



# kunzum

travel list



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## travel list

The time to travel is often preceded with an agonizing period - of figuring out where to go and what to do. There is information galore out there, but only if someone could plan it out and offer options on a platter.

And thus the Kunzum Travel List. Full of great ideas to choose from. From all across India, Nepal and the rest of the subcontinent. Holidays you will cherish, and remember for a lifetime. Something you will share with others and evoke envy - prompting friends to ask you more so they too can head out on the same path.

What you will read and see in this book is the effort of a lot of hard work. Ajay Jain has personally experienced all this for himself before recommending it further. And the presentation is not in a typical travel guide or brochure format - but in a first person travelogue style, peppered with anecdotes and photographs. He wants to inspire you, not just inform. Leaving you restless till you pack your bags.

Unlike many others in the market, we are not a list running into hundreds and thousands. These may make for fancy numbers but lose out on detail. What you have here is more imagery, more detail. The book wants to transport you on a holiday twice - once, when you read it, and again when you live it for yourself.

The list does not claim to represent the best out there - it is just about great experiences. The numbering is for reference only. There is too much for travellers to admire in this world and no one can cover it all; and it is not fair to rank them as each is as deserving.

Just go, and have a great time travelling.

P.S. This is the first in a series of compilations. Watch out for updates on <http://kunzum.com/travellist>

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# #02

## KAZA The land of the highest villages

A view of Kaza from up above



If you want to explore the high altitude cold desert region of Spiti valley, Kaza will be your base for much of it. At about 3800 metres (12,500 feet) Kaza is surrounded by a treasure trove of natural beauty, history, culture and religion.

All you need to do is drive around to be left awestruck. Natural rock formations, the wide expanses formed by the Spiti river bed, snow-capped peaks waiting to be summited, deep gorges, traditional Spitian villages, ancient Buddhist monasteries and their festivals, trekking routes - you cannot go wrong here. It is truly a wonder on this planet.

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The Key Monastery



Here are some not to be missed highlights:

## Key Monastery

The Key monastery (also spelled Key, Ki and Kee) is the most important and biggest amongst all in Spiti and has always been run by the Gelugpa sect or the 'sect of the yellow hats.' Located on a high barren hill like a vulture's nest at 4,116 metres (13,504 feet), it overlooks the valley where the Spiti river flows. This hill is said to be the palace of the Tantric deity Chakrasamvara; three rocky spurs projecting on a mountain behind the monastery are said to be the abodes of the protective deities Chamsing, Lhamo and Nesar. The temples are located on the top of the hill, all opening into a courtyard. Quarters for lamas are located at a lower level.

There is no clear date of its establishment, earliest going back to the 11th century. The monastery is believed to have been damaged or destroyed many times over by natural calamities or by invading armies. However, it still manages to look spectacular, and is an oasis of peace - but so is much of Spiti. Go there and you will be well received by resident lamas who will take you around and even offer you butter tea - in a kitchen blackened by centuries of cooking but filled with gleaming utensils.

A must visit when in Kaza, 7 kms (5 miles) away.

Masked dancers at Komic festival



## Komic Monastery: Nothing Funny About It

The Komic Monastery and its annual festival are a hidden gem no one will tell you about.

Located at 4,587 metres (15,049 feet), the small monastery is one of the highest in the world. The setting itself is highly picturesque, with snow capped peaks around and skies with hues of blue no artist can replicate. Living conditions are very harsh here, but the surrounding village (at 4,513 metres) still has about 114 residents who are happy to reside here.

An annual festival usually takes place in October every year, but the date keeps changing. Attendees are mostly Spitians – some come from far off villages in hired taxis – and a handful of travellers like me. The atmosphere is festive from the word go – all visitors are received with a welcome tea and a fried snack that looks like a puffed pancake. Travelling salesmen come from faraway plains to set up stalls selling blankets, clothes, spectacles, toys, decorations and gifts – talk about being enterprising. For locals, it is also a rare opportunity to access these goods – they live in some of the remotest human settlements on the planet.

Customers also include young Buddhist monks – mostly boys under 10 who live in the monastery. Where do they get the money from? From visitors who offer money to them like offerings to the Gods. Even though the boys are being trained to lead lives of no material attachments, they are still children – buying a few toys surely cannot upset their divine Masters.

