Chasing the Ghost of Spiti: A 4,000-Km Road Trip from Pune to Chicham for the Snow Leopard

I'd wanted to photograph snow leopards for years. The problem was finding people with the same number of days free. Since moving permanently to Pune, the Himalayas had also gotten even further away. So I stopped waiting for the perfect group and went with the one I had.

This trip ran from Pune to Pune in my Toyota Fortuner (manual, 4×4). It took 6 to 7 days to reach Chicham, a small village in Spiti Valley, and the same to return. I had planned a 9-day stay there, in the thick of winter, when the snow leopard is at its most visible.

SNOW LEOPARD Mar 2023

Dqy1 24 Feb	Fri	Thane to Abu Rd	- 706Km	13hours
Day 2 25 Feb	Sat	Abu Rd to Jaipur	- 482km	9h
Day 3 26 Feb	Sun	Jaipur to Chandigarh	- 474km	8h
Day 4 27 Feb	Mon	Chandigarh to Sarahan	- 260km	10h
Day 5 28 Feb	Tue	Sarahan to Tabo	- 240Km	8h
Day 6 01 Mar	Wed	Tabo to Chicham	- 70Km	4h
Day 7 02 Mar	Thu	Chicham		
Day 8 03 Mar	Fri	"		
Day 9 04 Mar	Sat	"		
Day 10 05 Mar	Sun	"		
Day 11 06 Mar	Mon	"		
Day 12 07 Mar	Tue	"		
Day 13 08 Mar	Wed	"		
Day 14 09 Mar	Thu	"		
Day 15 10 Mar	Fri	"		
Day 16 11 Mar	Sat	Chicham to Mud Village	- 72km	3h
Day 17 12 Mar	Sun	Mud to Dhankar	- 50km	3h
Day 18 13 Mar	Mon	Dhankar to Kalpa	- 200km	6h
Day 19 14 Mar	Tue	Kalpa to Chandigarh	- 313km	11h
Day 20 15 Mar	Wed	Chandigarh to Jaipur	- 474km	8h
Day 21 16 Mar	Thu	Jaipur to Abu Rd	- 482km	9h
Day 22 17 Mar	Fri	Abu Rd to Pune	- 860km	18h

1. This caters for 10 days at Chicham.
2. The trip to Chicham, with halts at Sarahan and Tabo are for acclimatization.
3. Even though we have planned 10 days at Chicham, if we get Snow Leopard Images and videos soon, we can also leave that many days earlier.

My Pune to Chicham itinerary



Tue 21 | Day

-3°

50%
SSW 6 km/h

Snow showers. High -3°C. Winds SSW and variable. Chance of snow 50%.

