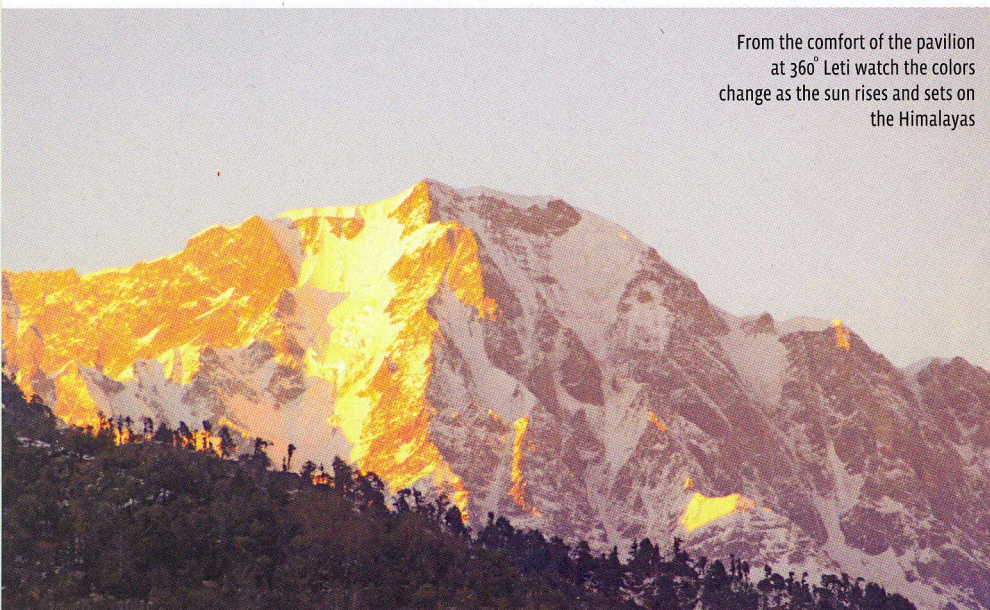


Finding the Heart of India

From the comfort of the pavilion at 360° Leti watch the colors change as the sun rises and sets on the Himalayas

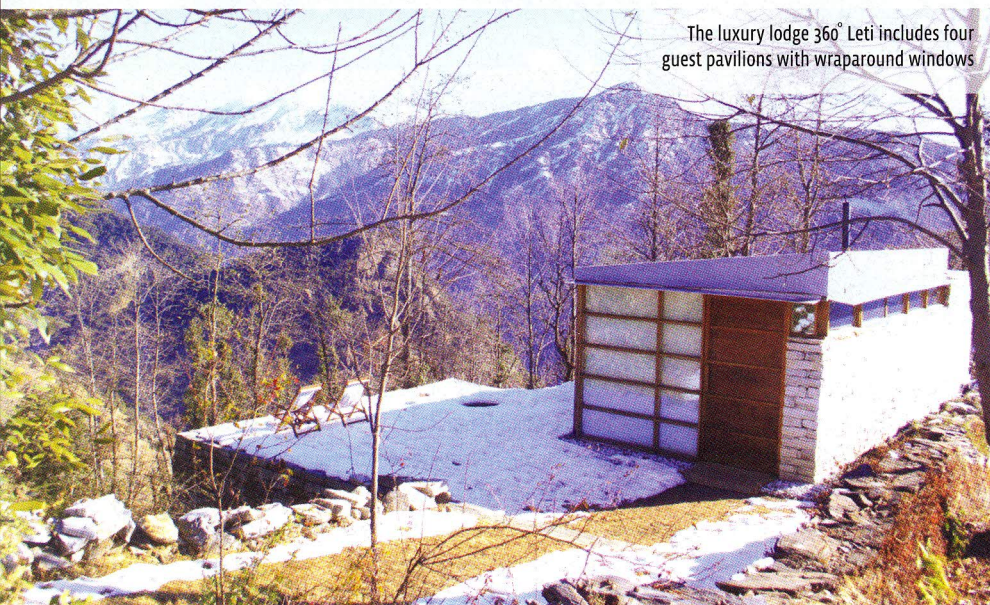


India is elusive. Every time I think I've found the real deal and I understand "who" India is, I discover another aspect of the culture I never knew existed.

