

Head for the hills: A lot on offer this summer

Kamini Mathai,TNN | Mar 30, 2015, 06.35 AM IST



In India, the hills always come alive as April approaches. And this year - incidentally the 50th since the first Indian expedition summited Mount Everest in 1965 - there seems to be a lot happening atop the Himalayas.

While the 777 days of Incredible India Himalayas hardsell which the Union Ministry of Tourism began in 2013, hoping to aggressively market the range to national and international travellers, plummeted in 2014 when the government changed hands, private operators and associations continued to keep the momentum soaring.

After some serious petitioning, Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOAI) has for the first time managed to convince the government to allow licensed adventure operators to use satellite phones in the Himalayas. "This will definitely make trekking a lot safer because it would mean there would be no loss of communication during a trek. We're hoping it will attract international travellers," says ATOAI president Akshay Kumar. "The government has also been pushing Uttarakhand, where tourism took a hit, because of the 2014 floods. But things are looking up with many sold out dates," he says. Kumar adds that with the government also relaxing the rules for trekkers in certain restricted areas like Nubra Valley in Ladakh, there may be more demand for treks this peak season (usually during April and May).

For avid trekkers, who like to explore new terrains and trails, mountaineer-trekker-cyclist 47-year-old Depi Chaudhry - who seems to have made it his mission to walk the length and breadth of the Indian Himalayas - will be releasing a map app this summer. The GPS-enabled app, says Choudhury, is possibly the 'largest trekking map on the Indian Himalaya, and will provide trekkers with newer routes to seek and find, without worrying about getting lost. "I am developing the map with Tata Consultancy Services," says Chaudhry, who adds that the app will also allow trekkers to feed in data. Chaudhry is now setting off to cover every trek possible in Uttarakhand and map it with GPS coordinates.

THREE TO GO

TREKKER DEPI CHAUDHRY PICKS SOME OF HIS FAVOURITE PATHS TO EXPLORE

► **Easy: PABBAR VALLEY** | But only if you go after the snow has melted. Early in the season, even the easiest of treks can become the hardest because you will find that for every step you take, you are thigh deep in snow. You won't be able to trek more than 3 kilometres a day in those conditions

► **Medium: WARWAN VALLEY** | This is definitely also one of the prettiest treks as it has everything you would want to see in a trek from meadows and forests to ice and barren terrain

► **Hard: SARA UNGA PASS** | This trek can get tricky because you can encounter crevices in the glaciers



Wing Commander Amit Chowdhury of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, says in the last few years, the number of organized treks to the hills has increased. "Earlier, trips were more haphazard, operators less trained, and there were no proper measures for safety," says Chowdhury. "These days we have tour operators who do first responder programmes and first aid classes. Safety has become the priority now, so that is a big change in terms of the way tour guides operate. Perhaps this is the reason we are seeing more international travellers," he says. Organised treks, say operators, have diversified - from motorcycling and cycling treks to even having a live band tag along for live music during treks.

Chennai-based Rekha Raja, 30, decided to do a Himalayan trek last year. "We went as a group of 20 to do the Chadar Trek, which is supposed to be one of the harder treks. We walked in the Zanskar river which was completely covered with ice. It was tough, but beautiful and I will be going back next year," says the IT company executive. "One thing about the Himalayas is once you are smitten by her majestic beauty, you would always want to spend lots more time with her. Chadar felt like a cold desert, but the Sherpas were so warm and cheerful," says Rekha, who now wants to trek Everest Base Camp.

But like with every peak, there are challenges ahead. According to Kumar, with several tour operators offering cheap trips and cramping large numbers in to every season, there is a problem with garbage and human waste. "Tour operators need to be sensitized on the carrying capacity of each camp site and area," says Kumar.

Math on Ice

Scientist R SHANKAR treks to the Himalayas every year to study the glaciers. What came first? The study or the passion? R Shankar, a professor with the Institute of Mathematical Sciences in Chennai, still hasn't found the answer. Since 2008, Shankar, has been travelling to the Himalayas twice a year, pre and post monsoon to study the physics of the glaciers.

"I study the glaciers because that is my area of expertise but glaciers have become my area of expertise because I like the Himalayas," says the 58-year-old. "I've always been fascinated by the hills, and this study I am doing, where we measure the glaciers to find the rate at which they are shrinking, allows me to go there often," says Shankar, who treks around the hills when he gets a little free time during his study. "We survey the boundary and compare it with the previous year's to measure the flow of ice. We are making a mathematical model to predict what is going to happen in the next century," says Shankar.

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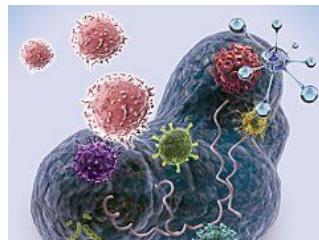
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