



[Home](#) » [Hotels, Resorts & Spas](#) » [The Butterfly Effect In Bhimtal](#)

Hotels, Resorts & Spas

The butterfly effect in Bhimtal

Flap your wings and head to Fredy's Bungalow, Bhimtal, a former home that has now opened its door to tourists

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Sattal is a short hike down from Fredy's Bungalow and a great birding destination



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Some places seem just too shy to announce themselves to the world, as if they're not sure exactly who they are at the moment, and would like to think things over first. So it was that we could find only the sketchiest information on Fredy's Bungalow, Bhimtal, though butterflies figured in it. All that was revealed by the invitation to visit was that it had recently joined the ranks of some 'rare' hotels in India — that, plus the lack of online details and sales pitch, made it appealingly mysterious.

The drive to Bhimtal from Delhi was past the extreme squalor of small towns apparently existing only to serve the trucking industry. Nature and butterflies were not uppermost on my mind; manoeuvring around the road-hog trucks was more urgent. The traffic continued to spoil the show even after the car ploughed through Haldwani and began the uphill climb towards Bhimtal. The hotel is very easy to find, I had been told before setting out. So I kept my eyes peeled for the typical roadside boards advertising hotels, guiding travellers with helpful arrows. There were none for Fredy's. A few kilometres passed. Still nothing. The 'appealingly mysterious' sheen was beginning to wear off now. Phone calls to my one saviour, Mr Anand from Fredy's, were repeatedly interrupted by the road bends cutting off the signal.

At last, we discovered the correct turn, veering off to the left from the main road that snakes past lake Bhimtal. Tyres kicking up dust on the kutcha road, the car bucking in protest against the uneven surface, we progressed, wishing for Fredy's to show up soon.

This part of the town, where Fredy's Bungalow stands, has an interesting history — a large tract of mountain slope was first purchased by one Mr Jones in colonial times; three buyers, including Frederick Smetacek Sr, the pioneering butterfly man, and a minor maharani, bought the Jones estate, now corrupted to June Estate; and finally, these three estates were further parcelled out to several individual buyers or tenants. The present June Estate — it's hard to see its exact boundary — is a mishmash of modest to picturesque private properties constructed decades ago and more recent structures that refuse to blend in with the landscape. Bhimtal is not visible from here, but Sattal is, if you can huff and puff your way up a rocky trail, to a high ridge near Fredy's Bungalow.

As it turned out, the hotel was easy to find, being one of the biggest houses in the neighbourhood. A green gate on the kutcha road announced its presence and a further few minutes' drive brought us to the large silver gate of the actual property. It was like arriving at someone's house while the host is still adjusting his dressing gown inside. A most un-hotel-like air hung about Fredy's Bungalow. It was a pleasing building in timeless European style, a large open space in front of it ending in a row of well-tended plants. The driveway sloped upwards from the entrance, and a little bench on a raised grassy area facing the gate invited one to flop down on it after that bumpy ride.

A smiling young man appeared with a tray of juice, water and cold towel, and thankfully that's where the reception ritual ended. A question put to Mr Anand later revealed that Fredy's Bungalow had got its 'hotel' status only a fortnight before our visit, so it was no surprise that the property was run like a semi-organised household, manned by genuinely polite and well-intentioned staff who didn't always get everything right, but that didn't really matter.

Frederick Smetacek Jr, who had built this house, passed away four years ago, but his presence is felt through his butterfly collection, displayed on every wall of the massive living room. It is his brother, Peter Smetacek (petersmetacek.com), who has created, curated and run the well-known butterfly museum of Bhimtal, housed in a room in Peter's home, located right next to Fredy's Bungalow. A visit to the museum (entry Rs 100 per person) is highly recommended.

The hotel has the understated elegance found only in houses built before the age of décor one-upmanship. The white walls contrast nicely with the dark polish of the wood (all deodar). The items of furniture have clean, straight lines and classy upholstery. With only four rooms, one of them qualifying as a single or a tiny double, Fredy's Bungalow is best experienced as part of a small group of like-minded travellers, especially those who value relaxation more than a long checklist of 'recreational activities'. Not the ideal pitstop for the package tourist crowds or day-trippers with noisy youngsters. All the rooms have their own personality and distinguishing features, e.g. an antique wood-panelled bathtub and ornate dresser in one room, and a sitting area under a sloping roof in another. A little library set in an alcove between the rooms has a variety of thrillers, travel titles and comics; on a quiet evening, one could spend a long time sitting on one of the wooden stools, turning pages. All the rooms have a second door opening to a common rear verandah running along the length of the house — a good place for sundowners or evening tea, though there's no view to speak of.

