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# In Quest Of The Forbidden Fruit

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There lies a fairy tale land in the bosom of Himachal Pradesh blushing red in autumn with the allure of the 'forbidden fruit'.

Sangla Valley in Kinnaur was the starting point of my exploration of Himachal's Apple Trail. Set in the midst of a sprawling apple orchard with plump, red apples glistening like rubies while the milky white Baspa River gushed through the backdrop hastily, my abode at the Banjara Camp was literally the Garden of Eden.



Since there was no tempting Adam or conniving Satan for company, I sat enjoying my solitude on a white boulder on a silver beach overlooking the Baspa, pairing hot aloo parathas with delicious apple preserves from my picnic hamper.

Later, during an evening trek to the Batseri village, I was invited by a local 'Pahadi' lady in a long, checkered tunic called 'Reshta' to her hut for a cup of hot 'chai'. While lighting a wood fire, she told me that the Pahadi community is primarily engaged in apple cultivation in the region, but the younger generation of this simple community are now mostly working in

the corporate world in cities, are air hostesses with leading airlines etc. She showed me the beautiful mountain architecture of her village, miles of apple orchards and took me to the Badrinarayan Temple that interestingly had carvings from all religions, showing the religious outlook of this peace loving community.



Himachal is the second largest producer of apples in the country after Kashmir. Apples account for the largest and primary produce in Himachal and the economy is largely centered on apples directly and indirectly through apple grading houses, processing plants, tourism etc. The major commercial varieties of apple are Red Delicious, Royal Delicious, Rich – A – Red Delicious and Golden Delicious that are grown all over the state. Apples are grown at elevations of 5,000 ft to 10,000 ft. The higher the elevation, the later is the harvesting season and usually better is the quality of apples due to better hours of chill.

Next day I took a day trip to Kalpa (50 Kms/2 hrs). Located at 9,711 ft, it is noted for its high quality apples, pine nut forests and deodar. The gurgling Sutlej River below cut deep gorges and the beautiful winding mountain roads were fringed by Chilgoza trees. As I sat wrapped in a light shawl, taking in the spectacular views of the sun playing hide and seek over the Kinner Kailash peak, locals told me in a few months from now as winter will set in the temperatures will drop to -20°C and the entire area will be covered in 5 – 7 feet of snow, creating the perfect condition for the next batch of high quality apples to grow. This is also the time that they will brew homemade alcohol with apples and apricots for personal consumption to keep themselves warm through eight long winter months.

One can also visit Chitkul, the last inhabited village on the Indo – China border that was earlier part of the ancient silk route.





I headed out for more adventure at Kotgarh. In 1882, Captain Lee, an English army officer planted the first apple orchard in Kullu. Unfortunately, the green apples (Ross Pippin) did not become popular as they were sour and could only be used for cooking. However, entrepreneurs Kartik and Anu, who quit their corporate careers in the television industry to set up a fruit processing unit at Kotgarh called 'Fruit Bageecha', have collaborated with the local Mahila Mandal to create an exciting and much in demand 'Green Apple and Ginger Chutney' using the Ross Pippin apple that is retailed in luxury hotels around the country. The dynamic duos are now planning to launch a new preserve that combines the heat of Naga chillies with Ross Pippin apples.



*Photo courtesy 'Fruit Bageecha'.*

It was almost sun set by the time I reached charming Thanedar in Kotgarh at a height of 7,700 ft, after a drive through winding hills bursting with

crimson apples.



*Photo courtesy 'Fruit Bageecha'.*

As I reclined in the quaint garden chair in the lovely Banjara Orchard retreat, breathing in the apple scented air and looking out at a panorama of mountains and farms, the hospitable owner Mr. Prakash Thakur told me a most inspiring story. Samuel Stokes, an American, came to India in 1904 to work in a leper home in Shimla. He realized that the people there were battling not just disease but also poverty. In 1916, he brought apple seeds of the 'Red Delicious' variety from Philadelphia and distributed them free of cost to the locals and helped them to plant and nurture them. This was the start of an economic revolution in the area as the plants bore fruit around 6 – 7 years later. This is the Red Delicious variety of apple that we eat today. Stokes also was a leading activist of the Indian freedom movement, married an Indian lady and is known popularly as Satyanand Stokes.

One can still see the orchard planted by Stokes in Thanedar. Parmjyoti temple, built by Stokes in Pahari style and St Mary's Church built in 1872 are worth a visit. One can also see the Nag Devta temple at the Tani Jubbar Lake and trek to the Saroga forest.

With some assistance from your hotel at Thanedar, one can also take part in apple cultivation, fruit plucking, visiting a fruit processing unit and buy homemade preserves from locals in all the above mentioned places. Winters in apple land and is a great time to stay indoors and watch surreal, snow clad landscape.





Photo courtesy 'Fruit Bageecha'

If Adam's example is anything to go by, don't even try to resist the lure of this curvaceous, red beauty. Switch off your phones, get off your latest 'app' and head out to Himachal to explore the enchanting Apple trail.

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