The festival is also a time for some games including Volleyball and Musical Chairs. Bollywood numbers play to pep up the mood. And there is such a thing as a free lunch here before the masked dances start.

Lamas pray from early morning till the afternoon. The dancers change into their dresses and masks after that. When I tried to ‘gently barge’ my way into the changing room, I was ‘scolded’ and shooed away by a stick waving boy monk in a yellow mask with an angry expression.

This Buddhist festival may be modest in scale compared to some of the more famous ones, but it is no less charming and enjoyable. The dancers move to the chants for about an hour in the monastery’s courtyard before moving out to dance in the open against the peaks. When they head back, all the devotees lie prostrate on the path as a mark of respect – the monks have to step over them as they make their way back.

As the sun goes down it is time to head back, having witnessed something few people in the world will ever do.

## DRIVING GUIDE

### **Kaza to Komic via Hikkim**

Kaza to Y-Junction (Left for Langza, Right for Hikkim – take Right): 6 kms / 0:25 hrs

Y-Junction to Hikkim: 10 kms / 0:40 hrs

Hikkim to Komic: 3 kms / 0:15 hrs

Total Distance / Time: 19 kms / 1:20 hrs

### **Komic – Kaza via Langza**

Komic to Langza: 10 kms / 0:40 hrs

Langza to Y-Junction: 9 kms / 0:26 hrs

Y-Junction to Kaza: 6 kms / 0:25 hrs

Total Distance / Time: 25 kms / 1:31 hrs

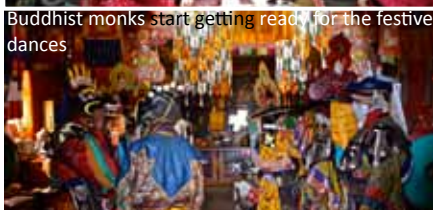
Note: All timings are approximate and do not include stops. May vary with road conditions.



Prayers before the start of the festive dances at Komic monastery



Devotees offering their prayers at Komic monastery



Buddhist monks start getting ready for the festive dances



Just before the start of dances in Komic monastery



Toblerone anyone? A peak visible on the road from Kaza to Komic



Shopping time at the Komic festival



A game of volleyball in the high altitudes of Komic



An abandoned village on the road to Komic



Landscapes on the road to Komic



## **Kibber: The highest village in the world?**

What do you do when more than one village claims to be the highest? First agree on highest in what - Asia or the World? And who are the contenders? For long it has been Kibber at 4,205 metres (13,796 feet) located 18 kms (11 miles) from Kaza. But Komic is higher at 4,513 metres but it rarely gets mentioned. The correct answer is obvious but one still needs to figure out if the honours are within the continent or global.

Nevertheless, a drive to Kibber takes you through some stunning landscapes with towering peaks above and deep gorges below. The village architecture retains much of its traditional look - you can check into one of the many guest houses and homestays if you like. One can even go beyond and drive to Chicham 5 kms (3 miles) away - but the road is only partially complete. The rest of the way can be trekked though.

What do villagers do here? Tend to their livestock and eke out a living from agriculture not made easy with harsh climatic conditions. But they are all a happy lot - cut off from the world, knowing only an innocent way of life.

A woman preparing the fields to sow crops in Kibber



A young girl preparing a mix of cow dung and water to spread on the fields as preparation to sow crops



A view of the Chicham Village

#18

# THE NILGIRI MOUNTAIN RAILWAY

A toy train you must ride

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway at the Ooty station



Wheeeee! I am on a toy train ride. Starting from Ooty or Ootacamund, now officially renamed Udagamandalam going downhill all the way to Mettupalayam in Tamil Nadu. And it figures in UNESCO's World Heritage List.

The train passes through some picturesque tea estates, the Nilgiris mountains, villages and towns with some retaining their old world charm - and skies with changing colours towards evening especially when there is a cloud cover. The train negotiates 208 curves, 13 tunnels and 250 bridges.

