everything from Ferris wheel rides to clothes on sale—and the festivals where local deities congregate and mobilise processions. The best-known of these deities include Hadimba Devi, who was an intimidating figure in the Mahabharata as Bhima’s wife and has a 16th-century temple dedicated to her here, and Manu Rishi, Manali’s own Noah who built an ark and saved humanity. He also gave the town his name; up in Old Manali, there is a temple that enshrines the spot where he meditated. Both temples are built in the traditional stone-and-wood architectural style and, were you to go there outside peak tourist season, you would be in the safe company of old deodar trees and the mellow sounds of temple bells.

Seasons define the kind of experience you can expect from Manali. After the snow has melted, each month of the warm season has its own flavour. In April, you would see slopes coloured with spring blossoms on apple, peach, and plum trees. In May, you will, well, mostly be in traffic jams surrounded by honeymooning couples. June is the only month when the locals are down to t-shirts and can call it a summer, the season of international tourists setting base here before exploring higher valleys beyond. By July, the town is a lime green beauty painted by monsoon,
and come August, it is dotted with red apples—Kullu Valley’s most famous export that can be seen spilling out of orchards or stacked in makeshift sheds along the roads. They are the coveted remnants of a fleeting British presence, along with, deliciously enough, trout fish—worth trying in any of the recipes devised by the cafes and restaurants here.

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The famous cafes of Old Manali are still serving banana milkshakes, impromptu jam sessions still do take place against vivid backdrops, but there are also enough high-end guesthouses tucked away amidst orchards for those who care for quieter retreats. New Manali, in its defence, has sprouted a culture that could be termed ‘cosmopolitan’ by mountain standards. If you are patient enough to look beyond the clutter of pseudo-Punjabi restaurants on Mall Road, you would find many meandering gullies where Nepali eateries serve spicy mutton curries, Mandiyali dhabas fry parathas that complete the hill-town experience with generous dollops of butter, Tibetans make authentic butter tea, and Bengalis cook chhole bhature right there on pushcarts.

Between the new and the old is the obvious, yet mostly (and thankfully) ignored Van Vihar—a protected forest land where 500-year-old deodar trees form a dark canopy with dappled sunlight that would brighten up any nature lover’s day. A path runs through these woods along the Beas river all the way from New Manali to Old Manali. For those who respect the fragile mountain ecosystem and do not wish to spend three hours stuck in the incessant honking and fumes of traffic, Van Vihar cuts the commute down to a 20-minute walk. Most importantly, it offers a quiet way back into the Manali as it must have been in the days when Nehru holidayed here and famous Russian painter Roerich found inspiration.
AROUND MANALI

Vashisht
This village across the Beas river, about 3 km from Manali, has woven its own magic spell on travellers for years. The gullies and temples here attract pilgrims, while the hot springs and cafes make it a warmer alternative to Manali.

Solang
For those unable to get the coveted permit to Rohtang, Solang Valley is a good option for a day trip at a 14-km drive from Manali. A ropeway lets tourists hold the same sweeping vistas, and if you come in winter there are ski instructors ready to teach the art of gliding on ice.

Manikaran
80 km away from Manali is the temple town of Manikaran, held unique and sacred for its Sikh Gurdwara as well as the Shiva Temple. It is also known for its hot springs and lovely little walking paths all around.

(DE)TOUR IN STYLE

GO OFF-ROAD TO BIJLI MAHADEV
About 50 km from Manali, the hilltop temple of Bijli Mahadev is a source of divine mystery. Every few years, during monsoon, lightning strikes completely decimate the shivling here, which is then carefully plastered back into shape by the temple priests. These days, the bumpy road leading here from Naggar is beckoning more adventurous folks. The full-day jeep excursions take travellers through thick conifer and oak forests and the immaculate wilderness of Kais Sanctuary in a comfortable 4x4 SUV. A stopover at the heritage village of Jana for traditional Himachali lunch under a sparkling waterfall is also one of the trip’s highlights.
FACT FILE

Getting there: The closest airport is in Bhuntar, near Kullu, 50 km away from Manali. Air India operates daily flights here from Delhi and Chandigarh. You could also drive up. Usually, a Volvo bus ride is considered the most convenient option.

Accommodation: There is a hotel literally in every direction you turn in Manali. The best ones, especially with parking space, are all outside New Manali. Take your pick from Old Manali, Vashisht, Prini, or any of the other neighbourhoods which have pretty cottages as well as resorts.

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

• Regardless of what your tour package or hotel promises, please be mindful of the resources you consume and the waste you leave behind.
• Walk. The world is a better place on foot. What is more, it would not leave you disappointed with an experience that reminds of the same clogged pollution of our cities.
• Rohtang Pass, for which thousands of tourists queue up every year to see snow, has become a costly novelty since the National Green Tribunal put a cap on the number of vehicles going up. The truth is that every peak in the vicinity offers the same stunning views. All you need to do is sign up for an easy to medium level trek at a fraction of the taxi cost, and take a few steps closer to understanding the kind of mountains that are worth travelling this far for.