

**Pushpa Nair  
escapes to the  
serenity of Manali  
to find solace**

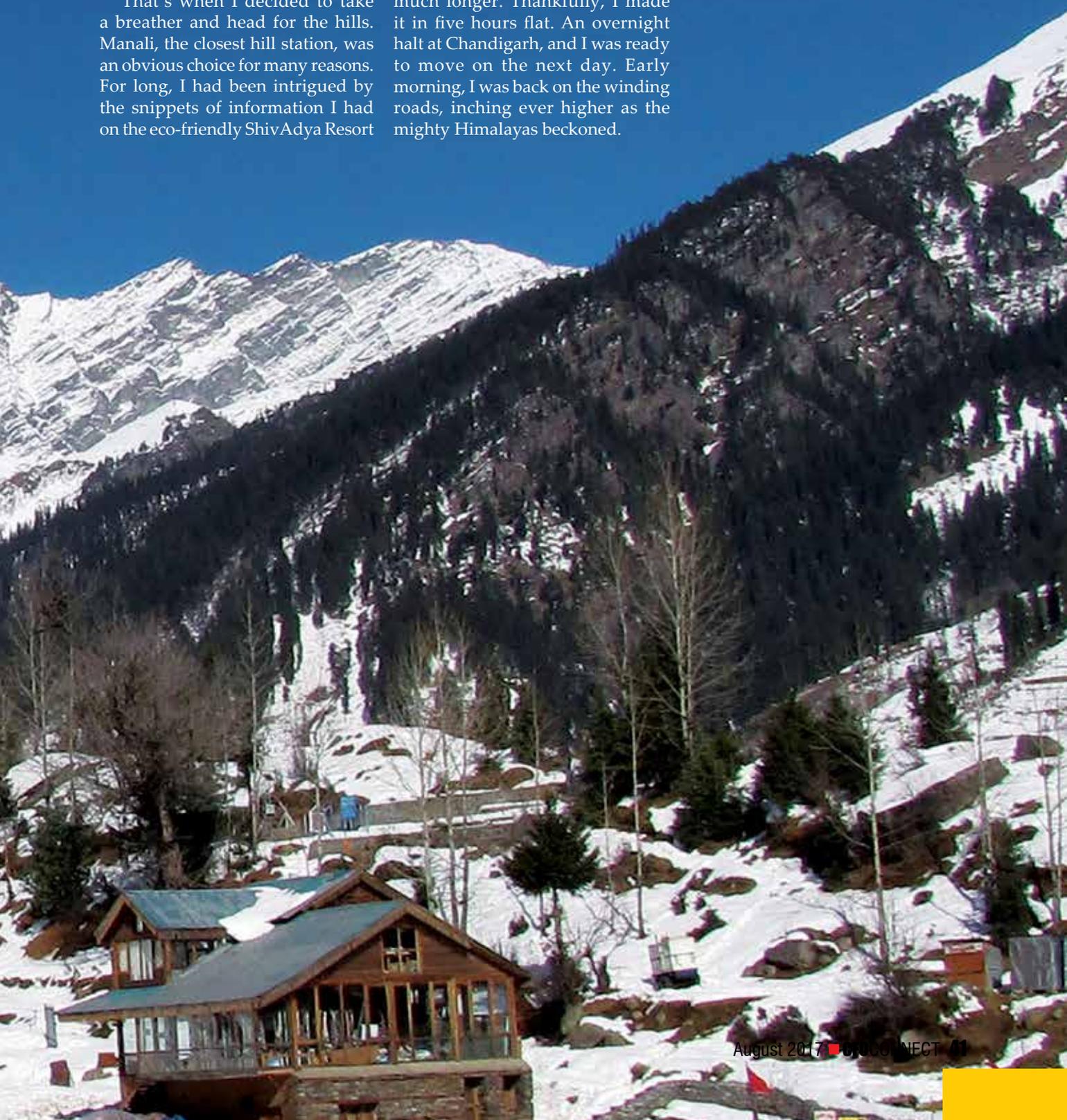
# WHEN THE MOUNTAINS BECKON

**D**iwali was dusted over and New Delhi lay gasping like an old woman wheezing, her lungs choked. Wither my city?

That's when I decided to take a breather and head for the hills. Manali, the closest hill station, was an obvious choice for many reasons. For long, I had been intrigued by the snippets of information I had on the eco-friendly ShivAdya Resort

and Spa, and I was keen to go and pamper myself there.

Bags packed, I headed for Chandigarh on what's supposed to be a five-hour drive, but often takes much longer. Thankfully, I made it in five hours flat. An overnight halt at Chandigarh, and I was ready to move on the next day. Early morning, I was back on the winding roads, inching ever higher as the mighty Himalayas beckoned.





