If Kashmir is “Paradise on Earth” and Kerala “God’s Own Country”, Himachal Pradesh (HP), without doubt, is “Dev Bhumi—Land of Gods”. With its vast tracts of high-altitude trans-Himalayan desert, dense green deodar forests, apple orchards, cultivated terraces, snow-capped high Himalayan mountain ranges and snow-fed lakes that gush down in rivers, HP is a geographic marvel.

In the lap of this Himalayan state, among its many treasures, is a natural reservoir of temperate forests and alpine meadows that harbours the most important gene pool of Western Himalayan flora and fauna—the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP)—our destination this time.

Protected naturally by snow covered, steep mountains on the northern, eastern and southern boundaries, GHNP located in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh, is spread over 754.4 sq km. Around 17 per cent of its area is under forest cover with ban-oak, deodar, and coniferous forests among the 14 forest types found in the Park. GHNP is home to 832 plant species apart from a variety of animal species.

GHNP delights scientists, nature-lovers and trekkers and casual tourists alike with its scenic beauty and treasure trove of the rarest animals,
birds and plant species endemic to the area. Once you come here you are captivated for life.

Payson R Stevens, an American trained in the Earth Sciences and Art came and was spellbound. For over 25 years, he was involved working with NASA, NOAA, and the USGS on global change issues. But in March 2000, all that changed after a chance meeting with Sanjeeva Pandey, the first director of GHNP. Now, Stevens lives half the year, with his Indian wife, the writer Kamla K Kapur, in a remote area of the Kullu Valley, where he “paints, writes, and does seva work in the rural valley”.

A recipient of Presidential Design Award from Bill Clinton, Stevens has an eclectic background, trained in both the earth sciences and art in the US and involved with Nature conservation for four decades. Perhaps it is this wide ranging experience that makes him feel an affinity for GHNP and its people.

“I’ve been coming to India since 1996, as my wife, Kamla is from the Punjab,” says Stevens. Incidentally, Kamla K Kapur, is an acclaimed writer. Stevens’s love affair with GHNP started with a trek “near the boundary of the Park” arranged by Sanjeeva and “I offered my pro bono services as an environmental scientist and media expert.” That was the beginning of a wonderful relationship both with the Park and “my friend Sanjeeva”, says Stevens.

The friendship culminated in many beneficial initiatives for the GHNP. The first was a website (http://greathimalayannationalpark.com). “I knew the Park needed to have a web presence,” says Stevens and he along with a group of volunteers, friends and Sanjeeva developed the site. It is a most comprehensive site for a casual tourist to a nature scientist looking for information on GHNP. From where to stay, what to do, community, ecology and ecotourism, it covers all aspects. Stevens and Sanjeeva also founded Friends of GHNP, a small group of volunteers outside India, who are dedicated to raising awareness about the Park.

Their efforts also include raising global interest in the exquisite GHNP heritage. The Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, under Pandey, had applied for UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) status for GHNP over five years ago. Meanwhile, Stevens organised a small group of dedicated volunteers in India (current Park administration and WII), US, and UK to prepare, write, and design the complex, technical, and detailed WHS application. It is book length (230 pages) and designed as an engaging coffee-table book. The application was accepted by UNESCO in January 2011, and GHNP is in the final stage of selection with a site visit by a scientific evaluator scheduled to take place in October 2012. The Park is under the UNESCO WHS “Natural Properties” category of “Outstanding Universal Value”, and is competing against eight other countries in this category for selection in 2013.

It is a huge effort, being coordinated by a handful of dedicated individuals, working with limited resources, for love and value of the Park.

And its significance is immeasurable. The Park is home to 183 bird species, including five species of pheasants—Western Tragopan, Cheer Pheasant, Himalayan Monal, Koklas and Kalij. The Western Tragopan and the Cheer pheasant are endangered species. Other distinct bird species of the area include Snow Partridge, Hill Partridge and Himalayan Snow Cock. Among its 31 mammal species are endangered Snow Leopard, Asiatic Black Bear, Himalayan Brown Bear, Grey Goral and Himalayan Musk Deer.

