



**From the Sunday Times  
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"The waiter served the food and carefully poured more chai. I leant back in my director's chair and looked out over the cascade of rice terraces. Far away on the valley floor, women flickered through the fields in their vivid saris, brilliant as candle flames. Level with us, a steppe eagle glided in front of the Himalayan peaks.

This was a lunch stop on my walking trip in the Himalayan foothills, and after three days I had no blisters, no upset stomach – I'd barely broken sweat. Until recently, visiting the Indian Himalayas meant staying in a hill-station hotel or in a tent on a trek. The first option means you're a long way from traditional mountain life, but you have your creature comforts. The second gets you closer to the villages: you get plenty of creatures, just no comforts. Now, a local company has found a middle way, with a range of easy walks through spectacular foothill scenery, staying overnight in converted village homes.

My trip did begin with a night at a hill-station hotel at 6,000ft to acclimatise to the altitude. I liked it rather too much – not just the views of the snowy summits, but my room's antique wood-burning heater, fluffy quilt and hot shower. At 9am the next day, after porridge and tea, a young Indian arrived wearing a quilted body warmer and a polo shirt. He was our guide, Jaggart, a gentle and urbane chap whose easy manner made it feel as if he were taking us to see a new rockery planting, rather than into remote villages in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, just a few miles away from Nanda Devi (India's second-highest mountain), Nepal and Tibet.

With our bags whisked ahead by porters, it was easy walking, downhill along the valley floor on dirt paths worn smooth by constant use. The first locals we passed were an elderly couple escorting a caramel-coloured calf up the valley. We stood to one side to let them by. "They are taking their animal to market," Jaggart said, "and they will have been walking for many miles." The happy couple cupped their hands towards their handsomely weathered faces and offered the traditional greeting: "Namaste." I'd been too shy to namaste in India before, worried it might look affected, but here it would have been unthinkable not to.

We took lunch on a steep hill jutting into a valley, just yards after our crunching over pine needles had disturbed two guilty-looking jackals. Table and chairs waited for us, miraculously, in the lee of a shed-sized temple. As I walked round the building, I jumped as I discovered the cook huddled by a gas stove, tending a dark pot of dhal. Meals on the go were sensibly light, usually a mild vegetable curry and chapatis, with tuna sandwiches, rice pudding and fruit. And every so

often, while walking, one of the two young bearers would flip open a Tupperware tub of Indian chocolate bars.

"The holy man who is looking after this temple is now higher in the mountains", Jaggart told us. "He prays, fasts and comes lower when the snows start. "Sounds like a hard life. "Well, no," smiled Jaggart. "You might say that he is born into the lucky corner of life. The villagers leave him food, alcohol and marijuana. He prays, drinks and walks around."

The afternoon, a figure in the distance caught my eye. He was unmistakably a holy man. His feet were bare, his beard was long, grey and straggly, and he wore orange robes and smears of ash on his face. As he stopped 100ft away to namaste, I realised that it is the perfect greeting over distance less a wave, more of a long-range handshake. The holy man stood quite still, with his hands cupped, and watched as we walked away.

Our home for the night was a long-fronted house with a large family, an excitable dog and several calves outside. A young girl showed me my mud-brick room. It had carved beams around the windows and eaves painted a deep maroon. I ducked to enter where the earthen floor was funnelled smooth at the entrance. Inside was a small bed with heavy blankets, with a light bulb straining to pick out a photograph of a young soldier, a calendar showing a buffed-up monkey god and, of all things, a poster of the Himalayas.

I walked to the sentry-box-style ablution shack a little distance from the house. Inside one door was a western-style loo, spotless and candlelit, with pink toilet roll in a little wicker tray. In the other was a shower room, with one pail of hot water and one of cold, and a single plastic beaker.

The care taken in the preparation, and the candles inside, lent the shack a shrine-like aura.

After sunset, the trees and houses on the other side of the valley glowed pewter in the light of the full moon, and wisps of silver smoke trailed from bright orange dots: other families cooking their food. I was drinking a Kingfisher beer when the grandparents of our family for the night - we were staying in converted rooms in the oldest part of their houses - came over the their little herb garden. The grandmother hollowed out a fresh cowpat, filled it with water from a plastic beaker, and floated in some marigold petals. Then they prayed together in the direction of the moon, and the old man blew a note on a conch shell. The valley then filled with shell blasts from other families thanking their deities for a successful harvest.

It was a contrast from grandad's earlier antics, when he had shown me his den in one of the half-height lower-floor rooms. Normally, these are reserved for livestock to shelter in during winter, but his contained a cot-like bed, a collection of combs in a glass and an enormous old television set. He switched it on and yanked out two chairs. On came the cricket-very, very loud. He clutched his knee and gyrated his foot with glee. I looked across the valley behind me, expecting to see a hillside of shaking fists. A young girl ran to her mum, tugged at her sari and pointed over. I don't speak Kumaoni, but I guess she was saying: "Oh no, grandad's showing off his TV again." But he soon got bored, closing up his room, and peace returned to the valley.