Humidity **85%**	UV Index **5 of 10**
Sunrise **06:54**	Sunset **18:08**

Tue 21 | Night

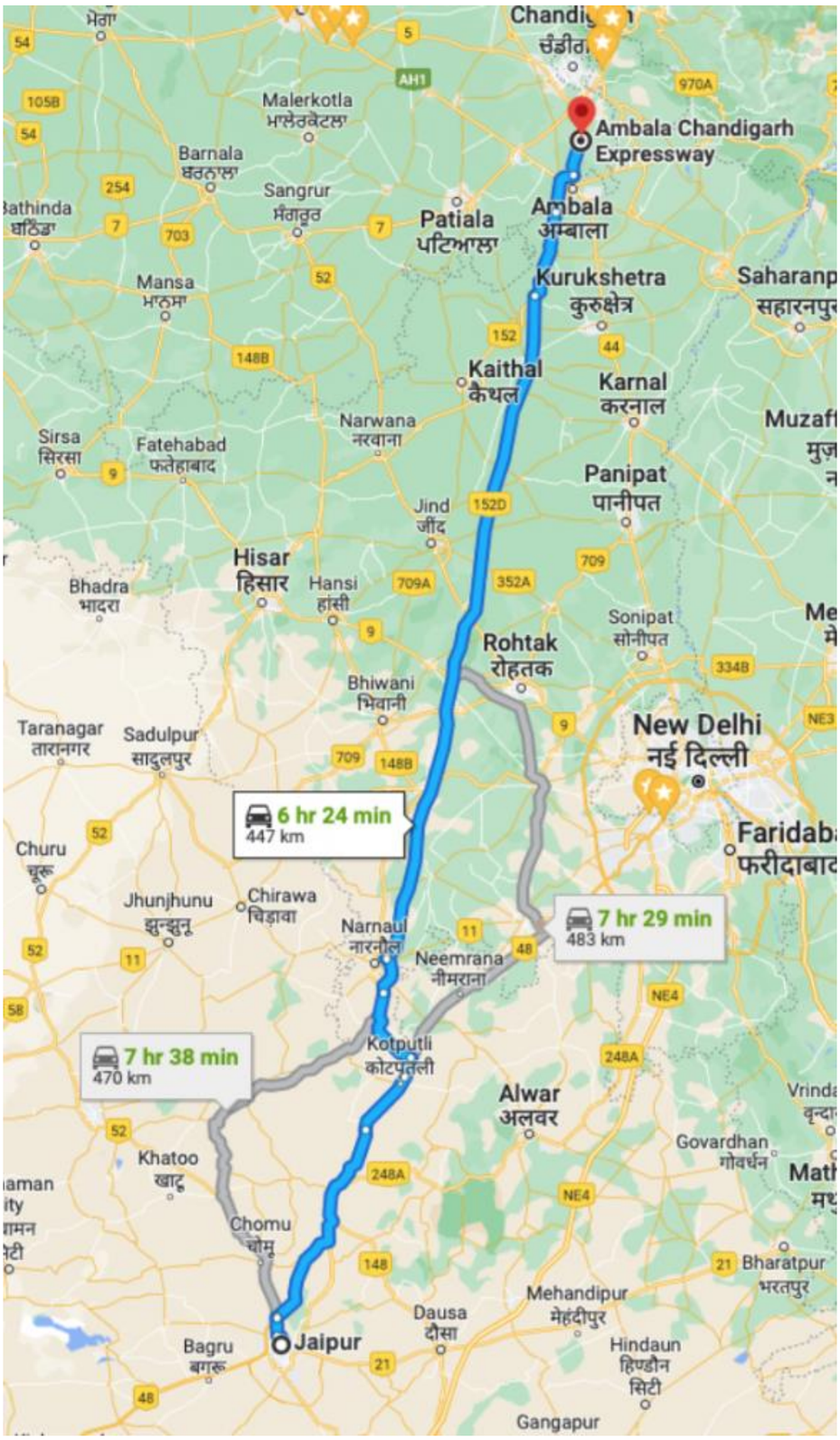
-16°

48%
WNW 4 km/h

Snow showers early. Low -16°C. Winds WNW and variable. Chance of snow 50%. Snow accumulations less than 2 cm.

Humidity **83%**	UV Index **0 of 10**
Moonrise **07:46**	Moonset **19:25**
Waxing Crescent	

Wed 22	-5°/-16°	PM Snow Showers	32%	SW 7 km/h	
Thu 23	-6°/-19°	Sunny	5%	W 4 km/h	
Fri 24	-6°/-17°	Mostly Sunny	3%	WSW 5 km/h	
Sat 25	-5°/-15°	Mostly Sunny	22%	WSW 6 km/h	
Sun 26	-5°/-14°	PM Snow Showers	43%	WSW 8 km/h	
Mon 27	-6°/-15°	Partly Cloudy	24%	SW 9 km/h	
Tue 28	-5°/-13°	PM Snow Showers	32%	WSW 7 km/h	
Wed 01	-3°/-10°	Snow Shower **arrival Chicham**	59%	SW 8 km/h	
Thu 02	-3°/-14°	Snow Shower	53%	SSW 8 km/h	
Fri 03	-4°/-14°	Partly Cloudy	24%	WSW 7 km/h	
Sat 04	-4°/-14°	Mostly Sunny	14%	WSW 7 km/h	
Sun 05	-3°/-13°	Partly Cloudy	15%	WSW 7 km/h	
Mon 06	-3°/-13°	Mostly Sunny	20%	W 7 km/h	
Tue 07	-3°/-13°	Mostly Sunny	18%	WSW 7 km/h	



Ambala Narnul Expressway

The Team

Five of us made the trip, including me. One friend came along from Pune. A girl from Hyderabad took a train to Thane, and we picked her up there. At Chandigarh we met a guy from Delhi, and another joined from Chandigarh itself.

Before leaving, I planned the route and had the Fortuner thoroughly checked. Kinnaur and Spiti are unforgiving on a vehicle, and you don't want to find a weakness at 4,000 metres. I also lined up local guides in advance, because in snow leopard country the guide and his spotters are everything.

