

# ICING ON THE BREAK

Whether it's faux flakes in manmade snow worlds or slushy slopes, Indians are smitten by snow. As the country sweltered, one family went chasing the white stuff

SHABNAM MINWALLA

I have three daughters — Aaliya, Nisha and Naima. And if there is one thing I know with absolute certainty — up there with the belief that the sun rises in the east and that Elvis lives — it's that my troublesome threesome never, ever agrees about anything.

Most routine conversations go like this: Me: "Girls, we are going out to dinner tonight and..."

Aaliya: "Pizza, pizza, I am desperate for pizza."

Nisha: "No. Idli!"

Naima: "Can't we stay at home and eat Maggi noodles?"

All three screeching: "You promised..." "That's not fair..." "What about meeeeeee?"

**BIG FREEZE:** A snowy holiday is a chance to wear those oh-so-cute winter accoutrements



**Snow World is an amusement park born out of a single attraction. The minute the throng enters this sub-zero chamber, portly Unclejis-turned-Teletubbies and frisky Chhotus swing into action, flinging snowballs and posing for photographs**

So when, about six months ago, we popped the question of the year, we expected a bloodbath. "Aaliya, Nisha, Naima stop drawing for a minute," my husband Vivek said bravely. "Is there anything special you want to do for your summer holidays?" All three looked at us strangely and said in the slow, firm tones used for the not overly bright, "Snow, of course. We want to play with snow."

Vivek and I were too stunned by this unprecedented show of strength to argue. So what if we had been checking airfares to Singapore. So what if we had to seek snow at a time of year when much of India is hospitalised for sunstroke. So what if the white stuff is notorious for its melty, here-today-gone-tomorrow nature. The orders had come from the top.



First we turned to a travel agent friend for advice. Then we headed for Google and typed the key words: snow India summer. The ever-obliging search engine threw up the inevitable pornography site, an ad for a hotel called Sun'n'Snow Inn and a post from a fellow who called himself DwarkaDelhiWala who, like us, wanted to find "snow/glacier within walking distance from a forest/pwd/electricity board rest house or even a hotel". Admittedly it also threw up a rather obvious solution to our conundrum: the Rohtang Pass near Manali.

Over the next few days, I wasted hours pouring over lonely places with names like Nako, Spiti and Nesang. But when you are travelling with three puke-happy children, practicality wins over romance. So we eventually decided to head to McLeodganj and Raison in Himachal Pradesh. We then spent the intervening months harassing hoteliers with frequent calls, not about the room or food but about the status of the snow outside. "Is there still snow close to you? Will it still be there when we come? Yes, we understand you cannot guarantee anything, but what do you think?"

Meanwhile the children were busy with their own plans. "Mummy," seven-year-old Aaliya announced one day in March, "don't forget to pack a carrot." Before I could investigate this strange request from a confirmed veggie-phobe, my five-year-old twins chimed in. "And an old red scarf." "And black buttons. For the snowman's eyes."

Ah well, obviously! Blame it on Enid Blyton's charming blather about snowball fights and snowmen. Or Christmas cards liberally iced with glittery white. At any rate many Indians seem fascinated with snow. Fake snow — a pointless white powder that fluffs up in water — is the big novelty-of-the-moment at birthday parties. And we had encountered long queues of other snow-obsessed desis outside Snow World in Hyderabad a couple of years ago.

Snow World — for those who have never visited that icy, neon-lit realm — is an amusement park born out of a single

attraction. Huge crowds wait to enter a room filled with mittens, fat woolly socks, heavy jackets and clunky snowshoes. Once everybody is sufficiently swathed, the crowd is permitted to shuffle into what can only be described as a cavernous freezer. You almost expect to run into a mountain of frozen peas.

The grey, tubelit room reveals a bizarre snowscape — complete with a snow-covered floor, a little igloo, ice sculptures and ski slopes. The minute the throng enters this sub-zero chamber, portly Unclejis-turned-Teletubbies and frisky Chhotus swing into action, flinging snowballs and posing for photographs. They are determined to enjoy every minute of the permitted half hour.

