



A Walk to

IN HER LONELY YOUTH, THE HIMALAYAS
BECKONED RACHNA SACHASINH, PROMISING
DELIVERANCE. NOW SHE RETURNS TO INDIA
TO TREK THE HIGH HILLS OF KUMAON, AND
FINDS THE PEAK OF CONVIVIALITY—EVEN
IN A TINY VILLAGE OF 10.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS CRISTOFOLETTI

Remember

In the Saryu Valley,
a view of Khaljhuni
village from Jhuni.



ABOVE: One of Satri's 10 residents, Mohan Chand Bhatt, takes a break from drawing water to chat about the joys of life in the hamlet.
BELOW: Guide Hem Singh (left) and the author cut across a ridge above Binsar Valley's oak forests on their way to Khatdhara village.



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THE HIMALAYAS AND I GO WAY BACK. FORTY

years ago, at the tender age of six, I was deposited in a boarding school in Dehra Dun, a pretty valley town 240 kilometers north of Delhi and right on the doorstep of the world's fiercest mountain range. The school's stark brick buildings and bleak courtyards reeked of melancholy and mischief. Strict

matrons in flowing saris and tightly coiled buns led rote lessons and inculcated Victorian manners. I struggled through interminable cycles of icy winters, searing heat and torrential monsoons, forever piling on and peeling off layers of itchy woolens and threadbare cottons. I choked on gum porridge, dry chapatis and rubbery chicken curry, subsisting on biscuits and salty peanuts from the school canteen.

When the drudgery of it all was too much to bear, I plotted mutiny and escape. Beyond the school gates, the wild and unruly mountains overlapped and tumbled all the way east and pressed the horizon with their splintered, snowy peaks. I cast my lot with the Himalayas and wished myself among its pleated valleys and cascading slopes. The mountains seemed formidable, but in them I imagined a refuge where I could live life's grand adventures.

My jailbreak fantasies were fueled by the school's *ayah*, or nanny, an inveterate rebel full of pluck and gumption. *Ayah* called herself *pahari* lok, or mountain people, and it took her no time to turn me into a *pahari* diehard. Standing with her hips cocked, the ends of her sari tucked into her petticoat, *ayah* pulled my hair into tight braids while hatching outlandish expeditions that took me to Kumaon, her birthplace in the high Himalayas some 250 kilometers to the southeast. A gnarled landscape strewn with 7,300-plus-meter peaks like Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot and Trisal, and populated with centuries-old villages, Kumaon is where India's eastern Himalayas fold into Tibet and Nepal.

Ayah's best yarns took place on the *bugyal*, high alpine meadows carpeted with wild flowers tucked in and around Kumaon's glaciers and lofty mountain passes. Every monsoon season, her father and brothers drove their flock of sheep and goats to the *bugyal* to feast on succulent grasslands. For three months, men and beasts wandered, living off the land and camping in rhododendron forests, covering great distances to arrive and return from the roof of the world. I imagined myself herding sheep on the *bugyal*, snacking on juicy pears and mulberries right off the tree, and eating delicious *daal* and *roti* by the hearth. Compared to the harsh rules, loneliness and crappy food at boarding school, the wild Himalayas looked pretty good.

Although I finally left boarding school, I never abandoned plans to go AWOL in the Himalayas—though not in the typical frostbitten alpinist way. *Ayah's* stories convinced me that the only way to truly appreciate the Himalayas was to spend time among its ancient villages absorbing the rhythms and, no doubt, the vagaries and hardships of mountain living.

After four decades of hemming and hawing, raising kids and moving around the world, it dawned on me that I had better commit before my knees gave out. It also helped that a friend introduced me to Village Ways, an organization that works directly with locals to conduct village-to-village walking holidays in the Kumaon region. The itinerary included village stays in Binsar Valley, an uphill trek through Saryu Valley's steep, terraced fields all the way to the tented camp at Jaikuni *bugyal*—an alpine meadow three kilometers from the Tibetan border—and a meandering descent via the glacier-fed millet and bean fields of Pindar Valley. It was an expedition that *ayah* herself would have cooked up.


