Imagine an arid land set high in the Indian Himalaya, a high-altitude desert punctuated by small patches of green and miniature villages of white, flat-roofed houses perched below stark rocky hillsides and jagged snow-covered peaks. Picture high passes blocked by snow and ice for half the year, and scattered stabs of color from fluttering prayer flags and precariously perched Buddhist monasteries.

This must be Ladakh, you might be thinking - the legendary Himalayan playground for lovers of extraordinary landscapes, wilderness adventures and spiritual horizons. But no, I’m talking about the wild valleys of Spiti and Lahaul, abutting the rugged western fringes of the Tibetan Plateau, and overlooked by thousands of travelers who rush headlong towards Ladakh in search of their own little piece of Shangri-La.

Gateway to the Himalayas

South of Ladakh in the state of Himachal Pradesh, Spiti and Lahaul have historically fallen more under the influence of Tibet than of India, and they remain far less known to the outside world. Travel here remains one of Asia’s great adventures, whether you get around by car (4WD essential), on bone-shaking buses, or by motorbike, on some of the world’s most challenging mountain roads.

Many travelers approach Lahaul and Spiti via the 3978m-high Rohtang La pass, which rises north of the tourism hub of Manali - a spectacular experience in itself and only passable from about May to October – but I took a more circuitous route into the region from the east, starting out from India’s most famous hill station, Shimla. This backdoor to Spiti traced the valley of the Sutlej River through Kinnaur district, where the mountains got steadily higher, the gorges more precipitous, and the terrain starker and drier, with every passing kilometer.

The culture, too, gradually changes, from Hindu to Buddhist as you gain altitude and lose vegetation in the rain shadow of the Himalaya. From the Sutlej’s confluence with the Spiti River, the road zigzags endlessly upwards to the village of Nako - a cluster of medieval-looking stone and mud-brick houses set beside a sacred lake 3660m above sea level. By the Buddhist culture and Tibetan facial features of Nako’s hardy inhabitants, you know you have indubitably reached Spiti. I visited the four 11th-century chapels of Nako Gompa (Monastery), peering in dim light at their elaborate Tibetan Buddhist murals and sculptures, before clambering up to the panoramic Nako Pass, an hour above the village. On the way back down, I paused at a wind-driven prayer wheel surrounded by strings of colourful, flickering prayer flags. The wheel, turning at speeds dictated by the wind, rang a bell with each revolution as if marking the passage of time, and here in this lonely spot, it seemed that time slowed every time the breeze dropped, and speeded up when stronger gusts blew.

Mountains, monasteries and magic

From Nako the dusty road climbed higher into the Spiti Valley, at times snaking along beside the rushing, turquoise-grey river, at times clinging to cliffs high above. At the neat, whitewashed village of Tabo, I stopped to visit Tabo Gompa, founded, according to legend, in AD 996, by Ringchen Zangpo, the ‘Great Translator’ - a key figure in consolidating the hold of Buddhism on the Tibetan plateau. Five of the nine shrines inside the gompa’s curious, mud-walled buildings bear outstanding murals painted by some of the best Buddhist artists of their time. The centerpiece is the main assembly hall, the Tsuglkang, whose walls are lined with stunning near-life-size clay sculptures of 28 bodhisattvas (enlightened beings).

Tabo has a handful of simple but appealing guesthouses and cafes, and I was glad of a warm bed and a hot meal before continuing on to Dhankar, where the most spectacularly-sited of all Spiti’s monasteries hugs the edge of a high cliff, hemmed in by eroded rock pinnacles.

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Monks perform costumed chaam dances in the courtyard at Ki Gompa