If you can make your way up to the ridge, you'll be treated to a view of Sattal far below, the tourist hordes that throng the lake out of sight from this vantage point. Sattal is a 2km trek down from Fredy's Bungalow, not a very hard one at that, though the wrong shoes might cause a few slips and tumbles where leaves and dry grass make the trail slippery.

Unfortunately, when you do reach Sattal, your senses will be assailed by the above-mentioned tourist hordes busily littering the place and shouting out every little thought that crosses their mind. A little more peace and quiet may be found at Naukuchiatal, the nine-cornered lake by which a previous Smetacek bungalow stood — it's still there, but with a different owner. I found a tree trunk leaning horizontally over the lake, a cool seat from where to contemplate life. A small lake that deserves some attention is Kamaltal, a water body full of hundreds of lotus flowers, seen on the way to Naukuchiatal.

Bhimtal, the largest of all the lakes in Uttarakhand, is a beauty when it fills up in the monsoon. In summer, however, its water is released for human consumption, leaving the lake part-dry.

In the cooler months of the year, and also in monsoon, Bhimtal and Sattal are good places for bird-watching.

The forests around Sattal have more than 200 varieties of birds, including babblers, tits, bulbuls, warblers, minivets, woodpeckers, pigeons, mynah and barbets. The butterfly species number more than 500 — a magnet for researchers and nature-lovers. Though tourists are everywhere, their specific interest in 'enjoyment' allows one to leave the throngs behind and walk through the quieter patches of greenery. Once these *tal* visits are wrapped up, you can get back to the real business of the trip: unwinding.

The meals at Fredy's Bungalow, both the Indian and Continental preparations, are rather good, barring some of the soups that I nicknamed 'experimental soups' for their overwhelming use of condiments like bay leaf and *garam masala*. The desserts are outstanding — the banoffee was described as "lethal" by photographer Dileep Prakash, an old friend of Fredy Jr.

To have a nice outdoor brunch, you needn't venture far. Sloping away from the ridge trail is a substantial tract of forest that's still private property and, therefore, free of outsiders. The family graves are here. Sunlight filters in through the dense canopy of leaves, helpfully illuminating potential picnic spots. Picture a gingham cloth, a hamper, grassy expanses all around, the light cool even on a warm morning, a few good friends, and chilled beer. Fredy Jr loved to tell stories, Dileep recalls. This is the perfect spot to keep that Fredy's tradition alive.

The information

Getting there

June Estate, Bhimtal, is about 6-7 hours by road from Delhi. The turning is about three-fourths of a kilometre from the point where the lake starts, when climbing up from Haldwani. Trains run from Delhi (Old Delhi and Anand Vihar stations) to Kathgodam, stopping at Haldwani, from where taxis go up to Bhimtal.

Where to stay

Fredy's Bungalow ([☎ +91-124-4062480/81](tel:+91124406248081), [☎ +919810265781](tel:+919810265781), info@rareindia.com, rareindia.com) has four double rooms, including one with twin beds (ground floor). Tariff ranges from Rs 5,176 (Beetle Room, single occupancy) to Rs 9,179 (Butterfly Rooms, double occupancy). Extra charge for children above six. Rates include breakfast, evening tea/coffee, taxes. Meal charges: Rs 600 per meal.

What to see & do

The most relaxing thing to do in Bhimtal is an easy hike, and some amateur birding. Take sturdy boots with a good grip, and a pair of binoculars for spotting birds and butterflies. Ask a Fredy's staff member for the best spot for panoramic views of Sattal. Pedalling enthusiasts can flit from lake to lake on bicycles; the hotel has no mountain bikes as of now, so enquire about hiring one locally. For a change of scenery, go for high tea at Fishermen's Lodge (thefishermenslodge.com, [☎ +919411107854](tel:+919411107854)), a hotel that sits on a slope across the lake from Fredy's, for its large wooden deck with a grand view of Bhimtal.

