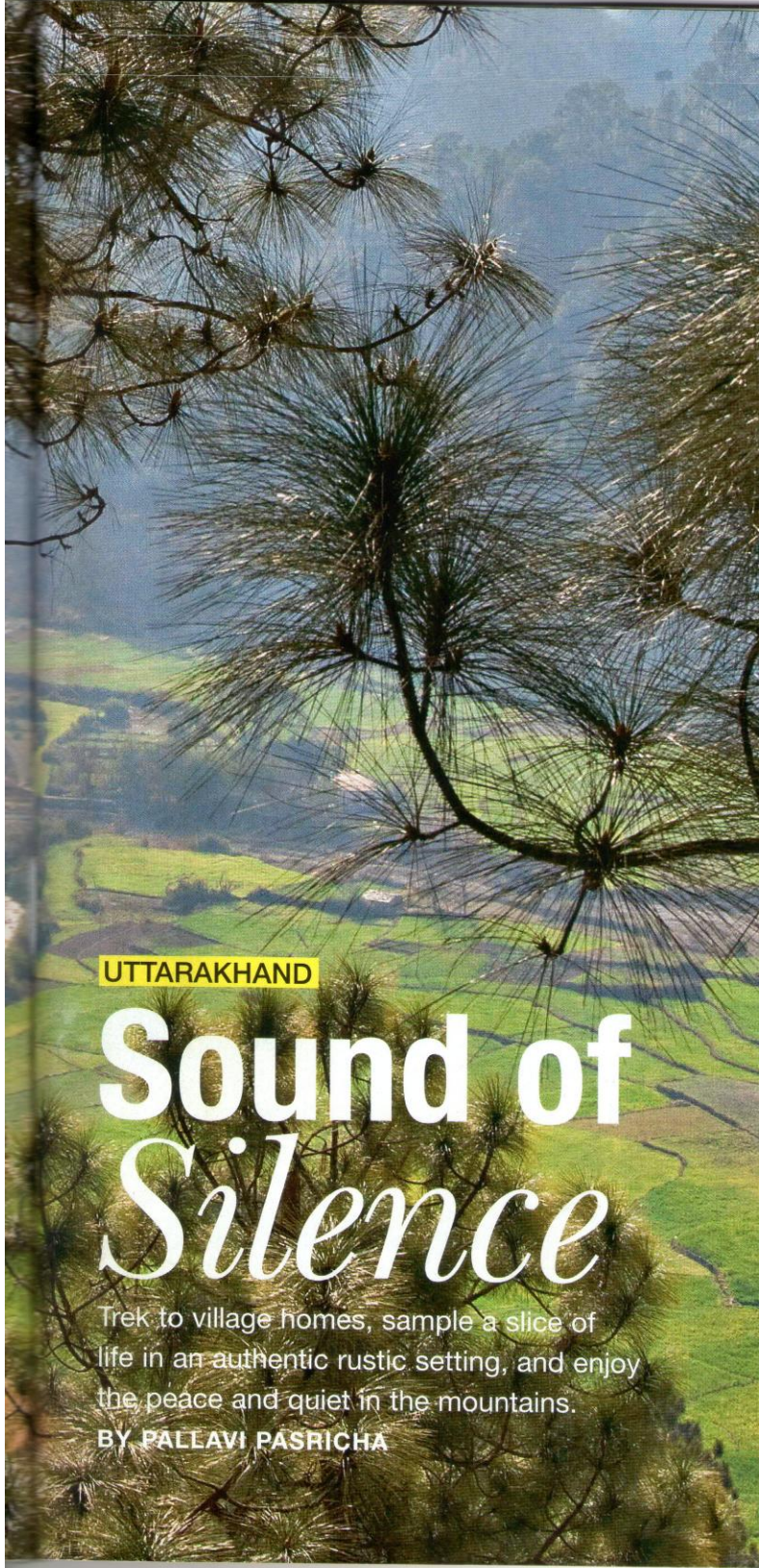


TRAVEL

EXPLORER

On the route to Almora you'll pass many points from where you get a gorgeous view of the Himalayas and lush valleys



UTTARAKHAND

Sound of *Silence*

Trek to village homes, sample a slice of life in an authentic rustic setting, and enjoy the peace and quiet in the mountains.

BY PALLAVI PASRICHA

“PLEASE MAKE YOUR calls in the next couple of hours because there won’t be any mobile network, or even electricity at Thikalna,” says Ashish Bhatia, the owner of Itmenaan Estate, as soon as we leave Bhimtal. My eyes open wide. I have lived without the mobile, but no electricity? This will be a first—besides the power outages in Gurgaon, I have not experienced life without a light bulb or a fan. But I am so looking forward to it as we head out for a brief stopover in Thikalna. My ultimate destination is Chalnichhina village where a 100-year-old Kumaoni stone house has been renovated by Ashish to give travellers an authentic experience. But before reaching there, we are going to get a taste of life in a rustic setting in two more villages in the Almora hills—Thikalna and Ghanget.

