



Uttarakhand

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Best Off the Beaten Path

- Munsyari (p448)
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Best for Culture

- Kedarnath (p432)
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Why Go?

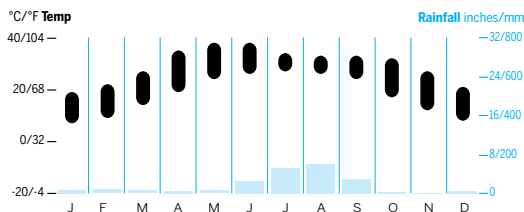
Soaring Himalayan peaks and steamy lowland jungles. Revered temples and renowned ashrams. Peaceful hill stations and busy cities. Uttarakhand is truly a thali of a state, with some of India's best trekking, yoga schools, holiday towns and wildlife-watching all tucked into one little corner of the country.

Hindus think of Uttarakhand as *Dev Bhoomi* – the Land of Gods – and the dramatic terrain is covered with holy mountains, lakes and rivers. Twisting roads and high-altitude hiking trails lead to spectacular pilgrimage sites where tales from the Hindu epics are set. And something of these ancient stories seems to have been absorbed by the land, which exudes a subtle sense of actually being sacred – even to ultra-orthodox agnostics. Many travellers flock here for this vibe, finding it a powerful place to pursue a spiritual practice.

Others come here for the tigers!

When to Go

Rishikesh



Apr–mid-Jun

The best season for tiger spotting at Corbett Tiger Reserve.

Jul–mid-Sep

Monsoons may make travel difficult; Valley of Flowers bloom is best July and August.

Mid-Sep–Oct

The perfect time to trek the Himalaya.

Food

Uttarakhand is not famous for its food, and cuisine is typically North Indian. The most variety is found in Mussoorie, Rishikesh, Nainital and Dehra Dun. A warning to meat-eaters: towns with top-tier religious significance are all-vegetarian, all the time.

DON'T MISS

Every evening around sunset, hundreds of Hindu worshippers converge at Haridwar's **Har-ki-Pairi Ghat** to perform *puja* (prayer offering) on the Ganges canal. Leaf baskets filled with a fragrant rainbow of flower petals, each softly lit by a candle nestled in the centre, are launched onto the water. Beautiful and intense, this might be the most potent scene of archetypal 'India' in all of Uttarakhand. Just north of Haridwar, follow the footsteps of The Beatles to **Rishikesh** (p424), the world-renowned spiritual-seekers' city, where you'll surely find a yoga or meditation course to suit your needs – whether you're a serious practitioner or an undisciplined dabbler. Spanning the northern half of the state are the mighty **Himalaya** (p434). A vast land of soaring, snowy summits and alpine meadows, Uttarakhand is a trekking paradise. Choose between busy pilgrims' trails on the **Char Dham route** (p431) or remote wilderness where you'll hardly see another soul.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Haridwar, Dehra Dun and Haldwani are easily reached by train or bus. Jolly Grant Airport is convenient to Rishikesh and Dehra Dun. Enter or exit Nepal at Banbassa.

Fast Facts

- **Population:** 10.1 million
- **Area:** 51,125sq km
- **Capital:** Dehra Dun
- **Main languages:** Hindi, Garhwali, Kumaoni
- **Sleeping prices:** \$ below ₹800, \$\$ ₹800 to 1800, \$\$\$ above ₹1800

Top Tip

If travelling through the hills or mountains, get to buses early to claim a window seat. The landscape, much of which you'll never stop to explore, is gorgeous.

Resources

- **US Military maps** (www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/india), useful for trekking.
- Background on the **Chipko movement** (<http://spot.colorado.edu/~wehr/491R10.TXT>), the original 'tree-huggers'.
- Read up on **Transcendental Meditation** (www.tm.org), founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Top State Festivals

- **Magh Mela** (☺ Jan & Feb, Haridwar, p419) Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims come to bathe in the soul-cleansing Ganges during this huge annual religious fair. The Ardh Kumbh Mela is held every six years; and millions of pilgrims attend the mega Kumbh Mela every 12 years.
- **International Yoga Festival** (☺ Mar, Rishikesh, p427) Rishikesh hosts the International Yoga Festival, attracting swamis and yoga masters from around the world for discourses and lectures. Most of the action is centred on the Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Swarg Ashram. Check the festival website for dates.
- **Shivaratri** (☺ usually Mar, Dehra Dun, p413) A festival celebrated in style with carnival rides and stalls at a picturesque riverside cave temple on the outskirts of Dehra Dun.
- **Nanda Devi Fair** (☺ Sep, Almora, p445) During this five-day fair, thousands of devotees parade the image of the goddess around and watch dancing and other cultural shows.