

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY ITMENAAN ESTATE

OFFLINE IN UTTARAKHAND

If you're on a holiday no one can see or 'like', is it even real? A traveller overcomes social media withdrawal at a Himalayan retreat with misty mountain views and delicious Kumaoni food

Sandip Roy

Which peak is which? I asked the smiling young man who brought the tea. "I guess that tallest one is Nanda Devi? What's the one next to it?"

"Himalay hain. They are all Himalayas," the man beamed. He had grown up in these parts of Uttarakhand. Used to a dazzling range of snow-capped peaks, he'd never needed to learn to name and label them all, like a lepidopterist collecting butterflies.

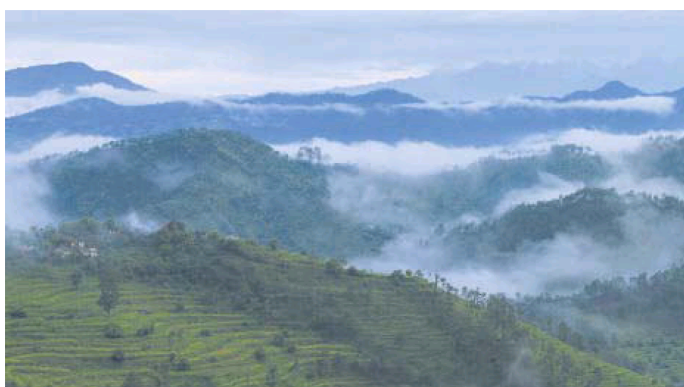
But Bishan, my partner, and I are plains people, peak collectors. We needed names so that we could tag them on our Instagram feed, to find our social media bearings.

We can just Google a photographic map of this part of the Himalayas to find out which peak is which, said Bishan. The problem was, here at the Itmenaan Estate in Uttarakhand, there was no Wi-Fi, my dangle was useless, and the network on the phone spotty.

Itmenaan dilaana, in Urdu, means to calm someone down, clearly a phrase popularized long before social media. The tumult of even the ocean is just the shallow end of the swimming pool when compared to the turbulence of our insatiable hunger to appear happening on social media.

Where are you going, asked my mother when I told her about the trip. Itmenaan Estate. Where is that? Near Chalnichhina village. Where is that? About 4 hours from Kathgodam railway station. Then you have to walk another 15 minutes or so to actually get there. What's it near? Nowhere in particular. But what's that? Peace. Tranquillity. Calm. I was thinking about the TripAdvisor reviews. Curl up with a book. Take a nap. Gaze at the mountains. Listen to the breeze in the pine trees. Later I realized all this is really code for withdrawal from social media.

It was idyllic getting there through pine and deodar forests and the occasional scarlet burst of rhododendron. The 100-year-old stone cottage is beautiful, the doors



(top, from left) Cottages at the Itmenaan estate; the cosy lounge area; (above) a breakfast at the estate; and (below) a view of the hills from the terraces on a cloudy day.

opening out to a tumbling valley in cascading shades of green, behind which lurked peaks obliterated by clouds. The all-stone bathroom, built by stacking stones without using cement, bathed in natural light from the skylight, was, as their website calls it, "arguably the best bathroom in the Himalayas". The roses were in bloom and bees and butterflies flitted around as we sat on the stone ledge in the sun with our welcome drink of rhododendron juice. The quiet was unbelievable.

But once we had breathed in deeply of the quiet, we had to confront the essential question every holiday presents—what do we do now? We have become used to thinking even a do-nothing holiday comes with cute mountain cafes, cooking classes with local ingredients, and Ayurvedic spas. Here there was none of that. The cook asked if we wanted chicken for dinner and then trekked up to the little village to buy it. Bishan and I looked at each other as reali-

zation dawned that we might actually have to make conversation.

I tried to remember the activities listed on the website.

Go for a walk among the pines. We did that, strolling a couple of goats.

Bird watching. A tiny blue and yellow one had made its nest in the wall outside our window. Every few minutes it would fly out and return with a freshly-caught wriggling worm, which its chicks would greet with ecstatic cheeps. We watched the bird but it is really bird-watching if you never try to identify it?

We could hike down to a waterfall. It's just down there, one of the employees said casually, skipping down the hillside in his rubber sandals. After 10 minutes of trying to follow him gingerly and slipping and sliding on wet stones, we could barely hear the sound of faraway water. Dusk was gathering. We abandoned the adventure.

