

think!

360°

NEVER IN A
RUSH

■ When you get to PIN code 173204, you realise there isn't much to write home about. But that's exactly why many people come here — to do nothing much

RAHULPANDITA

WANDERING THROUGH Kasauli leads to a night of rooftop singing with new found friends

traveltales

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Bunking college, Amit and I used to go to Kasauli almost every fortnight from Chandigarh. On an old Yezdi borrowed from a senior, we would compare these journeys to the one a revolutionary had undertaken many years ago. Amit is no more, and 13 years later, I am again in Kasauli, wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt gifted by a Nepal comrade.

The memories of Kasauli of mid-90s have faded. But a few get refreshed once

I walk around. The old photo shop that has pictures of some of the former students of the Lawrence School, Sanawar; Sanjay Dutt and Omar Abdullah are prominently displayed among others. The old teashop on the lower mall selling hot *pakor*s is still in business. I take great pleasure, like the good old days, in reading a Hindi newspaper while gulping down tea in chipped glasses and a few plates of mixed *pakor*s with sweet-and-sour chutney.

There is not much you can do in Kasauli, and that is exactly why many people come here — to do nothing except just be, and if one is in the mood, take stock of one's life. For those who insist on being tourists, there is an old church near the main square with brilliant stained glass work. And then there is

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the Kasauli club which has been resurrected after being gutted in an accidental fire in 2001. But you can only visit if you are accompanied by a member. And don't forget to carry a collared T-shirt as the decorum of the club demands.

The biggest pleasure in Kasauli, of course, is to walk around — aimlessly. This time, I head towards the upper mall all by myself, walking past Khushwant Singh's cottage.

I soak up the silence while sitting on a bench that overlooks a small path leading to a nearby village. It's sunny as I sit there, but in a few minutes, clouds rush above me, and a strong wind blows by. I break into a reverie, thinking of the words that have been failing me — words that would eventually become the novel I am hoping to write.

As I join my co-travellers near the main market, I cannot help notice a stream of tourists from Chandigarh and Delhi. They have instantly begun shopping for T-shirts, caps, and fake crocs, and between clicking pictures from fancy digital cameras, I overhear a conversation about "chicken with boneless". But after they disappear inside popular eateries, and inside their hotel rooms for siesta, it becomes quiet



■ For the touristy crowd, there is Christ Church near the main square with its brilliant stained glass work — and then there's the Kasauli Club



all over again.

We are booked at the Kasauli Inn, which if you are not fussy about hair on pillow covers or lazy room service, is just fine.

If you dream of building up your own cottage in the hills at some point, Kasauli is an ideal place to check out some very innovative designs. We highly recommend one on the road (it has a couple of pine trees in the front) that leads uphill from the Kasauli Inn towards the market.

Back in the hotel, I look out from my room window and notice a note at the hotel reception which says: 'Live Guitar on rooftop, 8.30 pm onwards'.

In the evening, I play pool with a friend and two kids who have come

from Delhi, and afterwards, as I climb towards the rooftop restaurant, it is already 9 pm. I can hear the strings of guitar, and I am already regretting missing 30 minutes of this magic.

In the middle, on a stool sits a young man strumming his guitar and singing mostly Kishore Kumar. Facing him at the bar counter is a couple enjoying the music the most, singing along every now and then. It's after we exchange a smile that they — Rajesh and Preeti — also own this place. Preeti also teaches geography at a local school, and the singer-guitarist is Sanju, her colleague. We end up there till way past midnight, singing along and later eating together like we have known each other for years.

The next evening, I am the first one to be there. It is yet another night of singing, and, as I look at the moon, words come to me. I have already asked Preeti to give me a job — either at her school or as a part-time singer at her place. Maybe I will take a sabbatical and stay in Kasauli for a month or so. I would drink coffee in the morning, gaze at the flowers in dried-milk tins, and then write. Towards the evening, I could walk aimlessly, exchanging cigarettes with strangers. In the evening, there will be singing. And hopefully, the moon will appear too.

Rahul Pandita works with the Open magazine