Summer in the plains of north India is particularly punishing. From early in May to well beyond September, the land bakes in mid-afternoon ovens of 45 degrees Celsius, or more. But a little more than 500 kilometres away, the pristine Himalayan balconies of Kullu and Manali in Himachal Pradesh bask in cool, breezy comfort, sprayed with intermittent rain.

There are three ways to reach Kullu-Manali. You can fly into Bunting, the nearest airport. Major airlines fly this route. You can take an air-conditioned Volvo bus or drive yourself from Delhi to Kullu. On a good day, you can drive from Delhi to Chandigarh in five hours. From there to the well-connected temple town of Mandi in the hills is approximately a four hour drive. The scenic mountain drive from Mandi to Bunting takes you along the glistening Beas river, through the breathtaking Shivalik Himalayan range—another nearly three hours. From Bunting to Kullu, it’s a smooth 30-minute drive in the backdrop of the majestic Himalayas.

All told a Delhi–Kullu drive will take you a little more than twelve hours. To enjoy the beauty of the drive, start really early from Delhi, preferably in the wee hours before sunrise. If you are unaccustomed to driving in the steep Himalayan tracts and

Escape to the breathtaking Himalayan paradise this summer, and the next...

By Ruchira Mittal

Photos Courtesy: Himachal Pradesh Tourism
squeamish about hair pin bends with sheer 1,000-foot drops on both sides, then reaching Kullu well before sunset is a good idea.

If you prefer to travel by train, try the historic narrow-gauge wonder from Pathankot in Punjab to Joginder Nagar near Kullu. Also called the Kangra toy train, it meanders through a maze of hills and valleys and tunnels. The 80-year old railway is a treat for the senses. Life-changing views, the heady smell of pine, fresh mountain air and the exhilaration of the climb, will set your adrenaline rushing.

Also called Silver valley for the shimmering waters of the Beas, Kullu was once known as Kulanthapitha - the end of the habitable world. Its lush forests, flower-carpeted hillsides and hovering butterflies beckon wide-eyed tourists. Visit the ancient and powerful temple of the goddess Hirma who blessed the erstwhile ruler of Kullu. In the south, the cliffs of the Largi gorge form the gateway to the valley. The 80 km long fertile Himalayan strip extends from Aut and ends rather dramatically at the 13,000 foot high Rohtang Pass, which literally means a pile of corpses, in Tibetan. A little more than 50 km from lush Manali, Rohtang is on the eastern Pir Panjal Range, and gateway to the Lahaul and Spiti Valleys beyond. Even in high summer, be prepared for a sudden snowstorm or shower.

In Autumn, you can’t miss Kullu’s famous, 10-day long Dussehra festival. There is dancing, singing and performances even from the Gaddi shepherds who climb down the hills.

Also called the Valley of the Gods, Manali is a welcoming town—it will charm you with its colour and beauty. Enjoy the majesty of the Himalayas, the gushing Beas cutting across the town, rolling meadows and lazy herds of goats and sheep dotting the hillsides.

Tourists can shop to their heart’s content in quaint shops and enjoy bargaining for handicrafts. The adventurous sort can head out for treks and skiing on the snow covered slopes. The rapids of the Beas offer rafting fun and also delightful experiences if you just want to sit by the river and angle in meditative silence.

The sprawling Institute of Mountaineering and Allied Sports in Manali conducts week-long courses in skiing, trekking, adventure sports and eco-tourism along the Solang valley, just out of town. For trekking and climbing, Patalsu and Sitidhar are among the easier climbs. More challenging are the Deo Tibba, Moulkila, Hanuman Tibba, Centre Peak and Indrasan.

If you want quiet natural beauty, visit Kothi at the foot of the Rohtang Pass. Behold the magnificent snow peaks and glaciers and prepare for the jaw-dropping view of a narrow, 60-metre deep gorge into which the Beas disappears.

In Manali, the Tibetan market on the mall is a visitor’s delight - shop for knick knacks, handicrafts and imported goods. The Mall has some good restaurants, too.

Sixteen km out of Manali, right where the climb for Rohtang begins, the stunning Rahalla Falls at 8,200 feet, are a must-see.

Whether you’d like to simply laze, soaking in nature’s bounty, seek the peace of the monasteries and temples, feast your eyes on ancient architecture and museums of art, try out adventure sports or imbibe the cultural extravaganza of festivals, Kullu-Manali has something for you. “Kullu-Manali are a unique, unparallelled treasure. Consider the profound beauty of the Shivalik hills’ shallow valleys and their dense scrub forests in the outer Himalayan fringe; the spruce and cedar forests of the mid ranges, and; the alpine meadows of the intervening ranges near the snow clad peaks of the inner Himalayas. It’s the destination of choice for every kind of tourist. And that’s why Himachal is known as a destination for all seasons and all reasons,” Dr Arun Kumar, Director of Himachal Pradesh Tourism told, India Now.

He said the state has worked hard to promote brand Himachal as an attractive tourist destination under the caption Unforgettable Himachal. The department is aggressively promoting ecological, adventure, rural, sports and pleasure tourism in the region, he added.