

FACTS

In all, 20 dialects are spoken in the Kumaon region

UNESCO has listed Kumaoni as language in the unsafe category which requires consistent conservation efforts



Itmnaan Lodges

Jim Corbett Park in Kumaon was established in **1936**

Homely in THE HILLS

Take a break from the hustle-bustle of city life and escape to the serene landscape and life of Kumaon

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It took three villages in the Kumaon region — Thikalna, Ghanget and Chalnichhina — to make me realise that Uttarakhand is not just about popular hill stations but also about authentic, rustic village experiences. Having visited Mussoorie, Nainital, Bhimtal and Ranikhet several times, I felt I had done justice to this region, but my opinion was about to change.

A four-hour drive from Kathgodam Railway station takes me to my first destination —

the village of Thikalna. On my way I'm told there isn't going to be any mobile signal or electricity up there and I couldn't be happier to hear that. Being a screen addict, it would do me good to reconnect with nature and feast my eyes on something more soothing and picturesque.

Thikalna is about two hours from Almora but the car does not drop me at the doorstep of my new abode. To reach each village, I have to work my way up a hillside and trek

for 45 minutes. Thankfully, it is a downhill hike through a lovely forest path lined with gorgeous red rhododendron flowers, but it is still quite gruelling and tiring for a city dweller.

My home for the night is a typical Kumaoni house that is located at a height of 6,800 feet on the edge of a cliff. Done up in traditional stone architecture, the walls are rough and unfinished, and the light flows from solar powered lanterns instead of electric bulbs. This village home helps in preserving the local art and architecture. I am exhausted by the time I reach, so after a delicious hot dinner, I hit the bed quite early by city standards — at 9.30 pm.

I'm told that the sunrise is something I should not skip. Bed tea at 6 am brings me to life and I step out of the cottage to see the Himalayas bathed in a beautiful orange glow. I could not have been luckier because it's a clear day and I can see as far as Nanda Devi, the second highest peak (25,643 feet) in the country. The distant, snow-covered peaks are a sight to behold.

I feast on a heavy breakfast of eggs, stuffed paranthas and cereal with an occasional butterfly for company. I am soaking in the views when I'm told I need to leave for my next destination — Ganghet. I am shocked to hear that I have to trek for six hours, but I am



Quick Tips

Stay

Itmnaan Estate in Chalnichhina and village houses in Thikalna and Ghanget. Packages are generally inclusive of accommodation and all meals. The village stays and walks range from ₹3,000 to ₹10,000 per person per night.

Getting there

Chalnichhina is 375 km from Delhi. It is best to take the Kathgodam AC Express or Ranikhet Express till Kathgodam. From there it is about three hours by road via Bhimtal.

Eat

Local food prepared by the staff at village homes.

Shop

Rhododendron juice, baal mithai & apricot jam from Almora.

all prepped up for it. Feeling guilty about not being in shape, I decide to make up for my lack of exercise with this long walk. I begin my journey through gorgeous forest paths surrounded by rhododendrons, oak and deodar trees. We pass a few small villages where children wave as we go, their eyes full of joy and their smiles wide.

I'm enjoying the trek, blissfully unaware that it is going to get tougher as we press ahead. My first halt is the Jageshwar Temple complex, which is home to more than 100 stone-cut temples built between the 17th and 19th century. I admire the huge life-size statues which stand guard outside each temple. The main shrine, dedicated to Lord Shiva, happens to be one of his 12 *vyotirlingas* in the country. The Sri Mahamritunjaya Mahadev Temple here, where local legend says Lord Shiva came to meditate, is the most elaborate of them all. Tarun Mahadev is the main temple.



(Clockwise) Local women toil in the fields; Interiors of a cosy mountain stay



Jageshwar Temple



ABOUT CHITAI TEMPLE

The temple is full of bells. According to the legend people must tie a bell and write down their wish on a piece of paper. Hence, one can see brass bells of all shapes and sizes. It is quite an impressive sight and even on a weekday there is a huge line to tie the bell and visit the deity. The temple is close to both Almora and Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary.

BINSAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

This sanctuary is home to leopards, foxes and rare migratory birds as well. One can go for long hikes or drive around with oak and pine trees all around. The mountain goat and barking deer can be easily spotted and if you reach Zero Point (7,900 feet) — the highest point in the sanctuary, you'll be surrounded by Himalayan peaks like Trishul, Nanda Devi, Kamet, Trishul, Panchachuli.

About an hour later I am famished, so I choose a pretty spot and enjoy a picnic lunch, which to my surprise, is by no means restricted to just sandwiches. The chef has laid out a gourmet meal for us — there is delicious rhododendron juice, hummus, homemade bread, carrot and orange salad, red cabbage salad, tortilla, potatoes and lovely banana bread followed by a choice of teas. This hearty meal gives me the necessary stamina to continue further.

But a couple of hours later, I just give up as my legs refuse to go any further. We stop near Shri Jhanar Saam Temple, where hot tea and the car come to rescue my tired limbs and take us on the final lap to our destination. This is a pretty blue and white house in Ganghet surrounded by terraced fields, with colourful flowers and chirping birds completing the beautiful picture. The silence of the night is so surreal that I can hear my own breath.

Next day's trek to the final destination — the village of Chalnichhina and Itmenaan Estate — is both gorgeous and exhausting. I become like a little girl again, hopping across streams, climbing mountains and walking at the edge of a cliff. I can feel the

adrenalin rush and chatting with locals on the way only adds to the charm. We finally reach our destination in about seven hours, where a century-old stone house is my abode.

Itmenaan Estate has three rooms and each is done up in traditional Kumaoni architecture. The roof is made of pine logs that were embedded in mud and then laid with local slate and sealed with mud. This method is called *kori chinai*; locals stack stones and make the house without using any cement.

The courtyard, which overlooks the entire mountain range is a perfect place for lounging around, reading a book, gazing at the blue sky in the day and counting stars at night. Being a true foodie, I also try different cuisines but the nothing beats traditional Kumaoni dishes — *dal* and fresh, locally-grown vegetables.

Doing nothing was perhaps what I enjoyed the most on this trip. Before boarding the train back, I stop at Chitai temple, dedicated to the local deity — Golu Devata, the god of justice. I make a wish and end my journey filled with hope that it will come true.