The Park is contiguous with the Rupi Bhaba Wildlife Sanctuary in the south-east, Pin Valley National Park in the north-east and Kanawar Wildlife Sanctuary in the north. The protected areas make this region a compact patch of interlinked wildlife habitats and together they form the Great Himalayan National Park Conservation Area. The area was declared as National Park under Wildlife (Protection Act) 1972 by the Himachal Pradesh Government in 1999. Four major rivers—Tirthan, Sainj, Jiwanal, and Parvati—originate from the glaciers in the Park.
Great Himalayan National Park

and confluence to form the River Beas. GHNP is a major source of water in the region. Stevens, along with Sanjeeva, has trekked up to the source of all the Park’s rivers. Since 2000, the duo has covered 1,400 km in the Park. “If you’re in good shape, Dhel Ridge (3,737 m) is a great four-five-day trek, going through different habitats and the campsite is a beautiful meadow overlooking jumbled mountains, so typical of the Himalayas,” says Stevens.

Sharing his trekking experience he adds, “The most exciting trekking I have done has been up to the higher glacial elevations going to the sources of the major rivers. Tirath, the source of the Tirthan (4,000m), is a spectacular seven-day trek passing through many of the Park’s ecological regions, up into dramatic high mountains and snow-capped peaks. I’ve had the good fortune to see large herds of Blue Sheep on treks with Sanjeeva and even the very rare, and illusive Western Tragopan.” He calls it a “blessed darshan”!

The treks are fruitful. “We did animal surveys (mainly pheasants and large mammals) and observed changes in the flora, especially in the higher alpine meadows where there had been grazing before the Park prohibited it. Indian experts from both the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department and Wildlife Institute of India often accompanied these outings.”

Trekking in the Park offers many exciting and demanding routes. Some trails are very primitive and often washed out by storms. There are surely a lot of challenges waiting to be experienced by trekkers in GHNP.

Any trekking inside the Park requires permits and fees so be sure to contact the Park administration (dirghnp@gmail.com) and alert them of your dates. You’ll also need a certified guide from the local ecotourism through BTCA (a local NGO associated with the Park; contact Gopal Krishna, President: 09418282148 ) to ensure your safety and enhance the experience.”

The GHNP Ecozone (surrounding the Park) offers the casual tourist a chance to experience rural Himalayan life. GHNP is rather remote and the Ecozone still retains much of its pristine culture.

A casual visitor can get first-hand experience of rural Himalayan life by camping out in GHNP or local home stays in the Ecozone. This can be arranged through BTCA and/or the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Department. If you want to savour more colour and local flavour, Stevens recommends timing a home stay visit during one of the many melas/festivals. This will deepen your appreciation of the devta (deity) traditions and culture, intrinsic to the communities here. The devta/deva culture of the Kullu Valley is particularly interesting. It can be traced to centuries back in time. Residents respect and worship nature in sacred groves and other natural places.

GHNP draws two kinds of tourists, those who visit the Ecozone to experience the local culture in the backdrop of beautiful nature, and the more serious trekkers who enter the Park. One must be in good health to really experience the wilderness of GHNP and be prepared to hike for days to reach the remote areas, camping out under the stars or hiking in the rain. There are only a handful of designated trekking routes as GHNP has been primarily created to help protect the plants and animals.

“Trekking visitors are a mix of Indians and foreigners. It has been particularly rewarding to notice the steady increase of young Indian men and women trekking into the Park over the last 10 years,” says Stevens talking about the footfall.

And he considers himself particularly fortunate. “I consider my efforts with GHNP and rural community issues to be some of the most rewarding work of my life. The chance to truly experience Himalayan wilderness requires fortitude and focus, which ultimately allows one to connect up with the larger energetic natural forces that make us feel both very small and also very large,” says Stevens inviting all our readers to experience this themselves.

GHNP beckons as one of the most picturesque natural spots in India. Visitors are sure to bring away unique experiences of the Himalayas’ unspoiled majesty in the Valley of Gods.

Green Roof: About 17 per cent of the GHNP area is under forest cover with 14 forest types growing here.

Top View: GHNP is home to exotic Asiatic Black Bears and Himalayan Brown Bears that can be sighted.