

# *VALLEY OF FLOWERS AND HEMKUND TREK*

## OVERVIEW

**Region:** Chamoli, Uttarakhand

**Trekking Altitude:** Max(4329 mtrs)

**Grade:** Easy to Moderate in parts with the Hemkund ascent being slightly difficult

**Total Trekking Distance:** 46 Kms

**Best Season:** July to Septmeber is the best season by far. This is when the flowers bloom in incredible profusion.

**Temperature Range:** 7°C to 30°C.

## BRIEF INFORMATION

The Valley of Flowers is one of the most incredible locations in India famous for its spectacular diversity and sheer magnitude of brightly coloured flowers that stretch as far as the eye can see, fringed by beautiful snow capped peaks. The flowers vary from the magnificent blue Himalayan poppy to the woolly white pure Edelweiss and the rare Brahma Kamal that is said to bloom here once in 12 years. During the flowering season between June to late August, the entire valley is carpeted in a knee high treasure trove of blossoms of probably all imaginable colours.

Close to the Valley of Flowers lies the sacred site of Hemkund Sahib, a high altitude glacial lake that is a place of pilgrimage for the Sikhs. This is a magnificent lake frozen through most of the year, and surrounded by fractured granite peaks with snow caps and glaciers that feed the lake.

The trek itself is fairly easy as far the Valley of Flowers is concerned, however the trek to Hemkund Sahib is fairly steep and due to the altitude gain can cause some to feel the effects of AMS.

To add to the allure of the trek is the visit to Badrinath, which is the holiest of the sacred "char dhams" in Hindu mythology. The holy town is nestled in a bowl surround by mighty snow peaks with the most prominent being the Neelkanth Parbat and the Swargarohini. Close to Badrinath is the village of Mana, 24 kms away from the Tibet border that is famous for the cave where Ved Vyas is said to have written the epic Mahabharata.

## **SHORT ITINERARY**

- Day 1:** Drive from Delhi to Rishikesh (250 Kms, 5 to 7 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Rishikesh
- Day 2:** Drive from Rishikesh to Joshimath (255 Kms, 7 to 8 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Joshimath
- Day 3:** Drive from Joshimath to Govindghat (21 Kms, approx 1 hour), Trek from Govindghat<sup>1,828 mtrs</sup> to Ghangharia<sup>3,050 mtrs</sup> (13 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs), Overnight Camping
- Day 4:** Trek from Ghangharia to Valley of Flowers<sup>3858 mtrs</sup> and back to Ghangaria (7 to 9 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs), Overnight Camping
- Day 5:** Trek from Ghangaria to Hemkund Sahib<sup>4,329 mtrs</sup> and back to Ghangaria(12 Kms, 8 to 9 hrs), Overnight Camping
- Day 6:** Trek from Ghangaria to Govindghat(13 kms, 3 to 4 hrs) & Drive from Govindghat to Badrinath (25 Kms, 1 hr), Overnight stay in hotel at Badrinath
- Day 7:** Drive from Badrinath to Rishikesh (297 kms, 9 to 10 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Rishikesh
- Day 8:** Drive from Rishikesh to Delhi (250 kms, 5 to 7 hrs)

## **INTERESTING FACTS/INFORMATION ABOUT THE PLACE**

### **Joshimath**

The name Joshimath is derived from “Jyotir-math” where “math” can be translated as a monastery. It is the northernmost monastery among those established by the seer Adi Shakaracharya, who had travelled extensively in the Garhwal Himalaya. It lies in the Chamoli district, and is the base for a number of treks and expeditions to some of the highest and most picturesque peaks in India. It has a number of interesting temples with their associated myths, none more so than the Narsinh Temple.

### **Narsinh Temple**

This is the main temple of Joshimath and is dedicated to Lord Vishnu in his avatar of “Narsinh”, half man and half lion. As per the local mythology, if and when the right hand of this idol of Narsinh breaks (and it is currently on the verge), the mountains of jay-Vijay en-route to the Badrinath shrine, will come together in a cataclysmic event, and the deity of Lord Badrinath in the Badrinath shrine shall disappear and re-appear from the ground as a solid black stone 10 kms away from Joshimath, at Bhavishya Badri. This may not seem far removed from a possible disaster, since the region lies on a fault line and is prone to seismic events!