You could refer to it as a toy train, but it is a real one. Going back to 1886 when the Nilgiri Railway Company started work on laying the line between Mettupalayam and Coonor, eventually completing it in 1899. They used the 'Alternate Biting Teeth' technology in the 'Rack and Pinion' arrangement between rails. Its gradient of 1:12 is the steepest in Indian Railways. The Government bought the company in 1903 and extended the line to Udagamandalam (Ooty) by 1908. The 46 kms (29 miles) journey takes the train from 6159 feet (1877 m)

altitude in Mettupalayam to 7228 feet (2203 m) in Ooty. You could plan a marathon along its tracks - a full course is 42.195 kms (26 miles 385 yards).

A few years back, a diesel was introduced for the leg between Coonor and Ooty - it is a treat watching the process of changing to a steam locomotive at Coonor or vice versa. Watch out for the water spraying from the engines.



The Coonor railway station for the Nilgiri Mountain Railway where the diesel / steam engines interchange



Inside the steam engine of the Nilgiri Mountain Railway

Trains have an official schedule, but they rarely stick to these. Mine left Ooty 30 minutes late, while the return leg got delayed in Coonor by a couple of hours! To kill my boredom, I walked on the tracks to the next station, Wellington, and still had to wait a while there. If you decide to walk on the tracks, be sure to be wearing thick soled shoes. The stones between and along the tracks can be quite a bother. It may be warm in the day, but do carry a light jacket - can be a bit chilly in the evening especially with open windows.

It is best to book a first class seat in advance on the net. You may not get tickets on the spot, and the other classes are too



The Nilgiri Mountain Railway at dusk

cramped to fully enjoy the views. The upper class is also towards the end, giving you views from that part of the bogey too. And the bigger windows here add to the joys of looking out. Try to get a window seat. But the computerized booking may not allow you to pick and choose. Suggestion? Block a few extra seats. Tickets are cheap.

If you are putting your head out to take pictures, be careful you don't take a knock against mountain sides, trains and poles. The train was slow, but moved faster than the one in Matheran I think. You may fancy the idea, but I don't think you can walk / jog along the train and keep up with it.

Carry water and some snacks with you - you may not be able to get any if you are just going for a ride and back.

## THE SCHEDULE (CAN CHANGE OVER TIME)

*Read as Train Number / From – To / Departure – Arrival*

56141 / Coonoor – Udagamandalam Pass / 07:45 – 09:05

56136 / Mettupalayam-Udagamandalam Pass / 07:10 – 12:00

56143 / Coonoor-Udagamandalam Pass / 12:35 – 13:50

56138 / Coonoor-Udagamandalam Pass / 16:30 – 17:45

56139 / Udagamandalam-Coonoor / 09:15 – 10:20

56142 / Udagamandalam-Coonoor / 12:15 – 13:20

56137 / Udagamandalam-Mettupalayam Pass / 14:00 – 17:35

56140 / Udagamandalam-Coonoor / 18:00 – 19:10

## TRAVEL TIPS

You could just do the Ooty - Coonor segment or go all the way down to Mettupalayam - or the other way round. And do the return leg by road which would be much quicker. Do book tickets in advance at [www.irctc.co.in](http://www.irctc.co.in).



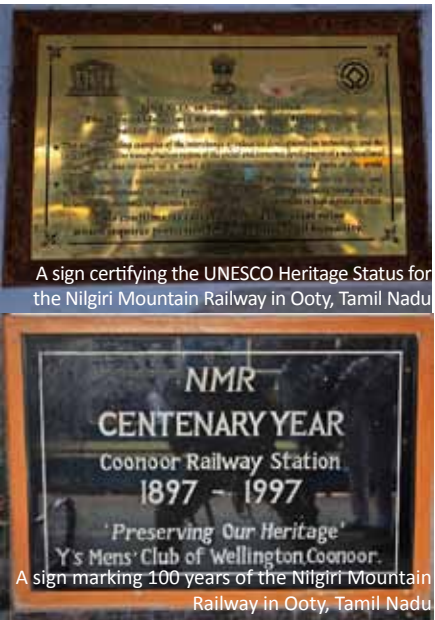
The Nilgiri Mountain Railway going under an overbridge

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway going through the woods

You can always pick up snacks (at your own risk) at stations along the route of the Nilgiri Mountain Railway



A sign for travellers on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway in Ooty, Tamil Nadu



A sign certifying the UNESCO Heritage Status for the Nilgiri Mountain Railway in Ooty, Tamil Nadu

A sign marking 100 years of the Nilgiri Mountain Railway in Ooty, Tamil Nadu



A speed limit sign for the Nilgiri Mountain Railway



The Ooty station where the Nilgiri Mountain Railway starts / ends

# #24 RANTHAMBHORE

## Looking the tiger in the eye



A baby tiger cub lounging in a water pool

Would you ride in an open Gypsy in temperatures exceeding 50 degrees Celsius? With the sun threatening to burn everything in sight, and the desert sand piercing your skin like countless needles? You would, if you were on the trail of the tiger in the Ranthambhore National Park in Rajasthan.