Two golden rules for any Himalayan Road trip: check your vehicle before you leave, and check what temperature to expect on arrival day. Both are easy to skip, and both can ruin a trip.

Trip video: https://youtu.be/ZjTWcPgm9Ps

The Route

Day 1, 23 Feb 2023: Pune to Thane. We drove out of Pune and spent the night just short of Thane. We chose the western route via Ahmedabad and Rajasthan.

Day 2, 24 Feb: Thane to Abu Road. We picked up our Hyderabad member in Thane and carried on. We stopped short of Vadodara for sugarcane juice, which is mandatory on any road trip. Lunch was a problem. We couldn't find a decent place for hours and ended up at a pizza joint on the far side of Ahmedabad. It was late by the time we crossed Abu Road, where we found a place for dinner and the night.

https://youtu.be/5G5V20CK3vA

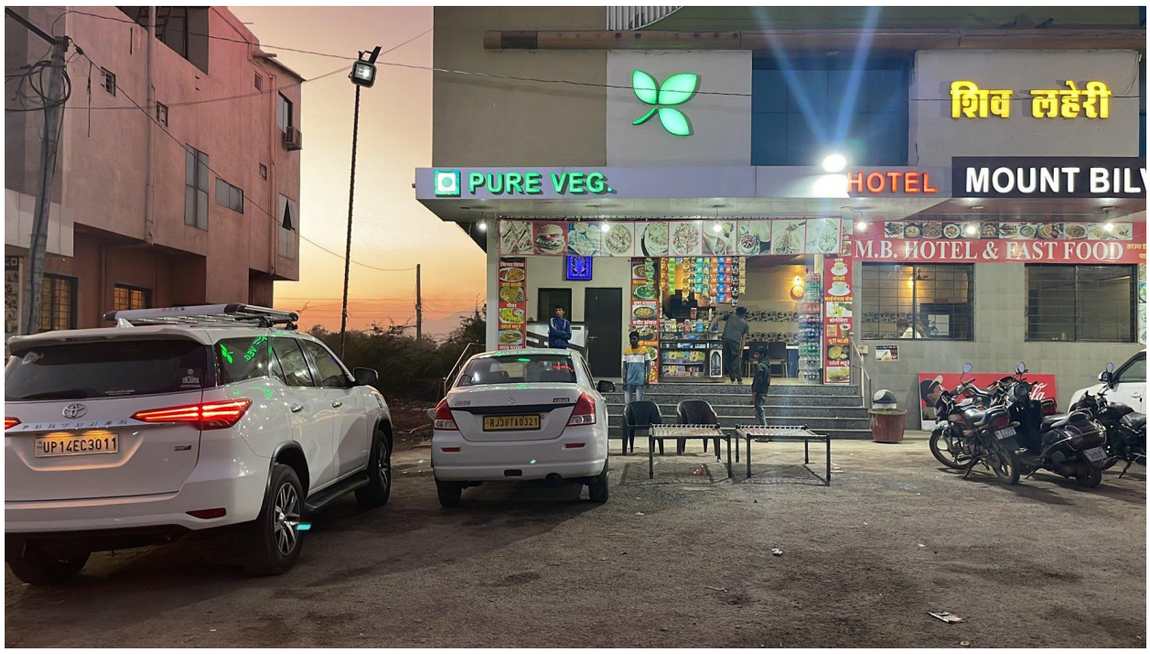
Day 3, 25 Feb: Abu Road to Panchkula. We crossed Sirohi on the Rajasthan route and stopped for breakfast, then had a tea break before the road joins the Mumbai–Delhi highway, a few kilometres short of Beawar. Lunch was midway between Kishangarh and Dudu.

A word on expressways: the Ambala–Narnaul Expressway is superb. It bypasses all the NCR chaos and is even better than the Western Peripheral Expressway around Delhi. I've ridden it a couple of times since my Pune–Manali trip. The Ambala–Chandigarh stretch, though, is an "expressway" only on the map. Our night halt was Panchkula, Sector 18.




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HOTEL
MOUNT BIL
M.B. HOTEL & FAST FOOD
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A.C.
CAR PARKING
VEG.
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WELCOME


HOTEL NARAYANA
RESTAURANT
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AC HALL
CHANDIGARHIYA DA DHABA
• BREAKFAST • LUNCH
• DINNER
PURE VEG







Day 4, 26 Feb: Panchkula to Sarahan. A long day ended at Vasu Mansion Homestay in Sarahan. I've stayed with the same family before, and nothing beats hot food served straight off the fire after a day on the road. Further along we stopped at Khab to rest my back, and about 40 km short of Kaza we pulled over for some breathtaking pictures.