We, however, were sorry wimps. Within a few minutes, my fingers were too numb to even turn on the camera. And the girls' lips were turning a Chelapark-ink blue. So we slipped and slosed our way to the exit door — along with another chitter-chattering family — and banged on the door till we were allowed to leave. The Snow World attendant was amazed. "You didn't even stay for the snowfall," she remonstrated.

Clearly, however, once frozen is not twice shy. And so, on a blazing morning in May, we stepped out of the train at Pathankot, all set for a snow-quest. And surprisingly soon after our *dhaba* breakfast, we spotted our

first snow-capped mountain of the trip.

Our hotel, Eagle's Nest, was beyond McLeodganj. As its name suggests, it was perched at the very top of a mountain. Which meant that our car had to crawl up a precarious path till it reached Gallu Temple. After parking in the middle of bear-infested nowhere, we trekked uphill for another 20 minutes. But when we stood, panting in the hotel garden, we knew the effort was more than worthwhile. For our only neighbours were the glimmering, snow-covered peaks of the Dauladhar range — and they beamed down at us from every window and vista.

The views were glorious, the Tibetan Suite was lovely, but the news was bad. The accessible snow had melted during recent downpours. So, Sheila — one of the English owners of Eagle's Nest — organised a magical, muscle-challenging trek to a nearby waterfall. "It's snow water," she convinced Aaliya, Nisha and Naima. "Snow that's just melted and come gushing down the mountains."

The girls loved splashing in the "snow water". They enjoyed the masked dance at the Dalai Lama temple in McLeodganj, their rides on Chandra the hotel horse and the serene presence of the Himalayas. But they still wanted to play with snow.

Which meant that by the time we completed the eight-hour-long, stinky-incident-



**Aaliya, Naima and Nisha completed the huffy-puffy climb without a protest. Then suddenly, they spotted it: a slushy, porridgy patch of snow. They squealed, they scampered, they made snowballs and stirred the mushy stuff with twigs**

filled journey to Neeralaya in Raison (45 minutes from Manali), Vivek and I were a bundle of anxiety. Even before settling into the charming Apricot Villa, taking a peep at the burbling Beas and organising extra towels, we rushed out to make critical inquiries.

The first reports were discouraging. Sure there was snow — in fact, the Rohtang Pass was closed and cars were allowed only up to Marhi. The problem was that 5,000 cars filled with snow-crazed tourists were heading up to Marhi every single day, causing traffic jams that made the Mumbai rush hour seem like a yoga session. The cars sometimes had to wait three hours just to make the U-turn and head back to Manali.

We were crushed. But then Muneer, the resourceful proprietor of Neeralaya, came up with an alternate plan. So the next morning we joined the convoy of cars along the scenic road to Rohtang — past dozens of little shops renting out snowsuits, skis, mufflers and gloves to eager busloads. Instead of heading to Marhi, however, we stopped along the way at a one-paan-shop hamlet called Gulaba. From there our guide Rigzin lead us up a scarily steep mountain. Every time we stopped for breath, we turned to gaze at the spellbinding views of the Dauladhar and Pir Panjal ranges and to enjoy the utter stillness.

Aaliya had been vomiting, Naima had a cold and Nisha was sniffing. But they completed the huffy-puffy, 90-minute-long climb without a protest. Then suddenly, up ahead, they spotted it: a slushy, porridgy patch of snow about the size of a double bedsheet. They squealed, they scampered, they made snowballs and they stirred the mushy stuff with twigs. They could have easily spent the morning there.

But Rigzin persuaded us to climb further to a bigger snowy slope. He then converted Vivek's windcheater into a sledge — and gave the girls a few thrilling rides. Half an hour later, the cold and damp was creeping in through cotton socks and cheap sneakers. Aaliya's school jacket and the twins' cardigans were cold and muddy. It was time to head back to the car, dry clothes and a cheesy pizza at Il Forno in Manali.

