

5 HOLY DESTINATIONS in Uttarakhand

Embark on a pilgrimage jaunt to Uttarakhand and discover this fascinating aspect of India where each destination has its own tale to tell...

By Shikha Sethi ♦ Photographs by Mirielle Josephine Guezennec

HARIDWAR

RISHIKESH

GANGOTRI

KEDARNATH

BADRINATH





The ancient Hindu scriptures refer to Haridwar, one of the oldest living cities known to man, as Mayapuri, Gangadwar and Mokhsadwar. The name of this sacred city, revered for its bathing *ghats* and its temples, means 'the Gateway to the Gods'. Numerous Hindu devotees visit Haridwar to bathe in the Ganges as it is a commonly-held belief that a dip in this holy river will wash away one's sins. Haridwar is also host to the Kumbh Mela, which is celebrated once in every twelve years and to the Ardh Kumbh Mela which is held once in every six years. The *mela* throbs with life in all its variety: *sadhus* (holy men), pilgrims, tourists, the old and the young. The Kumbh Mela is thought to be the largest religious gathering on the planet.



make it incredible!

Take a dip in and wash away your sins in the five sacred bathing spots in Haridwar. Gangadwara, Kankhal, Nila Parvata, Bilwa Theertha and Kusavarta are the famous sacred bathing spots.

haridwar

GATEWAY TO THE GODS

places of interest

Har ki Pauri: This *ghat*, also called Brahmakund, is considered to be the most sacred in Haridwar. It is particularly famous for the footprint of Lord Vishnu on a stone in the wall. Har ki Pauri was built by King Vikramaditya in the 1st century BC in memory of his brother Bhatrihari who had come to Haridwar in order to meditate by the river Ganga.

Sapt Rishi Ashram and Sapt Sarovar: The legend goes thus: the river Ganga did not want to disturb the deep meditation of the Saptarishis (seven saints) - Kashyap, Vashit, Atri, Vishwamitra, Jaindayani, Bhardwaj and Gautam - and so split herself into seven streams around each rishi.

Chandi Devi Temple: The King of Kashmir, Suchat Singh had the Chandi Devi temple built in 1929. Other famous temples in Haridwar include the Bharat Mata temple, the Maya Devi Temple and the Daksh Mahadev temple.

Piran Kaliyar: On the outskirts of Roorkee, 23 km from Haridwar is the shrine of Sufi saint, Hazrat Makhdum Allauddin Ali Ahmed Sabri. Piran Kaliyar is visited by thousands of Hindus and Muslims every year.

how to reach

Air: Jolly Grant Airport at Dehradun is the nearest airport. Haridwar is 35 km from Jolly Grant Airport.

Rail: Haridwar is well-connected with important centres in India - both directly and in some cases via Delhi.

Road: Situated on the main highway (highway No. 45), Haridwar is linked to the major centres in the region. Buses are easily available from Delhi. The distance between Delhi and Haridwar is 214 km.



rishikesh

HOLY MAN'S LOCKS. TAPO BHUMI

Rishikesh, which literally translates into 'Holy man's locks' is also known as Tapo Bhumi or a place of meditation for the Gods. Surrounded on three sides by the magnificent Himalayas and also the place where the Ganga enters the plains of India, Rishikesh abounds in natural beauty. Clear, gurgling water as it rushes across the rocks and pebbles, past cave temples of yore, snaking through the valley and verdant forests transports you to a world of great tranquillity. The Beatles could not resist the lure of Rishikesh, considered to be the 'Gateway to the Himalayas'. We invite you to walk through the gate and beyond; you will not be able to resist either.

make it incredible!

In addition to its sheer visual splendour, Rishikesh is also popular among adventure sports enthusiasts for the white water rafting (ranging from medium to tough rapids) opportunities it offers. A ride to remember!

how to reach

Air: Jolly Grant Airport near Dehradun is the closest airport. Rishikesh is 18 km from the airport.

Rail: The nearest railhead is Haridwar where one can take a bus or car to Rishikesh situated 21 km away.

Road: Rishikesh is 231 km away from Delhi and the driving time is approximately 6 hours.



places of interest

Triveni Ghat: *Diyas* (small earthen lamps) floating in the calm waters, their reflections delicately quivering as the temple bells sound – the evening aarti ceremony at the Triveni Ghat is as soothing as it is beautiful. This bathing ghat is also believed to be the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati river.

Laxman Jhula: This is where Laxman, Lord Rama's brother is believed to have crossed the Ganga. It offers a panoramic view of the surrounding hills and the river below.