### **Valley of Flowers**

The Valley of Flowers in the State of Uttarakhand is a high altitude alpine Biosphere Reserve that is included in the UNESCO World network of Biosphere Reserves. It is home to rare animals such as the Himalayan Black bear, the snow leopard, musk deer, red fox and the blue sheep. It is also home to the

Himalayan monal, but the biggest reason why the Reserve is famous is due to the huge variety and colourful profusion of flowers found here like a carpet covering entire mountainside slopes in pink, purples, yellow, red, blue and orange. The Park lies within the Nanda Devi Basin and is only open during summers as it is covered in deep snow during winters.

As per legend it is said that a rare Brahma Kamal blooms in this valley every 12 years and its glimpse is much sought after.

### **Hemkund Sahib**

Hemkund Sahib lies close to the Valley of Flowers and is a glacial lake at an altitude of 14,202 feet. It is regarded as a holy place of worship for the Sikhs who believe that God ordered Guru Gobind Singh to take birth here while meditating atop the Hemkund peak. The lake is surrounded by 7 peaks all adorned with the orange holy flag of the Sikhs – the Nishan Sahib. The lake is frozen most of the year and is out of bounds during winter with access only possible during the summer months. There is also a gurudwara at the lake which is kept open for the devotees while the lake is accessible. The lake itself is fed by a large glacier that runs along the grey mountain sides and makes for a fantastic visual delight.

### **Badrinath**

Badrinath is the most important among the “char-dhams” the four sacred pilgrimage sites in Hindu culture. It is located in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand and is at a height of 10,170 feet. It is surrounded by lofty snow capped peaks with the most prominent being the Neelkanth Parbat and the Swargarohini that is supposed to be the route to heaven that the Pandavas took, and perished along with the exception of Yudhishtira.

The name Badrinath came about due to the presence of the berry (jujube) trees called “Badri” found in abundance in the region.

The main shrine of Badrinath is very unusual and is made in a unique architectural style with a golden cupola and brightly painted stone walls and high arches that are more reminiscent of Buddhist temples.

### *The Temple legend*

As per legend, the great seer Adi Shankaracharya discovered a black stone image of Lord Badrinath made of Saligram stone in the Alaknanda river at this location and decided to built a shrine in a cave close to the Tapt Kund hot springs in his honour. It was in the late sixteenth century that the present day temple was built by the King of Garhwal, who moved the idol into it.

### The Legend of the name Badrinath

It is said that Lord Vishnu was meditating here amidst the “badri” berry trees in the scorching sun. His wife Lakshmi stood next to him and offered to give him shade from the sun by taking the form of a huge Badri tree (Badri Vishal) which gave shade to her Lord (“Nath”) and hence the region came to be known as Badrinath.

### **Mana**

Mana is a small village about 3 kms away from Badrinath and is about 24 kms away from the Tibet border. It is the last village before Mana Pass and is known for its cave where it is said that Lord Vyas wrote the epic, Mahabharat. You can also trek up to the Vasundhara Falls as an overnight trek.

### **Auli**

Auli is a ski resort in the state of Uttarakhand and lies a few kms above Joshimath. It is surrounded by spectacular peaks, primary among them being the tallest peak that lies completely within India – Mt. Nanda Devi. The Auli ski resort has a ski lift and an artificial lake that is frozen over and is used to generate snow for preserving the ski slopes if the powder snow is inadequate. Auli also has a Hanuman temple in memory of a short rest that Lord Hanuman is said to have taken while on his way to get the Sanjivani herb.

Auli is also the training centre for the ITBP (Indo Tibetan Border Police) who are regarded as one of the best warriors guarding our borders.

### **Tapovan**

Tapovan is a beautiful little wooded hamlet that literally means forest of meditation. It is 15 kms away from Joshimath and has hot springs and a small temple. It is the one of the start/end points of the complete Curzon Trail trek

### **Vasudhara Falls and Badrinath**

If you go for the trek during summer, it is worth going on a day excursion to Vasudhara Falls. You can drive to Mana village from Joshimath (the last Indian village before the Tibet border) and then trek 3 kms to Vasudhara Falls. The trail is over largely rocky terrain until you come to a tall cliff that is approximately 500 feet high, from where the waters of the Vasudhara river (which later on joins the Alaknanda) gush through with spectacular force. You can see the Chaukhamba, Balakun and Nilkantha peaks and also the bottom of the Satopanth glacier rolling down to the bottom of the Vasudhara river. From here, you can also plan a trek to Laxmi Van forest and then further on to Satopanth Glacier.