A Sholding Arch Bridge bridge constructed over Sholding Nala, National Highway 5. A rare bridge constructed without nuts and bolts.







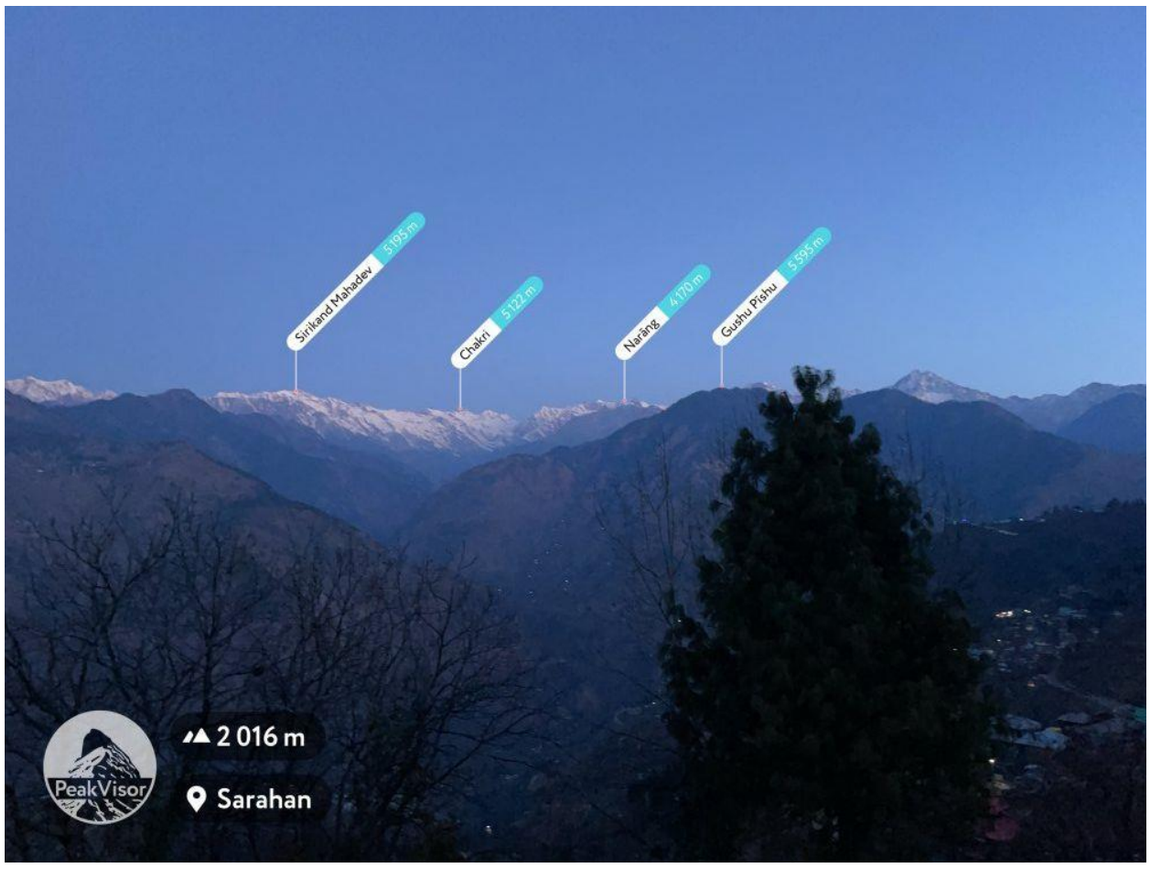




Morning view of snow peaks from the Vasu Mansion Homstay Sarahan.







Peaks visible from Sarahan



Himalayan peaks as seen from Kharo bridge, near Ribba village of Kinnaur.



Moorang Fort of Moorang village of Kinnaur.





Khab Bridge (the eponyms Khab Sangam). A place where confluence of river Satluj and Spiti happens.





Ka Loops. The hairpin road bend of NH5 are constructed between Khab Bridge and Nako village of Kinnaur.



Picture shot near Nako village.







Frozen Nako Lake.



Ice covered Nako lake.









