

Why *wouldn't* you want to go to the Indian Himalaya?

I was speaking to an acquaintance the other day about some of the work I've been doing in the Himalaya.

'Where in Nepal were you?' she asked.

'Not in Nepal, in India' I replied

'Oh...'

Her question reflected what I sometimes call the 'Himalayan Default Position of Nepal' and it's hardly surprising. Well, before I started my work in India, I too had dreamt about the big mountains of Nepal, fed in-part by stories of Everest. But as I started to experience more of the Indian Himalaya, I developed my own 'Himalayan Default Position': Why *wouldn't* you want to go to the Indian Himalaya?



Rishi Ganga gorge and Nanda Devi in the top-left corner. Look in awe at the footsteps of Shipton and Tilman

The broad sweep of the Indian Himalaya can be found across 12 states and territories, but the big mountains are found in four: Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Sikkim. While each has its unique qualities, my heart is found in Uttarakhand – a state where I've created connections to a place and a landscape where our Himalayan experiences become embedded.

Uttarakhand was once part of the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) – a state dominated by India's Gangetic plain rather than the mountains. Yet those of the Himalayan regions of Garhwal and Kumaon agitated for an independent state – in part because their own cultural identities were connected to the mountains rather than the plains. In November 2000, the Garhwal and Kumaon districts became Uttaranchal, the 27th state of the Republic of India. In 2007 the state was renamed Uttarakhand, reflecting the wishes of the population.



Along the ridge

What the State Offers

While you can find wellness centres, Yoga retreats, pilgrimages, white water rafting and mountain biking in the state – but for me there are two things that make Uttarakhand unique: its range of conservation initiatives and trekking opportunities.

The region has moved quite a way from when the Beatles discovered Rishikish in 1968 and briefly put it onto the world stage, but their legacy remains in a contemporary hippie trail.

There are big tourist and pilgrim numbers to be found in places like Rishikish and Haridwar along the Ganges.

Yet start to climb higher and away from the Ganges, and you see a broadening of focus on mountains. Interestingly, your focus broadens as the valley deepens; you begin to climb higher into the mountains, leaving the Ganges. Keep travelling though, and you can actually walk to the source of the Ganges – if you do, take an opportunity to remember the depth of the gorge and reflect on how far you (and the Ganges) have come.

The state has *Sal* forests with tiger reserves in the foothills, giving way to classic Himalayan landscapes of Alpine meadows (*Bugyals*), rhododendron forests, glaciers, and the ever-

present peaks (up to the 7,816 metre-high Himalayan giant Nanda Devi). There is therefore considerable change in the landscape and consequently a huge diversity of species, national parks, and trekking.

Ever-present peaks at first light

Last light on ever-present peaks

Conservation Initiatives

Protection has always been an important part of local people's connections to the mountains and their sense of responsibility to them. But the state has also formalized conservation in important areas for biodiversity protection – as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, and important world heritage areas.

You can find a list of these protected areas [here](#). It's a dry list – but use the names to search what's great about them all.

I have some favourites: Corbett National Park, focused on tiger conservation. Found in the forested hills, it's one of three tiger reserves in the state (with another one or two currently being assessed). I remember early one morning waiting for some chai, that sweet tea found all over India, prior to heading out into the park by elephant. The chai was delayed, as a large animal (tiger? leopard?) was seen by the river.

Nanda Devi National Park and Biosphere Reserve is also close to my heart – it's where I first went to the Uttarakhand Himalayas. The first sighting of the mountains, lit by the glow of first light as the vehicle I was in came around a corner, has stuck with me. Every time I return, I look for that corner in the road.

Late summer and winter villages of the Nanda Devi area

Spot the tiger! Corbett National Park

It's also the place where the Chipko movement started, when women of some villages hugged trees to stop the illegal logging of their community forests. In Nanda Devi, Himalayan musk deer, snow leopards and, according to some locals, an occasional *Yeti* (Himalayan snowman) can be found.

The Valley of the Flowers forms part of the state's world heritage listing (along with Nanda Devi). During the monsoon the valley is full of colour as the grasses flower. Frank Smythe's 1938 book *The Valley of Flowers: An Adventure in the Upper Himalaya* was an armchair introduction to Uttarakhand for me, pored over in Delhi while preparing for my first visit. Govind Pashu Vihar National Park has forests, wide Alpine valleys, meadows, and Himalayan peaks. It also protects Musk Deer and Snow Leopards. From the village of Sankri, you can explore beautiful valleys and Himalayan peaks.

You can find the source of the River Ganges in Gangotri National Park. Hardly surprisingly, it can be a popular trek for pilgrims.

Nanda Devi towers above

Dunagiri sunset from Nanda Devi National Park



What the Mountains Offer Trekkers

All of the above (with the exception of Corbett National Park) provide context to what is one of the premier opportunities within Uttarakhand: trekking.

India is experiencing a bit of a trekking boom at the moment. There are commercial trekking operators, internet booking agencies that put you in contact with trekking organisations, and local community groups. Some of the good commercial operators employ local people as guides and support crew, and many of the community-based groups enjoy taking you into their landscapes and possibly their homes.

Some Trekking Possibilities

Trekking around Nanda Devi National Park, Biosphere Reserve, and World Heritage Area provide opportunities to reach high mountain ridges and look down at deep gorges. You can even follow in some of the footsteps of Shipton and Tilman, the English explorers of the 1930s.

You can also trek to the source of the Ganges, India's most holy river. It's a 4-day trek from the road head, and you'll be following in the footsteps of pilgrims who have been coming for thousands of years.

Want to walk along ancient trading routes with Tibet? The state has you covered, and you can visit villages that have seen the movements of people trading for a very long time. If you're there at the right time of the year, you can take a side trip to Nanda Devi East Base Camp or Zero Point, where you can look over glaciers tumbling out of the mountains. Feel like a winter adventure? Routes are possible during winter in some areas, including Govind Pashu Vihar National Park. You'll need to contact a trekking company for this.



Sankri Village, Govind National Park



Village on the trail



Preparing for winter on an old trading route



A winter walk to a Himalayan peak, Govind Pashu Vihar National Park

Developing Your Own 'Himalayan Default Position'

Has this got you thinking? Conversations around the dining table now have the Indian Himalaya added to those of the Taj Mahal?

If so, I hope you get to visit the state and find your own 'Himalayan Default Position'. Or, do what I did at the beginning and do some 'armchair travel' in those mountains.

A small piece of advice as you do this, which I get regularly reminded of when I work with people from these areas: you're travelling in landscapes that have been travelled for thousands of years. These are the landscapes of both local communities and amazing biodiversity. Make sure your 'Himalayan Default Position' has its foundation of travelling *within* a landscape rather than through it. Enjoy your travels and explorations.



Gopeshwar, a gateway town to the higher Himalaya

Have you ever considered visiting the Indian Himalaya? Have you been? Let us know in the comments!