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A Pretty Place called Palampur *Elaine Rati Kochar*

Elaine Rati Kochar successfully blends her traditional values and social responsibilities with a streak for knowledge, creativity, social service and exploration. Elaine is fond of traveling and sight seeing apart from painting, dancing and gourmet cooking. Presently she is working at developing software for making computer lessons more interesting for school children.



Himachal Pradesh still feels like home ground to me, even after leaving it almost 25 years ago. We had a home there for 13 years and I visited it last year with a friend and her children. I saw it through their eyes as a child again. A very pretty place.

Coming up from the plains to Pathankot, the train stops at the station with a British hangover. The station is small and the waiting room for ladies has a fireplace. I can picture elegant British ladies warming their hands at a fire while waiting for a train. Now it is littered with fat, lazy railway staff stretched out on the wooden beds, muffled in blankets. It is mid-December and cold.

The best time to go to Palampur is in the summer months. My trip, after many years, comes in winter but if we are lucky the weather will stay sunny and the winter rains hold out. This time there has been an unusually warm autumn and no snowfall on the DhaulaDhar ranges. From Pathankot the hills are not visible but the wind is piercing. The buses leaving every hour for Kangra and onwards stand just outside the station.

We pick up our rucksacks and climb in and I inhale the nostalgic petrol fumes and smell of the woolen clothes of the locals with overtones of 'biris' and livestock. There are plenty of men wearing thick hand woven tweed and Kulu caps. Woolen trousers or pajamas and laced up black shoes with thick soles complete the outfit. The ubiquitous bidi is tucked between the third and fourth finger of a fist. In the closed bus it smells as vile as it did during my trips home from college.

We pass villages and dry riverbeds with small streams and climb into the hills. Half way to Palampur is Kangra with an old fort built on a hill. It is already cooler and the road climbs steeply after the small town. We have stopped for tea and sticky 'jalebis' at the bus stop.



The mountains are unveiled and I can't wait to get closer. The call of the hills is always loud and clear through out the year. This time unfortunately I see them for the first time with not a flake of snow covering them. Global warming?

We arrive in the dark, after four hours. The bus stop has shifted below the main town to accommodate the increase in traffic over the years. Now there are vans and autos, which ply as taxis, waiting to pick us up. I still think of the time I trudged home in the dark with my bag along the hillside with no streetlights, thinking of the panthers that come down to the town in winter.

The town is well lit and full of nightlife, which was unheard of earlier. Everything used to shut early in winter in Palampur. The roads are lined with pine trees and the tourist bungalow is double storeyed.

There is a little joint serving fast food that had started the year we shifted out of Palampur in 1979. It is called Joy Restaurant and is the joy of the children's hearts serving burgers and Chinese food.



The morning is bright and cold and it is delightful to go down the one-street market to the local bus stand to eat channas and puris for breakfast. Standard hill fare, the locals are crowding in before going on short journeys to Dharamshala and Kangra, or on to Jwalamukhi.

We wander through shops which stock an amazingly smart range of warm clothes from well finished coats to fleece pullovers. I pick one in red color for my husband. When I reached home my sister-in-law had brought an identical one (except for the colour) from the USA! We

walk on buying 'hing' and spices from the Tibetans.

Outside the market the roads are shady with pines and silver oaks. We pass by my old house, now a small hotel, and reach the tea estates. We wind our way through the tea bushes along a noisy, fast flowing brook. The road takes us to Neugal Khad.

The river Neugal has cut a deep canyon between two mountains and we can see the riverbed below us and a bridge going across to the opposite mountain. Neugal Park has a little cafeteria and a canal flowing outside it.

The water is crystal clear and we take off our shoes and socks and, gritting our teeth, stand in the water till the pain wears off and they become numb. We can wade comfortably now. An old childhood game! This canal is the only one, which flows *upwards* along the hillside from the Khad down below! The children are unbelieving at first and then amazed.

The circular road back to town takes us through a pine forest and then we stop for an hour or tow to gather pinecones and resin slide on pine needles. The sun starts to set and we walk back to our guesthouse and Joy restaurant after that.

Palampur has delightful walks all around it. The next day we go towards the army cantonment and through more forests for a short but invigorating walk. Then we decide to climb up to the hills behind Palampur to a bald patch on the mountainside which used to be a favorite picnic spot.

The road goes through fields along a stream called a "kul" and we stop at a water mill and peep inside for a view of the old lady covered with wheat flour as she works at the millstone. I wonder if it will still be there when I come again, having seen the new electric machines in town.



We go through the village of Bundla and start upward along narrow paths on the hillside. There is a spring of water with children washing small clothes aided by a pet lamb. The courtyards have chillies and maize drying and livestock tied up at the corners. The hay is stuck in the forks of the trees out of the rain.

It is strange to see haystacks on trees! We pass four men climbing up with guns and question them belligerently. They are evasive about their game. We are left with a bitter taste and fear for the dwindling number of leopard, panther and bear in the hills. The little Shiva temple on the top is beautiful and commands an impressive view of the surrounding mountains. I ring the bells hanging at the shrine and the sound echoes all around. Sadly, it is time to wend our way down again.

The next day we have to leave for Bhuntar and Shamsi, higher in the mountains. On the way back to Pathankot we take the small narrow gauge toy train. That is a trip well worth the slow pace. We pass quaint, flower lined platformed stations to slowly reach the plains again. Palampur will always occupy a special place in my heart.
