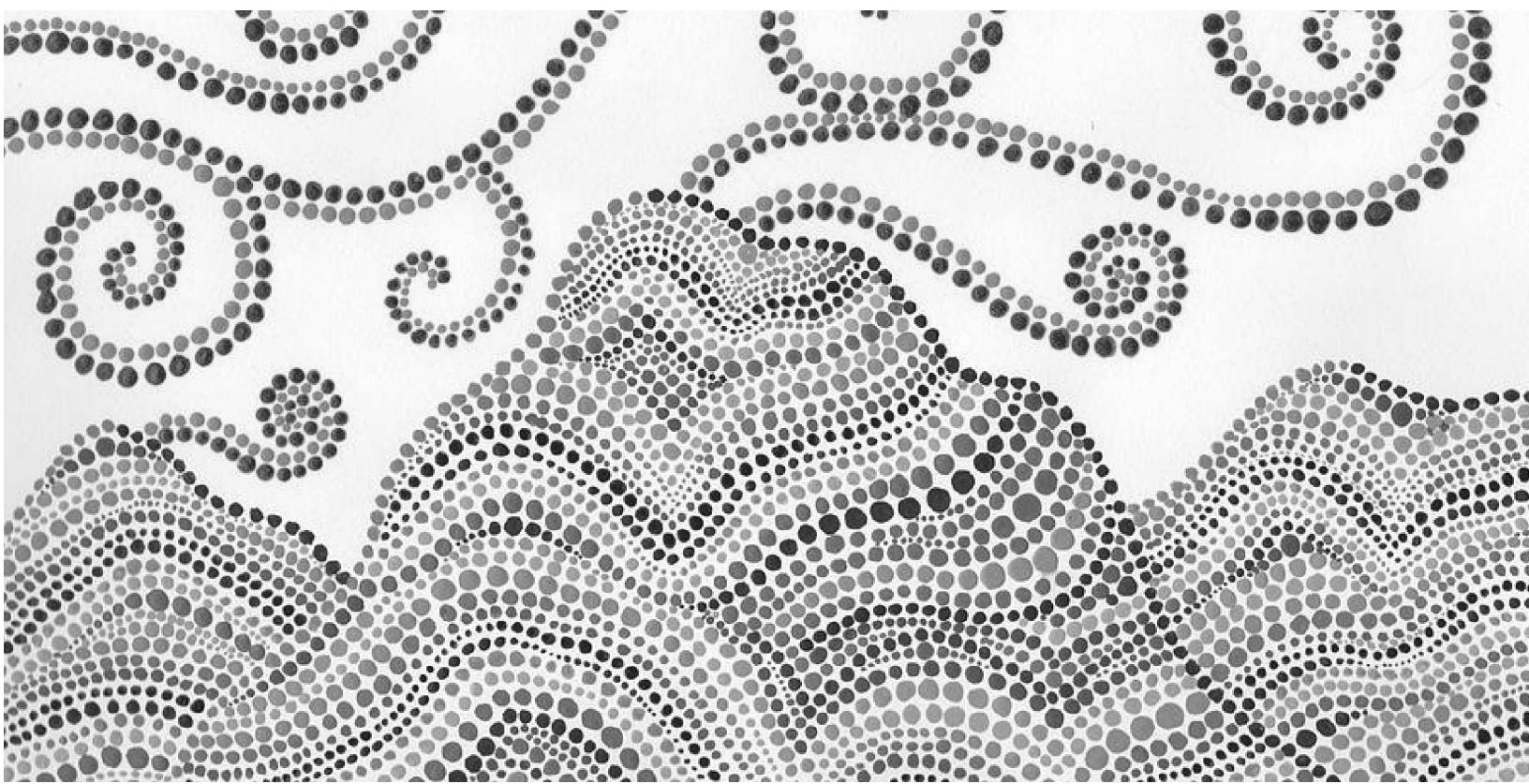
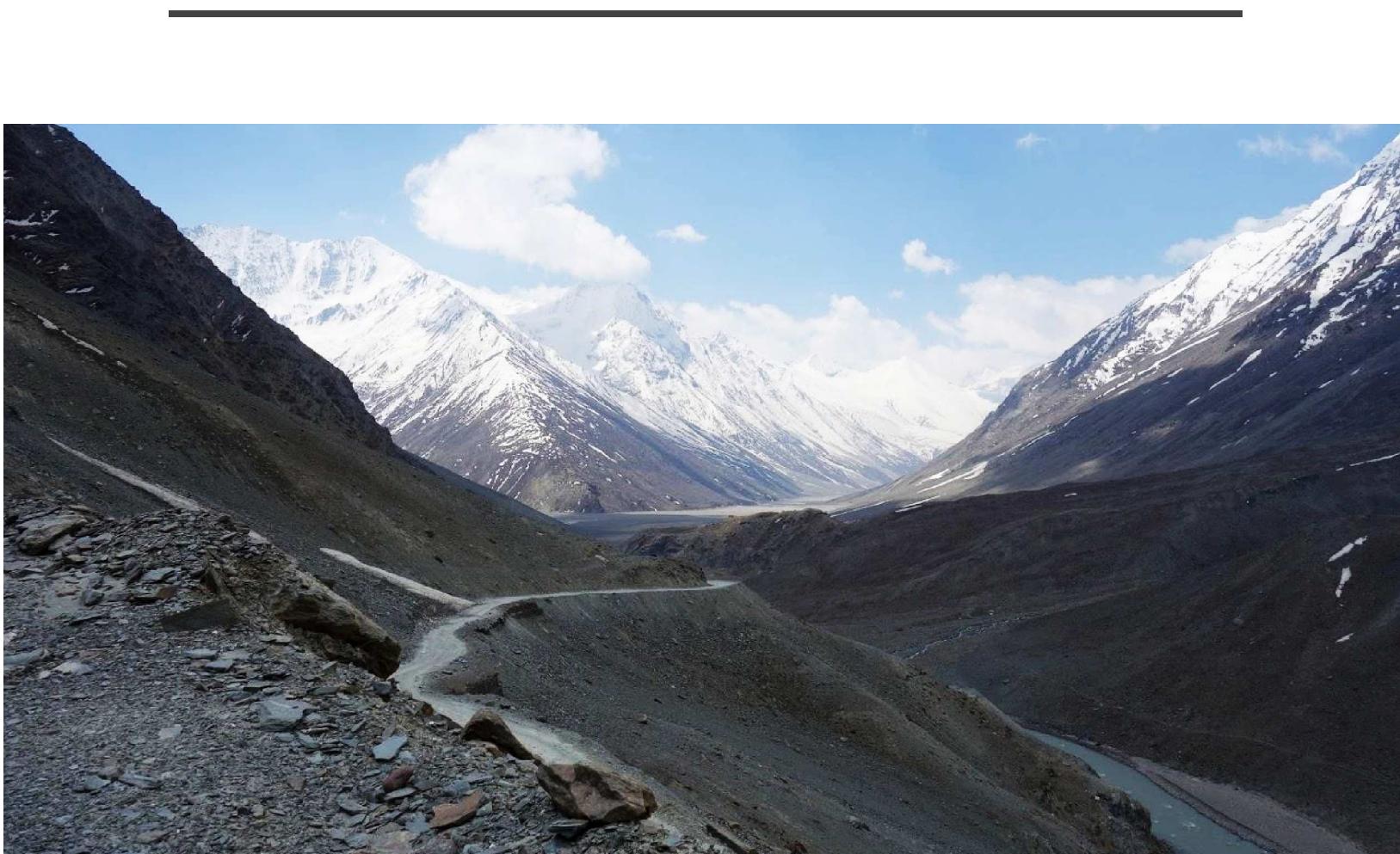




THE UNTAMED ROADS OF SPITI

Travelogue by Nitheesh





The winding road amidst the giants.

PREFACE

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In May of 2018, I and Phalgun ventured onto a five days bike ride in the Spiti valley of Himachal Pradesh, India. Hailing from south India and first time at such a biking adventure, we had a series of unexpected, invigorating, and breathtaking experiences. Picturesque valleys, gushing rivers, numerous water crossings, heavy off-roading, from being stranded to helping the stranded, age-old cultures, colorful landscapes and plenty more. I've tried to capture these along with some subtle details here, which I think are missed in most videos & articles online, and hope this travelogue serves as a guide to your Spiti adventures! Here's Phalgun's photo album that complements this travelogue - <http://phalgun.in/spiti>

“

To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer,
to find each other, and to feel. That is the purpose of life.

-The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty

”



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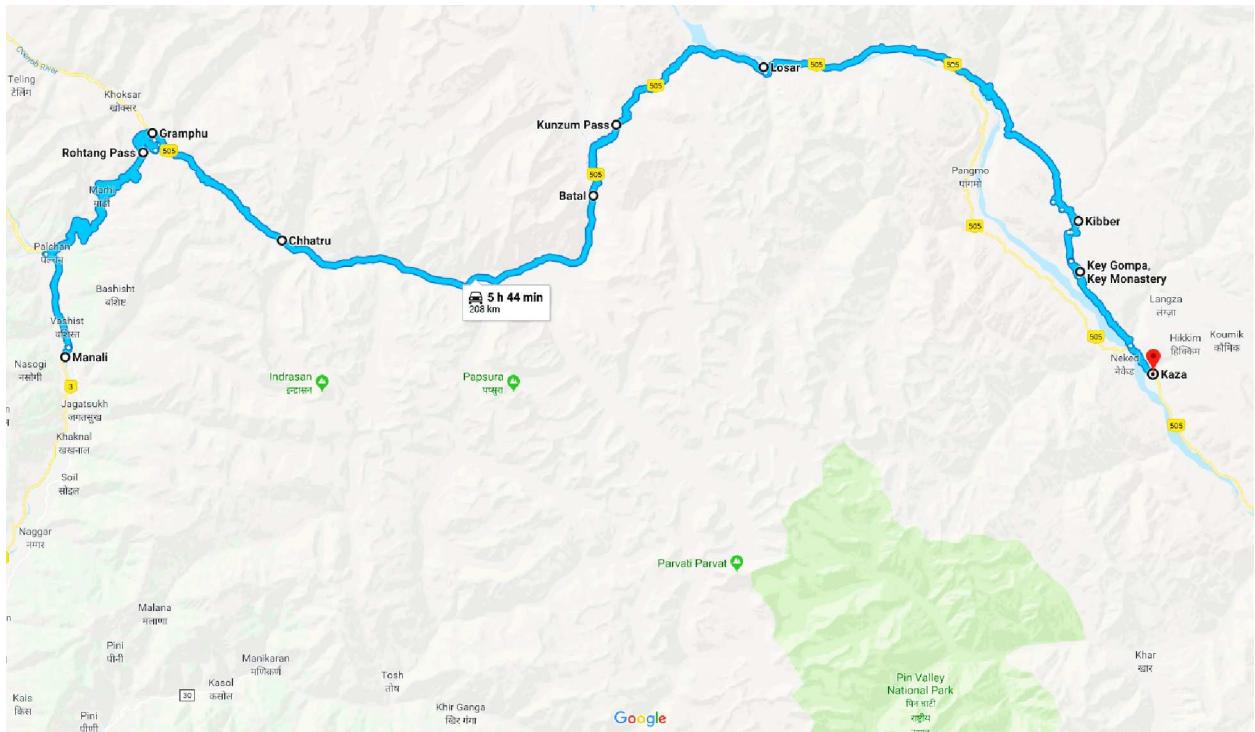
An engineer by profession, a traveler by passion. Eagerly venturing into the outdoors, with a calling for adventure. I've traveled far and wide in the US and been visiting the Himalayas for the last 5 years, but the mountains here never ceases to amaze and keeps calling me back.

This stretch of Himalayas is by far the most raw & secluded experience I've had. It is as if the time has never aged here!



Views of Spiti

Route Map



Onwards to Kaza

~ 210 km

Manali - Rohtang Pass - Gramphu - Chatru - Batal - Kunzum Pass - Losar - Kibber - Key - **Kaza**

Return to Manali

~ 240 km

Kaza - Rangrik - Pangmo - Losar - Kunzum Pass - Chandratal - Batal - Chatru - Gramphu - Rohtang Pass - **Manali**

Day X - Day 0

Acclimatize, packing & permits

Summary - It is highly important to acclimatize well before starting on this journey. You'll be ascending a lot of altitude in a very short duration and are susceptible to AMS if not acclimated well. I was trekking in the high Himalayas the week before, so I was well acclimatized and hence could do this long strenuous ride in just a few days.

Frequent goers to the high altitude regions will already be aware of this. For the new goers, it is highly important to acclimatize well before starting on this journey. You'll be ascending a lot of altitude in a very short duration and are susceptible to AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) if not acclimated well. I was trekking in the high Himalayas for a week before we started this bike ride. So I was well acclimatized and hence could do this long strenuous ride in just a few days. It is generally recommended to give anywhere between 24 to 48 hours for your body to acclimatize to new regions.

If you're renting bikes from Manali, then It is a common plan to arrive a day or two earlier at Manali and spend the time there. Besides acclimatizing, you'd have to go through the process of procuring permits, renting bikes, purchasing the harnesses & other required accessories and packing up your gear for the journey. I cannot stress enough to pack only the absolute essentials! (packing for travel is an art by the way). Else you might be capable of hoarding all your heavy gear, but managing it will soon become a pain, for both you and others traveling along with you, when you load & unload, fall, or passing through narrow sections...etc. I carried a 30L backpack while Phalgun had a 45L pack and that sufficed for all our needs. And, it's way more comfortable use bungee cords for fastening your backpacks than using ropes or any other ideas you have in mind. They're easily available in most stores for around 60 INR.