"We should have brought the Scrabble," said Bishan. In the little "common"

room, all I found were some discarded novels and a chessboard. Suddenly, fat drops of rain fell. Within minutes, mist blanketed the valleys and hail started clattering on the roof. Lightning flashed over the hills in front, dramatically splitting the dark clouds while thunder growled. Then, just as suddenly, it was over. The clouds disappeared and the stars started coming out, one after the other, like lights being turned on. Bishan tried to identify Orion's belt while I tried in vain to upload a video of rain clouds rolling across the mountains on Instagram.

Giving up, I focused instead on getting the kitchen boy to get us a flask of hot water. In perhaps our only moment of foresight, we had brought along a small bottle of whisky. Hot water, whisky and Orion's belt sounded like a good combination in the post-rain chill. For dinner, the cook had promised us local delicacies—*bhang ki chatni* made with hemp and *aloo gutika* with the nutty *jakhiya* (Asian spi-

EAT LOCAL

Here are some must-try Kumaoni vegetarian dishes

Aloo jakhiya: The standard simple and utterly tasty potato dish from the hills, tempered with 'jakhiya' seeds.

Bhang ki chutney: A delicious tangy chutney made with roast hemp seeds mixed with cumin and other spices.

Kulath ki dal: A hearty garlic and asafoetida infused 'dal' made of horse gram, a specialty of the hills.

Bhatti ki dal: The local black soy bean blended with rice paste is filling, warming and packed with protein and minerals.

Sisunak saag: The tender leaves of stinging nettles or 'bichhu ghaas' become a local delicacy when boiled and tossed with 'jakhiya' seeds.

Lingadu saag: If you come during the monsoon, you should try the stir-fried, tender wild asparagus fronds.

Thechwani: The simple 'pahadi mooli' or radish which is crushed into pieces and stir-fried with onions and tomatoes.

derflower) seeds only found in these parts. It was delicious but afterwards, there was nothing to do but sleep.

That night, I suddenly woke with a start. It was snug under the blanket, but my heart was thudding as I missed the reassuring hum of a big city, even a sleeping one. Here the darkness smothered in on all sides like cotton wool, making me feel anxious, cut off from everything I knew. Somewhere in the real world, friends shared selfies and pictures of meals they were eating, while I tossed and turned in the quiet, having a holiday no one could see or "like". As the sky lightened, the bird parents resumed their worm hunt, and the greys outside became green. Bishan sleepily looked out of the door and gasped.

Where there had been only clouds, there were peaks now, glistening in the rain-washed morning. Finally, I understood what it meant to surrender to the awe of the Himalayas even when you cannot immediately Facebook it.

As we sat outside having our morning tea, the elderly Californian couple in the next room emerged, ready for their morning trek to a local village.

"Good morning," she said. "Lovely, isn't it? Do you know what peak that is?"

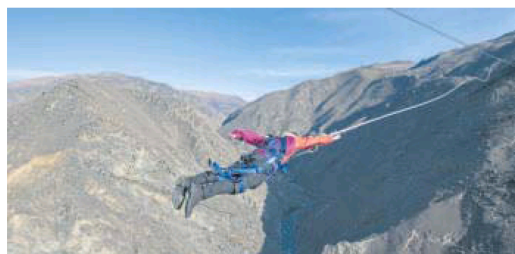
"Maybe Nanda Devi. I'm not quite sure," I replied. "Oh," she said, puzzled. "Not Everest?" "That's in Nepal," said Bishan.

"Oh dear," said her husband. "We told everyone back home we were having tea while looking at Mt Everest." "Our friends are so envious," said his wife. "One said it's been on her bucket list forever."

"What are you going to do?" I said laughing.

"Hmm," she replied. "Maybe we'll just let it be."

And I realized that was the real gift of cutting ourselves off from Facebook and Instagram. Free from their geo-tagging, check-ins and labelling, everything was suddenly magically possible and the difference between a Nanda Devi and an Everest was nothing more than a tall story, a lie as white as a snowcapped peak, to be savoured with tea and biscuits on a fresh mountain morning in a beautiful cottage near nowhere.



An adventure-enthusiast on the catapult in New Zealand's Nevis Valley.

Fancy a catapult across the ravine?

