

DESTINATION

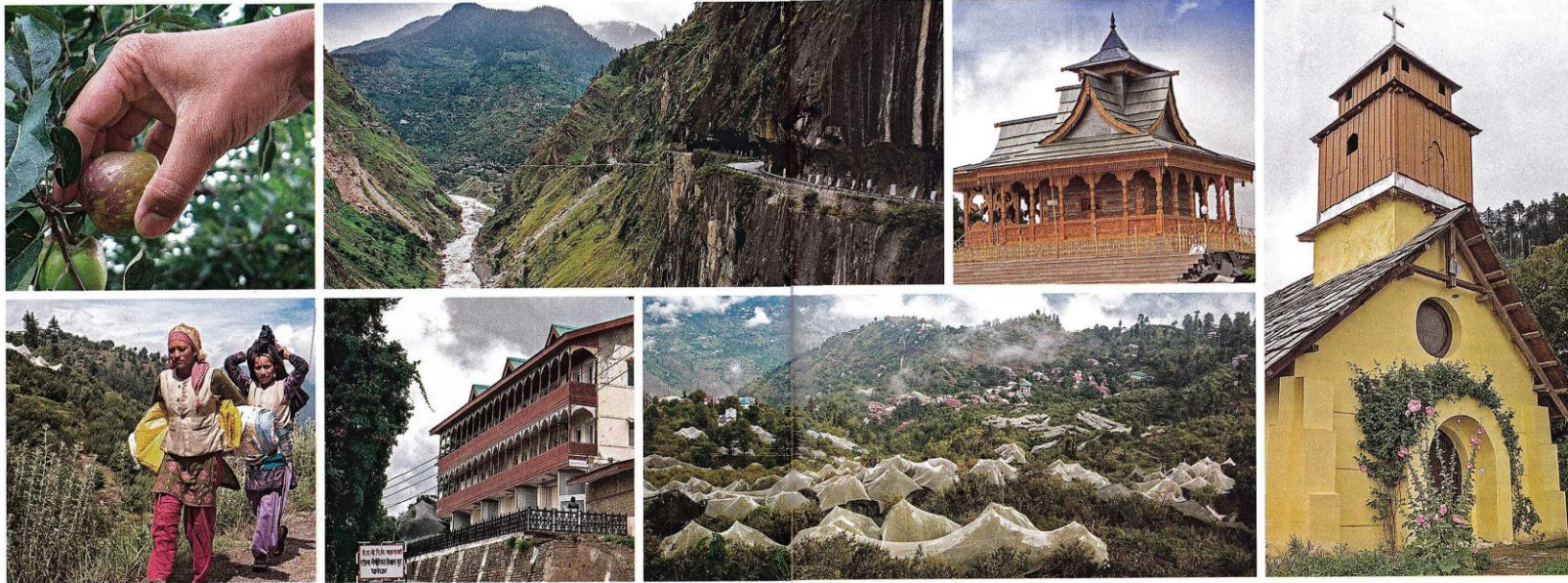
# Apple county

Thanedar, the Apple Basket of India, is home to some delicious varieties that have captivated the taste buds of the nation

❖ 📍 Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

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hells of mist swirled around us like whirling dervishes, forcing our car to inch along the narrow road that sloped away into a ravine below where river Sutlej flowed. Our destination, Thanedar—80 km beyond Shimla—seemed remote, even inaccessible. We were on the Hindustan-Tibet road (now NH 22), commissioned by Lord Dalhousie in 1850, parts of which felt like the road hadn't been repaired since!



After many twists and turns, Thanedar finally appeared dreamlike on the horizon, a Himalayan market town enfolded in apple and cherry orchards with misty mountains un-scrolling in the distance like a mighty accordion. Nestled in a hollow was the Banjara Orchard Retreat where we were to stay for a few nights, complete with family suites and log cabins, where enchanting views held centre stage.

Located at an altitude of 7,700 ft, Thanedar is the epicentre of the Himachali apple belt where apple trees are lovingly shrouded in netting to protect them from the occasional hailstorms that happen in the monsoons. As we sipped tea on the balcony of our log hut on that first morning, we saw that most orchards had been terraced into the valley below us; indeed, some of the tight little green apples were temptingly close enough to grasp. In that pearly dawn, mist rolled in and out of the valley, billowing like a giant bridal veil in flight. Breakfast in the

dining room of the Banjara was a treat, as it was cantilevered over the lush orchard-studded valley, the aroma of fresh *pohe*, buttered toast and coffee vying with the magical views.

In Thanedar, you can't go far without hearing various versions of the apple story. Samuel Evan Stokes, the scion of a wealthy Philadelphia family, came to India in 1904 with good intentions: to work in a home for lepers in Solan. By a quirk of fate, he arrived in Thanedar, fell in love with the place and a local girl, and settled there. Legend has it that his mother bought him an existing tea plantation. Subsequently, Stokes brought a few saplings from the US and planted them in his orchard in Kotgarh (17 km away from Thanedar), which is today known as the Apple Basket of India. The Red and Golden Delicious variety of apples bore fruit and ensnared the taste buds of an entire nation. Local farmers in the Shimla hills in the western Himalayas too started planting them, with Stokes keeping a watchful

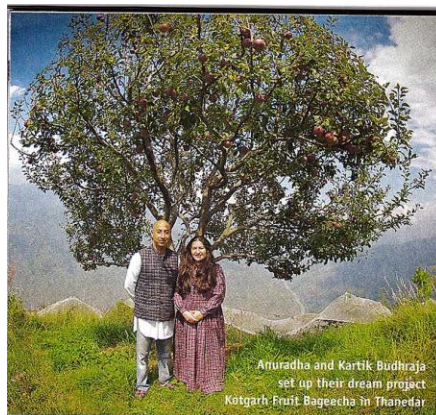
Clockwise from top left: the right way to pluck an apple; a road carved into the side of the mountain as the Sutlej River flows through the valley; the wood carved temple atop Hatu Peak; St Mary's church at Kotgarh; nets to protect the apple orchards against hailstorms; early 20th century residence of Satyanand Stokes; village locals on their daily rounds

eye on the newbie planters and advising them on how to reap rich dividends.

