

The Climbing Guide To India

Some trekking enthusiasts like to test themselves on tough hikes while others want joyful jaunts amid scenery. Here's a definitive list of must-do Indian treks.

Words SUPRIYA SEHGAL

ASHIS GHATAK

DIFFICULTY LEVEL Easy

Tadiyandamol, *Karnataka*

An ideal warm-up hike for new and experienced trekkers, the third highest peak in Karnataka stands at 5,740 feet; it offers a varied topography of shola forest thickets and upper grasslands. The trek starts with a seemingly elementary-level walk through a coffee plantation, but soon picks up pitch as one legs it on through yellow grasslands. Baked by the harsh sun in the day, despite the cool climes of Coorg, the golden grasslands are company for most of the distance. The shola forest patches show up in the higher parts, near the crown of the hill, where the cool shade of the trees is a welcome respite. Once you've wended your way through steep but reasonably easy trails, be rewarded by a brilliant view of stacked moun-

tains as far as you can see. There are two routes for this trek. The trail starting from the Nalknad Palace is open to everyone. An alternative route can be taken from Honey Valley Estate, one of the oldest homestays in the region.

Distance Approximately 8 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 6 hours.

Best Time To Visit September to February.

Closest Base Camp Kakkabe town. The main climb starts from Kaikamba, close to Nalknad Palace. The first 3 km on a tar stretch can be shaved off if you take a vehicle right till the base of the mountain.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides Honey Valley Estate (honeyvalleyindia.in).

(Facing page) A stunning view of stacked mountains welcomes you at the crown of Tadiyandamol Peak; (this page) a single day is enough to trek the rolling hills of Dzukou Valley



HOSHNER REPORTER

Dzukou Valley, *Nagaland*

Sprawled in the shadow of the second highest peak of Nagaland, Japfu peak, Dzukou Valley is rightly christened 'Valley of Flowers of the Northeast.' Despite the threat of grey clouds tearing apart to unleash copious rain, June is the most favoured month for trekkers. The rolling hills are embellished with vibrant shrubbery and tufts of flowers. The trail is a combination of flat grassy patches, with the twin rivers of Dzukou and Japfu playing hide and seek along the way, and steep sections, which challenge the legs at 8,000 feet. With intractable topography, mixed shrubs and bamboo forests along the way also dominate the hills. There is a clear stone path through for most of the trek that was built during

the World War II. It takes four hours of maintaining consistent speed to reach the end of the journey—a dormitory that hosts many overnight trekkers. If one starts early enough, a single day is ample for the trek. One can choose a different trail to walk down, ending in Jakhama village.

Distance Approximately 4 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 4 hours.

Best Time To Visit June to September.

Closest Base Camp Viswema village, 22 km from the capital, Kohima.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides kipepeo.in, Indiatrail.org, northeastexplorers.in and aldertoursntravels.com.

Deoriatal, Uttarakhand

A legit DIY hike for beginners, a climb to Deoriatal is breezy compared to many of the treacherous Himalayan trails. Breaking the norm, the reward for the short hike is disproportionately stunning. Deoriatal is a Himalayan lake that lies in the protective embrace of an 8,000-foot hilltop meadow in Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. The mirror-like flat waters reflect the image of the bright white Chaukhamba peaks in the distance. The breathtaking view is said to have enthralled the Pandavas, who stopped here for a drink of water. But events took a dark turn when the younger Pandava brothers took a sip of water from the lake and collapsed. The place was the abode of Yaksha Dev (God of Death) and he then put questions to the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtir, who answered them all satisfactorily whereupon he brought them back to life.

Ideal for camping at night in the summer, the trek is also viable during the snowy winters. In fact, this is one of the few treks that can be done any time of the year. Along the way fiery rhododendrons and oaks offer shade, and one is likely to bump into local shepherds trailing their cattle who saunter confidently on steep hillsides. A small shaded pavilion has also been built along the trail for trekkers to rest. If you give it a night's rest, the trek can be extended to cover Tunganath Temple and Chandrashila peak in the vicinity.

Distance Approximately 2 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 3 hours.

Best Time To Visit April-June, September-December.

Closest Base Camp Sari village.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides gio.in

JYOTSNA RAMANI/WANDERWITHJO.COM



Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu

The draw of the Kolli hills trek lies not only in negotiating the rocky flats, thick greenery and numerous river crossings, but also in a 300-foot waterfall thundering down when you hit the last patch. The sweat and labour of the trek up is washed away by the cascade of water, leaving you refreshed. The trek can be done on your own as the trail is clearly defined. Initially, the walk takes one through cultivated fields, and then along a flat riverbed that leads upstream. The landscape changes from scrub to a dense canopy of trees. In the distance, towering cliffs provide an impressive backdrop to the river. One can veer off the trail along the way to access different viewpoints. The ascent ends at the Kolli Malai Temple on a ridge.