THE EARLY-MORNING SHATABDI

Express pulled out of Delhi's old railway station in the wee hours and chugged eastward towards the Ganges plains. Discolored concrete buildings, tin shacks, mud huts, indolent Brahman cows slobbering on cud, women with brass pots queuing up at the local well, rows upon rows of empty fields and anemic forests rolled past in no particular order or pattern, a testament to India's timeless and immutable character. By noon, I disembarked at Kathgodam where an envoy from Village Ways led me through a chirpy bunch of porters and *chai wallahs*. We loaded my backpack in his tiny Maruti hatchback and highailed it to the hills. An incredible ascent through pine and oak forests and valleys sliced by glacier-fed rivers led us straight to the gates of Khali Estate, a colonial-era lodge in the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary.

Perched on a ridge, Khali Estate looks directly onto the expansive Kumaon Himalayan range, an impressive flank of massifs including Nanda Devi along the Tibetan border and stretching all the way to the dramatic five spires of Panchachuli on the Nepali border. Leading up to the mountains were a series of overlapping valleys and ridges dotted with quaint villages. Plumes of smoke drifted lazily up to the highest peaks; farmers knee-deep in earth coaxed oxen across fields; monkeys shrieked frantically.

For the first time in years, I inhaled Himalayan air, the scent of pine and earth at once spirited and serene.

Early the next morning, Hem Singh, a 34-year-old guide clutching a thick dog-eared bird book, collected me, and we began the first day of our trek through Binsar Valley's wild oak canopy. Following old stone trails originally used by British horsemen, we traversed ravines thick with wild ginger and

A night photograph of a village scene. In the foreground, several large, conical haystacks made of dry straw are illuminated from below, casting a warm glow. Behind them, a small building with a thatched roof is partially visible. The background features dark, silhouetted mountains under a deep blue night sky filled with numerous stars. The overall mood is serene and remote.

HERE ON THE EDGE OF THE
WORLD, SHADOWS DANCED ON
THE MUD WALLS AND
CONVERSATION AND
LAUGHTER CAME EASILY

Speckled night skies
over Supi village.

turmeric and made pit stops at Dalar and Risal villages for steaming cups of sweet masala chai. On the trail, macaques swung on branches overhead, and Hem Singh nonchalantly stooped to inspect day-old leopard scat, which frankly was a bit alarming. Binsar is chock-full of wildlife, and Hem made sure I didn't miss a thing—from scurrying footsteps of the ordinary Kaji pheasant to the majestic flight of the exotic Himalayan crested eagle. By late afternoon, we cut across a ridge and descended into Kathdhara, a hamlet of 16 families pressed onto a hillside and wrapped in tiers of fields and terraces.

Kathdhara was abuzz with activity. Swinging scythes and reaping hooks, men slashed and bundled hemp stalks that would eventually be dried and woven into rope. Several young women in headscarves and bright skirts stood on rooftops, winnowing hemp seeds that would be made into soup and chutneys. Families gathered in stone courtyards, sifting trays of chilies, lentils, yam roots and various herbs. Every now and then, women laden with inexplicably large bundles of dried grass moved gingerly across narrow trails.

Forty-eight-year-old Puran Singh ran up to greet us and led us to the village's two-story guesthouse, a classic Kumaoni-style stone and white stucco building with carved wooden doorframes washed in a bright royal blue. Kathdhara born-and-raised, Puran Singh showed me to my quarters, a Spartan, cozy room on the lower level outfitted with twin beds piled with warm blankets and pretty hand-sewn linens and handsome rugs. The villagers had managed to nail "rustic chic" without even trying. Through the windows, the village unfurled all the way to the mountains, and the view seemed like a gorgeous watercolor painted with saffron marigolds and magenta bougainvillea.

