

Sound of Silence

With no agenda to follow, Two Chimneys in Gethia allows you to unplug from the city and bond with nature

● Text by Pallavi Pasricha
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IT IS OH-SO-VERY quiet. Arriving at night, I'm startled by the stillness of the surrounding. I ask Manju, the lodge manager, "Is anyone staying here?" and pat comes the reply, "yes, but everyone has gone to sleep after dinner." I glance at my watch, and it is only 9.30pm. Living in a madly rushed city like Delhi, I have forgotten what turning in at this hour is like. But a peaceful weekend in Two Chimneys, a cottage in Gethia, the small village close to Jeolikote, familiarises me once again with the simple life. The lodge turns out to be just as I had imagined—charming and picturesque. It's a treat for the eyes and the mind.

I'm led to my cheerfully done-up room called Goat Shed. The fancy

hotel key has been replaced by a lock and bolt on the door. Intrigued by the name I ask Manju about it, who informs me that more than 100 years ago, the house owners tied their goats here at night. The sound of silence echoes in my ears. There is only one dampener, I find out later—the road is close by and every time a vehicle passes, it breaks the quietness I am getting used to.

In the morning, before my alarm rings, chirping birds and soft light filtering in awaken me. Walking up to the tall window, I draw the curtains to catch a glimpse of the ranges, but alas it's a foggy day. For the first time I realise that the absence of television and internet is a blessing. If only there was no mobile signal, I could have completely unplugged from the city.

Breakfast is served at the pool

deck where I finally see what gives the cottage its name—the two white chimneys with a dark green roof, hiding behind the leaves of a big silver oak. Digging into hot *aloo paranthas* I try to see any part of the green Kumaon ranges, while the clouds and mist are busy covering every inch of space that comes along their way. The sound of gurgling water can be heard at most parts of the cottage. A stone fountain at the front garden called Charbag, the pond outside the Reading Room, where water continuously trickles from the mouth of the sculpture hung on the stone wall, make for a perfect setting.

Sloping roofs, stone façades, wide verandahs and sitting spaces all around are a few things that give Two Chimneys its essence. Staying at this lodge is very much like being home. I don't mind the absence of a restaurant, as the staff rustles up delectable meals. The formality of 'ma'am' is replaced by 'didi', and I could feel the warmth in their greeting. It is all Geetan Batra's effort that's made the place what it is today.

After lunch, photographer Bharat and I head for a 3-km long trek to Nainital (about 28 km by road) although I'm a bit wary about tackling a tough climb over the hills. It is not that I am against treks but this one seems to be in a different league. We meander our way through towering pine and oak trees and lots of orange, purple, red wildflower bushes, and stumble on a small green and red temple. We rest here for a while.

A school and village called Alukhet follow next in line. A few villagers tell us that there were potato fields here many years ago but none of them remain now. Shy children, friendly villagers and buffalos; this trek connects me with village life also.

On the way I discover a new passion—asking everyone I pass how

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1. The charming façade of Two Chimneys in Gethia 2. The cheerful Deodar Suite has a cosy loft 3. The swimming pool is surrounded by lush mountains 4. Nainital, about 28 km from the cottage, is perfect for a day trip 5. The Grand Room at Two Chimneys is ideal for reading 6. The clouds and mist play hide-and-seek on the trek to Nainital

far my destination is. And everyone I meet tells me that Nainital is still a little further away. This answer disappoints me as I'm hoping someone will tell me it is right there! But unfortunately the reassurance never comes, until I'm half a kilometre away. When I'm no longer thinking of the distance, I soak in the stunning views of the lush landscape, and I'm falling in love with it all—the narrow stone path, laziness floating in the air, white clouds, the faraway valley and rustling of leaves. A goat and her master also accompany us for a part of the trek.

It takes two hours of huffing and

puffing before we make it to overcrowded Nainital. On reaching this popular hill station, all my childhood memories of coming here rush back—that horrendous jam to enter, boating in the lake, visits to the Mall Road and treks to China Peak. This time I want to avoid all that. But I can't resist visiting the famous The Sakley's Bakery to have hot coffee and chocolate truffle pastry. Now I feel the trek is worth the effort.

Next day I wake up late; and laze around the entire day. There is no agenda here, and this gives me a completely different high. I take my book to Land's End, a space where the cottage ends. Sitting on the swing, I read for a couple of hours under the shade of a solo silver oak. While my bookmark shifts about a 100 pages, nature is busy playing hide-and-seek. Thick mist covers the mountains and then suddenly moves apart to let bright sunshine creep in. It is all so magical.

The night is clear and I try to count what seem to be at least a million stars. Geetan tells me that they bought this house about 10 years ago.

This place reconnects me with nature, silence and, most importantly, with myself. The mountains manage to keep my worries at bay. I have to return to Delhi tomorrow, but at least this night is mine and I spend most of it under the canopy of stars. ●

FACT FILE

- Getting there: Kathgodam, connected to Delhi, is the nearest railway station. It is 30 minutes away from Gethia.
- When to go: March to December.
- Plus Says
 - Stay: Two Chimneys, Gethia; tel: (05942) 224 541; www.twochimneysgethia.com
 - Eat: Home-cooked meals at Two Chimneys.
 - Shop: Colourful candles from Nainital.
 - See: Make a half-day trip to Jeolikote.