We were already in the car when I realised that the girls had forgotten about their snowman. Dreading tears and tantrums, I broached the topic. But the threesome smiled reassuringly. "We are coming back at Christmas time when there will be snow everywhere," they explained. "We will make the snowman then." ■

## Tailormade Hoi An

Looking for couture at cut-price? A Vietnamese town may be the perfect fit

KALPANA SUNDER

Mannequins in svelte evening gowns and dapper suits line the streets. Aspiring fashionistas are urged to leaf through piles of catalogues or bring their own designs and have them custom-made in a few hours. Forget New York or Bangkok. Hoi An, a small town in Central Vietnam, is just the place for retail therapy.

Known as the tailoring capital of Vietnam, the town has more than 200 clothes shops aggressively marketing their wares. One can't walk by without insistent Vietnamese women shouting, "Madam, come see". Most of the shops display testimonials from satisfied customers and are very competitive with pricing. Many tourists seem to have done their homework — they fish out designs cut out from magazines that they want copied. Next time I will be better prepared, I tell myself. For now, we are content with a dress for my daughter: she is measured and chooses from the bolts of colourful silk, chiffon, knits and cotton on display. "Madam, fitting after two hours," says an efficient, young woman in charge of the shop called Hugo II. Two hours later we see her get off her motorbike carrying a package from the factory and presto, a custom-made dress for \$25. Not all shops offer the right fits and finish so it is best to go for the more reputed establishments.

For those who want a complete ensemble,



there are footwear outlets which can replicate everything from Jimmy Choo's to humble sneakers. Leather shops can do Gucci bags and jewelers promise Tiffany-style hearts.

Hoi An isn't just haute, it has a tangible sense of history. With faded yellow buildings, green louvered shutters and a heady mix of several cultures, Hoi An seems to belong more to the 17th century than the modern world. From the 16th century to the 18th century, Hoi An used to be called Faifo and was a trading post for the Chinese and Japanese. Warehouses overflowed with treasures from the orient like fabrics, paper tea,

lacquer, mother-of-pearl and Chinese medicines. This was also the first place in Vietnam to be exposed to Christianity and among the missionaries who visited it was Alexandre de Rhodes who devised the Latin-based script for the Vietnamese language which is still in use. The buildup of silt eventually made this port unnavigable and Danang emerged as the major port, leaving Hoi An frozen in time, with some 600 historic houses located along the city's three main streets.

There are Chinese assembly rooms, pagodas, shop houses and Vietnamese and French-style homes, earning it a place on UNESCO's World



Heritage List. Hoi An's historic homes are constantly restored and the work must be approved by the local government. Some home owners offer a tour for a modest fee. It is also a pedestrian friendly town and the historical heart of Old Town is completely closed to motorised traffic. Only bicycles are allowed and they can be hired very easily. Young girls in silk *ao dais* (tunics) and school kids in uniforms walk past. Toothless old women sell red clay whistles and figurines made in the nearby potter's village of Thanh ha.

The local office sells a 'five attractions' ticket which entitles us to see some old heritage build-

ings. Tran Phu is the main draw with most of the attractions and the shopping. The russet stucco and wood Japanese Bridge is an iconic structure. Talented artists have set up workshops and galleries here which stock multi-hued lacquer in modernistic interpretations, oil paintings and paintings on silk.

The colourful Fu Jian Chinese Assembly Hall began as an assembly hall for Chinese merchants and was later transformed into a temple for the worship of Thien Hau, a deity for seafarers. Bright pink incense coils with wishes attached hang from the ceilings. It even has a set of midwife deities who, locals say, teach the newborn skills. For a peek into ancient Hoi An, visit the Tan Ky house, a Vietnamese merchant home lovingly preserved. The interiors have beautiful Chinese poems inlaid in mother of pearl, carvings of crossed sabres and an open-to-sky courtyard. Being on the banks of a river makes Hoi An vulnerable to flooding and it becomes a watery Venice in the rainy season. We see markings on the wall for the 2007 floods when the entire ground floor was inundated.

Come sunset, Hoi An is lit by the glow of silk lanterns. Our guide Hai tells us that more than 10,000 such lanterns are shipped abroad every year. Every 14th day of the lunar month, locals turn off the electric lights and Old Town is bathed in the magical glow of hand held and hanging lanterns. This is called 'Hoi An legendary night'. ■