My first trip is a blur of mosques, tombs, forts, and temples — the historic landmarks that all novices feel compelled to visit. The second time around, I searched for the country's traditional side. I learned about Ayurveda and yoga, took a short (and

life-changing) course in Vedanta philosophy, and visited an ashram where saffron-robed devotees chant and set glowing candles afloat on the Ganges.

I was done. I got it — or so I thought until I met Jamshyd Sethna, owner of Banyan Tours, at an event in L.A. While he rhapsodized about the beauty of experiencing village life in the foothills of the Himalayas, I started planning my next trip.



The luxury lodge 360° Leti includes four guest pavilions with wraparound windows

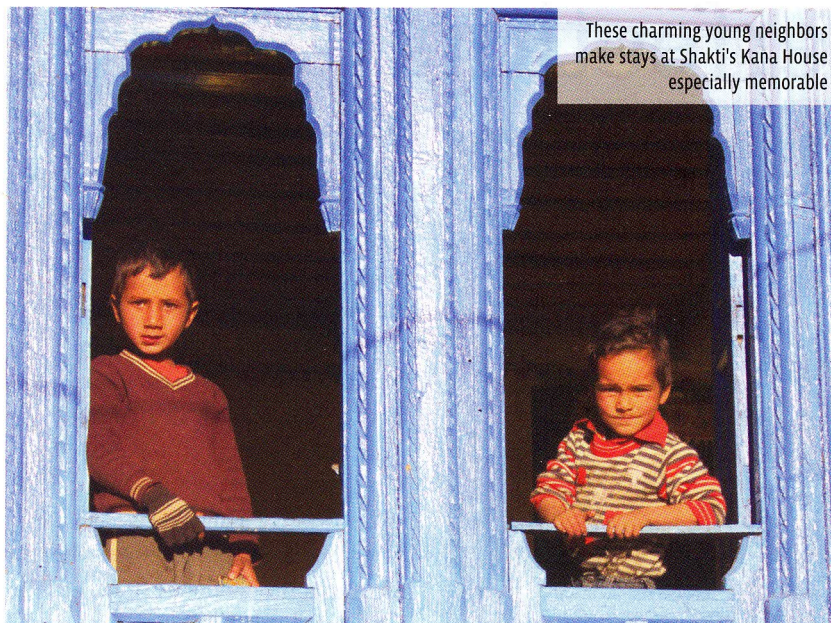
"You haven't been to India if you haven't walked through at least a few of her many thousands of rural villages where life goes on pretty much the way it has forever," he told me.

And he was right. I already knew that India is more than call centers and cities, but I had no idea how important agriculture is to this country until my husband and I walked (and drove) between villages in the Kumaon district many hours northeast of Delhi. Sethna has made this excursion very doable for overseas visitors by assembling a superb staff of guides, drivers, cooks, and hosts, and renovating and building houses that are a day's walk apart.

Our "Shakti Village Walk" allowed us the rare opportunity to stay in villages untouched by tourism and witness the daily life of the people who live there. "Our" houses looked like all the others on the outside, but inside they offered bathrooms with Western-style plumbing and solar hot water, comfortable king beds with down comforters and pashmina blankets, attractive furnishings, and — in most cases — a wood stove and electricity. (www.shaktihimalaya.com)

Every morning started with "bed tea" delivered by the house host, followed by a delicious breakfast served *al fresco* with a valley or mountain view. Then, with the luggage loaded in a waiting car, we'd set out on foot with our guide Stanzin Thinless — a virtual encyclopedia of information on local plants, animals, geology, and customs.

In the forest we saw a few rhododendron trees with bright red flowers, but we were a couple of months early for their really spectacular blossom display. Instead, our flashes of color were the blue,



These charming young neighbors make stays at Shakti's Kana House especially memorable

orange, yellow, and fuchsia saris worn by every woman we encountered. Some were herding cows or goats into the forest to graze, others were walking along the road with huge bundles of firewood on their heads, and others were tending crops growing in steep terraces that had been cut into the hillsides.

The big take-home message for me was that these villages are the backbone of the Indian economy and the strength of their society. Everyone works hard — and together — in traditional roles for mutual benefit. The people care for the animals and the land and, in turn, the land and the animals provide for them.