In search of the Stokes story, we travelled to Kotgarh where Satyananda—as Stokes was later called—had recuperated after a bout of illness. There we stumbled upon the quaint St Mary's Church, built in 1872, and said to be one of the oldest in India. With its polished wood pews made of fragrant cedar and Belgian stained glass that filtered light into the enchanted space, the quaint yellow-coloured church in the midst of silent woods was well worth the hike. Nearby, children in neatly pressed uniforms poured out of a local school like a bunch of frolicking lambs even as a shepherdess sauntered past with a flock of bleating goats.

That night it rained, pattering on the slate roof like a hundred dancing elves. The next morning, the skies were a clear blue, innocent and devoid of any memory of the previous night's tantrums. So we drove to Hatu Peak, 15 km away, via curvy roads bordered with blue pines, sturdy soaring cedars, fir and spruce; past silent feral forests inhabited, we felt, by mythical creatures.

At 11,000 ft, the air was fresh with a piney fragrance and we stumbled on a quaint temple with a tiered slate roof and an exquisite wood-carved façade. The temple seemed to languish in its own pool of serenity, detached from the world around. The snow-capped Himalayas arched across the northern horizon but when we were there, they were smudged with mist and clouds.



Anuradha and Kartik Budhraj set up their dream project Kotgarh Fruit Bageecha in Thanedar

We decided to walk down part of the way and so mesmerizing were the views that we stopped at a local *dhaba* to take it all in. A bearded silver, with skin that resembled dried tobacco leaves, sat on a rough-hewn bench philosophising about the world. Two young men were preparing *momo* for him. Suddenly, one of them sat back on his haunches and exclaimed: "This is paradise on earth... so much beauty in one's own land." The silver nodded in agreement, but added a rider. "Remember, this world is an illusion. Real paradise can only be glimpsed after death," he said, sipping his tea meditatively. Indeed, most of the locals we met were friendly and accepting of strangers, and grateful for the beauty that surrounds them.

Stokes was not the only one to fall in love with Thanedar. We met Anuradha and Kartik Budhraj—media professionals working in Singapore—who came to Thanedar on a holiday and fell in love with the place. This, they decided, was the place to set up their dream project: a boutique food processing unit. Three years on, the Kotgarh Fruit Bageecha is on track and has become a brand in the arena of fruits and preserves. Handcrafted at 7,500 ft in the midst of India's first and finest fruit orchards, their products seem to trap in their juicy depths the bounty of this fertile fruit belt. The lip-smacking green apple and ginger chutney, Xmas plum preserve, chunky Kiwi preserve with star anise, wild apricot preserve—they are all a labour of love.

For the duo, now in their late 30s, the Kotgarh Fruit Bageecha is a passion and, even today, they are taken aback by the flagrantly beautiful sunsets that set the mountains afire. They live in a rented cottage on the Stokes estate with their two dogs; on the periphery, jackals, foxes and even leopards lope, with a jackal once gate-crashing into their kitchen. But they have no regrets about their lifestyle choice or the harsh winters.

Now as much a part of the landscape as the mountains themselves, Anuradha and Kartik reflect the glow of

## factfile

### WHEN TO GO

Thanedar is a year-round destination. However, it can snow heavily in January-February and there are showers in July-August.

### WHAT TO SEE

In terms of sightseeing, apart from Hatu Peak and St Mary's Church, there's Tani Jubbar Lake with the Nag Devta temple and the Saroga Forest for a refreshing morning walk. The Parmjyotir temple built by Stokes in the Pahari style and the Bhimakali temple in Sarahan are worth seeing.

### GETTING THERE

**By air:** The closest airport is at Chandigarh, from where one can drive to Shimla (122 km) and then onward to Thanedar, located 80 km from Shimla on the old Hindustan-Tibet Road.

**By rail:** Take the narrow gauge Kalka-Shimla scenic train to Shimla, and drive down from there.

### ACCOMMODATION

The Banjara Orchard Retreat is the only choice in Thanedar ([www.banjaracamps.com](http://www.banjaracamps.com)):  
Tel: (0)9816747541, 1782222265  
email: [info@banjaracamps.com](mailto:info@banjaracamps.com)

Narkanda, 17 km away, has many more options:  
The Himalayan Inn & Restaurant: Tel: (0)1782242462  
Tethys Ski Resort: Tel: (0)1782242641

For more information, visit the official website of the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation at [hptdc.nic.in](http://hptdc.nic.in)

contentment that comes from living in sync with nature, unfazed by the hailstorms that pelt down at times and damage crops; the severe winters which transform the landscape into a white wonderland; the sight of the eternal mountains needling the blue skies with their jagged peaks; dense forests with floors mushy with pine needles and maple leaves; and the lower mountain slopes studded with apple and cherry orchards where plump fruit hangs temptingly from groaning bough.

It's a world that Satyananda Stokes, and many after him, fell in love with; a world that induces a sense of awe at nature's bounty and occasional capriciousness. ☉