



THE LAND BEYOND A SEARCH ENGINE

Braving divine wrath, bad SEO and blisters, a latter-day wanderer winds back the millennia to take tea with Lord Shiva's favourite shepherds

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FROM MY TEETERING VANTAGE POINT, THE TIGHTLY terraced fields seemed almost close enough to touch: hardly 4km as the crow flies. But since chances of finding a crow able to carry me – rucksack, tent, food and all – was an impossibility, I had to think on, and of, my feet. The village of my dreams was still a blisteringly long walk away.

That was an unpleasant thought: in part because I was already sporting a motley collection of blisters, and also because stories of the village’s inaccessibility that I had casually brushed aside as local legend on the first day of the trek, were playing out with alarming accuracy now I was up at almost 4,000m.

My favourite shoes, sopping from frequent showers and more than one brush with slush, had grown a dislike for my feet and rubbed it in by giving me a blister for each of the seven days that I had walked. The ‘best season’ seemed the worst. September generally sees the retreat of the monsoon as autumn sweeps in, and is noted for its dramatic skies.

Drama I got, with the weather turning wilder each day, drenching the earth with rain in the morning and snow at night. Armies of leeches marched the forests at lower altitudes, eager to gain a closer acquaintance. A mountain pit viper wormed into my bed on Day 3, and clouds of mosquitoes drowned the birdsong until I reached the treeline on Day 5. Once beyond the forest, exposure chilled me to the bone, hail lashed the tent and robbed me of sleep, and every single piece of clothing I carried was either wet or wetter.

Still the clouds showed no sign of having finished with me.

This is how Shiva, the destroyer in the Hindu trinity, treats trespassers on these mountainous ramparts between Manali and Dharamshala, a swathe of malachite green as untamed as those hill stations are teaming. “This is the Lord’s land,” Manoj, a Gaddi had said to me. He, like all the others of his pastoral tribe, believes his people are bestowed with a divine right to walk this land with their herds of sheep and goats. For them Shiva, sends down sunshine, keeps streams in check and grows a profusion of healing herbs to keep man and beast healthy. From what I saw, He had been especially generous with the cannabis, which the shepherds use with merry abandon, claiming that it keeps them warm and fatigue at bay.

For everyone else, Shiva reserves what Manoj called “havasi gussa,” lustful wrath. During my time in His land, He had seemed especially lusty and wrathful. Still, I had persevered and successfully followed the snaking trail on the map as it led me from Manali sanctuary to Lamadug, then to Riyali Thach, on to Duppu, across the 4,898-m Kalihani pass and onward to Devi Marhi. The landscape, though always seen through a curtain of rain, snow or mist, had been richly diverse. It moved from pine forests to oak groves and pure strands of fir and birch. Beyond that the land cloaked itself white as it climbed to the pass. On the other side, rolling pastures of wildflowers awaited, the air fresh with a thousand fragrances sharp and sweet.

Snatching at heavenly sights and scents while dodging Shiva-sent deluges, I had my heart set on Bara Bangal, a little-known



LAKES AND PEAKS
The shores of Lake Karakol (below) and the south side of Ak-Baital Pass (4,655m), in Tajikistan (right).





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The shores of Lake Karakol (below) and the south side of Ak-Baital Pass (4,655m), in Tajikistan (right).

The only rational decision is to turn around. In a place beyond any rescue helicopter, where the closest hospital is several hundred miles away

village sandwiched between the high passes of Kalihani, now behind me, and Thamsar (4,766 metres), and protected by impregnable mountains at its back. On the remaining side raged the River Ravi, effectively cloistering the hamlet from all but the most patient, inquisitive and bull-headed traveller.

The difficulty in reaching Bara Bangal is surely the prime reason it has been left to its own devices for so long. Even today, fleets of horses are regularly dispatched to carry rations for the villagers – and that’s in the summer. Their only contact with the outside world for most of the year is through the satellite phone installed by the government, which is to be used only in case of emergency.

Local lore offers several nuggets – varyingly far-fetched or tall – on how the hamlet came about. One speaks of residents of Bengal fleeing a massive flood and finding shelter there, though there is no record of a great inundation and there were surely many easier places to pitch up to then this.

More plausible is the tale that credits shepherds with setting up the village because it was the only flatish piece of land for miles around. From where I stood, in what seemed like my own deity-driven downpour, the thought of shelter and flat land sounded like manna indeed.

Bara Bangal is considered the oldest village of the gaddis, pastoral nomads of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh and is the oldest recorded settlement in Kangra district. But perched where it is, beyond the reach of roads, wires or pipes, it is a village where time has stood still – possibly because moving about would risk tumbling headlong into the river below.

If Google’s the yardstick for measuring how much is known about our world, this village urgently needs to address its SEO. A couple of blogs, and half-a-handful of clumsy images are all that the search engine reveals – along with countless travel agencies touting it as a hard or strenuous trek. Which is why I had to see it for myself of course.

I followed the padded-down grass trail to the village, traversing hill after hill, clambering up and tottering down as the trail commanded. In places, I crossed paths with hurrying streams, in others I was drawn into tangles of vegetation, the trail only re-emerging some metres away. The sun streamed in whenever the clouds parted: sometimes for seconds, sometimes for whole minutes at a time! In those fleeting

There are hundreds if not thousands
of peaks still waiting to be explored
between the Himalayas



moments, the landscape dazzled, distracting the mind from the ache of nine straight hours of walking, overshadowing the hopelessness of having lost sight of the village again.

Finally, four hours after I first saw the farms from across the river, I found myself amid a sea of kidney beans and maize. Beyond, I passed into patches of tomatoes and cauliflowers. And beyond them, in the deep ‘V’ carved by the Ravi, I sighted slate-roofed houses. I was still a good 30 minutes off, but the end was in sight.