Rohtang pass requires a permit for all vehicles including two-wheelers, although the Himachal TDC (Transport & Development Council) website doesn't explicitly state this. Online reservation for permits is available only for Cars and other vehicles. For bikes, the permit has to be taken manually at the TDC office in Manali. It'll take a day to obtain the permits and you'll be able to travel only on the following day. You'll need a copy of your license, ID proof and bike registration docs for the permit. Foreigners will have to take permits to cross Losar and enter into Spiti valley, else will not be permitted to continue at the Losar check-post. Kindly note that Rohtang Pass route is closed on Tuesdays for maintenance and hence no vehicle will be permitted to pass through. So, plan

accordingly. If you're renting bikes from Manali, the rental guys will be able to arrange the permits for you. Ensure to request it when you book your bike and remind them several days in advance.

Our Plan & What actually happened!

We were trekking in Uttarakhand from May 19 to 26. Our plan was to take an overnight bus from Dehradun on 27th and reach Manali early morning by 8:00 am. We had already pre-booked our rental bike and had asked them to keep it ready for us to leave Manali by 10:00 am. That would give us enough time to reach Kaza by nightfall on the same day. However, it turned out that there was a lot of road maintenance work happening from Bhuntar to Manali. As a result, we were extremely delayed and reached Manali only by 12:00 pm. With the next day being a Tuesday and Rohtang pass getting closed, we had no other choice but to pack-up as soon as possible and leave Manali at the earliest. We left our bigger packs with unnecessary stuff at the rental office itself, packed our smaller packs with essentials, finished the paperwork for the permits, had a quick lunch and left Manali by 2:30 pm on 28th itself to at least cross Rohtang pass and adjust the rest of our itinerary from the next day accordingly.



Rental bike | Avenger 220cc, with our backpack fastened with bungee cords.

Day 1

Manali to Rohtang Pass

~50 Km | ~2hrs with no traffic & ~4–5 hrs with traffic

TL;DR - There heavy traffic from Manali to Rohtang pass. Traffic starts as early as 5 am. Bikes may somehow squeeze through, but other vehicles have no other choice. So, leave as early as possible.

There is heavy traffic at multiple stretches from Manali to Rohtang pass. We started from Manali by 2:30 pm and reached the Rohtang pass by 6:00 pm. Others told us that traffic starts as early as 5 am. It's not continuously clogged all the way to the top, but only at certain stretches mostly due to army convoy crossing and road maintenance work. But on the top, the traffic is primarily due to the senseless cab fellows parking their cab on either side of the road without giving way to other vehicles passing by! Specifically, you'll hit traffic when you're about to leave Manali town and join the Leh highway, at the Rohtang pass permit check-post, ~20 km from Manali, a few stretches in between and then majorly as you reach the Rohtang pass top. Bikes may somehow squeeze through, but any other vehicle has no other choice. So, leave as early as possible.

After crossing the permit check-post, you'll encounter beautiful views of the Manali valley. There are plenty of spots to stop by and admire, but I'd suggest not to spend too much time here as the region after Rohtang pass is even more beautiful. Cruise along slowly if required and reach the top at the earliest. There is one food stop just before reaching the top. At the top, there are pretty good stretches of snow if you'd like to play in it. But it ain't fresh powder snow, just soft ice and extremely crowded. We just stopped a moment to observe the scene and continued along as it was already getting late for us.



En route to Rohtang Pass

By the way, there'll be no phone signals after you cross the permit check-post. You'll get BSNL signals on the top, but any other carriers are out of luck for the entire stretch from here to Kaza & back until you reach Manali again.

Rohtang Pass to Gramphu

~13 Km | ~30–45 mins

TL;DR - Completely downhill route from the top, to almost the bottom of the valley. We encountered only one water crossing in between. As you reach the bottom, there are large sections of slush due to roadworks and rain. But the major issue is to locate the turn to Gramphu. This is the only deviation you'll make in this route. However, this deviation to the right is just after a left turn downhill from Rohtang pass and since there are no markings or boards, it's pretty easy to miss this. Keep your GPS on until you reach this turn, very important! If you miss this you'll reach an army check post at Khoksar which is 5km away. This is a clear indication that you've missed the Gramphu turn.

This stretch is a completely downhill route from the top, to the bottom of the valley surrounded by snow-covered peaks and lush green vegetation. There were only a few vehicles on this path and I found it peaceful to turn off my bike engine and glide quietly to the bottom. Gave a surreal experience with the cool breeze across my face while listening to it whistling, going over my helmet visor. We encountered only one water crossing in between. As you reach the bottom, there are large sections of slush due to roadworks and water from the melting snow. But the major concern here is to locate the turn towards Gramphu. This is the only deviation you'll make in this route. However, this deviation to the right is just after a left turn downhill from Rohtang pass and since there are no markings or boards, it's pretty easy to miss this. I suggest to keep your GPS on until you reach this turn; very important! If you miss this turn, you'll next reach an army check post at Khoksar which is 5km away. This is a clear indication that you've missed the Gramphu turn.

I had kept the GPS on in my phone but had turned off the screen to save battery and still lost GPS connectivity on the top. Although I was constantly on the lookout for this turn, after having watched several videos on youtube, I still missed this turn. Phalgun was ahead of me and he missed it as well. We realized only after reaching Khoksar and had to trace back 5 km until the crossing, which is much easier to spot on the way back as you can clearly see a yellow sign board and a long dirt track on the left. There's a small set of tents at this crossing. That is Gramphu. We didn't find anything useful here to stop, so we continued along.



The valley after crossing Rohtang Pass, towards Gramphu

Gramphu to Chatru

~17 Km | ~2 hrs

TL;DR - This is where the fun begins. This is completely off-roading on gravel trails. You start at the bottom of the valley and raise up and come down to reach chatru. There are plenty of water crossings in this stretch (I lost count of how many!). Attempting this stretch in the night is a bit risky affair. You cannot go beyond 10-12 km/hr on bikes. There is no other stop place in between. Morning time you might encounter herds of sheep and horses. Once you get down to the river bed, you'll see a bridge across the river. Chatru is the place next to the bridges. There are two bridges, an old one and a new one. Both are functional. This place Chatru has 3 tents with food and beds. About 200 INR per bed per night. There's also a forest dept guest house about 0.5-1 km from here. But it doesn't have any facilities though, ie. no food water..etc Just a room with a bed. I suggest staying in the tents itself. It's more lively with local folks. I'd also suggest taking the first tent immediately next to the bridge. An old chap with his wife runs that place. They're very friendly and will feed you well. Btw, this old chap maintains the guest house as well. So if you do need the forest guest room, talk to this guy.

This is where the fun begins. From here it is completely off-roading on a dirt trail. You start at the bottom of the valley and ride up and come down to reach chatru. But we had no idea of this and it was already 7:30 pm and getting dark quickly. In all the videos & articles I had seen and read, no one stayed at Chatru, so my knowledge of this area was limited.

All we knew was that Chatru was around 20 km from Gramphu and the rental guy had told us that we'd find a place to sleep here for the night. So that was our goal for the day, to reach Chatru and find a place to sleep for the night. Since my GPS wasn't getting a lock and Phalgun's phone was low on charge, we decided to make a note of the odometer reading on the bike to keep track of the next 20 km. This is when we realized both of our bike's odometer wasn't working.

It was still showing the same number as at the start in Manali. It was dark by now & pretty cold. So we didn't waste time in thinking and just continued. Afterall, we were pretty sure to see some lights at Chatru as there wasn't anything else in between. For the next one hour, we encountered plenty of water crossing in this stretch (I lost count of how many!). Attempting this stretch in the night is a bit of a risky affair (Now I know). The road is narrow, a drop dead cliff edge on the left and melting snow on the right. The only source of light was the full moon and the spread of our bike's headlamp. Not a single vehicle crossed us in this one hour and not being able to track our distance covered; we wondered how much further it is to Chatru. By the way, the speedometer wasn't working as well, so we presumed we were doing around 20 kmph on average and at that rate, we

should have reached Chatru by now. The water crossings were getting higher & higher and the cold dark night without a single speck of man-made light felt eery! I wasn't sure if I were to be appreciating the beauty of the full moon in the valley or be worried about not reaching Chatru yet. Thankfully, a luggage jeep came across and the driver told us we were still an hour's distance away. Finally, after another 45 mins or so of riding and water crossings, we could see 2 lights along



Dirt trail starting from Gramphu to Chatru. The full moon was up already



The store room with beds for the night

the valley floor. It was such a big relief knowing we weren't lost after all. Chatru is at the base of the valley on the left side of the river and we ride on the right side until Chatru and finally cross the bridge across the river to reach chatru. What perplexed us that time in the night was that there were two bridge right next to each other to cross the river. This is a big river mind you. Logic prevails that one ought to be old or unmaintained and the other is its newer replacement. But there weren't any boards or indications as to which one to use. We can see the two pole lights on the other side, but couldn't spot anyone to ask. It was around 9:30 pm now and with a roaring river gushing below, a bad choice is the last thing we wanted to do. We stepped down from the bikes, walked a few steps to examine the condition and eventually decided to take the bigger one on the right. We crossed one by one without any issues. The tent was right after the bridge on the left. Thought comforting it was to see someone, we still weren't sure if we'd find a place to stay. There was an old chap and his wife in the tent and Phalgun went in to enquire (between us, he's the one who does this kind of talks & inquiries). Came back saying it was 200 INR per night, and boy were we relieved to hear that. We parked our bikes quickly and got into the tent for the warmth. The old lady smiled and happily asked what we'd like to have for dinner. We said anything and she offered as chapatis and hot rajma. It felt so good. Three other guys joined us after a while. They were traveling in a car. We had some small talk as usual and told us they couldn't do more and 10-12 kmph all the way till Chatru. No wonder it took us so long in the bike. The beds were put in a brick room next to the tent. I presume it was left over store room from when the bridge was constructed. Nonetheless, it was warm and cosy and we had a pretty good sleep.



Chatru. With the three guys who stayed with us the previous night

Day 2

Chatru to Batal

~32 Km | ~5 hrs

TL;DR - This section is a beautiful stretch of off-roading and the most wild section in the entire circuit. You'll pretty much be riding on river beds in some areas. So, the water flow is the most intense here as well. After about 10 km you'll reach a place called 'Chota Dhara', which has a small forest guest house of sorts but don't expect to find it open there. This place is known for its treacherous section of road, and arguably the worst patch in this route. You'll literally find yourself riding on boulders and big rocks on what seems to be a free-flowing river from the mountaintop. If you're in the early season, you can almost certainly have to ride through the flowing waters on the path for more than 500m and if during the day, due to more melting of snow, this will be knee deep waters! If you're on a car, you'll find a left curve after the water crossing which is extremely narrow, uphill and filled with large rocks. It's pretty common for axle breakdowns. So be aware! After you cross this, the next stretch all the way to Batal is probably one of the best, if not the best, view of the Himalayas I've seen. You ride along with the river and will see entire mountains from their base to the top along with their glaciers up close & personal! You'll finally reach Batal, which is basically two tents and a forest guest house. Unlike Chatru, it isn't as comforting to stay here, so stay here only if you've no other choice. If not, you'll find good food and several assortments of sorts

I was awake by 4:30 am. There was light outside already and it was seeping in through the room shutter. It had become a routine by now for me to wake up around 4:00 am, get ready and then wake up sadist (a.k.a Phalgun. There's plenty of reasons I call him as sadist, but let's not get into that here). If you haven't been to the mountains, you should know that there aren't any bathroom/toilet services available anywhere. You'll have to go in the open. I got ready by 5 am and woke him up. By 6:00 am we had finished our small breakfast, packed up and ready to leave. Oh, I should mention that the bike seats were frozen and had a layer of ice formed on it. We had no idea that would happen. You should probably cover it up with a layer of



Morning sun rays just after Chatru

cloth or something in the night. We wanted to leave by 6:00 am as we planned to reach Kaza by evening. It'd be close to 10 hours of riding that day and we wanted to reach Kaza early to relax. Besides, we had no clue of the road ahead of us and the previous night's experience seemed like a warning to reach our destination by nightfall. So I go onto the bike to start and get the engine warmed up, but as I had feared, the bike didn't start. While sadist settled the bills at the tent, I had several futile attempts to start the bike. There wasn't a kickstart as well, so I tried pushing it a bit and starting from gear...etc, but none seemed to work. With the bike not starting, I really thought I was fucked up for sure! And suddenly, I noticed I had left the kill switch ON. What a dumbass I was! No wonder they say that fear clouds one's thinking. Anyway, with that resolved, it was now almost 6:30 am; we bid goodbyes to those 3 guys and the old folks at the tent and we took off. Although the sunrise is early, the sun rays would take several more hours to reach the base of the valley. So the windchill is intense while riding early morning. Despite covering ourselves up completely with a shemagh for the face, the biker jackets which the rental guys had given (this is a heavy jacket, mind you!) and gloves, my hands were still going numb. And soon enough, as the route curved to the left, the sun rays shined bright & warm on us. It felt like a godsend to us! And the scenes in front of us were absolutely splendid. Every turn