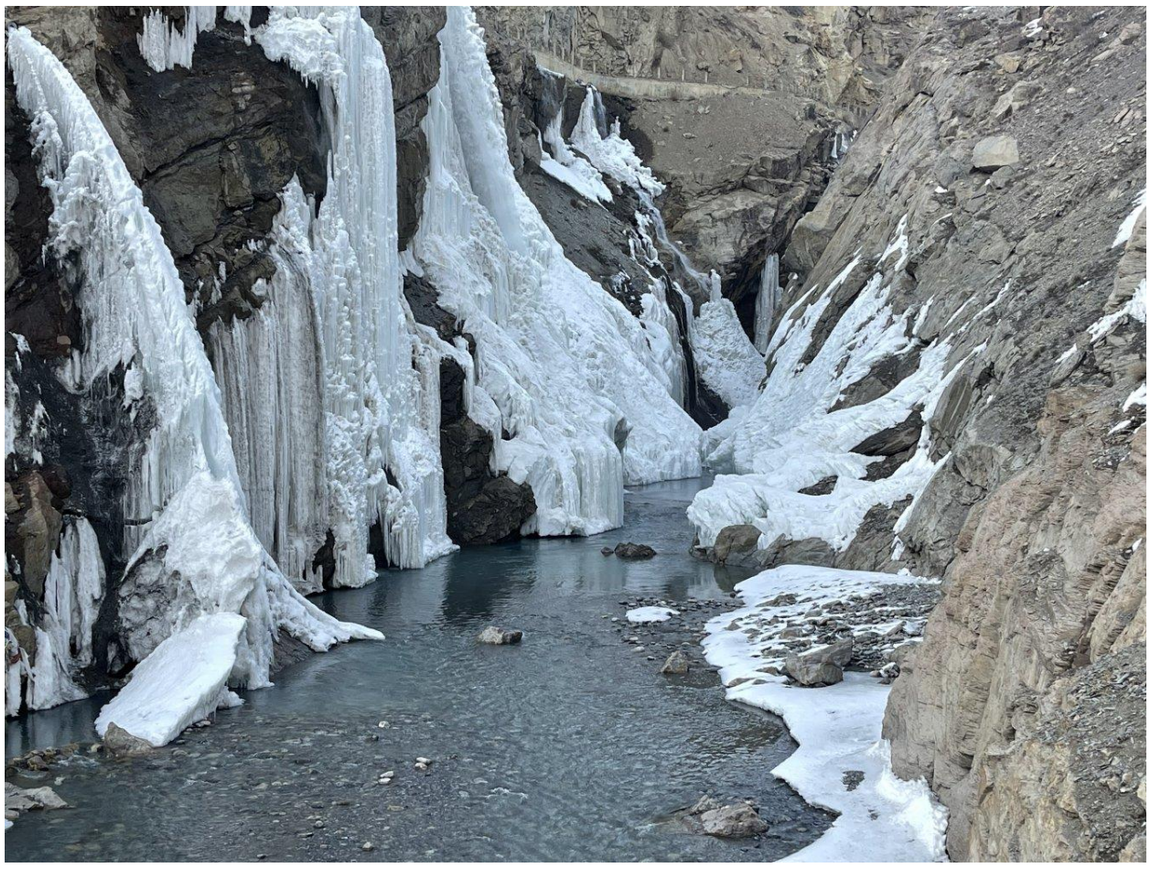








Frozen Lingti waterfall













Near Kaza town, the HQ of Spiti Subdivision of Lahaul-Spiti District.



