This year I travelled to Spiti with Pawan, a documentary film maker from Delhi. Spiti Projects is planning to update the film we showed in 2016 as much has changed since then.

We travelled through the Sutlej valley and it was the coldest winter on record with temperatures reaching up to minus 35C. We were lucky that the roads were open, thanks to the hard working road workers who come out in all weathers to keep vehicles moving. Pawan and I stayed at the Community Centre which was a pleasure as always. Inside the building the temperature didn’t go below 4C whilst outside it remains at minus 20C to -35C degrees centigrade.
Very sadly our longest serving Trustee Jean Rivington passed away peacefully just before Christmas last year having supported us from the very beginning of the charity. Dear Jean and I trained together as nurses in the 1960’s. Jean went on to have a distinguished career and became the Ward Sister of the Children’s Ward at the Charing Cross Hospital. She was respected by all the top Consultants for her efficiency and administration skills in running her ward. Jean supported us for over 25 years she had an amazing sense of humour and will be greatly missed by us all.

We would like to welcome a new Trustee, Vicky Drake, a retired captain of industry who lives in Herefordshire. Vicky will be a great to help to all of us in running our charity as she is full of enthusiasm and new ideas and loves the Spiti people.

Jeet retires

I’m sure many of you will know who I mean by Jeet. He and his wife Samtan have visited the United Kingdom twice on our invitation. No doubt many of you have had the pleasure of staying in his house in Spiti too. Jeet has now reached the age of retirement and will be returning to live in his village of Mane. We wish him all happiness in his new life and we are most thankful for all he has done for Spiti Projects over many years.

Fortunately for us Ramesh also a member of the Spiti Projects Society in Kaza has kindly offered to take over the running of the Community Centre in Kaza. Things will be a slow this year as there won’t be any visitors from outside. However, this is a wonderful opportunity for Ramesh to develop local traditional activities within the Community Centre for which it was built. We wish him well with all our support for a wonderful future in Kaza.

Eye Clinic update

I’d like to share with you what’s been happening behind the scenes. In February this year I met Dr Asha Negi who is an ophthalmologist at the Shimla Hospital. We met in my hotel as I was on the way into Spiti and she has kindly offered to come to Spiti and hold an Eye Clinic at the Maynes Eye Clinic in the Community Centre in early June this year. Dr Asha’s plan is to hold clinics in Kaza and also travel from village to village within the valley. She felt she could treat 100 patients a day and was especially keen to see children. There is a great need for children to have their eyes tested in the high altitude area where the sun is harsh and not many young people wear hats. Or have sunglasses.

We are planning to hire the necessary equipment until we have the funds to purchase it. This plan is now on hold because the valley is closed due to the Covid19 virus.

Child Sponsorship scheme

We continue with our child sponsorship scheme to give children from poor families an education and an opportunity for a better life in the future. We have 35 pupils on our books who are so motivated and happy it’s a real pleasure to see. Our first doctor qualified last March. He has now completed his probationary period and is now employed in a government hospital.

There are always many more children who would benefit enormously from your help. I have to tell you that it is a 10 year commitment of £250 per year to allow the student to reach 12th grade (A levels) in our system. Your ongoing support is vital to the children of Spiti.
The environmental threat of Snow Leopard Tourism

Snow leopard watching is a new form of winter tourism which is flourishing in the Himalayan regions like Ladakh and has reached Spiti in the last three or four years. International travellers from Europe, the USA and affluent Indian tourists descend on the area.

Visitors come to Spiti in January/February to see snow leopards during the mating season when they come to the lower slopes to find a mate. Snow leopards prey on blue sheep and the beautiful Ibex. They are sometimes cheeky enough to come into the villages to find sheep.

The question is whether this a good thing for the local environment?

There is no local infrastructure for this scale of accommodation in Spiti. People stay in Kibber and when the home stays are full they commute from other villages to see the Snow Leopards. The tourists pay local people huge sums of money for very basic home stays which have no en-suites or running water. This has brought huge profits to a very few people in the valley and this inevitably changes the mind sets of those who are benefitting. It’s a big change for the snow leopards too; they appear to be getting used to the proximity of vehicles as has happened over the years with wild life in Africa. It is essential that financial gain does not lose sight of the need to respect the sanctity and identity of this rare and beautiful animal.

It is important that The Snow Leopard Trust acts quickly to set down firm rules to safeguard the leopards by ensuring that baiting and other forms of enticement for the entertainment of tourists is firmly forbidden.

We are living in a time of change

The Spiti valley is in a remote area part of the Greater Himalayan Range and has not been hit with the Covid19 so far. The government has closed the valley to all outsiders and foreigners for the whole of the summer season. All home stays are closed so maybe this is not the time to think about visiting this area. This year there will be no workers from Bihar to help with the construction of new houses and road maintenance which is so important in the summer months. They will not be there for the various harvests. As before all the families will be working together in the fields and gathering in the harvest.

Life is very uncertain for all of us at the moment and it is difficult to plan. We are hoping to have a fund raising event in the autumn so please keep this in mind. We will give you the details when it is possible. In the meantime our Spiti team wish you all the best and thank you for your ongoing support.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Spiti at this uncertain time. It’s going to be a challenging year for everybody. We hope that the harvest there will be good; at least there shouldn’t be a shortage of water as the mountain snow melts!

Please take care and stay well.

With all good wishes from our Team,
Joan, Vicky Margaret and Tony
Joan Pollock has been taking pictures since she began working as a travel guide in 1977. Since then her career has taken her back and forth across the globe and she has documented pretty much every step of the way. She resides part of the year in London and the rest of the year from her suitcase!

Joan loves to take photographs of the people, life and culture of the countries that she has been welcomed into. She has made friends with whole tribes and communities and has an open house policy for those she has photographed. Her early training as a nurse has proved invaluable, on occasion she has been known to interrupt her picture taking to check the health of the locals, especially the children, endearing her further into the community.

As a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society she is committed to environmental and conservation issues. Her other love after her photography is Spiti, a breathtaking valley at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau in the Indian Himalayas, her spiritual home. She is passionate about the preservation of Tibet and Buddhism. The Mirror Newspaper named her the ‘Angel of the Himalayas’ in 2000, and her commitment to Spiti – helping to improve the health, hygiene and general wellbeing of the people of the Valley - has occupied a major investment of her time and energy, and it has paid off with a hospital, school and crafts center built from the funds raised.

£20.00

SPITI A Himalayan Story is a photographic essay which explores the many aspects of the life and culture in the Spiti Valley.

Joan Pollock’s wonderful photographs follow the landscape, the people and their customs through the seasons and give an extraordinarily vivid insight into this traditional society trying to come to terms with the modern world.

Paperback, 262 x 255mm, 122 pages
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