Neelkanth Mahadev: About 12 km away from Rishikesh lies the

Neelkanth Mahadev Temple, which derives its name from Lord Shiva. Legend has it that this was the spot where Lord Shiva drank the poison that resulted from the churning of the ocean (Sagar Manthan) turning his throat 'neel' or blue.

Traditionally, the pilgrimage to the Char Dham or the four holiest shrines of Hinduism is along an West-East axis. Thus the journey begins in Yamunotri and then moves to Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Gangotri is revered as the place where the holy river Ganga is believed to have touched earth for the first time. The river however, has its actual source at Gaumukh, another 18 km uphill. As the story goes, the Goddess Ganga came down to earth, the abode of mortal men, to wash away the sins of the predecessors of King Bhagirath. This is what accounts for the name Bhagirathi – which is how the river Ganga is referred to at its source. Lord Shiva spread his matted locks in order to receive the Goddess, to break the impact of her fall and the spot where he did so becomes visible in the form of a submerged 'Shivling' (Shiva worshipped in his phallic aspect), in early winter when the water of the river recedes. Gangotri is where icy mountains, deep forests and the river of life itself create an unparalleled synergy, where legend and history meet.

make it incredible!

Visit the Submerged Shivling, the natural rock Shivling submerged in the river, is an amazing sight reinforcing the power of the divine. It is visible in the early winters, when the water level goes down.

how to reach

Air: Jolly Grant Airport near Dehradun is the nearest airport. The distance from Dehradun is 226 km. **Rail:** The nearest major railhead is at Rishikesh, 249 km away. **Road:** Uttarakashi (97 km), Yamunotri (232 km) and Mussoorie (250 km).

gangotri

BIRTH OF THE SACRED RIVER



places of interest

Gangotri Temple: The temple built in the 18th century by Gorkha commander, Amar Singh Thapa is the main place of worship at Gangotri. The temple, an architectural marvel, is dedicated to the Goddess Ganga and is also said to be the place where the Pandava brothers performed a great sacrifice or yagna as atonement for the killing of their kinsmen during the battle of the Mahabharata.

Gaumukh glaciers: Gaumukh is snout of the Gangotri Glacier and the source of the Bhagirathi river. Pilgrims trek upto the sacred spot on foot or on ponies to take a holy dip in the ice-cold water.

badrinath & kedarnath

THE ABODE OF VISHNU HOLY SHRINE OF THE HINDUS

make it incredible!

June is an especially good time to visit as one can partake of the festivities of the Badri Kedar festival, which lasts for 8 days.



Dedicated to Lord Vishnu, Badrinath is nestled between the twin ranges of Nar and Narayan (both *avatars* of Lord Vishnu) along the right bank of the Alaknanda river. The area was also referred to as 'Badri Van' because of the profusion of *badris* or wildberries that could be found here. Fifteen idols, carved in black stone are found in the main temple. With its breathtaking natural beauty, the architectural wonder that is Badrinath represents the completion of the holy pilgrimage as it was traditionally conceived.

how to reach

Airport : Jolly Grant Airport at Dehradun is the closest airport 317 km away.

Railhead : The major railhead is at Rishikesh (300 km) and Kotdwar (327 km) **Road:** Kedarnath & Badrinath are well connected to Rishikesh, Haridwar and Dehradun.



Amongst the holiest shrines for the Hindus is the shrine of Kedarnath. Against the backdrop of the mighty Himalayas, the temple stands, regal, at an altitude of 3,584 mts. The Kedarnath shrine is the northernmost of the twelve 'Jyotirlingas' of Kedar or Lord Shiva situated all across India. Kedarnath is considered to be so holy as it is believed that the Pandava brothers after the Mahabharata battle wanted Lord Shiva's blessings. Lord Shiva evaded, taking refuge at Kedarnath assuming the shape of a bull. When Pandavas persisted in following him, he dived into the ground but his hump remained and it is this pyramidal shape that is worshipped here. Other portions of Lord Shiva's body are worshipped at different places. The statue of the Nandi bull, which stands at the entrance to the temple, and the ornate carvings are testimony to the artistry of the time.

places of interest

Tapt Kund : The natural thermal springs at Tapt Kund are believed to have medicinal properties.

Valley of Flowers: 42 km to the East lies the stunningly beautiful Valley of Flowers. Recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, the valley is home to a wide variety

of flora and fauna and endangered animals such as the Asiatic black bear and the snow leopard.

Hemkund Sahib: Not far from the Valley of Flowers, 43 km from Badrinath lies Hemkund which holds great religious significance for both Hindus and Sikhs. The shrine is thought to be the place where Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru unified with God.