Approaching Chota Dhara from Chatru, where the road goes from bad to worse

seemed like a new wallpaper. A narrow dirt road at the base of the valley next to a gushing river, surrounded by lush green lawns of grass and mighty boulders in between snow-tipped mountains on either side. It seemed like heaven! But the road was as harsh as well. Though our speedometers weren't working, what the other guys said seemed right. We were hardly riding at 10 kmph! Somewhere between 8-10 km from Chatru, we arrive a place called 'Chota-Dhara' (as the name board showed), which had a set of three tarpaulin tents on the right side of the road. The name board said 'Forest dept. Guest house', but it seemed to be abandoned though. Anyway, this is the place where the road started to get from bad to worse. So far it was just gravel & loose soil, but now there were visibly large rocks and boulders on the path. Similar to a dried up river bed. It was a precarious ride uphill on this stretch. Thankfully, there were only small puddles of water. Sadist continued to lead the way in front of me, as I couldn't ride fast since my rear brake wasn't inspiring any confidence and had to rely mostly on my front brakes, which meant I'd skid in the dirt if I braked hard. As I came about the left curve, I saw sadist waiting for me. It was literally a set of large boulders on an uphill and we could hardly call it as a road. He decided to give the first go at it as I watched from the back. He maneuvered through the first few but got stuck on a larger one. As he revved his engine, the rear tire just spun, but couldn't go up that rock. He almost slipped and fell. I had to run and hold the bike and push forward for him to finally go over and cross! As treacherous as it were, we had a big grin on our face as the adrenaline rushed in us. We had no idea of the road conditions, within an hour after leaving from Chatru we encountered this stretch and we could only imagine the road ahead of us to be much worse. It was my turn next to go up the rocks and I did it in one go. I felt proud. At the next turn, we saw a set of cars stopped on the road. The three guys in their Duster had overtaken us just a while ago and they were here too, along with an Innova that seemed to have two foreign photographers, you know, like the ones from NatGeo. (I didn't see any such badging on them, but you know the general attire of such folks, so I guess they were). We parked and went about to enquire and saw a Mahindra pick-up truck stuck in the middle of the curve with a broken axle. Let me describe the scene. First of all, it was this narrow, extremely bad stretch of road uphill with large boulders, and continuous blind curves. The width of the road was only slightly



The horrible road conditions at Chota Dhara

larger than the width of a truck, with a mountain wall on the left and a wild river gushing down just across the road with a layer of large boulders in between the road and the river. It seemed difficult for a bike to get across this section, let alone a car, and in this spot, there was this pick-up truck, smack in the middle, with a broken axle! There's no possibility of a tow truck coming for help. We were literally a 100 km from the nearest town on either direction. Besides, I don't think a large vehicle like a tow truck could arrive here and even if it did, it seemed improbable for it to carry over another vehicle in these road conditions. So the bitter reality is you either fix your vehicle there or leave it to die there! We saw a few guys trying to fix the broken truck, but it really wasn't going to be fixed anytime soon. The three guys in the duster reversed their car a bit and made way for us to squeeze through, else we'd been stuck at that spot for a long, long time. It is such a good feeling to see random people coordinating with each other and behave humanely in such remote areas to help some unknown stranger. Like Samwise Gamgee said - "...there's still some good left in this world!". The boulders reduced as we went further and arrived at a literally flatbed with sand & grass all around. A perfect blue sky and the surrounding brown mountains and white snow peaks complemented each other. We stopped for a pee break, munched on some dry fruits and did some photo sessions. Sadist had the camera, and I'm the most photogenic of the two, so you see me in a lot of pictures than him. As we continued through the valley, the scenes just got better. We could see the entire mountains from its base to the top. Fresh undisturbed layers of snow blanketing them. Glaciers coming down in between them and forming the river below. And all of this, just about 500m away from us. It was magical. I had never seen such formation so up close. There were plenty of streams and waterfalls as the road passes by next to the mountain. This scene continues for another 2 hours as which we get onto the flat river bed. This is huge, and I think it gets filled up during winter, but for now, the river was narrow and flowing on the right side corner and we drove on the left side. Finally, after about 5 hours in total, we reached Batal, which kind of literally is the end of this valley we were driving along. This is the famous Chacha-Chachi (grandpa & grandma) tents. They've been here and serving people



for several decades now. There are paper cuttings showcased inside the tents, of this being printed in the national newspapers. There's plenty of eatery & drinks available here. We rested for a good one hour, had some hot Maggie and relaxed before we continued from here. Opposite to the tent is a forest guest house, but it seemed closed as well and weren't sure how one could book and use them.



Scenes on the way from Chatru to Batal



Batal and the Chacha-Chachi tents there

Batal to Kunzum Pass

~13 Km | ~1.5-2 hrs

TL;DR - From Batal, it's completely uphill on the mountain with hairpin bends all the way up to Kunzum pass. The path is all loose gravel and a lot of melting ice with slush. About 1.5km from Batal, you'll find the turn to the left to Chandratal with a yellow notice board. See the Chandratal details below if you intended to go there. At ~15,000ft, Kunzum pass is a high altitude route. So make sure you've acclimatized well, else the quick ascent is surely going to affect you. Once you're on the top, you'll see a shrine on the left with a lot of Buddhist flags. The shrine itself ain't that beautiful, but the mountains surrounding you makes up for a magnificent view! The local saying goes that those travelers who don't stop and go around the shrine will meet with some or the other trouble in the next leg of their journey. Myth or not, we paid our respects to go around the shrine and rest up for a short while. Rest here, if you must as the next section is going to be a bit of a toil going downhill with incoming trucks/traffic! Note: at the shrine, there seems to be a direction board for Chandratal. Do not follow it. It's probably an old route or a goat path for local shepherds. Bikes couldn't pass there.

Immediately after Batal, there's a bridge crossing and it's a completely uphill ride from there on till the Kunzum top. The route climbs up the mountain, crosses the pass and then enters into the Spiti valley. The road is narrow and with gravel as before, but with a lot of slush from the melting snow and it's a constant hairpin bends till the top. Just after about 1.5-2 km from Batal, there's a deviation on this route which leads to Chandratal. There's a small board as well. However, we had decided not to do Chandratal now and go there on the way back. There's a lot of altitude gain here in a very short time. So for those who haven't acclimatized well, this stretch is going to hit you hard. As we went up, there was



The road with hairpin bends going up to Kunzum pass

snow on the path and the mountain slope. I hoped the snow would be a little soft at least, but it was as hard as a rock. Found out the hard way though, as I stretch my right arm to grab some snow to throw on sadist, but instead hit my hand hard! We saw a stretch of winding zig-zag route going up the adjacent hill, which seemed pretty scenic, but turned out it was an old route not maintained anymore. The road relatively flattens out just before reaching the top and this stretch is filled with slush. There's puddles of water and the large vehicles going across created this prime combination to skid & slide. I tried hard to not even place my leg in it, but it was a bit hard to control the sliding bike without placing the feet on the ground. So as you can guess, my boots were brown by now. And talking about boots, I was wearing my Columbia buga-boots, which was a high ankle snow boot with a thermal lining. It was extremely comfortable in them. Every place sadist got wet & dirty in slush & water crossing; I streamed through without getting even a bit wet. Sadist always made fun of me for wearing such big boots in previous treks, but this time, I left no opportunity to get back at him for how good and useful these were! There's a Buddhist shrine on the top, which is the highest place on the route. Several of the videos I had seen on YouTube, mentioned it's a customary ritual to visit this shrine and go around it, else there would be bad omen cast upon those who wouldn't and would certainly face problem in the route ahead. I don't generally believe in such customs and rituals, but given the fact that sadist's bike chain was causing some sound that we couldn't identify, my rear brake wasn't functioning properly, and a few more of such worrisome thoughts, I didn't hesitate to heed to them ritual and go around the shrine. Need all the luck I can get when I'm traveling! Besides all that, the place itself is stunning. The shrine with a lot of colorful Buddhist flags fluttering in the wind, surrounded by giant snow-capped mountains, and clear blue sky...I'm running out of words to describe this beauty. It took us almost 2 hours from Batal to reach here. We rested for a while, munched on some dry fruits I had packed and continued along. By the way, we saw a board that read Chandratal on it, next to what seemed like a goat path behind the shrine. I'm not sure what this was or if it would actually lead to Chandratal, but it didn't seem like any bikes could go through that path. So we didn't even try to venture there.





Going up to Kunzum Pass, overlooking the valley leading to Batal



Kunzum Pass. On the top

Kunzum Pass to Losar

~20 Km | ~2 hrs

TL;DR - road after the pass is downhill for an hour or so. We encountered a lot of trucks transporting fuel & LPG from Kaza. It wasn't that enjoyable. However, as you reach the bottom, you'll start to see the vast plains of the Spiti valley! It's truly majestic and our 2D photos do no justice to the immense depth we perceive looking at the valley from the top. When you reach the valley below, you'll see several small paths deviating from the road. These are just off-roading tracks left by people who probably wanted to have some wild fun. Knock yourself out if you're into that kind of adventures as well. It's completely harmless except for the fact that you'll burn fuel & might burst a tire if not careful. I was lucky and had a heartful of off-roading fun. The next stretch is a flat road all the way to Losar. You'll see the signs of Spiti civilization from here. You'll encounter a small village on the way with several intersections, but don't bother about them and keep going straight. We saw few funky looking guest houses as well, so if you're stuck somewhere close by, this could be your rest spot. On approaching Losar, you'll be stopped for registering at the police check-post. This is a must, but it's only a booking keeping procedure. No permits or fee needed for Indians. Foreigners will need to show their permits here. Also, you can expect to find electricity and BSNL phone signals from here onwards. Losar is the next biggest settlement after Kaza, so you'll find good homestays, transport options, food, help...etc here.

From the Kunzum top, the road leads down that mountain and enters into the Spiti valley. It was around 1:30 pm by now and almost 6-7 hrs of riding from the morning. From here we encountered a lot of incoming traffic of tourist cabs, tempo and goods transport trucks. But we didn't have any cars overtaking us towards Kaza; only bikes crossed us. I guess the roadblock from earlier in the morning had delayed all big vehicles. Anyway, that felt good for us as it didn't feel nice to have so many vehicles crossing us on the dirt track downhill leaving a cloud of dust behind for us to go through. Of the entire journey, this stretch till we got down to the valley floor was the most boring. Probably cause we couldn't see anything apart from brown mountain walls and the road filled with dust. But this is a short stretch anyway. Soon enough, the view opens up to the magnificent Spiti Valley. I say this is the point from where one starts to see the Leh-Ladakh kind of landscapes and colors. The valley is so vast and huge that our cameras do no justice at all. The immense depth we feel in our eyes is not captured in the 2D pictures at all. At the bottom of the valley, as before, there is Spiti river flowing on the far left and route leads on the right side of the valley floor. There's plenty of space of off-roading here if you have the right type of vehicle. We saw plenty of



dirt tracks forking away from the route, probably from bikes & cars trying to have some adrenaline rush. Seemed pretty harmless, except that you'd burn a lot more fuel and might burst the tires on the sharp rocks if not careful. With our cruiser style bikes, there wasn't much we could do. We did go on one stretch that seemed to go through grass and sand. We enjoyed like little boys with their first bicycles as our bikes slid and revved through the sand. We stopped for a while for some pictures, pee-break and snacks. The valley seemed like a flat plateau, with colorful rock formations on the mountain walls. No a single soul to be seen in the entire stretch, eagles soaring high above with a blue sky and the cold wind blowing across us...it was one of the most relaxing and peaceful moments in the entire journey. Not far from here is Losar. About 30-40 mins ride and we approached the Losar police check-post. This is where the Spiti valley officially begins and we've to provide our details for the police records here. Foreign visitors have to mandatorily need a special permit to pass through. The check-post had an electric pole and I could overhear the sounds from the TV playing inside the room. For the first time in the last 100 km or so, we saw electricity. It's a luxury out here. As we passed through the village, it seemed pretty big for mountain village standards. We noticed small shops & hotels where travelers had flocked for food. We had good food at Batal and with the snacks in between, we weren't hungry, so we continued along without stopping here. We also saw a bus that was going from Kaza to Manali. We wondered if there were any other routes that leads to Manali from here because we really didn't think these big buses and goods truck would go through the road conditions we had come through till now and especially that section near Chota-Dhara. We later found out that this is the only route and these buses and trucks also go through the same route. Now imagine traveling this region in one of those!



On the way to Losar. Spiti river in the backdrop.

Losar to Kaza (via Kibber & Key)

~58 Km | ~2.5-3 hrs

TL;DR - After a few km from Losar, there's a point where the road forks into two directions. One on the right crosses the bridge and follows on the other side of the Spiti river, and the other follows along the left side. The mile marker points Kaza as the right side road, but both roads leads to Kaza. The left fork follows the Spiti river on the left and is through the mountains, so you'll be going up and coming down. You'll go through Chicham, Kibber & Key on this route. But the exciting part is that this is well paved and tarred road. You can cruise across the beautiful landscape going uphill and you'll see plenty of fascinating rock formations. However, you won't find any human habitation here until you reach the top and cross over to the next mountain. You'll find come across the village of Chicham. A remote high altitude village, which looks exactly like out of the books. The local homes offer food if required. Their tea is a local blend of lemon and local flavors. Its green tea though, but one of the most refreshing ones I've had till date. The lady told us they've been blending it the same way for ages. So do give it a try. Oh, and, the good ladies there don't charge you any amount specifically. They'll say it's okay not to pay and if you insist will ask you to give whatever you feel like. So don't be a jerk, and pay accordingly! :) After Chicham you'll find a gorgeous canyon that reminds me of the grand canyon! Kibber comes after, then key and then Kaza.