Another short excursion is possible from Mana village, where you could go upto the holy shrine of Badrinath which is 9 kms away. Usually the trip to Vasudhara Falls and Badrinath can be done together in a single day, if you leave early in the morning. The trek to Satopanth Glacier however takes a couple of days.

## **DETAILED ITINERARY**

### **Day 1: Drive from Delhi to Rishikesh (250 Kms, 5 to 7 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Rishikesh**

We meet in Delhi and begin our drive as early as possible, so that there is some time to explore Rishikesh in the evening. The drive by itself is unspectacular until we come across the holy ghats of Haridwar where we will skirt the wide and swift flowing river Ganga. From this point on, the road gets more interesting with a climb up the wooded foothills of Rishikesh, passing by the various Yoga ashrams and retreats that Rishikesh is known for.

Check-in to the hotel and venture out in the evening along the banks of the river Ganga, or enjoy a walk along the Laxman and Ram Jhula, the famous suspension bridges of Rishikesh.

### **Day 2: Drive from Rishikesh to Joshimath (255 Kms, 7 to 8 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Joshimath**

We need to start early in the morning for Joshimath since it is a long drive and there can be traffic jams along the route due to the road being narrow. It is a picturesque journey with the lovely blue river Ganga a constant companion on our right. You can see the colourful kayaks and rafts dotting the spectacular white sands.

After a few hours, the road begins ascending sharply and we will encounter the beautiful confluences of the rivers that make the Ganga, with the Alaknanda being the primary arterial river meeting the others at Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, and Nandaprayag.

We will reach Joshimath by evening and will check into the hotel for a well deserved rest!

### **Day 3: Drive from Joshimath to Govindghat (21 Kms, approx 1 hour) & Trek from Govindghat<sup>1,828</sup> mtrs to Ghanghar<sup>3,050</sup> mtrs (13 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs), Overnight Camping**

The drive from Joshimath to Govindghat is along a rough, narrow road that skirts the mountainside dangerously with a deep fall off to the thundering Alaknanda far below. After an hour of some skilful driving, we finally reach the town of Govindghat from where the trek to Hemkund Sahib as well as to the Valley of Flowers begins.

The trail begins with a footbridge across the river that takes us out of the village and begins ascending gradually along the mountainside. The path is narrow and congested with a fair amount of human and mule traffic constantly giving company.

Gradually the path gets steeper and is mostly a long ascent with very few level areas. All along to our sides rushes the fast moving and chilled glacial river – the Lakshman Ganga that flows on down towards the town. Enroute we will come across the small settlement of Bhyundaar in the distance after which the path gets steeper as we begin our final ascent. As we crest the climb, we are just 1 Km away from the village of Ghangaria which has no permanent settlement except for hotels catering to trekkers and pilgrims enroute to Hemkund Sahib or Valley of Flowers. The village itself is also along the banks of the Lakshman Ganga and it is a charming place to camp for the night.

#### **Day 4: Trek from Ghangaria to Valley of Flowers<sup>3858 mtrs</sup> and back to Ghangaria (7 to 9 Kms, 5 to 6 hrs), Overnight Camping**

From Ghangaria we will get up early in the morning so that we can maximize our time spent at the Valley. Since camping is not allowed at the valley, we have to make our way back to Ghangaria before nightfall today.

The trail leads across a bridge that spans the Lakshman Ganga onto the other side where the path bifurcates with the right path leading onto Hemkund Sahib (the origin of the Lakshman Ganga) and the left leading on towards Valley of Flowers. We will move along the left path and can notice the difference immediately as the busy mule and pilgrim packed path is now left behind for the pristine vegetation along our trail (mules are not allowed in the Valley while they go all the way till Hemkund Sahib)

We will shortly be coming to a forest checkpoint after which we will cross a small stream and then come to an iron bridge across the thundering Pushpawati river that hurtles down at great speed to join the Lakshman Ganga below. This is the point from where the unique flora of the Valley starts showing itself with patches of the stunning blue Himalayan poppy lining the grassy patches to the sides.