Upstairs in the guesthouse kitchen, a handful of villagers squatted on the floor chopping vegetables and kneading *atta* (dough). A spry 48-year-old farmer named Prem Singh, all smiles and chatter, tended the hearth and prepared hot masala chai. I told them about my *ayah* and her stories of Kumaon. They warned that *ayah's* Kumaon was changing. Forty years ago, it was rare for families to move away from the village, they told me. Now, with no surplus crops to sell, young men are pressed to leave in search of jobs. Before Binsar became a wildlife sanctuary, Puran Singh explained, villagers co-existed harmoniously with forests and animals. They managed to eke out a subsistence living and have extra to sell. In 1990, the government issued a ban on hunting, resulting in the explosion of destructive species like the wild boar and white-faced monkeys, which are notorious for foraging and destroying crops. Village Ways' walking and trekking holidays presented a viable source of alternative income, bringing solace to old-timers like Puran Singh who have no intention of going anywhere. "*Lakri, mitti, pathar* (wood, earth, stone), fresh air and pure water. We have it all here and it's free," he beamed.

THE WEARY SHEPHERD HECKLED THE STUBBORN HERD, AND I LOOKED ON AMUSEDLY

SATRI, WHERE I STAYED THE following night, has no running water or electricity, harvests are touch-and-go, and all the young families have left for the city. In spite of this, the old-timers that live there were somehow even happier than Puran Singh, perhaps the happiest folks I've ever met.

At dusk, we gathered by the kitchen hearth and prepared the evening meal by firelight. While stirring onions and yams in a blackened pot, 74-year-old Mohan Chand Bhatt, who prefers to live here among nature with his widowed sister than with his wife and family in polluted Delhi, regaled me with stories about his army days in India and Nepal. Nearby, Uma Devi, 49, ground turmeric, coriander and hemp seeds on a large piece of stone. She mixed in yogurt, turning the crushed seeds and herbs into a creamy chutney. I rolled chapatis with Bimla Devi, while Puran Chand—the village's erstwhile realtor whose hard-sell tactics nearly convinced me to buy land in Satri—toasted them directly on the flames. Here on the edge of the world, in this smoky, fire-lit kitchen, our shadows danced on the mud walls and conversation and laughter came easily. Outside, the sky exploded with stars and the Himalayan snowcaps gleamed in the distance. In spite of drawbacks and hardships, Satri was flush with contentment and tranquility. I understood why the five families of just 10 people who have planted themselves here don't want to leave.

From Satri, I hopped in a jeep, rolled past rollicking mountain trading posts all the way to the lofty peaks of Saryu Valley, one of the last inhabited places before the Himalayas become impenetrable. In Supi, one of the largest homesteads in the region, Tara Singh, aged 28, took over guiding duties, and we explored the village's terraced fields, which began near the ridge and plunged all the way to the banks of the fast-moving Saryu River. We ducked into the village mill, a squat stone building where an ancient water-powered grinding stone turned barley, wheat and millet grains into flour.



ABOVE: In Pindar Valley, Narendar Singh and Uma Devi with their four children.

BELOW: A typical breakfast of *sarso saag* (mustard greens), *aloo sabji* (curried potatoes), and *roti of mudwa* (millet) and *geeyo* (wheat).





ABOVE: Farmers plough their terraces in Supi village. BELOW: Young Supi boys keep warm with a bonfire.



I bought a hand-knit goat hair blanket—a rustic pashmina—from Chandra Ram, who shears and spins wool in his tiny wooden shack of a shop. Bhupal Ram (no relation; all men's names here end in Ram, and all women's in Devi), the surly blacksmith, took a break from forging iron scythes to make me a silver bangle. From courtyards up and down the mountain, women in colorful headscarves and *ghagras* (long Indian skirts) hollered to us to join them. They served milky tea in steel tumblers and bombarded me with questions about my children and work, listening intently while sorting beans and potatoes.

