



## An Eco-Friendly Tourist Trail

With the summer having made its presence felt officially, it is time to discover new summer destinations that you can explore with an eco-twist.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Leh Ladakh

As the summer heat rises, it is time to plan a getaway to cool down and discover hidden gems often overlooked. In addition to their eco-friendliness, affordability, and sustainability, these destinations also have properties that blend awe-inspiring experiences with green initiatives. As people become more aware of the environmental impact of their trips, they are looking for ways to support and give back to the local community while travelling. According to Booking.com's travel predictions for 2024, 81% of travellers surveyed mentioned that they would want to visit a destination where they can see sustainability in practice this year. From going off the beaten path, and supporting the local communities to booking ecological stays, here are some destinations in India for the mindful and responsible traveller that are perfect for a summer escape.

### MASHOBRA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Dubbed 'Quiet Shimla', this underrated eco-friendly paradise showcases lush greenery and biodiversity through afforestation, waste management, and wildlife conservation. The town promotes environment-friendly practices such as organic farming, renew-

able energy usage, and responsible tourism to minimize environmental impact. Imbued with a rich tapestry of heritage and culture, Mashobra boasts the distinction of housing Asia's oldest winery, where the art of winemaking has been lovingly preserved and perfected through generations. "For nature enthusiasts, the enchanting Wildflower Trail offers a serene escape into a verdant oasis, weaving through lush forests adorned with a vibrant tapestry of wildflowers. Particularly breathtaking during the spring and summer months, when the landscape bursts into a kaleidoscope of colours, this trail promises an unforgettable hiking experience amidst nature's finest creations. Discovering Mashobra,

one can explore green and premium accommodation options like Udman Mashobra with energy-efficient systems and waste reduction initiatives," says Vaibhav Verma, Chief Executive Officer, Udman Hotels by Ferns N Petals.

### MANA, UTTARAKHAND

Located on the edge of the Indian border with Tibet/ China, stands Mana, once known as the 'last Indian village' and now celebrated as one of the oldest inhabited settlements in India. With its rich history, including being the reputed birthplace of the Pandavas from the Mahabharata, Mana exudes an aura of timeless allure. Despite its historical significance and unparalleled beauty, Mana remains a hidden treasure on the tourist map, waiting to be discovered by adventurous travellers. Accessible only by eco-friendly e-rickshaws and lightweight vehicles, the village takes proactive measures to preserve its pristine environment and minimize pollution, showcasing a dedication to sustainable tourism. For those in search of a cultural odyssey, properties like Sarovar Portico offer comfortable accommodations conveniently close to Mana village. "From exploring Vyas Gufa, where the Mahabharata

is said to have been penned, to paying homage at the revered Badrinath temple, visitors are treated to a journey imbued with spiritual and historical resonance. With its blend of ancient allure, natural splendour, and eco-conscious ethos, Mana promises a mutually beneficial experience for both tourists and the local community, ensuring a memorable and responsible travel adventure for all," says Verma.

### LEH, LADAKH

Known for its beautiful scenery including snow-capped mountains, high-altitude lakes, and vast deserts, Leh is a popular sustainable destination. "Many tour operators here are now offering environmentally sound tours that focus on minimizing the environmental impact. Hotels and guesthouses are also taking initiatives to reduce their dependence on traditional energy sources by using solar power. By supporting local businesses and communities, travellers can help preserve the local

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culture. While in Leh, travellers can go trekking, mountain biking, white-water rafting, visit the Shanti Stupa and explore the Leh Palace," says Urvi Thakkar, Sr Communication and PR Manager, Booking.com (India & Vietnam).

### DHARAMSHALA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

A beautiful hill station located in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala is known as the home of the Dalai Lama. Dharamshala is becoming increasingly popular for ecotourism as well. "There are several guesthouses and homestays in Dharamshala which are a great way to experience the local culture and support the community. Many of