Just after crossing Losar, we encountered a water crossing. We really hadn't had any proper water crossing this day until now and this one seemed to be deep and it was wide as well, with just rocks in this. This was a waterfall flowing from the top and joining the Spiti river below. There was a makeshift bridge being constructed beside it but wasn't yet accessible. I took the first go at this time and as guessed, it was deep. Had to keep my right feet in the water, but thanks to my extra high boots, I didn't get wet. Sadist, on the other hand, had to keep both his feet in the water and this time got full wet as the water easily went inside his shoes, although it was ankle length boots. He absolutely hates getting wet by any means and I couldn't stop laughing at him here. He had even tied his wet socks from previous encounters to the bike's crash guard as a good luck charm to not get wet in the remainder of the journey,



Water crossing at Losar

but nothing helped. Even those tied socks that had dried up got wet! It was absolutely hilarious to see his black & green socks tied up on either side of his bike for the rest of our tour. After this water crossing, it is a beautiful ride through the flat valley floor. You can feel that you're in a human habitation zone. Cattle grazing along the sides, a distant home or a ruin, an electricity line extending to the far end...and so on. Another small village comes up here. There were multiple crossroads here, so we stopped to ask around, but couldn't see anyone. We kept following the straight road and sure enough, was the right one as well. At the end of this village was a colorful decoration of what seemed like a small resort. Bright, colorful flags, big white umbrellas with tea tables & chairs underneath them and a neatly cultivated green lawn. Not sure what was happening there though. We had earlier crossed several chaps bicycling along the valley, so we presumed this was their base. Anyway, apart from this, the views are just magnificent. Felt like I was in Zion national park, but even better than that. I felt if the government took proper care and actions to preserve this entire Spiti valley as a National Park, this would definitely be ranked as one of the best national parks in the world! But it's a sad reality that such a thing is never going to happen. Just a few kms from here, we reached a point where the road forked in two. On the right, there a bridge crossing across the Spiti river and the road following along the right side of the valley and the left fork leads along on the left side mountains of the valley. There's a milestone here with a marking of a right arrow for Kaza, so we were wondering which route to take. By the time we opened up our offline google map, a pick-up truck came by from the back and the driver pointed us to go straight, i.e. the left fork. He said the right one also goes to Kaza, but take the left one here. We took his word and continued left. After about 200m from that point, we hit paved road. It seemed like a freshly (few months old) laid out layer of asphalt. After what we had been through

since the previous day, this was a great luxury. We cruised along at high speeds as the road took us up the mountain. We encountered a beautiful stretch of rock/sand formation next to the river bed. I instantly recognized it from



Landscapes on the way from Losar to Kibber

all the videos I had seen on YouTube and kind of got a general idea where exactly we were. On the far right of the scene across the river, we could see the other road that ran through the flatlands. By now I had looked in the maps and seen that this road takes us via Kibber & Key, which was perfect because our plan was to reach Kaza and then visit Kibber & Key from there. But now, taking this route meant we could visit these places on the way itself. An added bonus. After not being able to cross more than 30 kmph all along, I was now riding at close to 100 kmph, winding my bike left & right along the route. It was a bliss! We came across a lot of other bikers also in this route, each once waving their hands at us or showing a thumbs up with a big grin. I was riding so fast that I periodically had to wait for about ten mins for sadist to catch up to me. He was stopping for photos now and then. That reminds me, all along, we had this unspoken agreement that whoever is in the front waits for the other to



Interesting rock formations en route to Kibber



The high altitude village of Chicham

catch up after a while and not just rushes away alone. Cause, who knows what might happen. For example, if the guy in the back fell off somewhere and was waiting for help...etc kind of scenarios. Anyway, the road started to flatten out at the top, as though it was a flatland with slight ups and downs. There were a lot of agricultural land and irrigation canals on either side. I must say, I never expected to see such elaborate infrastructure in this region. After another good 30-40 mins of ride, we reached a village where the entrance arch read 'Chicham'. I think it was about 3:30 pm by then and we were hungry. We hadn't eaten much from Batal, apart from some dry fruits. Sadist wanted to check out if there were any food places in the village and went in. That village looked pretty old and remote and I didn't think there'd be any such facilities there. I followed him nonetheless. By the time I caught up with him, he had already stopped in front of one of the first homes and was talking to a lady there. He said she'll be able to give us food and we can dine inside. This was a small home, build in clay and white paint and with small wooden windows & door. If you've been to the high Himalayas, you'd know exactly the kind of home I'm talking about. Sadist tried to get in, but the lady said we'll have to remove the footwear. We didn't want to undo & redo our boots all over, so we decided to dine underneath a tarpaulin sheet that was tied beside the home. We had been riding for so long that my butt was beginning to hurt a little. Stretching our limbs and back and resting on the chair here felt extremely relaxing. In a few mins, the lady came back with food. I'm unable to recollect what we had here though. All I remember is relaxing and the tea. Oh I

must talk about that tea. I don't have the habit of drinking coffee or tea (milk tea to be specific. I've recently acquired a taste for green tea!), so sadist asked for a cup of tea and the lady got him a cup of tea. It was green tea and he didn't want to have it and so gave it to me. I took a sip of it and it felt extremely rejuvenating. I can still remember that aroma of lemon & mint. I easily was the best green tea I've had since my tea tasting session at San

Francisco's Chinatown. He was curious now and tried some and loved it. We asked for another one and had it. After some prime tea enjoyment like some good-ol english chaps having tea with their pinkies pointing up, we got up to leave and asked the lady how much we had to pay for everything we had there. I was dumbstruck at her response. She said we didn't have to pay anything and refused to tell us how much. She said she was just happy enough to serve fellow travelers going by. Man, in the world we live in today, it's so rare to come across such truly beautiful people we can call as humans! We insisted and she said we can give her how much ever we'd like. We gave her 200 INR and she accepted with a smile. I'm not sure if that was more or less, but at that moment, I'd not have minded even if she had asked 1000 Rs for the food. I genuinely felt happy. Meanwhile, a bunch of little girls had flocked around the house's gate and were playing. It was nice to see them lively souls. Sadist was interacting with them and took one up and made her sit on the bike's fuel tank. The smile on that kid's face was priceless I tell you! After a few mins of laughter and childish talk, started our bikes to get going, but the kid was refusing to back and so he gave her a short ride on the bike. Must have felt pretty satisfactory cause she then went back in all smiles. We waved goodbyes to the kids and took off. From Chicham, the route starts to descend



Joyful little girls at Chicham





The bridge on the left, the canyons, and Kibber under the shadow

downhill. There are plenty of agricultural fields as the road goes winding across them. Looking at all these seemed like the village was mostly self-sufficient. Going down these hills, at one spot is a picture postcard perfect view. Green fields on either side, with a dark asphalt road cutting across it, high above with a cliff edge separating the valley and huge snow peaks right across. I don't think sadist noticed this as he zoomed past that spot. I stood there and admired the beauty for a good few mins. Just after this is a bridge that connects this cliff edge to the adjacent mountain with a deep canyon below. That bridge is pretty high and I remember reading somewhere later that it is the highest bridge in Asia. Now I don't really know how true that fact is, but it does make one epic view looking down at the narrow stream flowing way below. It reminded me of the landscapes from the Antelope Canyons in the US. I never thought there'd be such canyons so high in the mountains. A short distance after this bridge comes Kibber. It is a decent sized village with a school and a clinic and some homestays. I didn't notice anything else spectacular here. At least the road that we went through seemed a bit dirty with garbage scattered across here and there. From Kibber the route goes winding down all the way to the valley floor, again with hairpin bends. Just before the descent, there's another dirt trail route that forks left. This goes to another set of remote villages, one of which is Kee. This is different from Key, which is the famous one with the gompa (monastery). Along the side of the road, there are notice boards about the different animals of this region. So keep an eye out in the open to spot for any wildlife. I didn't see any on our way down. After about 30 mins

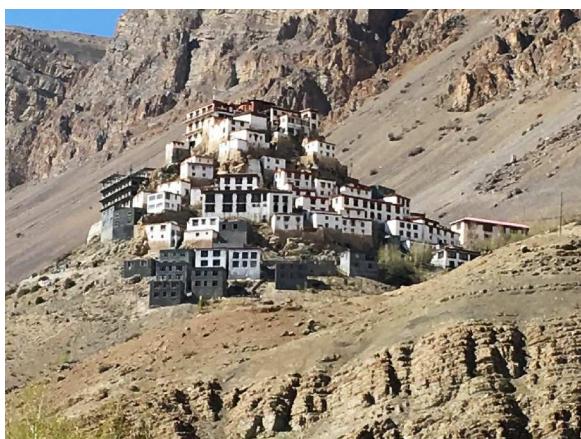
from the top is Key. The Key gompa is on the top and the Key village is below. There's a pretty big arch to the entrance of the gompa, so it's hard to miss it. We weren't keen on exploring the gompa; we just wanted to reach Kaza and find a place to stay for the night. All that we were interested in about the gompa was to get the postcard picture of it. I thought that view appears further down the road, so we kept going, we crossed the Key village and still didn't get the view. We then realized that view was from the top, overlooking the green fields and the Spiti river. We didn't want to go back to get that one view. Instead we had another decent view from the bottom, clicked that picture and carried along. But this place is really nice! If there's time, one should not miss exploring this area and the gompa. Somehow, the green agricultural fields on the flat piece of land give this region a unique view that not found anywhere else. The Key village also seemed nice and quiet with some homestays on the route. From Key, it took us about 20-30 mins to reach Kaza. Just after getting down to the valley, the other route after Losar that had earlier forked off to the right joins this road here to Kaza.



A closer view of Chicham



Descending from Kibber to Key



Key Gompa on the left and the agricultural fields on the right

Kaza

0 Km | Halt for the night

TL;DR - Kaza is the district HQ of Spiti and the largest establishment of the area. There's an Indian oil petrol bunk, but it operates during limited hours only. So if you're planning to travel early morning or at night, ensure to fuel up in advance. You'll find plenty of accessories and help around. There's a decathlon as well! The Zostel there is at the far end of the town and is almost always fully booked. So unless you have a reservation, don't even bother to go and ask for a room. There's one big hotel right across the fuel station, probably the largest hotel in Kaza, but seemed to be costly. There are plenty of smaller hotels and accommodations available inside the town and price in general, is around 2K INR per night for a room with 2/3 beds. We stayed at Soul cafe. They had a movie session and good music. I found my souvenirs there as well. But the food, in general, wasn't great. These restaurants offer you a fancy continental menu, but the dishes are all cooked in local style which is pretty bland. The local food we tried also was as bland. Maybe we were just unlucky! There wasn't any internet/wifi available anywhere. Only BSNL phone signals were available. I didn't find anything else to do here. Interacting with few other told me they went on a trek to a neighboring mountain and then to visit the Spiti river. That's pretty much it. All in all, I felt Kaza was just a rest stop to refill your supplies and resources and have a good hot bath after days. If you're hoping for local delicacies and culture, I'd suggest staying at the Key monastery or in one of the local village homestays. Note: If you're a group of many want to party, you'd probably want to rent a homestay a bit ahead Kaza on the Rangrik route. There were modern big homes/villa types, but we didn't stop to check them out.