Reaching the village, I pitched camp on the opposite bank, next to a primary school. I would have preferred the staying in the village itself, but as with most hamlets belonging to shepherds, formalities first need to be completed with the guard dogs that roam freely, and late evening, I presumed, would not be the best time for such introductions.

As night crept in, I had a more welcome greeting. One by one, each of the 80 houses in the village lit up with a single bulb. I heard later that this miracle had been made possible by a well-meaning engineer from the Public Works Department who in 1999 drew up a plan to illuminate Bara Bangal so children could study after dark. In 2006, a tiny hydroelectric project was completed, providing the village with enough electricity to light one bulb in each house for six hours every evening, thanks to the Ravi’s waters. Another villager told me that the Shirdi Sai Baba Foundation (a non-profit named after a prominent spiritual master) had sponsored the project and had all the equipment flown in by helicopter. I didn’t question further. Brave little globes of light fit into my image of the village,

aircraft thudding up the valley didn’t.

Early next morning, I awoke to the sound of my tent being unzipped and found myself looking into two pairs of eyes, one belonging to a goat and the other to its master. “Tourist?” asked the man, identifying himself as Munna.

“Yes.”

“Why are you not coming to the village?”

“I will today.”

“You must come to my house first. I’ll wait till you’re ready.”

Twenty minutes later, I was at Munna’s house having tea. And I had already been invited for a lunch of rajma chawal (kidney beans and rice) and fresh meat. I had accepted, but asked Munna if he would be kind enough to take me around the village before lunch. He was positively thrilled at the prospect.

We headed out of the house and into the stony lanes that joined the houses into a village. People were just beginning their day. The boys were heading out to the fields – villagers grow one crop of kidney beans and maize every year – the women were busy cleaning the house and the old people made themselves comfortable on verandahs to see everything was in order. Everywhere we went, we were greeted with smiles, offered tea and given invitations for further lunches.

When I told them I had already promised Munna, invitations were extended out to afternoon snacks, dinner, and then to breakfast, lunch and dinner the next day.

“It’s tradition,” said an old man who invited me to swig arrack, the local liquor, with him (it was 9am). “We’d all be hurt if you don’t

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The shores of Lake Karakol
(below) and the south side
of Ak-Baital Pass (4,655m),
in Tajikistan (right).





PRACTICALITIES

When to go

For those who love wildflowers, mid-May to mid-June offers a spectacular window of opportunity. If brooding skies and the prospect of joining the Gaddis on their winter retreat is more to your taste, the end of September is the perfect time.

How to get there

Begin your trek at either Manali or Dharamsala. Both of these popular hill stations are an overnight drive from New Delhi. Buses, both private and state-run, ply the route. Domestic flights service Gaggal (Dharamsala) and Bhuntar (Kullu) airports

What to take

There is nowhere to stay on the trek except at Bara Bangal itself where conditions are basic. Good trekking shoes, tents, sleeping bags and rations are par for the course.

Further info

Trekking agencies have begun offering this trek. The author recommends Delhi-based White Magic Adventure Travel, www.wghitemagicadventure.com

eat or drink something in each house.”

I turned to Munna for support: “It’s true sir. That is how it is in this village,” he said, draining my hopes of staying sober for at least the morning.

As we sat down to drink, I took in the details of the house. It seemed, as did all the others in the village, to belong to another era, when gigantic trees still stood on the mountainsides. The walls were stout stone bulwarks against the brunt of the weather while inside, massive pine trunks hoisted a mezzanine high above a ground floor made of brick, coated in a mixture of cow dung and mud, and padded with stalks of grass. Most of the utensils were stone. The villagers burnt herbs as incense and still used birch bark and charcoal to scribble down notes. The only thing that reminded me of the outside world were incongruous posters of Bollywood stars, brought back by youngsters who had ventured to the city.

I asked the old man if he’d ever gone to Manali or Dharamshala. “Yes,” he said. “My son took me there once. But I ran back after three days. It was too dirty and chaotic for me.”

Two drinks later, I politely excused myself, keen on seeing more of the village while I could still see straight. That’s how I met Uday Bhan, a weathered man with deep set, intense eyes and an insistence to match. He would hear nothing of my plans of exploring the village. I just had to have tea with him. And I’m glad I accepted, for over tea, he shared his own version of how the village came to be.

According to him, the inhabitants were direct descendants of

the soldiers in Alexander the Great’s army. The village, he said, was set up after the soldiers decided to stay rather than return home after their conquests. Over time they built villages and took nomadic shepherdesses as wives. “That’s why we are a different-looking people,” he said. It did make some sense, because history does document Alexander’s return from the far bank of the Ravi river, though how the village got its name still remains elusive.

There are tales of a king Bhangalia who ruled this region, who might have lent his name to the village. Then there’s the fact that the word for cannabis is *bhang* and *bara* means ‘big’ or ‘a lot’. As cannabis grows like grass here, it may not be too wild a trip to imagine that the name originally meant ‘place of much cannabis’.

My two-day stay passed by in a blizzard of activity – a mostly indoor blizzard for once. Drinking, eating and chatting, then moving on, almost at random, never short of hospitality. Another time I might have rued the inactivity, but here, in the village I had come to discover, all was as it should be. Optimised, you could say. Discovery, I decided, does not come with the click of a mouse.

I could have stayed longer, but eventually recalling that I had a job prevented me from taking a shepherdess of my own and adding my genes to Alexander’s. I bade goodbye to the villagers, stowing their gifts – a handwoven shawl, incense branches and meat – into my rucksack. The weather was souring again and I’d need the warmth, wishes and protein to make the four-day journey over Thamsar pass back to the present day. **AA**

