

DISCOVERY

And Miles To Go

These trekking destinations will challenge you, thrill you and exhilarate you. If you're looking to spend time with yourself or steal some moments away with your fitter-than-you girlfriend, these are extremely huff-and-puff worthy.

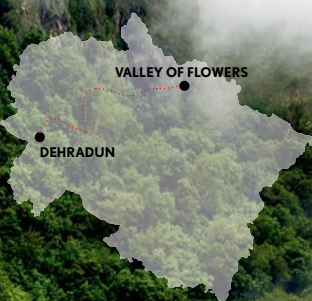
Text by SUPRIYA SEHGAL

SANDAKPHU-PHALUT
BAGDOGRA

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 magnolia 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. The paths vary between concrete steps and easy trails to some steep sections for over 30 km along the border of Nepal and India—major adrenaline rush!



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.



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. In the winter, the challenge lies not only in the steep ascents but also the falling temperature—sometimes becoming sub-zero. The highest pit-stop on the trek is Lamune at over 14,000-feet, but it's Dzongri that will leave you speechless with views of Rathong, Kabru, Kanchenjunga, Simvo and Pandim.



KALAVANTIN DURG, Maharashtra

If you're looking for high-calibre adventure tempered by the soothing greens of the Sahyadri range, then Kalavantin Durg may be the answer. Centred on the lower plateau of Prabalmachi, the trek is a popular weekend getaway option. Woodland treasures and ancient forts dominate this region, and Kalavantin is 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 a.k.a think it through. 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, you'll have panoramic views making the sweaty uphill battle worthwhile.





GREAT LAKES, Jammu & 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 Indian 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, Vishnusar 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.

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 bedspreads 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.



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. **M**