

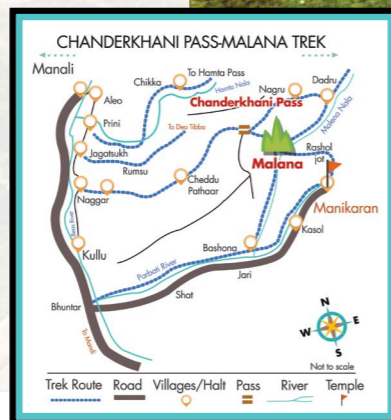
MYSTICAL MALANA

Is it time to write a eulogy for this tucked-away village yet?

Text **Supriya Sehgal**

Though clichés are said to keep tourism alive in most parts of the world, I find it imperative for the traveller to simultaneously acquire an attitude that leans towards diminishing any typecasting for destinations. Why should Varanasi be pegged only to spirituality and death, or Hampi be tattooed with a bohemian vibe? Why should smoke-veiled faces be the only thing that come to your mind when you think of Old Manali, or will no one ever look beyond the Taj Mahal in Agra? So when a friend asked me to join him on a trek to the Himachali village of Malana, I immediately tried to drop its cannabis

Start your trek down to Malana at the scenic Chanderkhani Pass.





Luis Fernando Dafos/age fotostock/Dinodia.com

**Above: Trekkers at the Chanderkhani Pass.
Right: The wooden Naggar Castle.**

legacy and replace it with the other things that I heard about the village—an apparent lineage of Alexander’s army, an exclusive language that is endemic to the village, and the fact that it is one of the world’s oldest democracies. A decade ago, I might have felt a nagging itch to see the unabashed cultivation of the infamous plant, but not anymore.

It did occur to me that the village was perhaps over-visited by college kids or SUV-loads of curious Delhi weekend vacationers, but it could still be worth my while—especially since we decided to ditch the 21-km drivable stretch that wends up from Kasol in the Parvati Valley, and replace it with a two-day trek from Naggar (22 km from Manali). It would be the ideal way to spend a Saturday, going up the *gaddi* (shepherds) route to Chanderkhani Pass and then trundle down to the village of Malana for a night.

When I say that Naggar suffered a stifling summer last year, I am in no way referring to the heat of the plains catching up to its altitude. It was the profusion of tourist spillover from Manali, who only come to this town to scan the wooden Naggar Castle. Few make it to the Roerich Museum at the end of the town and even fewer to simply sit at the edge of the



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mountain and sip cider made by locals. For those who like some peace, the scene may provoke pangs of longing to turn back the clock on this undiscovered place. Our trek was timed interestingly: on a Saturday morning, when ‘tempo travellers’ would come rumbling up from Manali and leave remnants of a seemingly fun trip—empty packets of chips and chocolates.

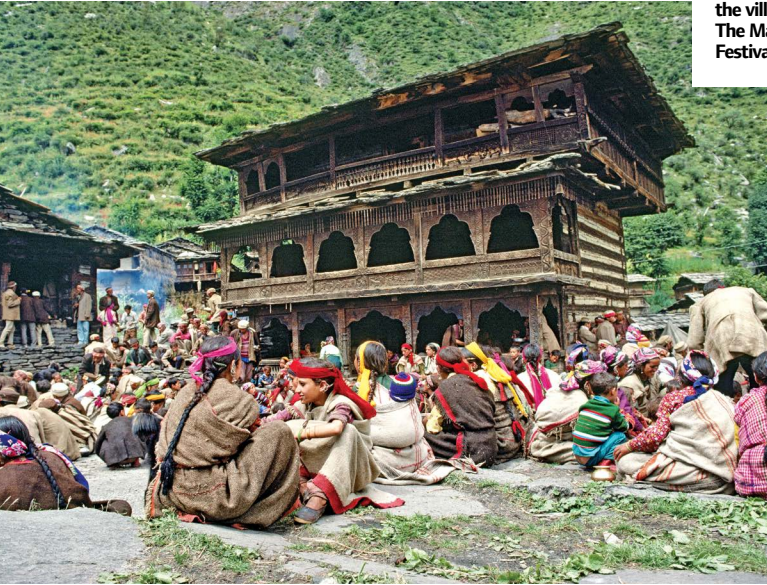
We started early with our toothless guide, Meherchand, whose supply of beedis never seemed to run out. With this unlikely hiking supplement hanging from the corner of his mouth he took large



Supriya Sehgal



Clockwise from above left: Homes at the mystical village of Malana; A view of the village from afar; The Malana Village Festival in progress.



Christophe Boisvieux/age fotostock/Dinodia.com

steps for a mountain trail, while we struggled to keep pace. I could have sworn that at a ripe age of 50-something he was, in fact, a mountain goat masquerading as a man! The gradual inclines until Rumsu and Ganchalini villages were easy, then came the forested stretch, interspersed with meadows. The stunning views of the Pir Panjal range of mountains and the Kullu Valley were the only respite to our gasping lungs. Clusters of pine, deodar and chestnut trees offered shade to slump onto the floor after every hour. Once we picked momentum, the sublimity of the surroundings kicked in. An overnight shelter at the only shanty before Chanderkhani seemed heavenly. Copious cups of black tea and hot servings of Maggi noodles resurrected us from the fatigue and we slept well.