One of the few forests in India where tigers still prowl, you can be almost assured of a sighting – but only if you venture out when summer is at its harshest. This is when water sources dry up, and animals come out in the open to water holes often filled by officials. And the dry vegetation makes camouflaging difficult. The roll of dice can still go against you, or you may be lucky like me – with seven sightings over a single weekend.

The opening act turned out to be the best – and a rare one at that. I spotted a male tiger, named T2 by the creativity deficient authorities, sitting by a water hole and a recently hunted *langoor* monkey lying in state three feet away. I was not more than ten feet away myself. T2 was waiting patiently, either for a guest or for the dinner bell to sound, when something in the water disturbed him. He slowly turned his head, looked for a few moments through the surface and then it was Pow-Wow in a flash. A poor turtle had floated in, and was probably the starter (or was it dessert) that T2 was waiting for. For the next many seconds, all one could see was frantic splashing as the turtle put up a brave fight. Before long, it was all tranquil again. The big cat had expectedly won, but it would be a while before he could carve the flesh out from under the hard shell. Witnessing a tiger in action live beats the most spectacular of hunts you would see on National Geographic.

It would be morally illegal to have a perfect trip, but I almost did. The following morning I encountered another male, T17 (these tigers will make someone

pay for these disgraceful names), looking hungrily at a herd of deer around a small lake. He weighed his options, made some calculations, and was off like a shot – a yellowed silhouette of a torpedo racing through tall grasses at his target. But it turned out to be a dud. The chap could have done with some heat sensing technology, like the Scuds, to home into his prey. Before long, he wandered aimlessly and crossed in front of my Gypsy – a scrawny fellow looking malnourished. Needs to be a better hunter I guess. He also had what looked like a dog strap around his neck. T17 has a tendency to wander outside the reserve area – the installed tracker helps pull him by the ears right back where he belongs.

True to his reputation, he crossed the limits the same evening. I was driving around in my own car around the periphery of the forest when he ambled across on the road. Still looking for food. He finally settled for a stinking carcass in a *baoli* (stepwell) – certainly not a meal fit for a royal species. But times can be hard for anyone.

The most entertaining was a tiger cub – actually more like an overgrown baby. At three years, he looked much sturdier than the adult T17. And he had still to learn to hunt. I guess being fed by the mother does have its advantages. Still to be christened, let's call him Baby T (where is my creativity now), he was lounging in the shade for hours at another water hole, probably waiting for his mother and siblings. A bunch of *langoors* must have known his teeth and claws carry no firepower yet – and took it upon themselves to tease him. Perched on a long branch right above his temporary abode, they danced and made noises at Baby T incessantly for hours. But our boy made sure he sent a message across – by looking back at them with snarling expressions as if to say, “It is just a matter of time before you guys will be on my plate. So stop monkeying around.” Despite waiting forever, the rest of the family failed to make an appearance for our entertainment.

And there was T40 (aargghh) sprawled behind a spiky bush – I was told he had an injured paw and could not move much. Doctors were on the way to get him back on his feet. Would have been nice had he made a clearer appearance for my camera. An unconfirmed anecdote was also doing the rounds: a villager was going through the forest recently in his donkey cart. T40 found an easy prey in the donkey and attacked him; instead of running for his life, the villager rushed to save the donkey. Both perished. Who says only donkeys can be dim?

Having been to innumerable jungle safaris, I have learnt one thing: for a truly enjoyable experience, think beyond the main attractions, in this case the tigers. And a wealth of beauty awaits. Take the common *langoor* monkeys - you cannot help but wonder how they can be so close to humans in their mannerisms. Or even the deer we take for granted: all species have large, beautiful eyes for one. And just when you think the Spotted Deer are a gentle lot, they will start fighting amongst themselves. Over what? A lady deer? No one knows.