Kaza is the district headquarters of Spiti. It isn't a big town, but the only town here. As we are approaching Kaza, there's another fork. The right one with the welcome arch leads to Kaza while the left one leads to another small village up the mountain. I had a sigh of relief as we drove into the town knowing we were at a safe place for the night. However, we hadn't made any reservations for the night stay yet. Our plan before the entire trip was to book two beds at Zostel here, but by the time we check, they were fully booked. Few articles online had indicated that we might be able to get some bed if we walk in since there might be cases when some people wouldn't have showed up. So our goal now was to find Zostel. Maps showed it to be at the end of the two so we drove all the way there. At about the center of the town, we saw a pretty big hotel on the left. There seemed to be several foreigners there, and the looks of that building, in general, seemed like it had good service but expensive. Opposite to that was the Indian Oil fuel station, the only fuel station in the entire stretch from Manali to Kaza. Our bikes fuel gauge showed about one-third to half tank fuel remaining. I'll get back to the fuel story in a while. We arrived at Zostel and I went in to enquire. As I walked past the dorm, I could overhear the guys and girls having loud laughter and conversation about some cake. They seemed fun and I was hoping we'd get to join. Me and Sadist, generally enjoy staying dorms than in a hotel as we get to interact with a lot of new folks and you know, fun things happen there. Anyway,

the guy in charge for that day told me there weren't any available unless we had a prior reservation. I felt a bit sad, but I had also expected that. It was only with a small hope of luck I even went in to ask. Anyway, as I shared the news to sadist, he said it's okay and we can probably find some small hotel inside the town to stay. He said he saw some paper ads about Soul Cafe on the way here, so we went to check it out. This place was located pretty much deep inside the town. It was his turn to do the talking this time, so he went in to enquire. 2000 Rs was the price for one room with two beds and had good beds, blankets, bathroom and an electric geyser for hot water. Seemed fair enough, but there was another cafe across this which had an attached open-yard restaurant with live music going on. It seemed a bit more hippy and so we enquired there also, but there weren't any rooms. It was almost 6:00 pm and we had had a long day already, so we just took the room at Soul Cafe. Taking off our gear and lying flat on the bed probably felt like the most relaxing thing I had done in my life. The electric geyser wasn't working, so while I stayed back till the owner fixed it, sadist went out to check out the food at the restaurants below and see if there are any wifi services available. It took a while for that owner to fix the leaking tap while I just relaxed on the bed all along. Sadist came with saying there weren't any wifi services available anywhere, but he had seen an ad for a movie screening happening at Soul Cafe that evening. So I took the shower first and decided to attend the movie. It was getting dark and there wasn't anything else much to do at that time. There was only one key to the room, so the plan was for sadist to get ready and join me directly at the movie. I had only heard about movie screening a few times before but had never attended any, so I wasn't really sure what to expect. I went into the cafe below and the guys there told the movie screening was happening at a different place, up the town after the marketplace. He said it also belongs to Soul Cafe itself, but that place was started newly, so it was happening there. There was still some daylight left, and as I walked up the market streets, I could feel the hipsterish vibes like in Kasol. This place was located at the far end in a corner, so had to ask a few people for directions. When I got there, the cafe was nicely decorated with lighting and artistic writings. There was a foreigner there who seemed to be running the place, which seemed a bit surprising. He told me the movie screening was happening in the inside room. This place was basically an old house which these folks had acquired and recently started this business. The front hall seemed to be the cafe where guests had their food, the kitchen was still the cooking place and a foreign lady was cooking in there. The bedroom seemed to be where the movie was being played and there was an old Indian chap, not a local though, who was setting up the projector. There were few ladies and another foreigner seating inside already. It was a decent sized room, with flat beds and pillows and small tea tables laid out in a U shape around the projector. I found a nice cozy corner for myself and got involved in some small talk with others. One girl was from Hyderabad, and her older friend was from Norway. I don't remember where the other guy was from, but I remember he mentioned that he had come

to Kaza in one of them buses I had mentioned to you earlier. He told us the ride felt out of this world! I told them about our ride to Kaza from Manali and they were telling me that we were lucky to have been alive riding around this area in the dark. Anyway, the movie for that night was "Hunt for the Wilderpeople". This was a movie from New Zealand starring Sam Neill, the guy who played Dr. Alan Grant in Jurassic Park movie, and another fat kid, whose name I don't remember, but he's that kid from the DeadPool 2 movie. The movie was good, light and funny. We were served some popcorn, tea and chocolates and I also ordered an additional hot chocolate to beat the cold. The movie was for an hour and a half and sadist hadn't joined me all this while. With no phone signals to call him, I was wondering what he was up to. As we finished the movie and walked up to pay the bill for hot chocolate, I was charged 400 Rs. That seemed a bit too much for a hot chocolate drink don't you think, I said to that chap at the counter, for which he instantly uttered "...oh no no. It's only 100 Rs for the drink and 300 Rs is for the movie". I'm not sure if that guy noticed the confused look on my face or not, but I sure was. Nowhere was it mentioned that it was a paid screening! Not that 300 Rs was too much or I didn't have the money, but it was more about them not specifying it anywhere until the end. I was under the impression that they were doing this for publicity for the new place. Anyway, as I came out to the dining place, I saw sadist sitting in the corner and having some food. I casually went and sat next to him and asked why he didn't attend the movie. He went out all fiercely asking where the heck was I and that he was searching all around for me and finally gave up and had came there to have some food. I told him with a smile that the movie was being played in the next room and I was just there all along and he just face palmed himself. That was a funny moment! Anyway, we ordered some more snacks and hanged out there for a while. The place seemed pretty lively as well. A bunch of folks has joined in and they were playing board games and a loud chat. I think it was about 8:30-ish pm as he headed back to our room and decided to have dinner at the restaurant below. I ordered a dish from the menu that read 'Kaza special' or something like that, which was a combination of local grown rice, rajma, lentil curry and mashed potatoes. As fancy as the name seemed, the food was actually pretty bland. The rice seemed like brown rice but wasn't quite that and I forced myself to have a couple of spoons with that lentil curry. I couldn't anymore and finished the rest of the rice just with the mashed potatoes. I saw some souvenirs placed at the corner and got myself two postcards and a fridge magnet. (I have this habit of collecting fridge magnets and postcards from all the places I visit and write down my feelings of the place and add them to my collection). That was pretty much it for the night and we went to bed.

Now about the fuel, we had filled up our tanks at Manali and the rental guy had told us we'd be able to reach Kaza easily with that and could refuel here at Kaza. So we didn't carry any extra fuel, as I also felt confident about the same and anyway had done enough research about fuel requirements for Spiti ride. However, what I didn't know was the bikes

fuel gauge shows a higher reading on a down slope and lower reading on an inclined slope than the actual quantity in the tank. Living in a flat land like Bangalore, I had no idea of this. The entire route from Key to Kaza was downhill and the place we had parked the bike in front of our room was also a down slope. My fuel gauge was showing half tank remaining and sadist's bike was showing a little over half tank. So he told me should be easily able to get back with just that fuel itself and didn't have to refuel here. Now I generally don't listen to anyone else regarding such matter and go by my gut feeling and I've almost always been right about it. But I didn't want to behave as too paranoid, so I agreed to him and also thought we'll be able to make it back, and if I still didn't feel comfortable in the morning, I'll refuel in the morning before leaving Kaza. It seemed like a fair decision to make, so I went to sleep peacefully.

[By the way, we didn't take any pictures at Kaza. Hence no pictures are attached here.]

Unfortunately, we didn't have much time here to explore as we had to leave the next morning itself to get back to Manali in time for our bus to Delhi. Talking to people here, I found out one can do several treks around Kaza and can go up close and enjoy the Spiti river. There are several interesting places to visit around here. Kaumik is the world's highest village connected by motorable road. Hikkim is the world's highest post office. Langza has a beautiful landscape with a huge Buddha statue overlooking the landscape. Tashigong & Thinam are extremely remote villages with the old lifestyle still preserved. Further ahead from Kaza are several villages and the most famous ones among them are Dhankar, Tabo and Sumdo. Tabo is the place with caves hosting mummies of Buddhist monks. You could also enter and visit Pin Valley after Kaza. Mud is the most prominent and the last place in that route. I was told Mud is extremely peaceful. This highway from Kaza continues much further ahead, goes pretty close to the China border and later joins Shimla. But I've heard the roads are much better and paved in this direction, unlike the road from Chatru to Kaza. Maybe the next time I'm in Spiti, I'll reserve more time and visit all of these places!

Day 3

Kaza to Chandratal (through old route via Rangrik)

~100 Km | ~6 hrs

TL;DR - As I mentioned earlier, this route is via the flat plateau. As you leave from Kaza, turn left towards the bridge and follow this route through Rangrik. The road is paved for the first 10 km or so, and we cruised through it at high speeds. I'd suggest doing this route in the early morning, as the rising sun's rays play a spectacular light show on vast grasslands in the valley. But the wind chill is going to be a lot as well. If you've plans to camp, this route has plenty of good spots with water sources for you to put up a good camp. In the last section before joining the Manali highway, the route goes through what seemed to be a canyon. This place seems ancient and magical I tell you, like in the Indiana Jones movies. The rest of the ride is just going to be tracing back the same route we came through. The Kunzum stretch was as slushy as ever!. While descending from Kunzum pass, just about 1.5 km before Batal is the deviation to Chandratal lake. This is a wild off-road and definitely not for the faint of heart, especially if you're venturing here in the early season before the road maintenance work is done! The first 2-3 km is a calm, wide dirt road, after which starts the treacherous downhill with plenty of loose rocks and ripples. The route is on a drop-down ridge on the slope of the mountain for almost 80% of the route and if not careful, it's pretty easy to slip off the edge. For bigger vehicles, once you enter, there's no turning back as the only place when you can take a U-turn is only near the Chandratal campsite, at which point you'd have covered the dangerous road and might as well go to the lake. Just before the Chandratal lake campgrounds, there's a big water crossing and this is no joke. It's almost always knee deep and has big rock underneath the water flow which makes it particularly tough for bikes! After this, you'll reach the Chandratal campgrounds. If you've plans to stay at Chandratal, this is where you'd be camping. However, the lake itself is around ~3-4 km uphill from the campground, but there's no place to stay there and no permission to camp. So you could either stay at campgrounds or continue with your onward journey.

The next morning, we woke up pretty early again and were ready to leave by 6:00 am. Our original plan was to visit Mud and come back to Kaza for lunch and then head to Chandratal for the night. Mud was about 2 hours ride from Kaza and that meant we'd have to do another 10-12 hours of riding today as well. We didn't want to do consecutive days of 12 hours travel, so we decided to give up on Mud and just go to Chandratal and relax for the day. I and sadist have always been in sync to visit fewer places and enjoy each to the fullest and relax than to visit a lot of places in a rush and stress ourselves out. We got onto our bikes, did our customary fist punch and started off. There was no one else outside yet. My fuel gauge was showing half tank and I decided to fill up at the fuel station which was about ten mins away, but when we reached there, it wasn't yet open. We didn't want to wait as the water crossings would get higher, so we continued on. After

about 1-2 km after leaving Kaza, there is a bridge on the left and that is the old route which goes through Rangrik and the flat plateau. The right side road goes to Key and Kibber which we had come through the previous day. As we crossed the bridge, the road is dead straight through the flatlands and is paved all through. For the next 10 km or so, the speed demon in me got out. I was zooming through this stretch at over 100 kmph. The sun rays weren't hitting the valley floor yet, so the wind chill was intense, but that didn't slow me down at all. I couldn't even see sadist in my rear view mirror! I'm not sure what all I missed in those 10 km or so, but all that I remember is a two-lane dark asphalt road stretching straight till the mountain at the far end and green meadows on either side of the track; the cold wind freezing my cheeks and fingers, and yet I had a big grin on my face as I glided through the plateau. I can't possibly explain how calm and peaceful it felt. There wasn't anything going on in my head, not a single thought of anything. As the road started to get harsher, I slowed down and stopped for sadist to catch up. I turned back and saw an amazing glimpse of the Spiti valley, as the sun says put up a spectacular show as it glistened the valley, with a bunch of small white village home at a distance and green fields beside them with a huge mountain wall behind. It was a splendid view. There are plenty of small villages in this stretch and a lot of open and perfect places with water



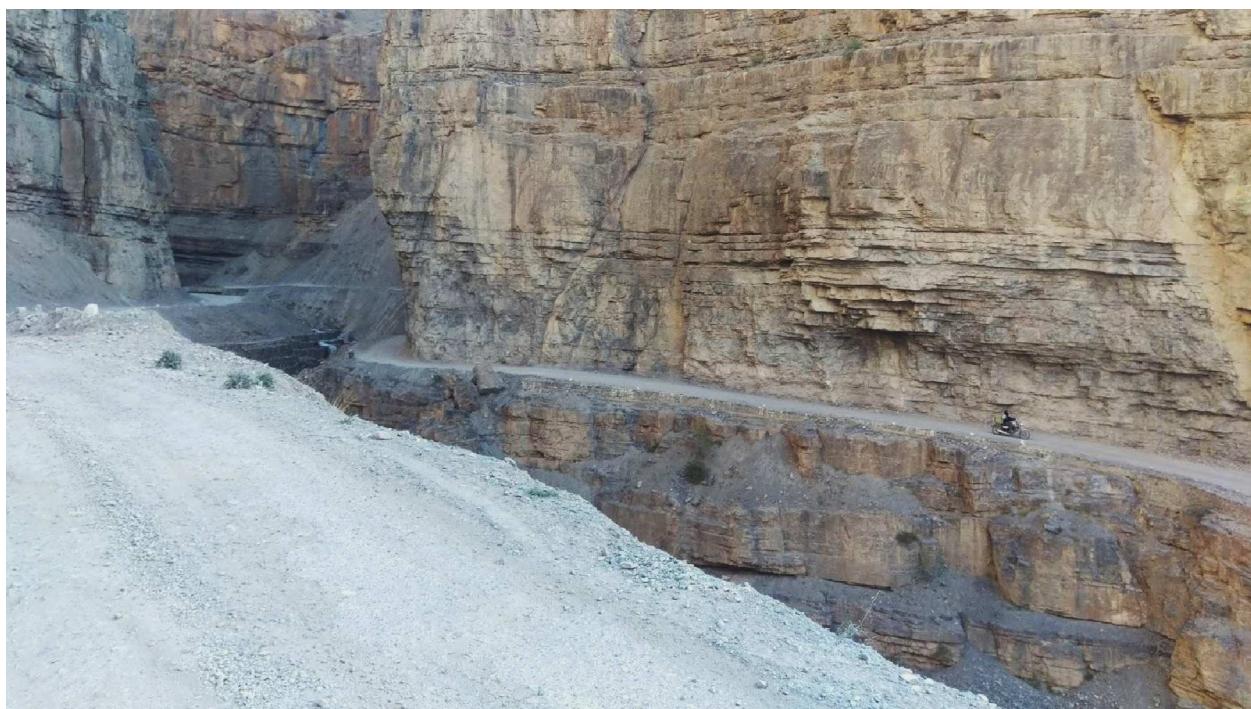
A view of Spiti Valley enroute from Kaza to Pangmo

sources to pitch a tent and camp; if you're into that sort of a thing. These villages had homestays mentioned on some the home wall as well, so if you'd like to feel more secluded, these perhaps are a better option and to stay inside Kaza. Sadist also caught up meanwhile, and the road started to get harsh from here on. It was paved, but a long, long time ago I suppose and was all broken down now. A tempo or two passed by us and

they seemed to do the job of local transportation here. The entire flat stretch of land took us about an hour to cover I think and at the end of it, we encountered a canyon. Going through this felt like being inside Indiana Jones movie. This place felt ancient and streams of water flowing inside with the sound of water trickling through the rocks felt magical. It's a complete dirt track though, with plenty of gravel. Sadist was ahead of me, and I couldn't help to stop and click a picture of him riding out of the canyon. Just after this, the



