



Uttarakhand

HIGHLIGHTS

- Follow pilgrim trails to the sacred **source of the Ganges** (p160)
- View the distinctive twin peaks of Nanda Devi – the highest mountain in India – while ascending to the **Kuari Pass** (p167)
- Visit villages out of **Munsyari** (p177) from where the legendary Pundits were recruited in the 19th century for exploration in nearby Tibet
- Ascend trails through pristine bamboo, rhododendron, oak and conifer forest to the mysterious lake of **Rup Kund** (p171)
- Spend time in the **Valley of the Flowers** (p167) or trekking to high-altitude meadows renowned for their wildflowers

Seasoned trekkers will testify that the Himalaya Range of Uttarakhand offers many spectacular opportunities. These include Nanda Devi, the highest peak within India, and a host of other 7000m peaks that stretch to the borderlands of Tibet and western Nepal.

For the pilgrim, Uttarakhand is revered as the true 'Abode of the Gods'. The main source of the Ganges flows from these mountains giving rise to the Char Dham – the pilgrimage undertaken by thousands of Hindu devotees each year to Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Gangotri is recognised as the actual source of the Ganges, though the stream emerges from the snout of an impressive glacier at nearby Gaumukh. Yamunotri is the source of the Yamuna River, a main tributary of the Ganges. Kedarnath is recognised as one of the divine resting places of Lord Shiva, while Badrinath is assigned to Vishnu. Then there is Hem Kund, revered by Sikh pilgrims, and the nearby Valley of the Flowers.

Yet for some inexplicable reason, Uttarakhand attracts only a handful of trekkers each season, making it one of the best-kept secrets in the Himalaya.

North of the hill resort of Mussoorie are trails to the beautiful meadow of Har ki Dun. For more challenging options there are forays over the Rupin Pass to Kinnaur. From the ancient pilgrim centre of Uttarkashi there are trails to the serene waters of Dodi Tal.

Treks in the vicinity of Nanda Devi will surpass expectations. Ascend the Kuari Pass to peer into the magnificent Nanda Devi Sanctuary or undertake the classic trek to the Pindari Glacier.



HISTORY

Uttarakhand's formidable terrain, characterised by deep gorges and high mountains, was conducive to the establishment of small kingdoms separated by well-defined mountain ridges. Many kingdoms maintained their independence by establishing a *garh* (fortress), a strategic position from which to protect themselves against their neighbours and invading armies from the plains of north-west India. The terrain was gradually divided into two regions: Garhwal to the west, as far as the Tons River; and Kumaon to the east, extending to the Kali River and the present-day border of India and Nepal.

Until the year 2000, the Garhwal and Kumaon formed part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. However as a result of increasing agitation throughout the hill regions, Uttaranchal became a separate hill state in 2000 with its administrative headquarters at Dehra Dun. In 2007, the state was officially renamed Uttarakhand, a traditional name meaning 'northern country'. Its main languages are Hindi, Garhwali and Kumaoni.

ENVIRONMENT

Unlike other regions in the West Himalaya there are no intermediary ranges between the Indian Plains and the main Himalayan Range. The foothills of the Siwalik hills give way to rugged gorge country formed as the tributaries of the Ganges forge a course to the northern Gangetic Plain.

The Himalaya Range includes many impressive peaks including Nanda Devi (7816m). North of the Himalaya is the Zaskar Range. It is the range that defines the border between Uttarakhand and Tibet. It is characterised by 7000m peaks that extend to the Kali River and the western border of Nepal.

Refer to the Flora & Fauna boxed text (p150) for an overview of the wildlife and birds in the region.

CLIMATE

With the exception of the remote valleys north of the Himalaya Range, Uttarakhand is subject to the heavy monsoon rains.

The pre-monsoon months are May and June, with monsoon rains falling by the first week of July. By mid-September, the settled, post-monsoon conditions return.

Winter snows start to fall by late October. This also marks the end of the pilgrimage season. Heavy snowfalls on the Himalaya Range preclude any thoughts of trekking during winter. In early May snows melt sufficiently to reopen the main trails into the mountains.

South of the Himalaya Range some of the valleys, including the Har ki Dun, enjoy milder climates. At lower altitudes the snowfall is not so heavy and the trails between the villages are passable even during winter.

PLANNING

When to Trek

There are two distinct trekking seasons: pre-monsoon (May and June) and post-monsoon (mid-September to October). The start of the pre-monsoon season is dependent on the spring snowmelt, although you may encounter snow on the high passes well into July. During this period, expect day temperatures to rise to 20°C, although they can still fall well below freezing during an occasional storm.

In July and August the monsoon rain does not fall incessantly and if well prepared you can still undertake a trek. Day temperatures rise to the mid-20s (Celsius). However, expect delays getting to and from the trailhead, as landslides blocking the highways are a regular feature.

Maps

The Leumann 1:200,000 series and US Military U502 1:250,000 series are useful for planning as well as trekking. The Ground Survey of India trekking map series are also available from the Uttarakhand Tourist Office (p213) in Delhi. See Planning for each trek for specific map requirements.

The detailed aerial survey *Garhwal Himalaya* is published by the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research (SFAR). There are two sections, east and west, based on the Survey of India maps and drawn by Ernst Huber at a scale of 1:150,000.

Books

For an introduction to the possibilities of trekking in Uttarakhand go no further than *The Nanda Devi Affair & Mountain Delight* by Bill Aitkin. Also refer to *Beautiful Garhwal* by Ruskin Bond and *Garhwal*