The next morning held in store the steep walk along a narrow creek bed. Any hiking prowess that I had acquired in the years of travel seemed insufficient for the tough trail. The charm of reaching Malana was fast dwindling until I spotted the last bend. A moan of relief at the very last hop onto muddy path announced the end of the trek.

Malana was unarguably gorgeous. Intricately carved temples and smaller shrines dotted the village. Traditional homes lined the capillaries like paths that criss-crossed through the span of the village. We mindfully kept locals at an arm's length (literally) to avoid brushing against them—an outsider is levied a fine of ₹5000 and ₹2500 for touching a shrine and a local, respectively. Some of our namastes fell on mildly hostile locals who didn't want to mingle with outsiders but some reciprocated with enthusiasm. Advice and information came from the slightly more cordial. One of them even broke into *kanashi*—the local language—to exhibit how different it was from the other Himachali dialects; something that we naturally failed to decipher but nodded in appreciation of the interest in keeping a culture alive.

We were lucky to spot the council of the village as they were returning from a meeting, dressed in finery and business-like expressions. The long-standing parliamentary system of the village has been an exemplary depiction of the democratic mindset of the people. This is the Malana I wanted to explore.

But then there is a side that has made the reputation of Malana travel far and wide. Feeding the stoner culture for decades, it is difficult to keep this talk at bay. Cannabis bushes grew unbridled all over the town, adding a hefty dash of green to the brown topography. Young kids with definitive regal features

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(think sharp nose and light eyes) waved “hello, how are you?” in flawless American accents.

Just as we decided to settle into a prospective guesthouse for the night, I spotted a troupe of young out-of-towners, complete with branded footwear, dark glasses propped on their heads, recklessly noisy and clearly fitness averse making their last tired steps to the village. They had driven from Delhi via Jari to Nerang, the point from where one can walk up to the village in 45 minutes. They revealed their agenda even before catching their breath, as young Malanis converged near the group, promising the best stuff they had ever had. Negotiations completed, the tourists whipped out a smartphone with speakers that would wake up the dead. Entitled hollers for chai and parathas filled the air. I saw an empty packet of chips make a fluttery journey from the group towards me.

It was not so much the cashing on a profitable business that I felt averse to but the fact that the youth of Malana had failed to preserve the cache of traditions, effectively diluting the spirit of the village. There was no cultural osmosis—just a one-way street where Malanis were left with Bob Marley T-shirts and mashed-up accents that sounded nothing like kanashi. The last words I heard as I turned back to leave were, “Pump up the volume bro!”

Luis Fernando/age fotostock/Dinodia.com

Fact File

Getting there

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Chandigarh from Mumbai and Delhi. From here, Naggar is about 290 km and can be reached in around eight hours.

Accommodation

Stay options in the form of budget and mid-range hotels are available in Kasol, which is approximately 20 km away from Malana.

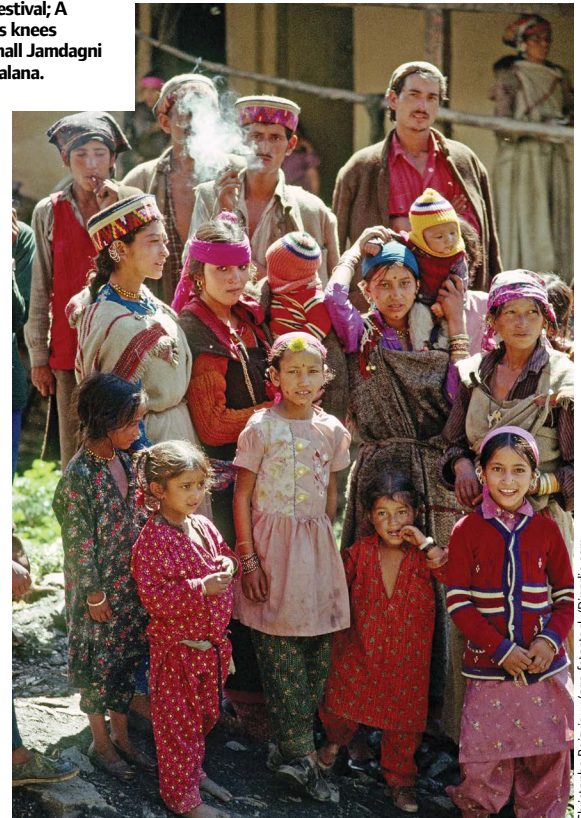
For more information

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Clockwise from above:
Meadows on the hiking trail from Naggar to Chanderkhani; Villagers gathered for the Malana Village Festival; A young man on his knees worshipping a small Jamdagni Rishi shrine in Malana.

Supriya Sethgal



Christophe Boisivieux/age fotostock/Dinodia.com