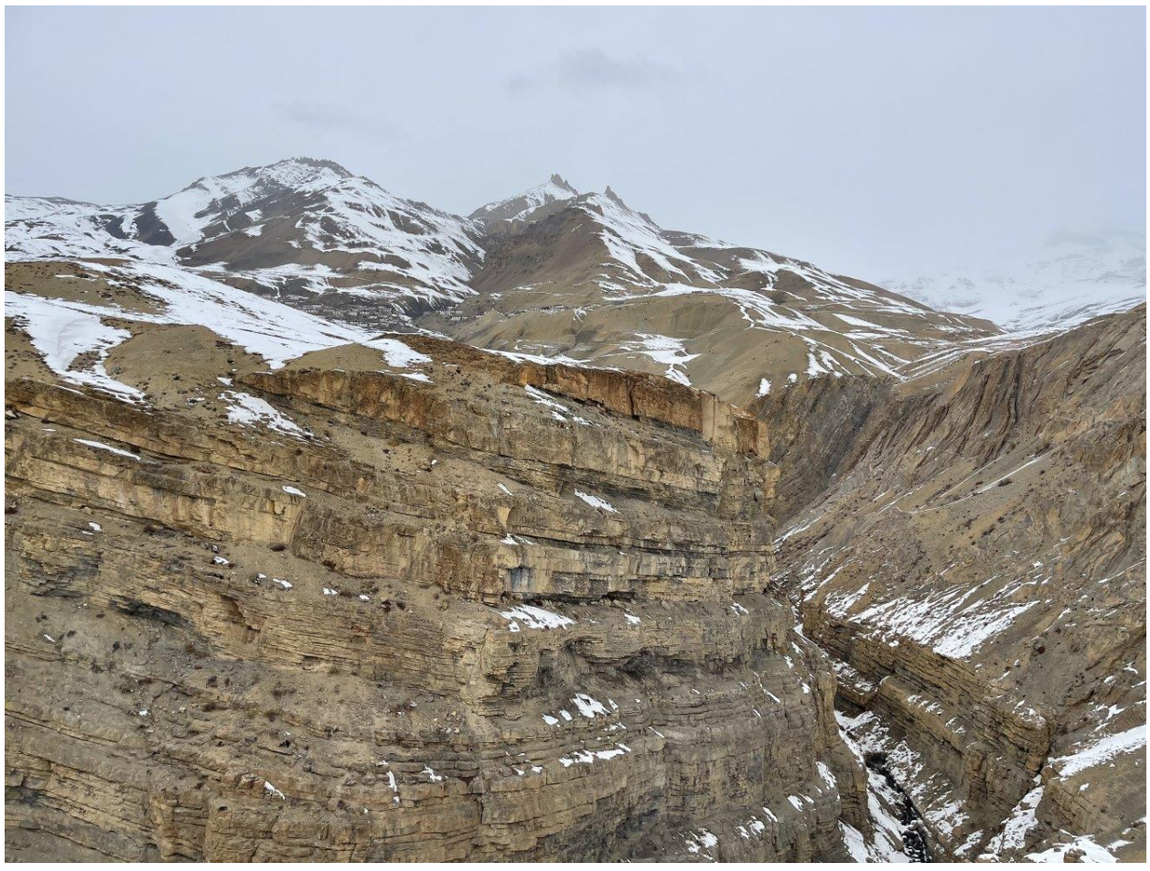




The Snow Leopard

Day 5, 28 Feb: Chicham. This was it. Our subject was a mother with two cubs. They had clearly made a kill the previous day, and with full stomachs they slept the whole day. No stalking, no movement, just a lot of sleeping fur.

We had planned to stay longer, but circumstances forced us to leave after two days. The painful part is that we missed what I really wanted: a snow leopard moving across fresh snow. That shot stays on the list.



The Chicham village can be seen on top left corner of this photo.









Snow leopard spotting spot.











A Snow Leopard resting in his den.











Blue sheep (funny why it is named blue) eating wild shrubs.





Some good hot and yummy soup we had after we got back from Snow Leopard sighting session.



Homestay dining hall.



Chicham Bridge



Chicham Suspension Bridge











The photo favorite place to click Key Monastery.


UP14EC3011





Key Monastery Entrance Gate.





Inside Key Monastery premises.



Stairs leading to Key Gompa/Monastery



The view from Key (also spelled as Ki) Monastery/Gompa of Spiti valley.


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Highest Post
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Spiti
Administration
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WELCOME TO TSEDUP CAFE
STICKER



Hikkim Post Office of India Post.



Posting a postcard from highest post office on earth, Hikkim.







A Note on Snow Leopard Attacks

People often ask whether snow leopards attack humans. I've never heard of it happening. We're not on their menu. But like any animal with young, a mother will do anything to protect her cubs, including attacking whatever she sees as a threat. Give them space and respect. A long lens exists for a reason.

Flashback: How I Got My First Snow Leopard (May–June 2022)

Snow Leopard, Chicham, Spiti Valley, May/Jun 2022

This story starts a year earlier. Whenever I planned a Spiti trip, I always missed Dhankar, Mudh and Chandratal for one reason or another. Then I found someone with the same itch: Anand Bawa from Raipur. He drove 1,200 km with a friend to pick me up near Delhi, and we did the full Spiti circuit, going up via Shimla and returning via Manali. Kunzum Pass and the road to Chandratal were open, so the timing was perfect.

