

# Sojourn in Spiti

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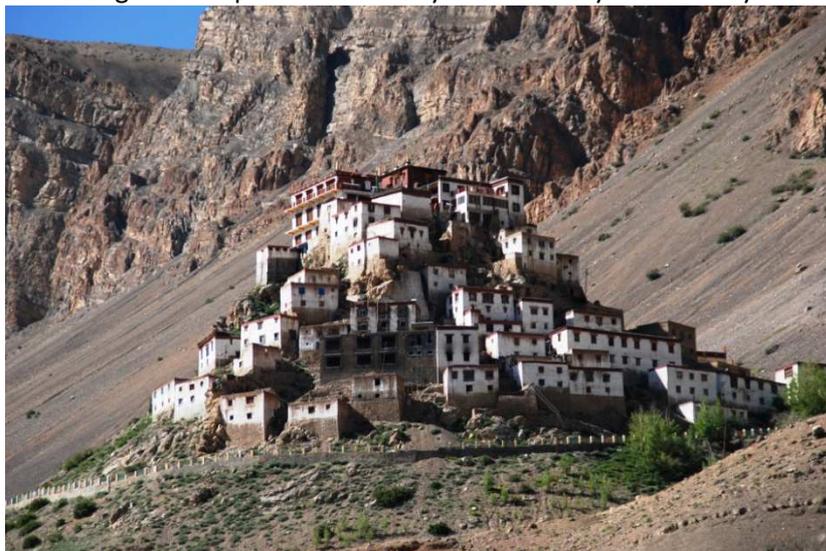
Finally I have done it! I am away from the rest of the world, without mobile or internet access and able to concentrate on the important things in life! I am happily ensconced in a homestay in Comik, known as the highest village of Asia at an altitude of 4580 m. The thin air up here makes the brain fuzzy, I have been told by my friend Sunil from Ecosphere [www.spiticosphere.com](http://www.spiticosphere.com), a social enterprise that links local livelihoods to the conservation of Spiti's natural and cultural resources. So I hope my little report makes sense!

Just for orientation, Comik is situated in Spiti, a serene and secluded valley in Himachal Pradesh, where India borders on China. Spiti, once part of the Western Tibetan kingdom, is reachable only after a day's trip over some of the most precarious and rough roads imaginable, and which are open



only for about four months of the year. The same roads are also used by the Gaddi, the shepherds, to access their summer pastures. I was surprised to see the number of Gaddi sheep and goat flocks which are also accompanied by throngs of horses that carry the tents and other belongings of the herders. Once again I was struck by the enormous economic contribution of these pastoralists that produce food, fibre and

fertilizer without any of the normal agricultural inputs, such as chemical fertilizer, oil and so on, just converting the rich plant biodiversity in an entirely natural way.



Spiti is reknown for its gompas or Buddhist monasteries, most notably among them the more than 1000 year old Tabo gompa. I have toured several of the monasteries, but thanks to Ecosphere, I have been able to get a glimpse of Spiti's animal cultures. The Spitians are agropastoralists that traditionally combined cultivation of barley and black peas with the raising of a spectrum of domesticated animals – yaks, sheep, goats, horses, donkey, cows. As Buddhists, they are averse to

slaughtering animals, or to selling them for that purpose, so they keep only a small number of sheep and goats, mostly for wool and hair. The sheep, goats, and young yaks of a village are herded by the village families on a rotational basis. Here you see the young girl of the family I am staying with, as she is counting the animals in the evening. The adult yaks and horses however graze on their own during the summer and are stabled in enclosures next to the house in the winter. Having to feed them for eight months out of the year is quite a major task.



Spiti is known for the Spiti horse, one of India's recognized livestock breeds. However, locally it is referred to as Chhumurti breed, after an alpine pasture area. Its distinguishing features are a special trot and sturdy legs. The population of this breed has declined, and in 2003, only 644 animals were counted in the government census. The reasons for this are probably the wide availability of



motorized transport, but also predation by snow leopards and wolves. People who earlier had herds of horses now have only one or two animals. But the horse culture is still strong in the area and there is an annual horse race and festival in the village of Dimul. And the village of Khibber recently made it mandatory for each household to own a horse. On my trek today I was lucky enough to meet two nicely decorated horses with bells around their neck that were being brought to Khibber.

Chumurti horses were earlier also

traded with the Changtang area that is due north of here, but this has now reduced. The best place to buy a Chhumurti horse is the Lavi Fair in Rampur that takes place each year in November.

Now to the yaks of which there were 944 head in 2003. Yaks are multi-purpose animals that can be used for milk, meat and hair. But most important are their dung – for heating and fertilizer, and their transport function. Yaks (male) and dimos (female) are only half-tamed. Yesterday I was lucky enough to find a yak that would carry me from Gomik to Dimul. I love yaks! They are very cuddly, like a cross between a cow and a sheep. Although they look massive, they are not very high and provide a surprisingly smooth



ride. My yak carried me up the hills with great patience and very surefootedly. I had no sores afterwards, and neither did he! The yak population in Spiti is now restricted to the high villages, while those in the valley bottom have been replaced by tractors. During the four summer months – June to September – the grown up yaks graze together with horses on remote pastures. During the remaining months, they are kept in the village.



I had an interesting conversation with the *Nono*, the king of Spiti, who also is a studied sociologist. He bemoaned the fact that Spiti was rapidly losing its traditional autonomy, leading to a crisis every time the roads are blocked and trucks cannot come through. Traditionally the crops were barley and black peas. But now the black peas have been replaced by green peas, a cash crop that is exported to the rest of India. The profitability of green peas has reduced the amount of barley that is cultivated, thereby decreasing the availability of barley straw for livestock. He feels that this has already reduced the numbers of animals kept which in turn is leading to lack of manure and the need to import chemical fertilizer. The *Nono* was concerned about this and the eventual effect of the Spiti people changing from their traditional barter economy to becoming a part of the cash economy. This is certainly what the government sees as the future of Spiti.

On the day of my arrival, the chief minister of Himachal Pradesh had come for a fleeting visit by helicopter to lay the foundation stone for a shopping mall. The government has also tried to ingratiate itself with the locals by distributing free dish antennas – which can be seen on every roof. However, due to lack of electricity I did not see any TV in use.

Spiti has retained its unique charm due to its remoteness and inaccessibility. But the Chief Minister also indicated plans for an airport to be established in Kaza – which would be popular with many Spitiains but also lead to an enormous influx of tourists. I am glad that I visited here before this happened!