trains of lilting music wafted over the crisp cool air as we crossed a weather-beaten wooden bridge that straddled a gushing stream and sabotaged our plans to go on a trek in the mountains. Like little children drawn to Pied Piper’s hypnotic tune, we were lured into the little village of Chitkul to seek out the source of the music. This charming mountain village in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh is the last outpost on the Indo-China border. It is where the road on the Indian side of the border ends. A narrow paved road, hemmed by traditional slate-roofed cottages, led us to a troupe of musicians and dancers, decked up in festive costumes, performing in an open courtyard.

Suddenly, a tramp in tattered and dirt-encrusted clothing ambled into the middle of the
circle of dancers and started to sway to the throbbing beat of drums and the sweet strains of flutes. Then, as suddenly as he had materialised, seemingly from nowhere, he disappeared. We had no idea if he was part of the act or an intrusion that the dance troupe chose to ignore.

We figured we had seen enough and were about to move on when a local resident stopped us. What we had witnessed, he said, was a group rehearsing for the main event that would take place at the pagoda-roofed temple in the centre of the town. We were hooked. The trek could wait: if what we had seen was a trailer then we had to catch the main show.

A celebration of colour and festivity greeted us once we stepped through the carved wooden doors. The entire village, it seemed, save a few, filled the courtyard and they were decked in traditional and ceremonial finery. Every head, male and female, was covered with a green-band Kinnauri headgear; many sporting floral tassels. Our cameras, however, started to zoom in on the chunky silver jewellery that adorned the foreheads of young women. We were particularly fascinated by the large ornaments that hung over their faces. How on earth could they see where they were going? Judging from the way the dancers who had taken centre stage swayed and gyrated to the music without tripping over their own feet or bumping into each other, they managed very well.

An appreciative audience cheered as the performance came to an end and members of the troupe celebrated by hugging each other. The audience cheered once more as the next group of dancers and
Musicians stepped into the limelight. Their music and routine were not very different from the one that preceded it till a couple broke free from the chain of dancers and started to whirl in the middle of the circle that formed around them. And the crowd expressed its approval with cheers and laughter.

The next act included two musicians carrying enormous brass horns which reminded us of the alpine fog horns of Switzerland. When they blew on those over-sized instruments, we imagined that it was what elephants might sound like, trumpeting love songs to each other!

On that note, we set off in search of nourishment and found a small rooftop café whose existence betrayed the fact that remote as Chitkul may be, it still figures on the tourist map. Its main attraction is that it is the highest village (altitude 11,320 ft) in the Baspa River Valley in Kinnaur district and the last inhabited place on that side of the Indo-China border. The actual border is about 90 km away but entry to this region is restricted as it is controlled by the Indian Armed Forces. The owner of the eatery took it upon himself to explain the significance of the festivities we had stumbled upon as we tucked into bowls of Maggi Noodles which for some reason taste better in the mountains. It could be the air, water, altitude...
According to him, what we saw was part of the annual summer festival. It is essentially a celebration of summer which takes place in June-July in the region. The festivities start with young lads climbing up to the higher reaches of the surrounding mountains to collect exotic flowers like the *Brahma Kamal*, found above 10,000 ft and said to be the first flower of *shrishti* or the universe. The flowers are then offered to the local deity. This is followed by two days of celebrations when musicians and dancers from the surrounding villages congregate to showcase their skills.

We strolled through the little settlement of around 1,000 souls who were largely Buddhist, a fact affirmed by the pagoda-roof Kagyupa temple that rose like a benediction over the village. Among the many deities and treasures enshrined in the temple were the highly revered image of the Shakyamuni Buddha and a colourful Wheel of Life mural. The village houses that clustered around the shrine sported traditional slate roofs made of stone and wood.

Dotting the outskirts of the village were log cabin storerooms perched on stilts, each one secured by antique padlocks and accessible by wooden ladders. These cabins are the lifeline of Chitkul during winter when heavy snow fall often cuts the village off from the rest of the world for days.

The fields around Chitkul that greeted us that summer day were green with the promise of a rich harvest (potato is the prized crop) with winter, a distant memory etched in white on the snow-tipped peaks of the surrounding mountains.

We briefly considered setting off on our planned trek but dismissed the option almost immediately and drove back to our cozy resort, a haven on the Baspa river which sang a siren song as it flowed just beyond our log hut. Early next morning, as the mist trailed its fingers on the tops of saw-toothed mountains, framed in the windows of our room, we set off on the promised trek: forded glacier-fed rivers; slaked our thirst with water from a mountain stream; picnicked at the foot of a waterfall; stepped gingerly over logs that served as a bridge over gushing waters; walked down narrow trails that traced the lip of vertical cliffs; strode through a valley of flowers...

That night, back at the resort, one of us had a pleasant dream of being decked up in traditional Himachali garb and dancing at the base of a waterfall that tumbled into a river flowing through a mysterious forest.

**FACT FILE**

Shimla is the closest airport and railway station. However, Chandigarh has far better frequencies and connections in terms of flights and trains. Sangla, the base for Chitkul, is a 10 to 11-hour drive across spectacular terrain. One could break journey at Shimla, from where Sangla is an eight-hour drive. By way of accommodation, there are a number of options. However, it is best to avoid hotels in cluttered Sangla town. A better option is to look at retreats and camps outside the town. One may also consider budget lodges in Chitkul and the neighbouring village of Rakcham.