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## Meandering in Manali

It was still early when I reached Manali, and blessedly, there was no mad traffic. Karajan is about 20 minutes outside town, and if one follows the directions precisely, it's easy to navigate your way there. As soon as I came to a discreet sign that announced I had reached my destination, I felt a sense of relief. (Caution: keep your eyes open or you could miss the turnoff.) Set amidst apple orchards, gentle slopes leading down to the valley, and of course, the majestic, snow-capped Himalayan peaks, it was a visual treat just to be standing in front of the resort. The first thing that struck me was its earthly tones and a structure that beautifully combines stone, mud and wood.

I was most taken in by the resort's ethos of seamlessly blending into the environment. The wood used in the rooms – walnut, fir or sheesham – is locally sourced, with no extra wood finish but only a small amount of chemical to help the wood retain its original properties. Local skills are extensively deployed, and everything from the flooring and ceilings to the outer walls have been built by local artisans. The spa therapies incorporate the energies of five natural elements, including wood, fire, stone, plants and water, and there is something about this place that is so personal and intimate. Ritesh Sood, the resort's very hands-on owner, warmly welcomed me to the property, and he makes it a point to meet every guest and make him or her feel at home.

## Green ethos

A quick check-in by super courteous staff, and I was escorted to a warm fire, where, over a cup of coffee, I was briefed about the vision of creating a place in the mountains inspired by the local architecture of the Kullu, Kangra, Mandi and Kinnaur valleys. These so-called 'Kath Koni' houses are not only earthquake-resistant, but



also follow a tradition of allocating different floors to varying uses. For instance, the ground floor (or 'Khud') is used for cattle-rearing, while the first floor ('Bouri') is usually a living room where one welcomes guests. The top-most floor ('Taala') must only be used as a kitchen. All of the 15 guest rooms at ShivAdya pay homage to the valleys and passes of the mighty Himalayas, with names like Kaza, Kalpa, Zanskar and Hamta. The entire resort is zero wastage,

with all the material left over after construction used as land-fill.

### **Warmth and charm**

Fortified by coffee and biscuits, I decided to freshen up in my luxurious, toasty-warm room before stepping out. Then I met Baxter, a five-year-old Labrador – the resident mascot who also has an innate awareness of how to pose. A quick sniff and welcome, and off he went. Totally awake, I took deep breaths, letting the freshness of the mountain

air clear my oxygen-starved system.

A gentle, meandering walk across the property and it was time to get some grub. I realised I was hungry after all the walking, and the in-house restaurant felt like an extension of one's own kitchen. The menu changes according to what guests want to eat, and not what the hotel expects one to eat. The Indian and Continental offerings were good, but what stood out for its sheer wholesomeness and flavour was the local Himachali cuisine.



Chha Gosht, a rich lamb curry made with gram flour, yoghurt and spices like cardamom, coriander, bay leaf and ginger, is a must-try for non-vegetarians. Those who love fish must try the local trout, which is marinated with subtle spices to keep the nutrients and the original taste intact. The dish is best paired with boiled vegetables, making it an ideal choice for weight-watchers. To encourage guests to have only piping-hot food, and at the same time, to get people to interact with



each other and with the omnipresent Mr Sood, there is no room service.

A quick siesta and I was ready for the evening barbecue next to a roaring bonfire, and with a view that is hard to beat. It was a full-moon night and the stars, seemingly just an arm's-length away, beckoned to be plucked out of the sky.. Here I met Neelam, the owner's charming wife, who entirely seconded the ethos behind ShivAdya. After dinner, I made a hasty retreat to my bed, and I was fast asleep in five minutes.

I woke up refreshed the next morning. The staff suggested a hike in the nearby Soel village – one of many activities to keep yourself engaged while at the resort. After a quick breakfast, I set off with a few other guests on what turned out to be an exploration. We crossed delightful streams surrounded

by thick Deodar trees and rice fields, and time seemed to stand still. I clambered up and down several slopes before bumping into a charming villager, who proved to be a super salesperson. She was selling clarified butter and blackberry jam, and together, we ended up buying her entire stock. I was admiring the entrepreneurial spirit of this lady, who makes a living selling homemade jams from different fruits that grow in abundance there.

That afternoon, I made time to see some typically touristy sights, including several temples. Hadimba, an impressive wooden temple built by Maharaja Bahadur Singh in 1553, is dedicated to the demon Hidimba, wife of the Pandava Bhim. Vashisht Temple is named after a sage considered by the villagers on this side of the River Beas to be Lord Ram's 'Kulu guru'. Finally, I trekked

up to Manu Temple in Old Manali, one of the most popular attractions in the area, which is dedicated to the sage Manu, the supposed creator of the human race.

Back in the resort, it was time for a completely different experience. Neelam, a food connoisseur who took it upon herself to learn how to cook local food, spent time teaching us the nuances of some local dishes. We polished off the food, accompanied by a traditional local beer that lent a pleasant punch to our evening.

On my return to Delhi, I was pleased to see my city no longer

looking as dull and grey – but for how long, I wondered. ■



Pushpa Nair is a communication professional and an avid traveller