The trail narrows and ascends amidst rocky flanks on both sides, passing by remnants of a glacier and ascending all the way for the next 3 Kms, till we finally come to the start of the valley where a map of the valley has been put up. Just beyond it is the unbelievable visual delight with huge varieties of flowers in massive quantities spreading out as far as the eye can see- Swathes of violet Himalayan balsam, large stretches of white topped Himalayan Hogweed, the incredible Himalayan Whorl flower that has tiers of petals that change colour from white to pale pink and then rosy red over time, the brilliant blue Trailing Bellflower and the incredible woolly white Edelweiss, the symbol of beauty and purity in Switzerland.

As you wade along the knee high sea of flowers, you will find it impossible to keep track of the sheer variety that lies before you, although do look out for the spectacular blue coloured Himalayan snow berries that grow along rocks, low to the ground.

As you walk further along you will also spot the grave of the botanist Miss Margaret Legge who lost her life in an accident while studying the multitude of flowers here in the valley Of Flowers.

Continue exploring further down to the banks of the glacial streams that flow through this truly unique valley and marvel at the geranium of all colours that line the banks while all around you the snow capped peaks with huge glaciers form an incredible backdrop to this unique valley.

Finally it is time to leave and we will have to head back the way we came to Ghangaria where we will halt for the night.

**Day 5: Trek from Ghangaria to Hemkund Sahib<sup>4,329 mtrs</sup> and back to Ghangaria(12 Kms, 8 to 9 hrs), Overnight Camping**

The initial section of the trek from Ghangaria to Hemkund Sahib is the same with the difference being that this time we will take the path leading to the right after the bridge. The route is extremely steep and ascends constantly. All members are advised to walk slowly and ensure they hydrate well since there is a fair amount of height gain involved, due to which the chances of AMS are pretty high.

After 4 hours of hard ascent, we finally reach at the breath taking lake of Hemkund Sahib surrounded by 7 spectacular granite fissured peaks with glaciers leading down and feeding the lake. The weather here is pretty inclement and the lake itself remains frozen for the better part of the year due to the altitude and the precipitation. After visiting the Gurudwara here, we will begin our return journey back to Ghangaria. The return journey is also quite difficult on the knees due to the steep descent and it is important to walk carefully to avoid any injuries. We will halt for the night again in Ghangaria and will begin our return journey early morning tomorrow.

**Day 6: Trek from Ghangaria to Govindghat(13 kms, 3 to 4 hrs) & Drive from Govindghat to Badrinath (25 Kms, 1 hr), Overnight stay in hotel at Badrinath**

The trek from Ghangaria to Govindghat is a pretty easy descent and we will begin early in the morning to make sure we have enough time to explore Badrinath. We will move along the same narrow path running parallel to the Lakshman Ganga past the village of Bhyundaar, but this time due to it being a descent, the journey is much faster and we should be at Govindghat by afternoon. From here we will drive to Badrinath which we should reach in about an hour.

In Badrinath we will stow away our gear and then visit the impressive temple that stands 50 feet tall and have a golden gilt cupola roof. The exterior is made of stone with arched gateways and is brightly

coloured in the traditional Buddhist style, rather than the typical Hindu style. The inner mandapa has intricately carved pillars and walls.

The town is surrounded by snow capped peaks with the most impressive being the Neelkanth Parbat and the Swargarohini peaks.

**Day 7: Drive from Badrinath to Rishikesh (297 kms, 9 to 10 hrs), Overnight stay in hotel at Rishikesh**

The route from Badrinath towards Rishikesh is along the narrow switchbacks that cling to the sides of Himalayan mountainsides, all the way past Joshimath, Chamoli and Gopeshwar until we are finally at a much straighter route, lower down at the city of Srinagar (the capital of Garhwal) from where the road is fairly straight forward all the way to Rishikesh, pretty much paralleling the Alaknanda.

**Day 8: Drive from Rishikesh to Delhi (250 kms, 5 to 7 hrs)**

From Rishikesh to Haridwar, we descend along forested slopes, paralleling the river Ganga. The drive from Haridwar onwards to New Delhi is through the plains via Roorkee, Meerut and Ghaziabad and is almost an anti-climax after the beautiful time spent amid the sublime Himalayan beauty.