For once, I did something unusual for me. I booked everything in advance. Normally I just hit the road and find a bed wherever I end up.

The packing dilemma: I was flying Pune to Delhi, so I couldn't carry everything I wanted. I paid ₹2,250 for 5 kg of excess baggage, and it was worth every rupee. In the end I had a little space left and had to choose between a lens and a soap. You can guess which one won.

Day 1, 20 May 2022: Pune to Delhi by air.

Day 2, 21 May: Landed in Delhi to a pilot-reported 44°C. Stepping out to wait for the bus felt like standing over a barbecue.

Day 3, 22 May: Gurgaon to Shimla. Nothing much to report, as the route has become mundane over the years. We halted at a hotel a few km short of Shimla, and rain started at night.

Day 4, 23 May: Shimla to Sarahan. I woke to rain that eventually eased, and then the cloud show began. A traffic jam greeted us as soon as we hit the road, and we crawled to the far side of Shimla. Near Narkanda there was a new fuel pump, and we had lunch there. At Sarahan, I had hoped for a galaxy timelapse, but the clouds had vanished and the sunset wasn't what I wanted.

Day 5, 24 May: Sarahan to Chitkul. Rain and clouds again, but the clouds were playing games, so I did two timelapses in different directions. Breakfast was aloo paratha, pickle and dahi. What better way to start a day? After a visit to Sangla Monastery, I waited until the clouds gave me the shot I wanted. Then we drove the Sangla–Chitkul valley with the Baspa River for company. The old landslide spot is still there, with the bypass built after the road was blocked years ago. At Saama Resorts in Chitkul, I set up my camera right away for timelapse, then did some night astro. Here's a teaser.

Day 6, 25 May: Chitkul to Kalpa. A beautiful morning, so another cloud timelapse over the peaks as the sun decided to rise. A walk through Chitkul is always refreshing. I trekked behind the village for an amazing view, then we drove on to the BSF post, beyond which tourists aren't allowed. After Rekong Peo the views just keep getting better. We reached Kalpa by evening, in time for sunset timelapse.

Day 7, 26 May: Kalpa to Dhankar. After a hot breakfast we drove down the Kinnaur–Spiti road. We stopped at Khab, where the Spiti and Sutlej rivers meet, as I always do. We went on through the Ka Loops (looking back from the top is spectacular) and had lunch short of Nako. Lunch takes at least 45 minutes, so I set up the camera for a timelapse while we waited. We passed Moon Land and the road to Gue (one day I must visit), and the formations along the road kept us stopping. Sunlight faded as we climbed the S and Z bends to Dhankar. We'd reach it after dark for sure.

Day 8, 27 May: Dhankar. The night before, I'd set up for a galaxy timelapse. While everyone slept, I went out with my camera. Then I realised my mistake: the morning conditions were perfect for a timelapse of shadows. I'll have to go back for that one. The homestay balcony overlooked the entire valley, and the owner's dog clearly wanted to follow me. We skipped the Z-bend route back and took the direct road behind Dhankar. On the way down we saw the start of Pin Valley and a new landmark in Kaza, where I took a few clicks while my friend refuelled his SUV.

Day 9, 28 May: Pin Valley to Mudh. The drive through Pin Valley is superb, with the best road you could ask for. We met a biker we'd first run into at Kalpa, 18 years on the road and taking along pillion riders who don't own a bike but want a road trip. Amazing. The deeper into Pin you go, the more beautiful it gets. We crossed a branch of the Pin River, stopped for a walk on a footbridge (of course we did), and reached Mudh for the night. After lunch, as the shadows started crawling, I set up for a timelapse of the shadows and later got my galaxy timelapse.

https://youtu.be/4iKx7Vog_BA | https://youtu.be/a8Bu62eCNEs | https://youtu.be/-8y7pwEGUO8 | https://youtu.be/cSKwIbADOjY

Day 10, 29 May: Mudh to Kaza. One bus a day links Mudh to Kaza. It arrives in the evening, stays overnight and heads back in the morning. I watched it leave while waiting for breakfast, then took a short walk to the other side of the village. If you're planning the Bawa Pass trek, this is your base. We headed to Kaza, but

changed plans on the way: better to do Hikkim, Komic and Langza first. We had lunch at Hikkim, visited Komic, and came back for Langza, since the direct Kaza–Langza road was closed for widening and rock cutting. We then reached our homestay by the river in Kaza.

