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Rustic retreat

A village walk tour through Almora district took Suktara Ghosh deep into the heart of an unspoilt region



The sun sets over Kumaon; Pic by Suktara Ghosh

I'd been aware of a steady wheezing sound for some time and was wondering where it was coming from. And it was with a bit of a shock that I realised that I was its source.

That's lesson one: book yourself on a rigorous workout schedule at least a month before you go for a 'walk' in the mountains. Not surprisingly, mountain tracks go either in a lung-bursting uphill direction. Or they head downhill — and that's just as bad. As I discovered, pine leaves can be very slippery.

I was on an exclusive village walk with Itmenaan Lodges that would take me to two villages in Uttarakhand's Almora district. Surrounded by the Nanda Devi range, nature is still lusciously bountiful in this largely untouched section of Kumaon.

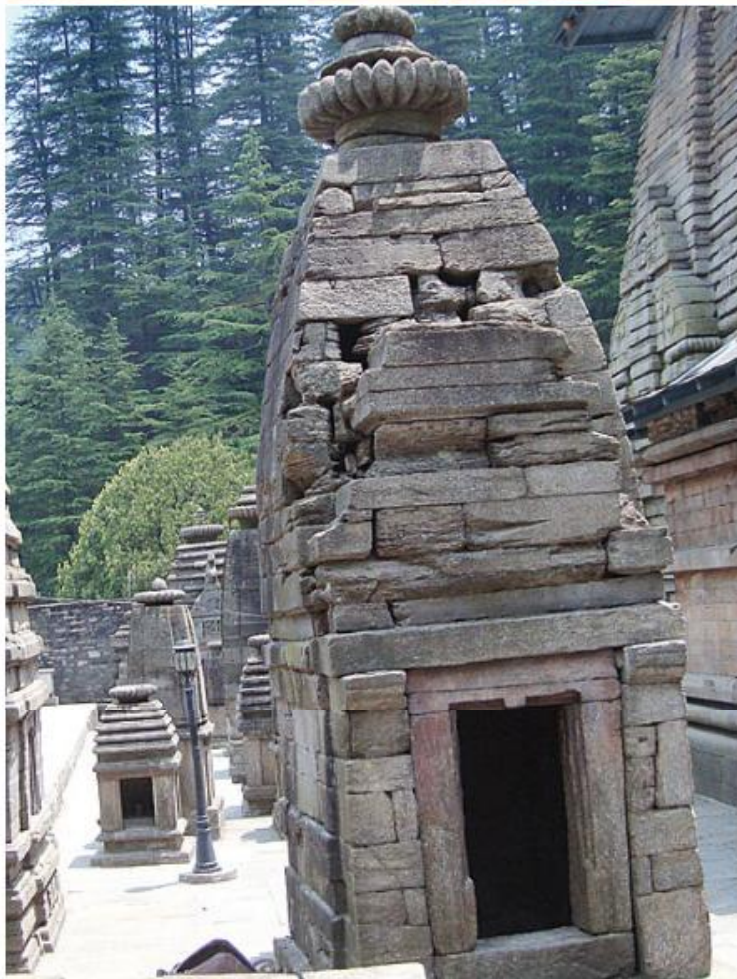
It was a four-and-a-half hour drive from Kathgodam station — and about a 20-minute walk from the main road — to Thikalna village, where I'd be staying the first night. The homestay is powered by solar lamps and is fairly basic. But I had no complaints — it was pretty comfortable.



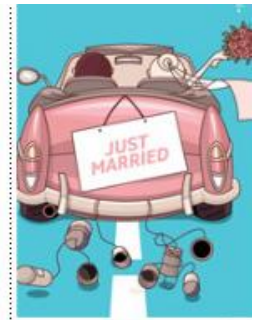
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(From top)The 100-year-old restored stone resort at Itimenaan Estate,the resort provides a fantastic view of the surrounding hills; photographs courtesy Itimenaan lodges; the Jageshwar complex is made up of about 125 temples; Pic by Suktara Ghosh



HOMES
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READY
FOR
POSSESSION



After dropping my luggage and drinking a very welcome cup of tea, we set off to explore the surrounding area. This part of the world is a birder's paradise. Dipani, an ecologist who accompanied me on the trip, pointed out several species as we hiked through a forest of rhododendrons, oaks and chir pines. There were the oriental turtle dove, rosefinch, Himalayan woodpecker and more. These forests are also home to leopards, called *bagh* by the locals. We were told they often creep into villages to hunt dogs or goats — and sometimes even men!

Our walk took a few hours and when we returned to Thikalna, I was definitely ready to put my feet up.

The macaque-infested Jageshwar temple complex topped our exploration itinerary the next day. It's an antique marvel, built between the seventh and the 18th century. Made up of 125 structures, it's located deep within a forest of tall firs. The main shrine is dedicated to Lord Shiva, believed to be one of the *jyotirlingas*. There are other shrines dedicated to deities like Parvati and Surya. Just a short distance away is a holy ground where the mountain people come to cremate their dead.

After Thikalna, it was on to another village, Ganghet, 12km away by road. Most houses in Kumaon are painted white and blue and the ones in Ganghet were no exception. The homestay here is a pretty nook surrounded by terraced fields, which lay fallow, post harvest. In the afternoon, we explored the forests to discover wild flowers in brilliant hues, and of course, more birds.

The next day, we drove to Itmnaan Estate. The quaint 100-year-old stone building has been restored and has three en suite rooms with an organic garden, where much of the kitchen supply comes from. Expect garden-fresh salads, fruits and even walnut pastries on the menu and don't miss the rhododendron juice. By the way, *ganja* (yes, cannabis) chutney or even soup is a delicacy in Kumaon, but it lacks its mind-altering qualities when served this way. I was hoping to try it out but sadly, a pack of rats beat me to it. Apparently, they like *ganja* too!

The next day, Dipani and I set out for Naugaon, a nearby village, guided by Uday Singhji, a genial elderly staffer at the resort. The women were threshing wheat feverishly when we arrived — anxious to beat the steadily gathering rain clouds. We were soon comfortably settled in Singh's house. Not only the family but also the neighbours dropped in to chat.

To a city-dweller, the light-eyed men and beautiful women of these villages appear almost impossibly innocent. They welcome complete strangers into their homes, ready to share their stories — and meals — with a heartfelt generosity. Every family made us feel welcome as we toured the village.

It began raining on our way back. But we took shelter in Chalnichhina, a nearby market. A steaming plate of Maggi may not qualify as haute cuisine but it is not to be disdained in such moments.

The weather turned colder. As we huddled around the bonfire that evening, jagged streaks of lightning lit up the inky sky. But as it is often in hilly areas, the storm cleared up within the hour.

We'd dined early and I stood alone on the balcony for a while before retiring to my room. The stars were out — sparkling in the clear mountain air. I recognised Venus and the Great Bear. Then, there was a power out and the villages around plunged into darkness. The resort had back-up power though. A night bird called and an answering call came from a distant hill. I felt just happy to be there.

TRAVEL TALK

Getting there: From Kathgodam, the nearest railhead, Thikalna is a 4.5 hours' drive away, while Chalnichhina is a 3.5-hours' drive.

Staying there: The stay at Itmnaan Estate costs Rs 10,000 per night for a couple. It includes all meals, beverages and guided walks. The Village Walk goes up to Rs 10,000 per person per night on a twin-sharing basis and includes accommodation, all meals, pick-up/ drop from Kathgodam, surface transport and an English-speaking guide.

Call 91-11-2612 2509 or go to www.itmnaanlodges.com.