Government schools are free, and I loved watching flocks of kids in their crisp little uniforms laughing and playing on the way home. One highlight of the trip was stopping at a school and delivering supplies we'd brought from San Diego.

In addition to creating the village walks, Sethna also built 360° Leti, an exclusive retreat near the borders of Nepal and Tibet. This remote lodge is comprised of four stunning guest pavilions and a main lounge and dining room area — all with a breathtaking view of the

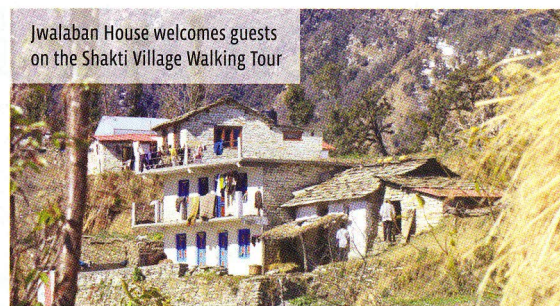
Himalayas. Many guests (including us) combine a few days at luxurious Leti with three or more days between villages.

Walking trails start from the lodge, but I gave in to temptation and hung up my hiking shoes while we were there. Instead, I took a cooking lesson from chef Yeshe Lama, who stole my heart with his memorable meals. While we stirred and chopped, I learned that this talented Tibetan was a monk until age 26, and that he's since been featured in books on Indian cuisine.

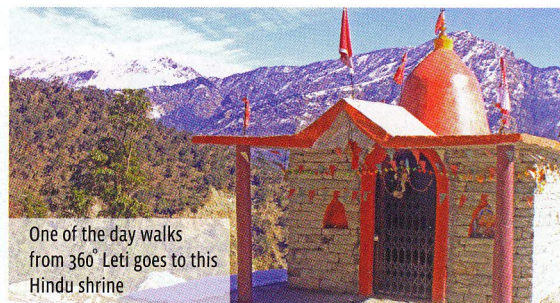
I also studied the night sky and did a little yoga, but — honestly — what I will always remember about Leti is waking up to the view of the snow-white mountains and clear blue sky. Cuddled under my pashmina blanket, I gazed at the panorama through floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall windows long after the tea was cold. Outside nothing stirred and the only sound I heard was the distant voices of village children.

Once again, I was sure I had found the heart of India. ELIZBETH HANSEN

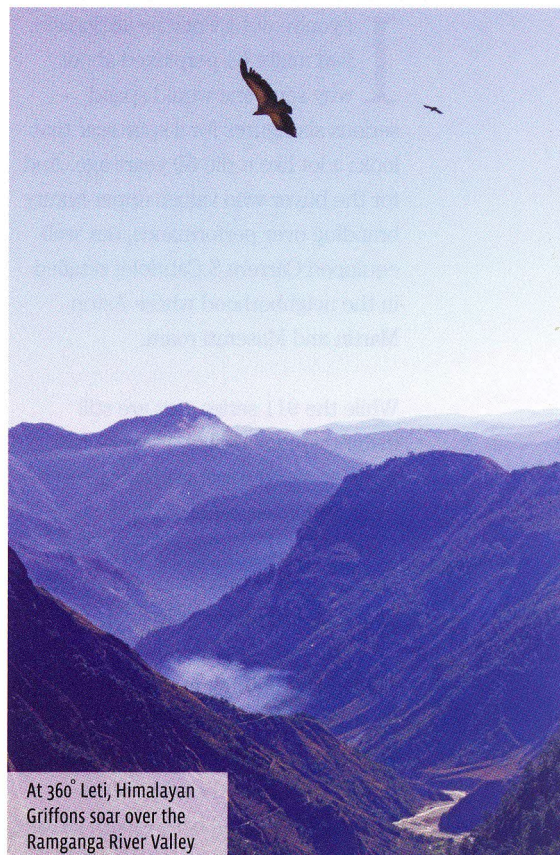
For details on getting there and getting around, please visit www.ranchandcoast.com.



Jwalaban House welcomes guests on the Shakti Village Walking Tour



One of the day walks from 360° Leti goes to this Hindu shrine



At 360° Leti, Himalayan Griffons soar over the Ramganga River Valley



Fresh air and a panoramic vista was served with breakfast 360° Leti