After a break here, one can head to the Agasa Gangai waterfall at the end of 1,070 steps down. The spray of water from the 300-foot fall is as refreshing as jumping into the pool at its base. Many trekkers choose to call a vehicle up to Kolli Malai via a motorable road, so that they don't have to trace the way back. After a 10-km hike, this seems to be a prudent thing to do.

Distance Approximately 10 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 5 hours.

Best Time To Visit July-December.

Closest Base Camp Puliyancholai.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides indiahikes.com.



(Facing page) Fiery rhododendrons and oaks offer shade along the way to Deoriatal; (this page) the Kolli hills trek takes you through rocky flats, thick greenery, numerous river crossings and a stunning 300-foot waterfall

Promising dramatic scenery at 14,400 feet, the Valley of Flowers is one of the few monsoon treks of the Himalaya



DIFFICULTY LEVEL | Moderate

Valley of Flowers, *Uttarakhand*

As popular as this trek might be, it's not for fledgling trekkers. Considerable conditioning and fitness are required to truly enjoy the 14,400-foot altitude weather and dramatic scenery. One of the few monsoon treks of the Himalaya, the Valley of Flowers trek sets the bar high for many flower-scaped hikes of the country—several of them are given the moniker of 'Valley of Flowers of the East, West...' and so on.

The ideal time for the trek is two days with an overnight halt at Ghangria, the halting point between Govind Ghat and the Valley of Flowers. From here, another route radiates towards the alpine lake of Hemkund Sahib (two km). Walk the route that explorer and legendary mountaineer Frank Smythe trod back in 1931. Mid-July to mid-August is the season to see the Brahmakamal, blue poppy, cobra lily anemone, geraniums and more than 300 other species of flowers in full bloom. Though the animals of the region are elusive, if you're lucky, sighting of Asiatic black bears, brown bears, snow leopards and blue sheep is not all that rare.

Distance Approximately 13 km.
Average Time Taken Approximately 5 hours.
Best Time To Visit June-October.
Closest Base Camp Govind Ghat.
Trustworthy Operators or Guides gio.in and indiahikes.com

SRINIVASA PRASATH

Often hailed as a great monsoon trek, Kalavantin Durg is actually an ideal trek for the cooler months as the rains make the path slippery; (facing page) the Sandakphu-Phalut trek promises a breathtaking view of the Kanchenjunga massif, also known as the 'Sleeping Buddha'



ROHAN SANGODKAR

Kalavantin Durg, Maharashtra

If you're looking for a high-calibre adventure tempered by the soothing greens of the Sahayadri range, then Kalavantin Durg may be the answer. Centred on the lower plateau of Prabal-machi, the trek is a popular weekend getaway option. Woodland treasures and ancient forts dominate this region, and Kalavantin is certainly at the helm of the experience. The lone fortress stands at 2,250 feet above sea level, and can be reached by a complex trail of high stone steps. One would think that it makes climbing easier, but hauling yourself up onto each step takes inordinate muscle power. From the midway point of Prabalmachi, another trail veers off towards the taller Prabalgad, a longer trek to another fortress. But one can choose only one of the two on a

single day and Kalavantin is easier on the legs. Often hailed as a great monsoon trek thanks to the gorgeous views that one can expect after a shower, it is actually better to do it in the cooler months – the rains make the path exceptionally slippery. Once atop the hill, the panoramic views are balm for the eyes.

Distance Approximately 3 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 4 hours.

Best Time To Visit October-February.

Closest Base Camp Thakurwadi.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides Local guides are available in Thakurwadi but you can trek on your own.



DEBANISH ACHOM/JOURNEYB.COM

Sandakphu-Phalut, West Bengal

It is no exaggeration when one speaks of the Sandakphu-Phalut trek as one of the best in India. After all, not many journeys award a view of the Kanchenjunga massif—also known as the 'Sleeping Buddha'—and other grand views. The week-long trek traverses several high-altitude villages before one hits the highest point at Sandakphu, at 11,950 feet. October and November are best for clear views of Lhotse and Makalu (the fourth and fifth highest peaks in the world at 27,939 feet and 27,765 feet, respectively), Everest at 29,030 feet and Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak, at 28,169 feet. Later into the winter, an all-white scape offers an otherworldly feel, which is memorable too. Spring throws up surprises in the form of mag-

nolia blooms along the way. Despite the long trek of over 30 km with three stops at Tumling, Kalipokhri and finally Sandakphu, it is still considered a moderate one, with tea rooms and homestays to stop at for the nights and the paths vary between concrete steps and easy trails to some steep sections for over 30 km on the border of Nepal and India.

Distance Approximately 30 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 6-7 days.

Best Time To Visit October and November, March to early May.

Closest Base Camp Jaubhari.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides indiahikes.com and himalayantrekker.com.