Open stretches of road on the flat plateau of Spiti Valley



The canyon on the old route to Kaza



Water crossing at Losar

road joins the old Manali highway. From here on, it's pretty much traversing the same route back towards Batal. I'll do you a favor and not repeat talking about the same route again. Losar was the next stop and we knew there was big water crossing before it. This time I think sadist crossed it in a much better fashion without getting wet except for the bottom of his boots. We stopped at Losar for breakfast and had a good bowl of Maggie. I wasn't keeping track of what day of the week it was. The daily morning business seemed to be going on in full flow in the village and there was commotion all around. We could hear vegetables being auctioned in the market, some hurrying to get into the tempo for work I suppose, and so on. We have to stop at the police check-post again and update our entries in their record. We didn't stop much after this all the way up to Kunzum pass. The roads here were as slushy as ever. This time we even noticed a Mahindra Xylo getting stuck unable to go up. We stopped for a while at the shrine after going around it. Needed all the luck we could get since my fuel tank was now showing just a little under quarter tank left. I felt like a fool to not have refueled at Kaza, but nothing could be done at that point than just to get along and face whatever happens. I'm not the kind of guy who starts to panic at the sign of trouble, but rather I've realized through all these years that I'm actually calm and respond to whatever happens instead of just reacting to it. For the next

stretch of descending from the pass, I was riding with my engine turned off as much as possible to conserve fuel. So I was naturally slow and took a while to catch up with sadist at the turn towards the Chandratal lake. The first 1-2 km of this road towards Chandratal is pretty much the same as the route we were riding so far. A decently wide enough dirt track. But after this, the road condition drastically reduces. The road becomes pretty narrow, just about the width of an SUV. It goes downhill with a drop-down ride on the left and loose, fallen granite rock on the mountain slope along the right. The path itself is treacherous with plenty of bumps and rocks and rubble. One small slip is all that would probably take to go tumbling downhill, and I had such shivers at once such bump at a steep section. I couldn't brake hard as the wheels would slide in the gravel, so I was controlling in low gear when I had to go through a small puddle of water which I thought was shallow, but wasn't. My front wheel jumped and landed right at the edge with just a little under half the type outside the road. That was truly scary. I don't remember why I had to come towards left side edge though instead of staying on the right towards the mountain slope. Anyway, there are plenty of such sections until we reach the valley floor. I don't know what it would feel like to drive a 4 wheeler in that route though. By the way, once a 4 wheeler enters that road, there's no turning back. There's no place to take a U-turn until you reach the bottom, and once you've reached till there, there's no point turning back as Chandratal is just a few km from there. However, this is a big water crossing just before reaching Chandratal. This is the deepest one we encountered



The road to Chandratal

throughout. Needless to say, sadist's boots were all wet again, including his good luck charms. Yep, they were still tied to his bike! Just after this water crossing is the Chandratal campgrounds. This is where one would have to stay if they're staying at Chandratal. No other place beyond this points is permitted for camping it seems. It was about 1:00 pm by the time we reached here. The campground seemed completely vacated with not a single soul to be seen on sight. We got in to check out the availability and we spotted only one fellow who was setting up somethings at the tents. As usual, sadist went in to do the talking and found out it was 1000 Rs per person for the tent and food. The campgrounds have 4-5 different groups of tents and they vary in features and price. Some have attached bathrooms as well, while other have common ones. We couldn't find anyone else, so we came back and asked that fellow to reserve one tent for us. This is only the campgrounds though; the lake is about 3-4 km uphill from here. And so, we finished that days ride and it took us about 6 hours to reach Chandratal from Kaza.

Chandratal

0 Km | Halt for the night

TL;DR - We chose to stay at Chandratal for the night to keep our ride light and not stress ourselves since we had done ~12 hrs of ride the previous day. We reached the campgrounds at around 1 pm. It was pretty much empty. There are 3-5 groups of camps, each with around 20 tents. The prices range from 1K-4K per person based on facilities and timings. We were pretty much the first customers for that day and the attached toilets weren't yet fitted to the tents, so we got a tent for 1K each. Compared to our treks, these are king size tents and are luxurious with beds & thick rugs inside. After setting up our tent, we visited the lake. The drive up the lake is again a narrow off-road, which we were used to by now. After reaching the top, it's around 1 km walk to the lake. Every step is worth it though. The lake is extremely serene! It's a typical blue/green colored glacial lake. We relaxed for an hour or two there. The sun is going to shine bright, so be sure get your sun protection! Don't just stay at the lake, climb around the hill and explore around. In the far distance, you'll see a breathtaking view of the Chenab river and its source glacier, with a flat grassland amidst all these. We got back to the campground by around 4-ish pm and for the rest of the day, the time just didn't seem to run at all. With not many people around, no electricity or network, nor any energy & stamina to explore around, we kind of had to come up with new ways to spend the time. The 1k for each includes the food as well. Nothing particularly great, just rice and rajma. The next day, we had a short ride to Chatru, so we had decided to leave Chandratal only by 12 pm. So in the morning, I trekked from the campgrounds to the Chandratal lake via the goat path. It's a beautiful 1-1.5 hour trek. Since I had nothing but time, I trekked all the way till the edge of that mountain standing right next to the Chenab river and its glacier. The sheer joy of seeing something as spectacular is just indescribable. One wouldn't be exaggerating if they had tears of joy while admiring the view. For those who love the mountains and glaciers and all this nature, this is an absolute must. I spent good time there till heart's content and started to Chatru at around 11-ish

The Chandratal lake is about 3-4 km uphill from the campgrounds below. It is a dirt trail, but easily doable. There is also a trekkable route from the campgrounds to the lake, but

that takes around 45 min to 1 hour if you're in good shape. Since we had reserved our tent for the night, we went riding up to the lake. There's pretty big and a nice parking spot on the top. From the parking, the lake is almost another km walk through mild ascent and grasslands. Mountains surrounded the place in all directions and the views are just spectacular. If you're into landscape photography, this is THE place to be. The Chandratal lake itself is pretty huge and it's turquoise blue still water will hit you with a view that you can hardly ever forget. There is no sand or dirt here. It is all layers of granite slabs or rocks broken down into a billion pieces. So the water and the environment is extremely clean. The only dirty thing I noticed was this pathetic excuse of a human who was having a bath in those waters! I mean, yes this is beautiful, take a dip & go for a swim, but bathing with soap & foam is just disgraceful. And it goes without saying that most of these tourists have no regard for preserving nature and throw garbage at any place, so there's some plastic lying around here and there. Apart from this the scenes are just perfect. The place isn't crowded, so you get the secluded feeling as well. We removed our gear and found a nice spot to perch upon. We spent almost an hour there just lying around and admiring the vast landscapes in awe and trying to skip some stones in the water now and then. We had so much of time to kill and nothing else to do for the day other than chillout and relax. We decided to climb up on the higher ground on the left of the lake and take a walk around the lake. As we reached the top, we could see the vast openness of grassland rolling down and at the far distant, a huge glacier that formed the river and the valley next to us. That was the starting point of the entire valley and we could literally see the glacier just across us. I'm not sure if many people climb up here or not, but this is an absolute must see. You'll see the entire valley



Crystal clear waters of Chandratal



View around the Chandratal lake

and not just Chandratal, but plenty of smaller lakes too. I don't think any amount of 2D photography can capture the magnificence in that view that our natural eyes perceive. Nevertheless, we still took some pictures in our measly camera and phones. We spent some more good time there before went back to the campground. It was almost 4:30-ish pm by the time we were back to the tents. With no one else around, the guy who was the caretaker of those tents became our friend to talk to. He gave us some rice and rajma which served as late lunch for us. I went through all the offline songs I had on my phone and mp3, we slept for a few hours, even spent some time staring at the clear blue sky (which I love to do by the way!) and it still hadn't been 7 pm. At that point, we were quite frankly running out of ideas on how to kill time. By then, several other started arriving and as I overheard the conversations, I noticed the tent prices to have increased to 1500 Rs per person now. Four families of friends or relatives along with their young kids checked-into our neighboring tents and they went about making extremely irritating noise, speaking out so loudly. Generally one would like to enjoy the calmness at such places, but I realized it's only the other trekkers and adventure seekers who share such feelings and these typical family tourists are there just for fun. I apologize for generalizing and commenting at such groups, but they were really getting on my nerves. Anyway, me and sadist were



Chandratal

lying for some more time in the tent and he apparently had some quiz books in his phone. Now I've no clue why he had them in his phone in the first place, but with nothing else to do, it actually got quite interesting. He went about asking me questions from those books that he felt were interesting I was guessing the answers. It turned out that I had some brilliant guesses that blew away his expectations. It was dark by the time we were done with it and later got invited for dinner. I didn't engage in conversations with anyone here apart from that caretaker. All I remember doing later is quickly falling asleep listening to my music and in hopes of waking up in the night for some stargazing. With the mountains covering through and with absolutely no light pollution, this was the ideal place for observing our Milkyway. I even wanted to go up to the lake in the night to see the galaxy rise over the distant mountains. I used to regularly go for stargazing in the night while I was living in California, but hadn't got a chance to see after coming here. So I was all excited and as planned I woke up at around 2:30 am in the night to watch the sky. Contrary to my expectation, it was an exceptionally bright night with the almost full moon shining its glory. So the plans to view the starry night sky was a big flop, but what did catch my attention is the complete absence of any breeze at all. I literally stepped out of the tent with just my thermal layer and I didn't feel any breeze nor did I feel cold at all. Apart from that, there was so much moonlight that it seemed as though there was a huge flood light setup above us like in a stadium. I could clearly see all the objects around me including their colors. The snow caps on the surrounding mountains shine brightly as

well. I noticed a satellite going across the sky, and nothing else apart from that. As brilliant as the scene seemed, it was still a bit sad not being able to see the Milkyway, so I came back in and slept again.

The next morning, I woke up a bit late at around 6:00 am. We planned to leave Chandratal only by noon, so I didn't wake up until later. I got ready and was listening to music and just sitting and observing the scenery all around. In a while, all of those tourist families woke up and started to create a big commotion as they got ready to leave. I mean, in this kind of a place, instead of being and enjoying with nature, who'd want to have their hairs straightened, do makeup and check if their clothes are looking nice or not. I couldn't stand it anymore. I packed my daypack with the last of the remaining dry fruits and water and went away from the tents to explore the surrounding. I went on that trekkable path to Chandratal, and boy-oh-boy, what a gorgeous walk that turned out to be. This is small shepherds path that went up through the green lawns of grass and tiny streams of water going through all across them. Tiny flowers of various colors had bloomed all over and there were plenty of tiny birds flying across. I noticed the top layer of those streams were frozen into thin layers of ice. At the top, there was vast meadows of green grass and large puddles of water all across. I walked all the way to the left end of that mountain and now I could see the glaciers even closer. It won't be an exaggeration if I say one can be overwhelmed by such immense beauty and be filled with tears of joy! I climbed up and went down and then back up again and roamed around all of the area.



View of Chandratal campground



Trail from Chandratal campground to the lake

I saw small structures made out of stacking rocks one on top of another, like an igloo, probably by the shepherds. One of it was still filled with snow inside. The waters in these lakes were absolutely still and I was trying to capture the reflection of the mountain on them, but my phone camera couldn't capture the angles clearly. As I was leaning at the water, I noticed some tiny movements inside them. It was some kind of an extremely tiny and flat organism. I've no idea what they're called as, but I noticed the entire lake bed to be filled with them. I couldn't stop but be amazed by the variety of life forms that survive here. Eventually, I came up to the Chandratal and sat there for quite a while before I turned back to the tent. It was around 11 am when I reached the tent, and sadist was all ready and packed. He said the breakfast was ready, but I had had enough dry fruits up at the lake, so I skipped breakfast at the tent and packed up to leave. While I was up the lake, Sadist had met another Kannada guy here at the tent who was also from Bangalore. Apparently, they were two of them riding together on a Royal Enfield classic 500. There were doing the Shimla to Manali route via Spiti and they had a tire puncture last night as they were approaching Chandratal. These guys were absolutely unprepared. They had no emergency kits not knew the route map and the closest safe points. They had borrowed a hand pump from one of the other riders in another tent and temporarily filled the air with that. So his partner had gone to Batal to see if he can find any help there and this other guy was here waiting for him to return. So the caretaker at the tents had put him in contact with sadist since we were also going in the same direction and he was hoping if

we could offer him a lift to anywhere close by. It felt extremely sad to say no, so I offered him to give him a ride till Batal and he'd be able to find a bus or other truck from there to get to Manali. My fuel tank was already below the quarter line and I knew giving him a lift meant more fuel would be burnt, (that other guy was hefty by the way!), going uphill with a pillion. Regardless, it felt like the right thing to do and so offered him the lift anyway.