Ashish explains that the idea is to walk to these villages, in each of which he has refurbished one traditional home, and then ultimately reach Itmenaan. Just as I am digesting that, the car stops in the middle of a road. “From here it is a gentle, 45-minute walk till the house,” says Ashish. I set out cheerfully, drinking in the stunning sight of rhododendron trees in full bloom, giving the hills a gorgeous red hue. But I slowly realise that this 45-minute trek is turning into a seemingly never ending, gruelling one for a city dweller like me. I keep glancing at my watch then I just give up keeping track of time. Little do I realise that this one is just the tip of the iceberg as far as walks are concerned.

It is almost dark by the time we reach and lanterns and solar lamps are placed in my room. The house, with a traditional Kumaoni roof, made of pine logs, has two rooms and a small lounge area. I am dead tired after the journey and the walk, so after a hot dinner I turn in at 9.30 p.m.—something I have not done in years. I am happy being cut off from the world. As I lie in bed, all I hear is the sound of the wind whipping around the house. I just need a horror book to complete the picture.

PAUL STREET/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARINDAM DEB/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



1. Itmenan Estate has a century-old stone house that's traditionally Kumaoni 2 & 5 You'll pass lush fields & beautiful scenery while trekking around the estate 3. It is easy to spot birds as you sip tea in the morning 4. The estate offers all kinds of cuisines, from Italian, Continental to Indian

Instead of my mobile, bed tea wakes me up at 6 a.m. and I walk out to see the Himalayas bathed in an orange glow. That's when I realise that the house is located at the edge of a cliff and to my left lies the stunning snow-capped Nanda Devi. I sip my tea, gazing at this magnificent wonder as birds chirp and butterflies flutter—amazingly this is the only sound I can hear. I could not have asked for a better start to the trip.

After a hearty breakfast, Pujan from Itmenan Estate, the photographer Arindam and I, begin the trek to our next destination—a village house in Ganghet.

I am all geared up, but little did I know that this will turn into a six-hour marathon going across hillsides, meadows and streams. As I huff and puff, the only consolation is the stunning views of the mountains and those lovely, red rhododendron trees. We walk for a couple of hours to Jageshwar Temple, spend about half an hour there, then carry on. Thankfully, after another hour, we take a much-called-for break over a picnic lunch. I am delighted to find that this is not just goodies like sandwiches, but a huge spread—rhododendron juice, hummus, homemade bread, carrot and orange salad, red cabbage salad, tortilla, potatoes and lovely banana bread followed by Earl Gray, Darjeeling and Tulsi tea. Impressive!

After walking for a couple of hours, my legs refuse to carry me any further. A quick glance at my watch and I realise that I have been walking for about six hours. I am proud of what I have accomplished, but decide to summon the car for the final lap to Ghanghet. This village is located at a lower height than Thikalna and all I can see around me are mountains covered with terrace farms. Sitting around a bonfire that night, Ashish tells us he

started this venture thinking that staying and trekking to a traditional Kumaoni village house would add another dimension to the experience of travellers.

He asks if we are sure we want to do the four-hour walk to Itmenan the next day because the car cannot be called at any point. With my legs still hurting, I ponder for a minute, but then bravely agree to do it. After today's grind, I am confident of pulling it off tomorrow. At night, it is so silent that I can hear my own breath and the page turning as I read a book. Heavenly!

Again we set off after breakfast, passing lush green fields, crossing streams, and going uphill and downhill along what seems a million times to me. At one point, I am walking at the edge of a cliff—a step here or there and I would have hurtled down. We meet locals from a nearby village at one point. Yet another picnic lunch is laid out and I gorge like there is no tomorrow. We finally reach Itmenan in about seven hours. Even though I am exhausted I feel great. Mission accomplished!

The estate with the century-old stone house looks absolutely gorgeous. The roof is made of pine logs embedded in mud, and is then laid over with local slate and sealed with mud. Only local material has been used. The massive stone bathroom has a *lota* instead of a mug. These all add to the charm. The courtyard is the perfect place for meals. The next day I have the option of going for walks around the estate to the nearby village, but after all those treks to get here, I don't want to even step out! I simply put up my feet, spend the day with a book, sleep in the afternoon and just enjoy the peace and quiet of the mountains. I guess this is what Itmenan Estate is all about—a slow and measured pace of life—far far away from the madding crowd.

HOT DEAL

HOLIDAY FOR A COUPLE

Stay at Itmenan Estate for 2 nights/3 days at ₹28,500 onwards per couple with all meals, train tickets, transfers, guided walks and taxes

At a Glance

GETTING THERE

From Delhi Itmenan Estate is 375 km. Take the Ranikhet Express or Kathgodam AC Express till Kathgodam and then drive about three hours.

of all meals for Itmenan Estate. The village stay and walks start from ₹3,000 to 10,000 per person per night depending on the services chosen. www.itmenaanlodges.com

WHEN TO GO

All year round

GOOD TO KNOW

There are many activities you can do at Itmenan: go for walks to villages nearby, trek to the highest point—Gantika temple which has spectacular views. Another interesting temple, an hour away by car, is the Chitai Temple dedicated to Golu Devta, the God of Justice.

STAY

Itmenan Estate in Chalinichhina and village houses in Thikalna and Ghanghet. Stay on a twin sharing basis inclusive of all meals and taxes. Cost: ₹5,000 onwards per person per night (twin share) inclusive

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