https://youtu.be/tsFevRMbpK0 | https://youtu.be/9NtcZqOWIFg

Day 11, 30 May: Key, Kibber and a Night of Stars. We visited Key Monastery and Kibber, where I noticed they've planted trees along the way and use drip farming to keep them alive. At night we went back to the Hikkim–Langza road and set up at the highest point for galaxy shots. We stayed there until 4:30 am.

https://youtu.be/2Xu4EILghqA

Day 12, 31 May: Kaza to Chicham. Finally, Chicham. We'd been up until 4:40 am, so we got a late start, planning to go straight to the homestay, drop our bags and head out for ibex, blue sheep and, hopefully, snow leopard. But first, the famous Chicham Bridge. As we climbed the S bends I had to look back at the village. I once spent 11 days here doing a drone shoot for the Bedi Brothers, the internationally known wildlife photographers. I'd promised myself I'd return in Feb/Mar 2023, in the thick of winter, exclusively for snow leopard. (That's the trip at the top of this post.)

After lunch our guide arrived, and we headed out with our cameras and high hopes. The guide has a network of spotters who keep him updated on where the wildlife is. Soon he took us to a slope where ibex were grazing.

Day 13, 1 Jun: Ibex, Blue Sheep, Still No Leopard. We spent the day clicking away at the ibex. We even forgot to look for the leopard, though our guide never did. The next morning, news came of blue sheep, so we drove out. We stopped for the views along the way, including a point right above Key Monastery with views in every direction. The guide took us to a spot for breakfast, packed from the homestay: a picnic with hot tea at an incredible location.

We parked the SUV and started trekking, taking frequent halts to avoid AMS. We found the females first, all pregnant. The guide explained that when blue sheep are pregnant, the females move away from the males, and the males go off on their own. We didn't follow them all the way up. After lunch at a tiny village of his relatives, barely a handful of homes, we found the males. They grazed and drifted higher, away from us, so we followed for a while from a safe distance. I shot with my Canon RF 100-500L. All males, plus some young females, I'd guess. Eventually they stopped grazing and rested.

Two days, and not a sign of a snow leopard. We went back to Chicham.

The Day the Leopard Showed Up

Next morning we woke to a beautiful day but with no snow leopard images on the camera. The plan was breakfast, then Chandratal. While waiting for breakfast, my friends and I photographed each other, and I photographed our room, which had views on three sides.

Fifteen kilometres out of Chicham, the guide called. **Leopard sighting.** We turned back immediately.

We got to the homestay, packed lunch and set off. After a 10-km drive, we parked and began the trek. **I don't do treks. But for a snow leopard, I'll do anything.** Just after starting, the guide had to go back over a mountainside to fetch my zoom lens. He was also carrying my oxygen tank, 673 litres.

https://youtu.be/nH9S4hO7vz8

After about 1.5 hours we got closer. A rock outcrop in the distance was where the leopard was sitting, deep in the shadows. The guide and tracker could see it. I still couldn't. We took up position.

Three hours passed. My hands ached. Only the leopard's face was visible, and we waited for him to move. This is the first image straight out of the camera, a Canon R5 with the RF 100-500mm at 500mm. **Can you spot the leopard?** Of course you can't. Here's the heavily cropped and post-processed version. Just his head, and he's definitely looking at us and probably laughing.

I didn't dare blink, in case I lost him. Then I saw a flicker of movement. He was yawning. Probably bored of watching us.

After 4 hours, he finally stood and moved to a new spot behind a huge rock. I got just **10 seconds** to shoot him moving, but I got it. There he was: majestic and silent.

These last frames were shot in very different conditions. The sun had dropped behind the mountain, the sky was overcast, and I was pumping the ISO every few minutes. These images only become worth viewing in post-processing. Look closely and you'll notice the heavy grain. I'll take it. Every grain was earned.

What I Learned

- **Patience is the whole game.** Four hours for ten seconds is a good trade.
- **Your guide is your best piece of kit.** Trust the local spotters.
- **Pack smart, and acclimatise.** Frequent stops and an oxygen tank are not optional.
- **Leave room in the plan.** Two days of nothing, then a call that changes everything.

PS: I got valuable info in planning this trip from Raacho Trekkers website.

https://raachotrekkers.com/snow-leopard-expedition-himachal/

Highly recommended for snow leopard photo tour planning.