

# THE VALLEY OF FLOWERS

Nisha and Vasudevan have reached the picturesque Uttarakhand in the nature's beautiful canvas of colours

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**T**HERE IS A HEAVEN AND IT IS right here on the earth and it is in Uttarakhand, India. It is the Valley of Flowers!

Uttarakhand is often called Dev Bhoomi, the land of Gods. It has earned the sobriquet because of the numerous temples and pilgrimage centres that dot the Garhwal region with history going back to the time of Mahabharata. The region is full of rivers, valleys and mountains. The most prominent, Valley of Flowers is called Heaven on Earth for entirely different reasons. This valley is home to more than 500 species of flowers and medicinal plants, many of which are indigenous. Let us explore the Valley of Flowers national park, a UNESCO world heritage site which is located at an altitude of over 4000 metres in the Indian Himalayas.

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Ghangaria, providing shelter and food for the pilgrims. We had our dinner here at the Gurudwara Langar and it was one of the best langar-food, we ever had.

In fact the Gurudwara at Ghangaria also manages the one at Hemkunt Sahib. Since no one is allowed to stay at Hemkunt Sahib at night, the religious heads from the base Gurudwara, hike up and down the trail every day and for us going one itself was an ordeal! It soon started raining and we called it a day and crashed into our beds. Next day was going to be a big day.

**AHOY TRAIL AHEAD!**

It was our plan to start early, because we were expecting to be on the trail for 8 to 10 hours, which included going upto the Valley of Flowers, exploring the valley and returning before 5 PM as stipulated by the local laws. We had stocked up on our food and water, checked our cameras and batteries and packed a couple of raincoats as this was still the rainy season in these parts

**THE GATEWAY TO HEAVEN - GHANGARIA**

Ghangaria is a picturesque little hamlet which serves as a home base before hiking to the Valley of Flowers. Veritably a gateway to Valley of Flowers and a couple of more hikes. We reached Ghangaria before lunch time to an awe inspiring view of Himalayas all around. We could almost feel the power of the mountains while we checked into one of the many hotels there.

There was not enough time to make it to the floral valley and return before dark as mandated by the authorities. So after lunch we decided to explore the pleasant little one-street village.

This place is nestled at an altitude of over 3,000 Metres, at the confluence of two high altitude rivers, Hemganga coming from Hemkunt Sahib and Pushpawati from the Valley of Flowers. A visit to the office of Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam, which manages the upkeep of the village with respect to tourists and pilgrims alike, was quite informative. There was a short video of Valley of Flowers giving us the much needed trailer before embarking on the easy-to-moderate hike.

Ghangaria is also the starting point for the Hemkunt Sahib hike, the world's highest Gurudwara at around 4,300 Metres. There is also a small Gurudwara at



**GHANGARIA IS A PICTURESQUE LITTLE HAMLET WHICH SERVES AS A HOME BASE BEFORE HIKING TO THE VALLEY OF FLOWERS**







and we started just when dawn broke. We were enthralled as the early morning light kissed the surrounding mountains.

Within a couple of minutes we saw a huge waterfall and our trail was leading to it. In less than 10 minutes of leaving Ghangaria, we hit a T-junction, the right branch, the Hemkunt path, leading to the waterfall on the river Hemganga and left to the valley of flowers. At close quarters we could hardly hear each other, such was the ferociousness of the waterfall!

We paid for the tickets and took the trail to our destination for the day which was about 4 KM only but in the hills you don't measure distances by kilometres, you do it by the time taken, which we soon came to know. We crossed a smaller water fall on which there was a rickety metal sheet, doubled up as a bridge. We crossed and crossed the river Pushpawati a few times. Other times we zigged and zagged on never

ending switchbacks, all the while going up.

The terrain seemed to change magically ever so often. Our trail took us through dense forests, paths made slippery and soggy by wet leaves, landslides, myriads of types of mushrooms, minute waterfalls from which you could drink straight off and such natural phenomena. There was never a dull moment. On the other side of the gorge was a huge wall of rock, upon which nothing seemed to grow. We even saw a few flowers of types never seen on the plains below. After 3 hours of relentless walking and crossing the river one last time, we reached the entrance of the Valley of Flowers at an altitude of 3,800 Metres or so.

**THE HEAVEN ON EARTH**

The valley of flowers flanked by high mountains, was a vast expanse of almost plain land, upon which nature seemed to have created a canvas full of colours. The



**THE VALLEY OF FLOWERS WAS A VAST EXpanse OF ALMOST PLAIN LAND, UPON WHICH NATURE SEEMED TO HAVE CREATED A CANVAS FULL OF COLOURS**

valley of flowers was discovered quite by chance, about 90 years back by 3 British mountaineers, while returning from their successful summiting of Mt Kamet. The weather turned bad and they lost their way and stumbled upon this valley full of flowers. We thank Frank Smythe, Eric Shipton and R L Holdsworth for this spectacular serendipity.

Knowing that the valley was over 8 KM long, we had to decide whether we should keep walking or whether we should criss-cross for a few hours and spend more time at some places. We decided on the latter as that would also help us to reach the final resting place of Joan Margaret Legge, a botanist who was researching this region in 1939, slipped and lost her life while collecting some rare flowers on the slopes.

An Indian botanist, C P Kala, later carried out a study and painstakingly documented over 500 species of plants and flowers found in this region. Quite suddenly we noticed that there were hardly any trees here, only plants and bushes. We must have crossed the treeline somewhere en route. It is said that this carpet of flowers changes its colors every 15 days as different species flower at different times.

We were also informed at the village, half-jokingly, that these were the favourite haunts of the Himalayan Snow Leopard and the black bear. There is also a myth that fairies rule this place at night and no one who decided to stay overnight, returned ever. Walking down hill was not without challenges as it was quite slippery because of wet leaves and slushy track and at many places there was loose gravel as well.

We spent well over 3 hours at the valley and did not feel like leaving at all. Who would want to leave heaven but we neither wanted to meet the animals nor the fairies and with a heavy heart made our way back. ☐