Also not to be missed is the Ranthambhore fort, built in 944 A.D. located at the entrance to the reserve. In winters it can be a challenge going all the way up the fort built 700 feet above ground level; if you can do it in summer, you deserve a free pass to a masseur and a Jacuzzi for a year. That is, if you survive the heat and fatigue going up and down. Surprisingly, many a brave soul do and live to tell the tales. For locals, a major attraction is the temple inside; wannabe brides and grooms make it a point to seek blessings here before tying the knot.

When not in the forest, it's enjoyable walking in the fields and woods along the road from Sawai Madhopur to the park's gates. In the right season, you can hope to spot many birds, animals going astray, some shops selling local handicrafts especially paintings and more. If trains excite you, go to the Sawai Madhopur station and hang around - it is a major junction for trains including the Rajdhani to Mumbai.

Of course, you can go to Ranthambhore anytime except when the park is closed from June to September. The cooler it gets, the bigger the crowds - but lesser the sightings.

When are you packing for the safari?

## TRAVEL TIPS

- Booking for safaris can be made online at <http://www.rajasthanwildlife.in/> - always a good idea to do so in advance during peak seasons. There is an option of going in a canter bus (seating 20) or in a Gypsy (for 5); the latter is the better option.
- You can drive to Ranthambhore from Delhi – it is 400 km and takes 6-7 hours. Many trains also go to Sawai Madhopur, the town adjoining the park.
- For best sightings, go from April - June. Tourist traffic will also be low, and hotels offer great discounts.
- Ranthambhore is full of properties for all budgets - starting with the pricey Oberoi Vanyavilas down to rooms costing no more than a few hundred Rupees a night. Food is best had at the places you are staying - unless you want to venture into town where the options are not really much to write home about.
- The park is usually closed from July 1 - September 30.

## ADDITIONAL LINKS

- **Kunzum Route K103 from Delhi - Ranthambhore:** <http://kunzum.com/2010/06/01/driving-from-delhi-to-ranthambhore-sawai-madhpor-in-rajasthan>
- **How to book a safari in Ranthambhore:** <http://kunzum.com/2010/06/03/tiger-safari-in-ranthambhore-national-park-in-rajasthan-how-to-go-about-it>
- **Raining Leopards in Ranthambhore:** <http://kunzum.com/2011/03/01/raining-leopards-in-ranthambhore-national-park-rajasthan>



T17 on the prowl after a failed hunt



A wild hare



The baby tiger cub, a close-up



T2 trying to eat the soft underbelly of the turtle under its hard outer shell



T2, waiting to eat the *langoor* he had hunted a few minutes before



A pair of male and female Blue Bull (Nilgai) or Antelope



Langoor monkeys



A mongoose



A baby crocodile



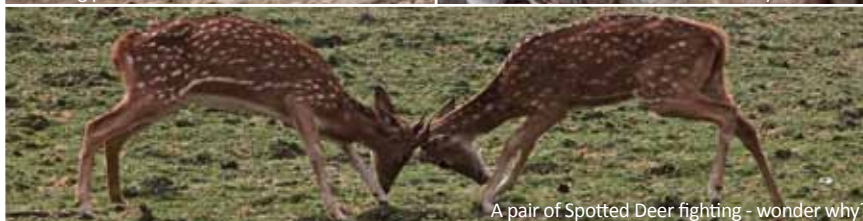
The Ranthambhore Fort



A dancing peacock



A Sambar Deer with only one antler



A pair of Spotted Deer fighting - wonder why?

# kunzum

Since 2007, Kunzum has served as an important guide for travellers planning journeys in India and the subcontinent - and some international destinations too.

## INTRODUCTIONS FIRST...

Kunzum is a high altitude pass in the Lahaul Spiti region of Himachal Pradesh in India. And the inspiration behind the brand that is all about memorable travel experiences. Our journey started in 2007 as a travel blog by writer and photographer, Ajay Jain. And we have crossed many milestones - literally and figuratively - since then.

## KUNZUM.COM

An independent, objective and one of the most trusted online travel information websites in India. A unique style of writing, peppered with anecdotes and illustrated with high quality photographs and videos, have won the site a fan following of tens of thousands of travellers. More at <http://kunzum.com>.

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