Reflections at Chandratal

Day 4

Chandratal to Chatru

~55-60 Km | ~6 hrs

TL;DR - Since we left way past sunrise, we were mentally prepared to get wet in the water crossing as flow would've increased by this time. The first crossing at the campgrounds itself seemed like a formidable challenge. My friend's feet & shoes got completely drenched. We stopped at Batal for a good lunch and rest. The route back to Chatru is wild and enjoyable now especially since we're accustomed to the terrain and could control the bikes well. Sheer Off-roading pleasure. Then came Chota-Dhara! It wasn't just streams anymore. We literally had to ride through free-flowing water for a considerable stretch of road. We encountered a lot more water crossing and waterfalls and with increased water flow than what we encountered on the 2nd day. We finally reached Chatru around 5 pm, just in time before it started to rain. Note: Spiti is a rain shadow area, so there aren't any rains there, but from Chatru onwards, you can expect heavy rains if the weather goes bad.

We left Chandratal by around 11:30 am and headed towards Chatru to stay for the night. I had the additional pillion (sorry I forgot his name, so I'll address him as pillion henceforth) with me and I let sadist wear my backpack until we drop the other guy at Batal. Boy, was this guy was heavy. My 220cc Avenger struggled to get up the slope from the campground to the road. And our first water crossing for the day was just across. We were riding way past sunrise, so we were mentally prepared to wet in the water crossing as there'd be a lot of water due to snow melt. I took the first go here. I asked the pillion to get off and cross the water on foot. This time my front wheel got stuck in front a big stone underwater that I couldn't spot. I had no other choice but to keep both my feet in the water. I wasn't worried about getting wet, but more about the water getting into the silencer and engine parts. Thanks to my extra long boots, I placed both my feet on the stones and didn't get went. Just my pants and the top part of the boot got a bit wet. Unfortunately for sadist, he also had to keep both his legs in the water and the water got in easily into the boots. But the sun was bright and warm and it wasn't cold. So continued along as it would dry up on the way. My bike took a toil going uphill with the pillion, for the first time in the entire journey, the bottom of my bike hit the stones underneath several times. But I was happy the bike was able to pull us through it. There was one other spot where I asked him to get off and cross on foot. The same spot where my bike almost went off the track while going to Chandratal. We had crossed almost three fourth of the way to the Manali road, and this is

where there were two tempos stopped at the middle of the road and the drivers of both tempos were outside examining the road and seemed to be arguing with the passengers. The passengers looked like a bunch of college guys and he seemed to have hired these tempos from some city outside of the mountains and come over here. I'm guessing somewhere from Chandigarh or some other city in Punjab as both the drivers were Sardarjis and they all seemed to be conversing in Punjabi. The guys have probably gotten the drivers here looking at some online source, but this was the first time for the drivers here in this regions and they were horrified by the road conditions. The drivers were yelling at them that they've gotten them to some unknown place and the vehicles can't pass through...etc etc. Anyway, sadist had already crossed across and but these tempos blocked the road for me to get ahead and I absolutely had no intention to get involved in their quarrel, so I asked the pillion to get down and I tried to squeeze in through the narrow gap from the right. It was a serious drop-down edge on the right. I crossed on tempo, but there was no place to get across the second one, and unwilling got caught in their arguments. The drivers were asking me how bad is the road ahead, is there a place to take a U-turn...etc kind of questions and I told them there's absolutely no turning back now. They can't either go up in reverse nor have any place to take a U-turn. The only possibility for them now is to go down the path carefully until the flatland and decide if they want to turn back, but at that point, Chandratal is just 5-6 km away and so might as well visit it. Well, the drivers got even more curious getting to know there was no way back. Our time was getting wasted, so I told them that other tempos also go through the road, and if they go along slowly, they'll be able to make it safely. Thankfully, one of the two drivers seemed a little sensible, and moved the tempo as little towards the side and gave me just enough space to get through. Not sure what those guys decided later, we just continued along. This is exactly

the reason I keep telling everyone that Spiti is easily doable if you're prepared will for it. But if you go to Spiti without no idea of what to expect, then you're definitely bound to get into trouble and for sure will leave you scared. As we reached the Manali road, the pillion's friend was coming back to get him. Apparently he couldn't find anyone to help fix him at Batal it seems. Duh! Of Course he wouldn't find anyone.



Views en route from Batal to Chatru

These guys had no clue what they were getting into. So I suggested them to find some truck and request them to carry their bike till Manali or Khoksar or let one of them travel with all the gear in the bus which was going to cross Batal by noon and let the other guy temporarily fill air with the hand pump from someone and get at least till Gramphu. That way they'd reach Manali-Leh highway and could find some help. They agreed to it and the guy turned around and went to Batal again to look for a truck or the bus, and boy did he drive rashly! He just took off like one would on a paved road and was jumping through the bumps and rocks. Not sure if that's how they had been driving before, in which case, it was no surprise their bike was punctured. Anyway, we slowly reached Batal, and this guy was waiting in front of the bus. Apparently, he had requested the bus driver and kept the bus waiting for the last 10 mins or so for the pillion to arrive and send him in the bus. The driver was hurrying, so the pillion quickly got into the bus and his friend handed their bags to him. They were carrying a 70-80 ltr loaded backpack along with another 40-50 ltr pack. That was definitely a lot of weight to haul around and that combined with all the rail mounting on the bike and their two hefty bodies, no wonder their bike punctured! Anyway, I told him the list of places he'd encounter in between and where possible he could find help and then he took off from there. Meanwhile, sadist was drying his wet boots and socks and the also his good luck charms! We had plenty of time that day and so we weren't in any hurry. Our only concern was that my fuel was very low and sadist's fuel had also dropped below the quarter line. I asked the guys inside the tent and the Chacha there, but they didn't have any fuel. The only option was to see if we can at least make it till the Manali-Leh highway on reserve. Then we could probably ask anyone on the way if they could lend some fuel for us to get at least up to Rohtang top. After Rohtang top, it was completely downhill till Manali, and I could go on in neutral from there. We had some Maggie and coke here. We were there for at least an hour until his boots dried up. While we were there, we met another group of Kannada folks from Bangalore. It was a guy, his wife and his father-in-law who were going around the Spiti circuit in a Duster. That uncle seemed pretty excited to be on the trip and was talking to us about different places in Spiti they had been to and etc etc. There was also another royal enfield who were going to

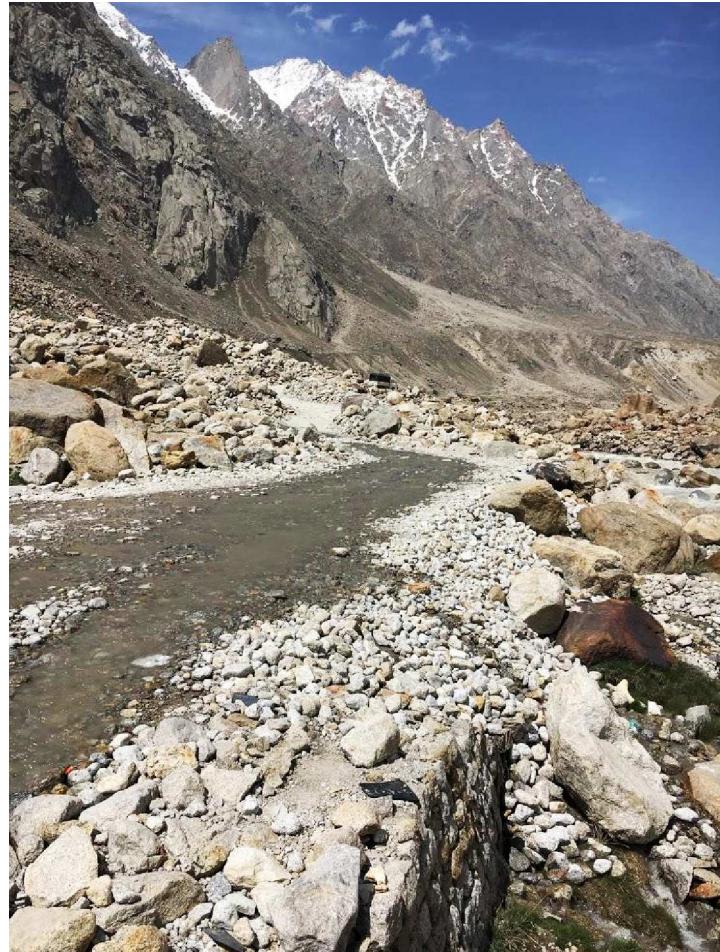


Waterfall and crossings en route from Batal to Chatru

Kaza and stopped here for refreshments. Two of them in that gang were also from Bangalore. An interesting difference was one girl had come in a Dio/Activa till there and was parking it there at Batal and continuing the rest of the ride as a pillion with her partner. Strange things that people do there, eh! Anyway, they all left in a while and we also left shortly after them. Except for the worry about the fuel getting over, we had no other concerns at all. We knew exactly what to expect and where and how to tackle them. I might as well dare we felt like we were now professionals riding through this route. Sadist led the way as usual and I followed in the back. We now weren't that concerned about getting into trouble, so we followed our own pace. We came through numerous waterfalls and their corresponding water crossing.

We could clearly see more water

flowing through the river and streams. There weren't this many waterfalls while we were going towards Kaza. As I passed through each turn, I recollected the thought I had while I was going them earlier. And eventually, we arrived at Chota Dhara, that nasty little stretch of road that causes all havoc, and boy was there a lot of water. The water from the falls was free-flowing on the road like a small river. No wonder there are so many rocks and boulders here. Poor sadist had yet again gotten his shoe wet after all the drying and was waiting for me on the other end of the water crossing. This was the longest water crossing until now, so I took some time to analyze and plan my route. Sadist was waving his hand in a swerve-ly manner indicating how to come. By the way, I should tell you that now there was no fear of falling or getting wet or anything. The only feeling in my mind was of joy and excitement with the adrenaline rushing in. I tried to follow what sadist showed, but at about half point, the water flow was a bit much and I couldn't control the steering, and the bike naturally steered right and I just let it while controlling the clutch and throttle accordingly and in the end, I crossed it in one go. I must agree that truly made me feel like



Water flowing on the road near Chota Dhara

a hero. Sadist got some good pictures and even recorded a video of the crossing here. Sadist was telling me that he tried to make the left there at the middle and got stuck there and so had to keep the feet down, but even he was now speaking in all excitement. We knew Chatru wasn't far away from there, but the clouds were covering in. Spiti is a rain shadow area, but Chatru is definitely not. So we considered that and continued along. We encountered couple of guys which their girlfriends, I suppose, as millions and most of them were having to get down and push the bikes through or make the pillion cross on foot. Yet again, this is exactly why I feel each rider should have their own bike, else the fun is completely spoilt. Anyway, that side, not far from Chota Dhara, my engine turned off! Despite me turning off the engine in all downhill to conserve fuel, it got over even before reaching Chatru. I was hoping the fuel would last until Chatru and could go on reserve till Gramphu, but now I knew for sure I'd exhaust the reserve fuel as well just after crossing Chatru. I had no choice left. I put on reserve and came till Chatru, turning off the engine in the slopes where ever I could. My only hope now was to find any good biker on the route and see if they could spare some fuel. I even had thoughts running of leaving the bike at Chatru and hitchhiking till Manali since we had time until next day evening for our bike. Despite all these thoughts, there was some slight feeling in my mind that told me everything would be fine and someone would definitely help me on the way. Sadist was waiting for me at the same tent we had stayed earlier. I reached there with a big smile on my face and waving my hand signaling I was already on reserve for the last 10 km or so. It was about 5 pm I think when I arrived at Chatru. Even the old chap in the tent was telling us its okay about the fuel, that there's still plenty of time left in the day and some or the other good biker would pass by and help us out. It was reassuring to hear that. Anyway, we arrived right on time at Chatru. Just after we got in, it started pouring down and there were heavy winds too. High up the mountain, we could see it was snowing. The wind was pretty strong too and the shelter that was put up in front of the tent was all squeaking



Water crossing at Chota Dhara

and almost seemed like it would fly away in the wind. We sat inside the room where the beds were and with plenty of chips packets from the shop, we sat there dry and enjoyed the rain. As we sat there, we saw some foreigners bicycling in in the rain itself and heading towards Gramphu. After a short while, we saw another person who came to our tent riding in the rain. He was also a foreigner, but he was well packed in rain gear and rode a Hero Impulse. He enquired if there was any place to stay for the night and getting to know there were beds available, he soon got onto the bike and went back in the direction he came from. He came back in a short while, but this time he was on a Royal Enfield bullet and another lady with a little kid were on the Impulse. He told us they were waiting at the forest guest house about a Km before the Chatru tents, for the rain to stop. This kid was probably not more than 3 years old, and I was a bit surprised to see them get such a young kid on a drive like this. But they were properly geared up and seemed to have pretty much everything to survive on their own. The kid was covered in skiing gear, while those two were all decked up in top-notch rain gear. What was more curious to me was that he was able to understand Hindi clearly and was conversing with the tent folks in Hindi,



Chatru after rainfall. Do you notice the rainbow?!

albeit I agree it was broken Hindi, but Hindi nonetheless. The unloaded their packs and placed it inside the room. The tent opposite to ours had a fire going on, so they went in there to get warmed up. I thought of joining along with them for the fire but wondered what this tent folks would think of us seeing us leave this tent and go to the opposite tent. So I didn't and stayed back. Now I feel I should've just gone and no one would have cared about it. After a while, the rain stopped and that guy came to our tent for something but got involved in some small talk with the tent folks and us. We got to know that he was from New Zealand and was the guy who designed and set up the bungee jumping platform in Rishikesh. The only bungee platform in India! He told us they live in India for six months of the year running the bungee business and go back to New Zealand for the other six months. They were currently on a bike ride from Rishikesh to Leh. As though that wasn't cool enough, he also told us his wife was Swiss and his son's name was Meru. "Meru? As in the mountain Meru, the shark fin ?!", I interjected spontaneously and he nodded his head saying yes. Man-oh-man, that was just so rad! He asked about us and we told him our story so far. I also told him about my fuel shortage and asked in all hope if he had any spare fuel with him that he could lend us. He told me he had a spare can of fuel but wasn't yet sure if he'd need it further or not. He said he'll check with his wife and if everything is fine with them, he'll lend us some. I wasn't sure if he'd be able to or not, but didn't want to push much, and said thanks. I really didn't feel comfortable asking others to help because of my ignorant mistake. But I had no other choice as well. He soon left and went back into the other tent. It was about 6:30 pm by now and the daylight was fading. With nothing else to do, I bought another pack of fruit cake and finished it. Then, two other guys in a royal enfield classic 500 came and stopped at our tent. They seemed to have been coming from Manali and had gotten slightly wet in the rain. We initially didn't speak much, but we got into conversations in a while and these two folks turned out to be such fun folks to hang out with. They both were friends working at Gurgaon in a pretty famous company that I'm not able to recollect right now. Something like Hindustan Unilever or some company like that and they were into logistics. They had suddenly decided a day ago to go on a Spiti bike ride for the weekend and were now here.