Founders of the world's oldest commercial bungee jump have launched a new activity

Queenstown, the city dubbed the world's adventure capital, has a new challenge for thrill-seekers. Besides bungee jumping, skydiving, paragliding, canyoning, zip-lining, river surfing and more, visitors can now also try the catapult. The catapult propels participants 150m across a ravine, where

to reach one million bungee jumps at its original Kawarau Bridge Bungee Centre. It offers bungee jumps at two other sites in Queenstown and one in Auckland, as well as ziprides, swings, a bridge climb, tower walk, and now the catapult over a ravine in the stark and beautiful Nevis Valley.

Henry van Asch, co-founder of the company along with A.J. Hackett, says he came up with the original idea more than three decades ago, while travelling around France in the 1980s. At the time, he toyed with the thought of riding a mountain bike off a bridge with a bungee cord attached. It took several million dollars in research and development, and nine months of heavy-duty testing to transform that old idea

An artistic lotion for the ocean

A British artist is using sculpture to spread awareness about fragile marine environments

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In August 1954, a bronze cast of Jesus with outstretched arms was sunk in the cove of San Fruttuoso, a parish in north-west Italy. Evocatively titled *Christ Of The Abyss* and created by Guido Gallotti, it may have been the first instance of an "underwater sculpture". The work was a tribute to the first Italian to wear self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (scuba) gear, the diver Dario Gonzatti, who had died tragically in those very waters a few years previously.

Now, the term "underwater sculpture" is synonymous with one man: 44-year-old British artist James deCaires Taylor. Since 2006, his website says, he has created a number of underwater "museums" and "sculpture parks"—permanent, site-specific installations that collectively hold



Anthropocene, a life-sized replica of the Volkswagen Beetle, in Cancun's Museo Subacuático de Arte.

ALAMY

alone at a table with a typewriter. At about 13ft, they can contemplate the 16 female forms lying flat on the ocean floor. At the Museo Subacuático de Arte (Musa), located in the waters around the Mexican resort town of Cancun, one of the major draws is *Anthropocene*, a 19-ton cement replica of a Volkswagen Beetle. Taylor's underwater wonders are not confined to the tropics. In January 2017, the Museo Atlántico opened off the south

facilitate his art. He uses textured, pH-neutral cement to encourage coral polyp attachment. Projects are located down-current from natural reefs, so there are areas for fish to settle in after spawning. Setting up

What may appear as relics of

sculpture sites has the added advantage of reducing tourist footprint around the natural reefs. Stimulating fish aggregation is one of the design objectives—for instance, little holes in the windows of the cement Volkswagen allow marine life the ideal space to breed and live.

The dominant theme of Taylor's works is transformation—the essence emerges when the ocean begins to colonize the sculptures, which are continually transformed by natural light effects. What may appear as relics of a submerged civilization actually constitute an underwater iconography of an alternative marine conservation model.

Taylor's latest project is much closer home, and a relatively short flight away. The Coralarium—which opened in July at the Fairmont Sirru Fen Fushi in the Maldives—comprises semi-submerged sculptures on plinths at different heights to transform the viewing experience on the basis of tidal movements. According to a press release, the 120-villa resort offers guided tours of the structure, led by its resident marine biologists.

Scientists have predicted that 90% of the world's coral reefs will have disappeared by 2050. In a TED talk he delivered on a boat in the Solomon

they experience up to 3G of force and speeds of almost 100 kilometers per hour in 1.5 seconds. The catapult has been developed by AJHackett Bungy, which set up the world's first commercial bungee jump 30 years ago at Kawarau Bridge, putting New Zealand on the world's adventure map. This month, the company is set	into the Nevis Catapult <i>At a turn on the catapult costs 255 New Zealand Dollars (NZD), around \$12,000 per head; www.bungy.co.nz/queenstown/nevis/nevis-catapult.</i> —Neha Dara	over 850 life-size public works. In Grenada's Molinere Bay, Taylor's first major project, begun in 2006, is now a sculpture park with 75 pieces. Among them, at a depth of 22ft, divers can approach the eerie <i>Lost Correspondent</i> , a man sitting	coast of Lanzarote in Spain's Canary Islands. Art for art's sake? Far from it. Taylor, a former dive instructor, has witnessed the rapid depletion of coral reefs. This is why he spends a lot of time understanding the science to	a submerged civilization actually constitute an underwater iconography of an alternative marine conservation model	Islands in 2015, Taylor pointed out that it is "really hard" to think of the ocean, "something so plain and so enormous", as fragile. Through his art, he hopes to convey the potential for beauty, light and life in the threatened abyss.
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