SHUBHAM MANSINGKA

For a trekker, the experience of the Great Lakes of Kashmir is no less than divine; (facing page) the Goecha La trek offers ultimate glimpses of Kanchenjunga and 14 other peaks

DIFFICULTY LEVEL Moderate to Difficult

Great Lakes, *Jammu and Kashmir*

Amongst the list of epic treks in India, the Great Lakes of Kashmir features high. So pristine is the beauty of the state that it has long been immortalised in Bollywood films. The contrast of the political turmoil in the mainstream urban areas with the abiding calm in this region is striking. For a trekker, this trek reaches one close to divinity. Clumpy grass tufts on meadows, wild horses roaming close to the streams winding through wide passes and emerald lakes in the shadow of burly grey mountains are what one can expect each day. It is considered a challenging trek due to the steep sections. But gentle, descending slopes after every such ascent give the trekker a breather. The twisting trails go over crests and down

the troughs via Nichani, Vishnusal lake, Gadsar via Gadsar Pass and Kishansar twin lakes on to Satsar, Gangabal and finally Narang. The highest point of the trek is 13,800 feet. While the view is easy on the eyes, each day requires grit to cover approximately 10 km. This trek is definitely not for the faint-hearted.

Distance Approximately 70 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 7 days.

Best Time To Visit July and August.

Closest Base Camp Shitkadi, ahead of Sonmarg.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides trekthehimalayas.com.



PHOTOCONCIERGE

Goecha La, *Sikkim*

If statistics is what you're after, there couldn't be a better trek than Goecha La. It offers ultimate adventure and glimpses of not only Kanchenjunga but also 14 other peaks like Kabru, Simvo and Pandim. Tackling the rough and meandering trail is well worth it when you have a trove of snow-clad mountains as the reward. The bright blue sky doubles as a canvas to showcase the snowy peaks in the foreground that extend into a sheet of ice with the frozen glaciers. Since this is the beginning of winter, the challenge lies not only in the steep ascents but also the falling temperature – some-

times becoming sub-zero. The highest pit-stop on the trek is Lamune at over 14,000-foot, but it's Dzongri that will leave you speechless with views of Rathong, Kabru, Kanchenjunga, Simvo and Pandim.

Distance Approximately 90 km.

Average Time Taken Approximately 11 days.

Best Time To Visit October and November.

Closest Base Camp Yuksom.

Trustworthy Operators or Guides kipepeo.in

Calm Buddhist monasteries and quaint villages lend a soothing touch to the otherwise adventurous trek of Markha Valley; (facing page) isolated stretches and high mountain passes make Kanamo Peak a challenging trail

SHUTTERSTOCK



ALAMY

DIFFICULTY LEVEL | Difficult

Markha Valley, Jammu & Kashmir

One of the most popular treks of the state, it gives one the opportunity to witness the diverse topography and unique experiences of the Leh and Zaskar regions. The cold desert topography brushed with strokes of green vegetation is spectacular. While the trek itself does not require high calibre, it traverses an 85-km trail that needs reasonable fitness to push 10 km per day. The route passes through the Hemis National Park and the Rumbak Valley, both home to rare wildlife species like the snow leopard and also the lynx, *Ladakhi urial* (goat), *argali* (Tibetan sheep), blue sheep, red fox, Tibetan wolf, *dhole* (wild dog), marmot and hare. The extreme adventure is interspersed with calm Buddhist monasteries and slow-paced villages, before surprising one again with high passes like Gandala La (15,748 feet) and Kongmaru La, (17,060 feet) or deep rocky canyons along the way.

- Distance** Approximately 85 km.
- Average Time Taken** Approximately 8 days.
- Best Time To Visit** June to September.
- Closest Base Camp** Spitik.
- Trustworthy Operators or Guides** gio.in and thegreatnext.com.

Kanamo Peak, Himachal Pradesh

To think that one can climb to 19,000-plus feet on a fairly non-technical trek in India would sound outrageous at first. But the Spiti and Lahaul valleys of Himachal Pradesh have a secret that is now slowly being discovered by trekkers. It goes by the name of Kanamo Peak. The trek requires reasonable fitness but very thorough acclimatisation as one moves up from Batal to Chandratal, then onward to Kunzum La, Kibber and the base of Kanamo, finally towards the summit and then down to Kaza. Isolated stretches with glacial lakes, meadows over mountains crumpled like bedspreeds and high mountain passes covered in snow make this a challenging trail. The trek should be done with operators who know their way around the mountain and are fully equipped with gear, medical aid, proper camping facilities and experienced guides. ♦

- Distance** Approximately 60 km.
- Average Time Taken** Approximately 8 days.
- Best Time To Visit** June to September.
- Closest Base Camp** Batal.
- Trustworthy Operators or Guides** gio.in and indiahikes.com.