

CITY EXPRESS

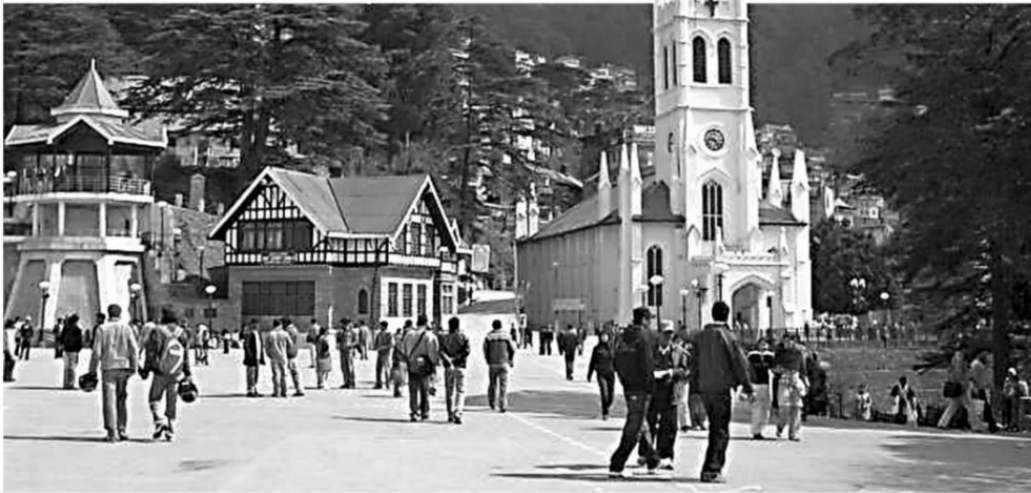
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LIKE ALL GREAT

travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen — Benjamin Disraeli



Melange 5



Gaiety Theatre: alive with history

Gaiety sits in a narrow section of the Mall Road and you might even just walk by it. It stands just before the largish square in front of the Town Hall. This theatre was formally inaugurated with a performance in 1888 and since then has showcased productions of many renowned artistes including KL Saigal, Shashi Kapoor, Jennifer Kendall and even Anupam Kher.

The world outside is the mad, bustling town of Simla. You take your ticket, walk inside a door and it closes behind you. The room you have entered is dimly lit and it takes a few minutes for your gaze to adjust to the light and then you can see the stage on one side... low, wooden chairs with green leather covering them all along the central pit of the theatre, and the galleries on either side. The dark blue ceiling with golden designs, the intricate panels along the side of the main seating area... phew... there is a lot to take in.

You make your way to one of the chairs, and sit down till the guide is ready to take you through the history. Dressed in a crisp dark suit, the guide tells you about the history of Gaiety. He tells you stories of its construction, stories about the beautiful plays it hosted, and the well-dressed guests who would throng these very halls. When the British left, these kind of buildings were ignored and fell to great disrepair.

The restoration process at Gaiety began some years ago and they ensured every piece, every little inch was as good as the original. It was restoration work in the truest sense, hard to find across all monuments in India.

While you take in this information, you are surrounded by gorgeous hues of light aqua green, dark Prussian blue and bright gilded gold decorations - it all looks simple yet so grand. And stylish even today.

There are panels all along the sides of the seating area. They were specifically designed to address the acoustics of the theatre. "You don't need mikes here," the guide says with great joy. Behind that panel is a 1 foot deep cushion of air, and all these elements help reflect sound.

As you walk around, you discover little ducts in the wall that were the fireplaces that warmed the audience in the cold Simla winters. You walk onto the stage and look at the old curtain, that still drops down from the ceiling. You explore the green room, walk about the stage, say a few lines in dramatic fashion and click pictures to preserve for posterity. Then reluctantly, you head upstairs. Don't worry, the treat continues. There are two main exhibits here - one with pictures of the restoration - how it was before the restoration, and the second - a series of pictures from the Indian Independence movement.