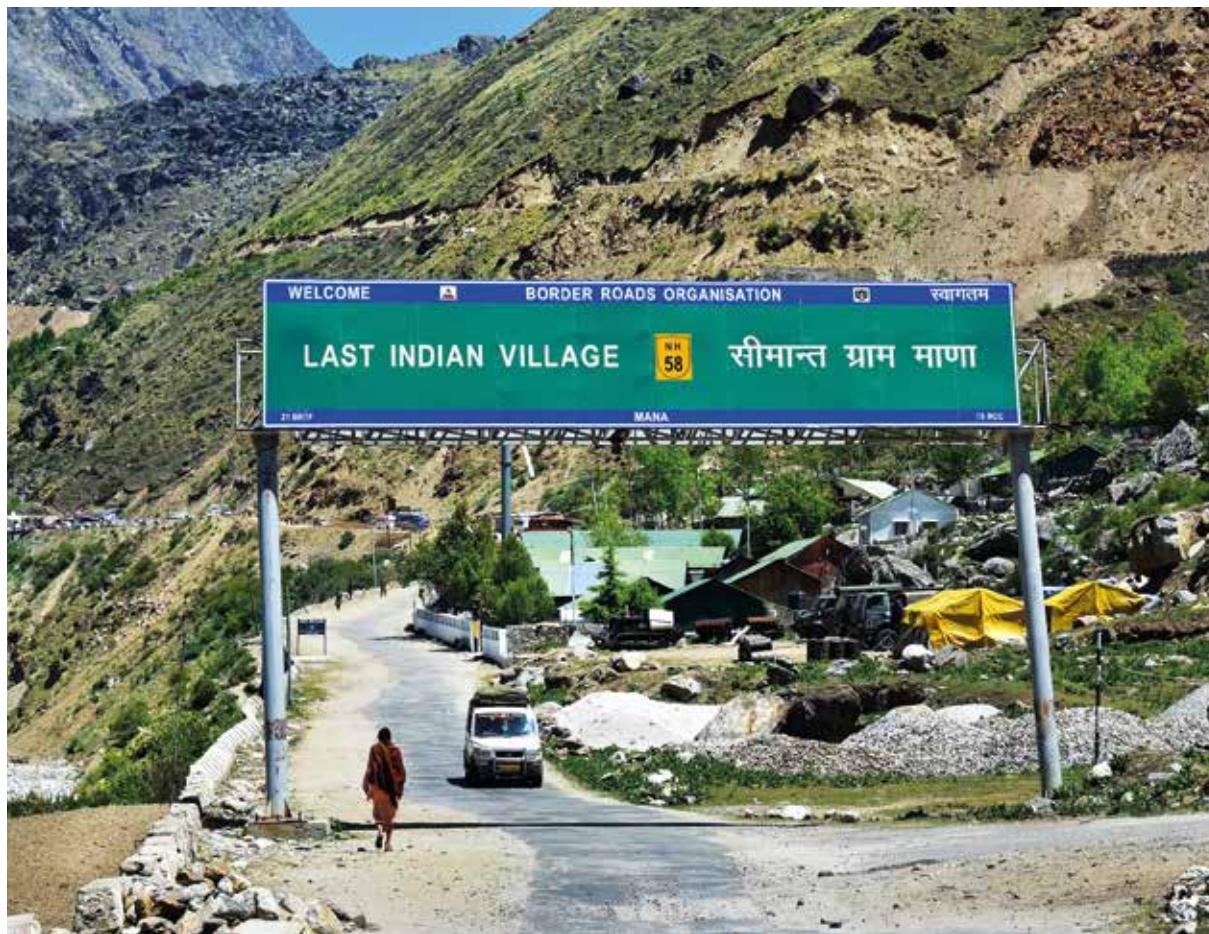
Mashobra

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the accommodations are now using sustainable practices such as using solar power, composting food waste, and reducing plastic use. During their stay, travellers can explore the Kangra valley, go on a trek, learn about Tibetan culture and Buddhism, and enjoy their summer break," says Thakkar.

#### TOSH, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Beyond the bustling cafes and guesthouses, lies a world of hidden eco-friendly havens, perfect for the intrepid solo traveller in Tosh. From the secluded village of enchanting Rudragana to the untouched beauty of Lila valley and Malana near Tosh, these destinations offer a glimpse into pristine landscapes untouched by mass tourism. "Opting for homestays in these areas emerges as the preferred choice for eco-conscious trav-



ellers. These locally run accommodations not only offer an authentic immersion into village life but also prioritize sustainability," says Verma. Constructed using eco-friendly materials and practices, they support the community and reduce carbon footprint by sourcing food locally.

#### MUNNAR, KERALA

From Blossom park to Kundala lake and Mattupetty dam, Munnar offers a wonderful blend of natural beauty, cultural experiences, and adventure activities for travellers to enjoy during their stay. Arun Bagaria, Co-Founder and CEO of TravClan, says, "Kerala offers eco-conscious options to Indian travellers seeking an enjoyable summer escape. Embracing sustainable tourism, Kerala's hospitality industry prioritizes water conservation and forest preservation for its tourists. Some time ago, Kerala introduced its sustainable tourism development initiatives, channelling efforts towards cultural preserva-

tion, environmental protection, and infrastructure enhancements. These initiatives enable travellers to contribute to a legacy of preservation, ensuring Kerala's timeless beauty can be enjoyed by tourists for generations to come."

#### DAKPATHAR, UTTARAKHAND

Dakpathar, situated on the foothills, is a beautiful town of Uttarakhand which is surrounded by the river Yamuna on one side, the Sirmour hills on the other side, and is also the first Ramsar site of India known for bird watching, the most unique aspect being the topographic advantage to promote solar electricity generation. Travellers can immerse themselves in eco-friendly activities like trekking in the nearby forests of the Rajaji national park, bird watching to spot Himalayan avifauna and around 100-plus migratory birds, and participating in community-led conservation projects. "The region's rich biodiversity and sustainable tourism initiatives promote responsible travel practices, ensuring minimal



Rishikesh

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environmental impact. Sukoon - A Wellness Resort (Amidst Nature), lets visitors engage with local communities to understand their traditional practices and contribute to sustainable livelihoods through homestays and locally sourced cuisine. Being a farm-stay, the traveller gets unlimited access to the expansive farms where vegetables are grown for consumption within the resort and the riverside is only a 10-minute walk away," says Manish Goyal, Founder, Stotrak Hospitality for Sukoon Retreat & Spa Dakpathar.

#### RISHIKESH

As the summer sun beckons, travellers seek destinations that not only offer respite from the heat but also align with their eco-conscious values. Rishikesh, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, emerges as a prime destination marrying natural beauty with sustainable tourism initiatives. "Rishikesh is renowned for its spiritual significance, but it also stands out as a haven for eco-tourists. The region boasts lush forests, meandering rivers, and majestic mountains, providing a playground for nature enthusiasts. Adventure seekers can indulge in activities like river rafting, trekking, and camping, all while soaking in the pristine beauty of the Himalayan landscape. From eco-friendly accommodations to organic cafes, the city is dedicated to minimizing its environmental impact while maximizing the visitor experience. The Westin Resort and Spa Himalayas seamlessly integrates into this ethos, offering guests an eco-conscious stay that complements the natural splendour of Rishikesh. At The Westin Resort and Spa Himalayas, enriching the guest experience is the farm-to-table concept, exemplified by the Garhwali thaali experience. Ingredients sourced from nearby regions not only add authenticity to Garhwali cuisine but also reduce the carbon footprint associated with food transportation," says Prabdeep Arora, Director of Operations, The Westin Resort and Spa Himalayas. ■