



**TREK TO
REMEMBER**



If you love trekking, but are a novice, you can still take this five-day trek to the Valley of Flowers. We tell you how. Thank us later



■ *Neeharika Satyavada*

I waited nervously at the Haridwar railway station, fidgeting with my brand new trekking bag. I was to be off on my first full five-day trek in the Himalayas. Having only done short half-day treks previously, I was as nervous as I was excited, clueless on what to expect. All I knew was I wanted to see the flowers that would have, by now, carpeted the high altitude alpine meadow wedged in the mountains somewhere beyond the mighty Nanda Devi Peak, for monsoon was here.

Come monsoon, the Valley of Flowers, a UNESCO World Heritage Site of breathtaking beauty in the Himalayas, is a deluge of exotic and rare flowers you wouldn't see anywhere else. This four-kilometer stretch of valley lies in the transition zone between the Zaskar Region of the Himalayas to the north and the Greater Himalayas to the south, making this one of the few unique bio diversity hot spots of the world. The Valley of Flowers is accessible only through a trek route through the mountains, between the months July and August.

Getting to the Valley of Flowers is a week-long affair that begins from Haridwar, the heart land of Ganga. While the actual trek begins at Pulna, reaching Pulna is in itself quite an adventure. Driving along the sinuous Himalayan roads, you trace the river Ganga from Haridwar back to its birthplace, crossing the Panch Prayag along the way. The Panch Prayag refer to the five holy confluences of rivers that eventually become the Ganga as they run downstream. Once you cross Rishikesh and go farther up the Garhwal mountains, Dev Prayag greets you first, where the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers meet just before they become India's most important river, Ganga. Beyond Dev Prayag are Rudra Prayag, Karna Prayag, Nanda Prayag and Vishnu Prayag, in that order. Vishnu Prayag comes later, for Joshimath is the first stop on this journey. The drive from Haridwar to Joshimath – the last big town before the trek begins, takes a day, giving one time for a good night's sleep before starting off on the trek.

Early next morning, we set off from Joshimath and a short drive of less than an hour later, we were in Govindghat. This is when you cross the Vishnu Prayag. At Govindghat, all trekkers to the Valley of Flowers and pilgrims to the Hemkund Sahib are issued identification cards by the Uttarakhand Government, as the trek route to the Valley of Flowers goes through the same base camp, Ghangaria, as the one to Hemkund Sahib, the world's highest gurudwara and an important pilgrimage centre for the Sikh.

Formally known as Gurudwara Sri Hemkund Sahib Ji, Hemkund Sahib sits at 15,000 feet in the Himalayas surrounded by seven peaks and a glacial lake kissing its feet. Its very name, Hemkund (Sanskrit for snow bowl) describes this stunning setting. Accessible only through a trek route between the months of May and September, this gurudwara is next in significance only to the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Every year, families made up of both the old and frail and the young and enthusiastic, take up this pilgrimage of over 14 kilometers through the rugged mountain terrain. And for me, the true spirit of this journey was in those families, their encouraging smiles and those elders who would always be ready with a kind word for the obviously struggling first-timers.

From Govindghat, taxis take you on the newly constructed road, which shortens the trek route by a good four kilometers to drop you off at Pulna. From here on, it is a three-four day trek; the first day to reach Ghangaria, which serves as a base camp; the second to go up to the Valley of Flowers and back; the third day – an extra day if one wishes to go further up, another 3,500 feet into the Himalayas to Hemkund Sahib and back; and the next day, to get back from Ghangaria to Joshimath.





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Stone paved pathways lined with shops selling refreshments, dotted along the way with gushing mountain streams and thunderous waterfalls take you from Pulna along a 12 kilometer long trek to the base camp, Ghangaria. The final leg of the trek to the Valley of Flowers is only a stretch of four kilometers, but it is the toughest for it goes through a steep path up the mountains, sometimes so narrow it is as if you are walking on a ledge with no end in sight; only the mountains to one side and a sheer drop to your other. But here too, the trek route is crowded and there are porters for hire whose livelihood comes from carrying those who can go no more in baskets, on their backs. Though it is yet another full-day trek, a picnic of packed lunch in the Valley of Flowers is the perfect payoff and that much deserved reward which serves as a great refresher of energy to complete the trek. Also, isn't the downward journey so much easier, always?



As the trek is also a popular pilgrimage route, it is logistically one of the best equipped, from helicopters that fly in to the base camp every 20 minutes to mules and porters that one can hire even further along the route. There are enough arrangements to ease your trek if needed which makes the Valley of Flowers a good option for novice trekkers just beginning to explore the Himalayas. ▣