After two nights in Supi, Tara Singh and I hit the road and made our way to Jaikuni *bugyal*, the alpine meadows *ayah* had spoken of so long ago. The ascent took us through rugged country and past Trisal, Baicham, Khaljuni and Jhuni—villages that seemed lost in another century. We ambled past women pitching bundles of hay into large, obelisk-like hillocks and a wizened postman who had spent the last 50 years walking up and down the valley delivering letters and documents. All the while, Tara Singh was alert, pointing out griffins and kestrels overhead and rattling off scientific names like a seasoned field biologist.

I huffed and puffed along, breathing a little harder as we scaled 3,000 meters. Tara Singh strolled effortlessly and kept his eye out for the iridescent blue-feathered Himalayan monal, his favorite bird. Suddenly we stumbled into a meadow teeming with bleating goats and sheep. The weary shepherd heckled the stubborn herd, and I looked on amusedly, thinking how nearly half a century ago *ayah*'s father and brothers must have done the same. I was hardly paying attention when we climbed over the ridge and arrived at Jaikuni *bugyal*'s tented camp.

JAIKUNI BUGYAL SITS AT AN IMPRESSIVE 3,500 meters and looks straight east to Nanda Devi and Nanda Kot, and behind them, the Everest-high peaks rising from Tibetan and Nepali soil. The enormous mountains that I had seen from a distance at Khali Estate were now up close. Atop the peaks, feathered clouds and dark thunderheads billowed and dissipated, only to show up again seconds later. Tara Singh pointed to Sundar Dhunga, Pindari and Kafni glaciers, which lay at the end of the v-shaped valleys and overlapping mountains.

THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Fly into New Delhi's Indira Ghandi International Airport and hop on the NDLS Shatabdi Express for a six-hour journey from Old Delhi Railway Station to Kathgodam Railway Station. From Kathgodam, it's three hours by car to Khali Estate in the Binsar Wildlife Preserve.

Village Ways' capable drivers handle all ground transportation in Delhi and Kathgodam, and will pre-book train tickets for you.

Tourist visas are required for entry into India. E-visas can be obtained in advance at indianvisaonline.gov.in.

VILLAGE WAYS TOUR

Launched in 2004, Village Ways was founded by a group of seven mountaineers and guides from India and the U.K. Modeled after inn-to-inn walks popular in the English countryside, the walking programs can be tailored to suit each group's preferences. The

program's founders trained the communities to be seasoned guides, with impeccable knowledge of the region's flora and fauna, and on the nuts and bolts of hosting foreign guests. Villagers handle day-to-day operations, such as guiding, portage, cooking and cleaning, divvying up the work equally so that each family has an opportunity to participate. The walking holidays give *parhari* lokh a much-needed lifeline, making it

By the time we arrived, villagers from Supi and Jhuni had already pitched canvas tents and laid out tea and biscuits. My tent was pretty and spacious, with high ceilings, block printed canvas panels, and a comfortable twin bed piled high with thick blankets. Though it was incredibly cozy inside, I spent most of my time hanging out on the veranda. Wrapped in a warm blanket and sipping tea, I stared at the mountains well past sunset.

I spent my last night in Dhurr, a village of about 32 families clinging to a hillside above the glacial-blue waters of Pindar River. There, I met Bhavana, a 17-year-old girl who loved her Kumaoni home but was aching to see the world beyond. While peeling potatoes—Dhurr is famous for their version of these durable crops known as *pahari aloo*, which have a creamy texture and naturally sweet taste—milking cows and doing homework, she dreamed of becoming a female cricket player or an English professor. Bhavana and her three best friends were hatching their own escape plans to Bombay where they hoped to study at a big city university. For now, she walked two hours each way to get to the high school and helped her parents with fieldwork or played cricket with her friends. I asked her if she would ever leave Kumaon for good, and she replied thoughtfully, "I want to, but I will always come back. The mountains are my home."

It was early evening, and the sun was starting to fade. We stood side by side on the stone courtyard and surveyed the mountains beyond, lost in our thoughts. I realized that my Himalayan odyssey felt like both an emancipation and a homecoming. I hoped Bhavana and her friends would make it to Bombay one day. And I wondered if my *ayah* thought of her own departure from Kumaon as an escape or an adventure. ☺