

Footloose in the clouds

GIRISH MOORTHY

SHARE · COMMENT · PRINT · T+



High note: Terraced wonderland at Nowgaon in the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand - GIRISH MOORTHY

RELATED

TOPICS

[India](#)
[Uttarakhand](#)

[economy, business
and finance](#)
[tourism and leisure](#)

station.

Itmnaan is a beautiful word in Urdu, connoting, I am told, a combination of relaxed confidence and insouciance, and conjures up images of holidaying without a care. It has been aptly chosen for the lodge I was fortunate to visit in the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand at an altitude of over 6,000 ft.

The journey began at Old Delhi Station, where one boards the train to Kathgodam, the railhead for Nainital and other hill-stations. Travelling light, I decided to try the much-vaunted Delhi Metro, emerging above ground at the Chandni Chowk stop after a pleasant 30-minute ride, and then walking for a couple of minutes before being thrust into the hurly-burly of Old Delhi railway

For the modern traveller habituated only to airports and taxis, Old Delhi will come as a bit of a shock, reminding one of the maddening contrasts of India. The Ranikhet Express left after 10.30 p.m., and we sleepy passengers alighted at a sleepy Kathgodam in the wee hours of morning.

CLIMB INTO THE CLOUDS

Ashish, the lodge owner, had arranged a pick-up vehicle for me, and the driver, Azhar, was waiting at the station. As we set off a little after 5 a.m., the first hour of the 95-km drive was spent in darkness, and I waited with a mixture of impatience and anticipation to see the daylight break. And when it did, we had already ascended a few thousand feet. It was a cloudy day, and as we stopped at a roadside stall for a cup of the strong, cloying, steaming mixture that passes for tea (but welcome nonetheless!), we were able to catch a glimpse of Trisul (so called because it is a massif of three peaks, representing Lord Siva's trident) playing peek-a-boo among the clouds.

The road to Nowgaon (our destination), Azhar said, was built by the British colonial rulers when they were setting up most of India's hill-stations; and it appears that other than the cursory maintenance, not much has been done since. The rains often wash away parts of the road. We encountered several unpaved stretches under construction. However, the laborious and trundling three-hour trip had its own rewards, as I could contemplate small-town and village life and take in the scenery, as we steadily gained altitude, one hairpin bend at a time.

IN SPLENDID ISOLATION

When we arrived at Itmenaan, I was met by two staff members, who took charge of my luggage and handed me a walking stick for the remainder of the journey, as the lodge can be approached only on foot. I promptly branded the stick as "Himalayanstock" as it reminded me of the famous Alpenstock used by Swiss shepherds to negotiate the glaciers of the Alps. It is a definite boon for the not-so-surefooted, as the path was steep, uneven in parts, and long. I was getting warmed up for the treks that lay in store.

After a 15-minute walk, I had my first glimpse of the lodge — three tidy rooms in a painstakingly restored Kumaoni house. Navin, the chef and chief steward, was waiting with a glass of warm, delicious rhododendron juice, and hot towels. From this very gesture, I knew I was certainly going to enjoy my stay. The room was tastefully decorated, and the spacious bathroom had sleek, modern fittings. The entire building seemed to have been carefully restored using local material. In fact, masons were at work during my stay, and so quiet was the general area that for hours during the day, the only sound heard was of chisel striking stone.

A few books were thoughtfully placed in an alcove in my room, and I read a fascinating account of the Mount Nandadevi Sanctuary, the history of assaults on the mountain, the subsequent closing of the sanctuary, and its brief re-opening for the expedition. The magnificent high-altitude meadow, populated by mountain goats and a few other animals and birds, has two protective rings of impassably high and treacherous mountains. The Nandadevi peak is the crown jewel as seen from the Kumaon hills, visible on any clear day from the lodge, looming above its neighbouring summits — Trisul, Trisuli, Nandakot and Nandaghunti among others — a forbidding wall of glistening white in the distance.

TREKKING PARADISE

An excess of carousing at a family wedding the previous week had rendered me somewhat *hors de combat*, so my stay involved more slumber than strenuous exertion, embracing the true spirit of *itmenaan*. Yet I did enjoy two good hill walks. The first was a tour of the sprawling estate with its assortment of vegetation, my favourite being the lemon tree with bright, large succulent fruits only yards from the gazebo that serves as the Itmenaan dining room.

On the second day, I set out on a seven-km hill walk with a lissom guide named Dhyan Singh. Although he gave me the 'Himalayanstock', I was determined to make the least use of it. But in retrospect, whenever we encountered the horned bullock or a herd of goats along the trails, the stick gave me a great sense of security even as I stepped aside gingerly to let the beasts pass. There are innumerable walking paths that criss-cross the terraced landscape, giving you multiple options for getting from point A to B.

FOOD OF THE HILLS

All the meals at the lodge appeared to be carefully planned and executed. The highlight of breakfast, for instance, was the fruit plate piled with produce both grown on the property and sourced locally. So there is a wide and fresh selection — an assortment of berries, orange, papaya, chikoo, banana, fruit of rosemary, kiwi, watermelon, black grapes and more. The bread, too, was baked on the premises and then toasted — infinitely preferable to the factory-sliced fare that is the bane of modern living.

Lunch and dinner were elaborate affairs too. Being the only diner, and vegetarian to boot, I was served a variety of tasty foods prepared just for me; typically continental fare during the day — zesty hummus with pita, an endive salad, and deliciously roasted potatoes and other vegetables, and a traditional North Indian dinner. The imaginative desserts concocted included chocolate mousse, banana foster and banoffee, the last of which apparently came to Himachal Pradesh from young English trekkers in the 1970s. The meals, paired with a young though bold Sula Cabernet-Shiraz, shall always remain unforgettable for me. And truth be told, I lost count of the pots of Darjeeling I savoured each day, starting with 'bed tea' and ending with the last cup of the night, relished in the stillness that was broken only by the crackling of the bonfire as it smouldered and slowly faded into the night.

Keywords: Kumaon hills, Uttarkhand, trekking in hills, Itmenaan lodge, food,



Ads by Google