You walk out of the theatre filled with stories, the charm of the theatre and the smell of the Raj lingers on.

Close your eyes. Let's go back to 1888 and the opening performance. The grand theatre throwing open its doors to the people of Simla.

You are wearing a lovely gown of mauve with lace running along the sides or dressed in gorgeous sari representing the elite of your country. Throngs of people dressed in their best clothes.

An equally well-turned out young gentleman takes your hand and guides you into the theatre to your seat. The curtains go up and the show begins...

— Bhavani

Why Simla still allures

I had been to Simla when I was 11 and even then people spoke about the crowd, excessive development, commercial establishments ruining the city and the downward slide of the once summer capital of India. I don't remember much about that trip. I had gone with my parents and my cousins, and like all family trips, the children tend to run around, while the adults do the more serious 'touristy' stuff. The four of us cousins hung out at the guest house, ate *daal* and *roti*, played with pillows, hit each other, fought, exchanged words and then made up again. That sums up my memory of this trip to Simla at 11.

I wasn't expecting much when I visited last month, knowing that even 20-years-ago it was no longer the 'Queen of the Hill-Station' - a term coined by the British.

But I was surprised. I thought of many reasons to explain why I liked what I saw - maybe we went off-season, maybe because it was not a weekend, maybe... maybe... Simla offered us a lovely holiday. It let us take long, meandering walks about the main road with no cars honking to make us jump out-of-the-way. It gave us a range of food from road-side *chaat* to tiny shops with warm, delicious *gulab jamun*, to five-star hotels with brilliant *daal*. There was lots to do, so much that we didn't even

TRAVEL TIPS

- Stay at a place near Mall Road, makes walking about much easier. That's if you like to walk around a city - I feel that's the best way to get under the skin of any place.
- Definitely visit the Institute of Advanced Studies.
- Even if you cannot walk the entire heritage trail, try to see some of the key stops on the way. There are some marvellous buildings under various states of disrepair and one never knows when some might collapse. You can also take a car for more than half of the route.
- Get into the bazaar road, the lane below the main mall lane - it's narrow, crowded but has all the local stuff. You also get to mingle with the locals as they muddle about their Sunday shopping sprees. The *jalebi* is brilliant at Nathuram's - fresh, hot and juicy. There are many shops to choose from, am sure any other one will be equally good.



do the typical points that seem to exist without fail in ALL hill stations in this country. We walked, got lost, found another route, talked, dicked and walked. There were two highlights of this trip - two things that

each of you must absolutely do if you visit Simla. The first one is a heritage walk - it is a DIY heritage walk, so you set your own pace and it's a nice long walk. Just in front of the main square, there is a green

board that says Heritage Walk 1. This walk was more than 2 kilometers long, so be ready for it. Parts of it are not via the main road, and those bits are pedestrian paths, curved, quaint

and with lots to see. There are 24 stops and each stop can be easily identified with a green coloured board and a bit of history of the building you are looking at... read it... and then walk on

ahead.

CLARKS-HOTEL

I walked, marvelled and loved so many of these old structures, read the little bits about their history and made my way to take in the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. If there is anyway to sum up my memory of Simla, it is this building. Imposing and beautifully maintained, it is a wonderful treat, also given that you have tours inside. It stands like a regal Renaissance styled building, belonging to another world, surrounded by green grass (that you are not allowed to walk on) and luxurious trees. I went for a guided tour inside the building and there are stories, secrets and gasps to be shared.

And the second is this brilliant, one-of-its-kind heritage theatre in Simla called Gaiety. It has been renovated really well and is open for all to oggle at.

Simla was fun. It wasn't disappointing and far from boring. And it made me realise that you are never completely done with any city, even if it is one of the oldest tourist hill stations in the country... there is always more to see.

Go to Simla, include it in that plan next time and you might also be surprised!

— Bhavani is a traveler by choice, photographer by interest and writer by desire. She crafts tours at Audiocompass. In and blogs at merry-togoaround.com.