Night at Chatru with a bright full moon

While we were sitting outside and conversing, the foreigner came back to the tent. (My apologies for calling his as foreigner. I don't remember his name). He enquired the tent fellow about the room in the army guest house and requested to see if there was a possibility of his family spending the night there as his kid was feeling a bit unwell for the cold. It turned out that the old chap at the tent itself maintains the guest house there. But he mentioned there weren't any facilities there except for the room. No electricity, no water, nothing. The foreigner said that's pretty much okay with them and all that they were looking for is the warmth for this kid. That guy was quite an interesting character I tell you. I didn't want to remind him about the fuel again, but he was so nice and promptly came to me and told me that he'd be able to spare some fuel for me. I felt so happy and relieved listening to him; I got up in all smiles started thanking him. I told him a liter or so should be sufficient for me since all that I was looking for was to just reach the Rohtang top. He gave me a little over a litre of fuel and filled the rest of the can into his bullet. They were going to leave for the guest house so tried starting his bullet but it wouldn't. That was 1985 classic model. It had to be turned on with a kick-start, but no amount of kicks seemed to start the engine. To be honest, I had no idea how those old engines operated. He told me the issue is probably for the carburetor not functioning properly for the cold weather. He had all the tools and equipment need for the bike and soon took out the carburetor and cleaned with something that seemed like sandpaper and put it back. I helped to hold the bike steady and push a bit and after several kicks, the bike started. Soon they all packed up, and bid us goodbyes and left off to stay at the guest house for the night. It was getting cold outside, so me, sadist and those two guys went and sat inside the tent as the kitchen fire was on and so the whole tent felt warm inside. It was here that we four of us had such fun conversations all the way from explaining happiness to solving the world's problems. In a short time the emotions inside the tent felt like we were some close friends who knew each other for several years. Meanwhile, I'm not sure from where or how these guys managed to get it, but they managed to get a bottle of old monk! After that, the conversation went on to a whole new level and the laughter increased multiple folds. This is why we love to travel. Apart from getting to see and experience all the glorious place, we also get to meet and interact with fantastic strangers and that experience is just priceless! The conversations and the laughter went on for another hour or two and we all finally went in and slept around 9:30-ish pm. As I put on the blanket to sleep, I felt extremely satisfied with how the day had been. I felt like I had experienced all forms of emotions on the same day. I still remember that I had an extremely happy sleep that night.

Day 5

Chatru to Manali

~80 Km | ~6-7 hrs (depending on traffic)

TL;DR - By now, you'd be so accustomed to the dirt roads and the Spiti valley, that civilized paved roads seems extremely boring. Chatru to Gramphu has plenty of water crossings, but its all paved roads after that. Rohtang pass is ~30 km from Chatru. You could stop at Rohtang pass, enjoy/play in the snow fields for a while before moving down to Manali. You'd be stuck in heavy traffic again, so plan wisely!

As always, I was the first to wake up again by 5:00 am. I got ready and woke other up to get ready as well. Our plan was to start from Chatru by 6 am. That way, considering 6-7 hrs to Manali, we'd reach there by around 2:00 pm and that would give us enough time to return our bikes and pack up for our 5 pm bus. As I had mentioned earlier, there are no toilet facilities at Chatru and one has to go out in the open. The other two guys had forgotten to get their toilet paper rolls, so I lent them mine as it was of no more use to us. Anyway, despite the freezing water, we brushed and washed our faces and got ready to leave by 6:00 am. The previous night, I had mentioned about our fuel shortage to those guys and they had agreed to lend us their fuel as well since they had plenty of fuel to reach Kaza and could refuel there. This time sadist took about a liter of fuel for his bike as he was also running low and I took another half or 1 ltr from them. Like I had hoped for, we were lucky enough to find such helpful riders along the way, else we'd stuck for sure. By the time we finished paying the bills and the guys having another round of tea, it was almost 7:00 am. Without causing any further delays, we bid farewell to each and thanked them a lot for both the fuel and the previous night's dinner



With the guys from Gurgaon at Chatru

(they paid for our dinner too!) and we left off on our final leg of the journey. With the additional fuel, we were now fairly confident of reaching Manali without any issues. The morning ride was freezing as ever, but we hadn't seen this section of the road in daylight before. So it felt new. The only thing we could expect from this stretch of road was that we'd undoubtedly find plenty of water crossing here and sure enough, we did. There seemed to be more than what we encountered a few days back going towards Chatru. In last few days, there was some road maintenance work done, so certain narrow sections of the road were widened. As the road took us higher, we could now see the beautiful valley in all its glory. I don't know the name



Early morning ride from Chatru



The valley connecting Chatru and Gramphu

of this valley thought, but it is extremely green and beautiful. On our way, we encountered several large flocks of sheep with shepherds who seemed to be herding them to the high pastures. We even saw plenty of horses as well. Sadist stopped now and then to capture the picturesque valley. I couldn't help but feel the sadness of the journey coming to an end and having to leave such a beautiful place. This is always the hardest part of all my travels. Slowly, we arrived at Gramphu. We stopped at the mile indication board at the Manali-Leh highway junction and took a quick picture for memory. From that point onward, it all paved road and to be frank, it now felt utterly boring! We were thoroughly accustomed to the wild roads of Spiti and I definitely had that feeling of being like a badass outlaw in the Wild Wild West. At one point while going towards the top, I stopped to ensure my pack was fastened properly to the bike. As I was examining the rope, there was a family who were sitting beside the road with their car parked on the side. I think the entire badass biker look has a cool appeal to it, because they all came to me and requested for a couple of pictures. I let the kids sit in the front and back of me on the bike and posed for some pictures. I must agree I felt like a celebrity for that short moment. After that quick episode, as we were approaching Rohtang top, my engine turned off again! Despite the fuel I had borrowed, I still ran out before reaching the top and had to go on reserve. I can hardly imagine what my condition would've been had I not had even that lent fuel. Anyway, I had no worries cause we were almost at the top and from there on I could easily go in neutral till Manali and use the reserve fuel to reach the rental shop. We stopped at Rohtang pass top to have some fun time in the snow or actually, I must say soft ice. Regardless, we had some fun time. Made some snow angels, had a snowball fight, I slipped and fell once and some more. We were probably there for a max of 20-30 mins I think before we got back onto the bikes and continued to Manali. As expected, there was plenty of traffic in this route. I turned off my engine and went down in neutral for the most parts until we reached the bottom. We reached Manali by 2:00 pm as planned. We hadn't eaten any food from morning, so we first wanted to go to a good hotel for food. One of my biking friends had mentioned to me about this bikers cafe in Manali called "Ride INN". I had checked out their website before and it seemed like an ideal place for us bikers (yes, I think I can call ourselves as bikers now, I suppose) to settle for a satisfactory lunch after a ride through Spiti. It took us a while to find the cafe, and when we entered in, it was pretty



big and ambient. We ordered plenty of food and went about checking our phone calls and msgs. Each of us took turns to call and update our parents that we've returned safely in one piece, and then we had our satisfactory lunch. By now we had realized that our bus was at 8:00 pm and not 5:00 pm. Not really sure why we thought it was 5:00 pm. It was actually my fault cause I had the reservation papers with me and

sadist hadn't looked at it. Anyway, it meant we had plenty more time to kill. Godwin, the owner of the cafe, suggested that we could ride through the old Manali village and then to another village nearby across the river. With nothing else in mind, me and saidst mutually agreed and decided to go there. But first, I refueled with delaying any further, and I could now ride peacefully. It now felt more scarier to ride in the Manali traffic than in Spiti. The clouds covered up and it started to drizzle as we were heading towards that village Godwin had mentioned. So we stopped and turned back. It was a downhill road and there was road maintenance work happening, so the road was filled up with mud and rocks for flattening. After an entire Spiti ride without even a scratch, Sadist finally dropped his bike here! I burst into laughter and eventually helped him to get the bike up and get on. I mean, after riding through all those harsh roads, water crossings and despite the bike skidding plenty of times, we had actually managed to do the entire circuit without falling or dropping our bikes anywhere and I was particularly proud of it and then he finally drops it here in Manali. As I was saying this out loud to him, even I slipped while reversing the bike on the slope. Thankfully, I didn't fall though, somehow controlled and managed to keep it steady. Phew! We then decided to find a nice cafe to just sit and relax and if bored then we could hop onto multiple cafes for the rest of the evening. We found a bunch of good cafes on google maps that showed them all on one street at old Manali. As we were riding to that place, we were surprised to see Manali being so beautiful! The past two time we were at Manali, we had just been to the bus stand and the new Manali's marketplace. This place is extremely crowded and dirty and so we both never really like to be in Manali at all. But the parts of Manali we were now seeing was a lush green mountainside road with big secluded cottages and homes and classy restaurants. Turns out that was all old Manali and we had never been there. Approaching the center of old manali, there were plenty of shops and restaurants and both sides of the road and there was a large touristy crowd as well and plenty of hippie travelers. We parked our bikes and chilled-out in a cafe for a long time. We then decided to explore and asked the cafe owner



Lunch at Ride Inn, Manali

to look after our bikes as the backpacks were still on them and we took a stroll through the entire market. This is a pretty hippie place and this is the real Manali. So if you're like us and never visited this part of Manali, then you've not actually been in Manali, so do come here next time. Sadist wanted to buy a hemp jacket and backpack, probably to look like a hippie at work I suppose, so we spent quite some time shopping to find the design and the size of his liking. After killing a few good hours there, it was time for us to leave. From there we went straight to the bike rental place and dropped off the bikes. The rental guy was happy to see the bikes being returned in such good condition and we told him we couldn't have been more happier with the bikes. The bikes were in top-notch condition and never broke down anywhere, apart from the non-functioning speedometer and odometer, for which the rental guy said that most rental agencies do that on purpose. Not sure why though. Anyway, the scene was all of excitement inside that small office, with us telling them about all that we had been through and they sharing their past experience with us. The rental guy was extremely friendly too. He took no extra charges for the bikes than what he had agreed upon and promptly returned us the entire security deposit amount with no questions asked. This guy's service was of top quality and completely reliable and you'd by now understand how important that is to ride in Spiti. I've provided this rental guy's details at the end of this travelogue, if you'd like to opt for his services as well. We repacked all our bags and walked to the bus stand. We were on time for the bus and were able to leave and return to our home as per schedule. As the bus started, we both had the look of achievement on our face and shook hands. We had successfully completed one of the best and most difficult bike rides in the world. Spiti!

- Nitheesh | July, 2018



Info

Lessons Learnt

1. Gather as much knowledge as you possibly can before heading into Spiti.
2. Bikes must be absolutely reliable. The best bike is the one you can comfortably place both your feet on the ground.
3. Bike's fuel gauge shows different readings in up and down slope.
4. Resupply and refuel at Kaza without fail!
5. Trust thy partner. Else don't travel with them in the first place.
6. Travel as light as possible to have maximum enjoyment.
7. Do not trust Google maps time predictions in this region.
8. Be sure to have offline maps with you at all times.
9. Each rider gets his own bike, unless you've experience with pillion on such road conditions.
10. No good luck charms can protect you from getting wet. Travel with appropriate gear!

Our bike rental agency details:

Agency: Voice of Himalayas Manali Bike Rental

Owner: Anubhav Shashni

Phone: +91 8800814790

Address: Old Mission Road, Manali - 175131 (Near Mayur Restaurant, Near Mall Road)











