

TOURISM UPDATE

LOWER HIMALAYAS



▲ **Mr Bond:** A meeting with celebrated author and Padma Bhushan Ruskin Bond on Mall Road in Mussoorie is an added bonus.

▲ **A Hill With a View:** Head to Sursingdhar, at an altitude of 1,900m, for an exquisite view of the sunset over Tehri Dam.

▼ **Holy Valley:** Alaknanda river is one of the best for rafting in the world due to its high rafting grade and the view it offers to the adventurous.

Discovering My Backyard

Take a tour down the lower Himalayas and discover the magic of the hills, rafting down the Ganga. **TEXT & PHOTOS: SUPRIYA SEHGAL**



Growing up in Dehradun had its perks! Summers spent in feasting on juicy lychees and mangoes, cycling around town with abandon, treats at historic bakeries and my favourite—being able to see Ruskin Bond quite often. My most vivid memory is that of him sitting on a low chair, facing a packed hall of students of classes 5 and 6, and joking about being able to balance a cup of tea on his paunch—all with a straight face! After that I must have read *Room On the Roof* at least seven times, devouring it from cover to cover—even acquiring an autographed copy of it. Even now, reading a Ruskin Bond book is so relaxing. It feels at home to go through the simple stories of Rusty and Gang! So when I got a chance to loop around Mussoorie, Dhanaulti, Tehri and Rishikesh a few months back, I

couldn't let go off the opportunity! I had heard that Mr Bond still ambles into Cambridge Book Depot on the Mall Road in Mussoorie every Saturday and signs books. I knew I was going to be the first in line to get my stack autographed.

With the Bond mania a constant hum in my head, I started out on my journey of rediscovering the 'much treaded' hill station, Mussoorie, a place I was so familiar with that it never even demanded a nostalgic spot in my head. After all, it was my own backyard. It was the first day of travel and even though ominous grey clouds

hung low, I was too excited to stuff in a juicy omelette at Lovely Omelette Centre and a bull's eye sweet at Chick Chocolate on Mall Road. As the evening closed in, the sharp orange line across the horizon became prominent and Dehradun started lighting up. I was told that the distinct orange line is called the Winter Line. It divides the dark valley from the blue hue in the sky prominently and can be seen only in Switzerland and Mussoorie; a phenomenon I had completely missed out while growing up. I left a sparkling Dehradun view and burrowed under multiple blankets—it seemed colder than usual.

A frantic 7 am banging on the door soon transformed into the most pleasant wake up experience as I opened the windows and saw the valley bathed in white. I could see customary snowmen emerge from the piles of snow and snowballs being aimed at passersby, as people came out to enjoy the snow. A slippery walk to the mall became essential and soon I was taking deliberate steps through 1.5 feet of snow! In my 18 years in Dehradun, I had never seen snow like that; neither had the locals in a long time. Of course, getting snowed in meant that travel plans had to be postponed but the 8 hours of consistent white flakiness around was worth it. Of course, Mr Bond must have enjoyed it from his window instead of trudging down to the Mall Road—the plan to meet him had to be abandoned. A few days later, I looped around Dhanaulti, Kaddu Khaal (Surkanda Devi base) and finally pit stopped for the night at a small village called Sursinghdhar. As I approached the wonderful red bricked Himalayan Eco Lodge at the edge of the mountain, a grey film of mist added intrigue to it. I prayed hard for the clouds to clear so that I could get a clear view of the snowy Himalayan range in front. My religious fervour must have paid off. I woke up to a sunrise that felt like a dream and to a cloud filled valley. Soon though, Nanda Devi, Neelkanth, Kamet, Trishul, Chaukhamba, Kedarnath and Banderpoonch peaks emerged slowly behind the cottony cloud cover. It was the most striking Himalayan view I had ever seen. New Tehri town came to life on one edge and the cottony clouds persisted in a flirtatious game with the valley below us. I walked down to Kanda Gaon on the same hill to see how local homes were starting their day. Friendly sun scorched Garhwali faces peeped from windows (some even endearingly made a dash

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. FRUGAL DELIGHT



A staple and filling favourite food for tourists in Mussoorie are the hot omelettes served at its tiny eateries—nourishing!

2. RIVERFRONT RESORT



Jayalgarh is the ideal riverside camp offering adventure lovers rock climbing and rappelling fun.

3. FISH FOOD



A not to be missed ritual at Rishikesh involves throwing flour balls for fish.

4. BRIDGE OF FAITH



Laxman Jhula attracts curious tourists and devotees alike.

5. A GARHWALI WOMAN

Life goes on in simple serenity for the hill folks of these lands.



And the twain meet...Devprayag, the holy confluence of Bhagirathi and Alaknanda.

for the indoors when I asked for a picture) and of course countless tea invitations had to be reluctantly turned down, as it was time to be back on the road.

The view of snow topped mountains at Sursinghdhar still lingered in my head when I swerved down to the lego like town of New Tehri. The massive green reservoir on the Tehri Dam started peeping sporadically between the silver oak trees. It was an emotional day when the last of the houses was vacated in the Old Tehri, which lies below the 42 sq km stretch of the reservoir with its clock tower, school buildings and homes, possibly still intact. The exodus to the upper edge of the valley had started 10 years ago when the dam was planned. The eventual submersion of the area under the water, however, happened much later. The confluence of Bhagirathi and Bhilangna rivers is lost in the altered topography of the region. Nevertheless for the traveller, skirting around the lake is a splendid ride, especially if you have a steady supply of ghost stories on the way. My driver did the needful.

After many loops and bends, I entered the Alaknanda valley, the river first appearing only in snatches and then staying with us right till the next stop-Jayalgarh. As I descended from the higher mountains, the colour palette had brighter greens as mustard and onion crops hugged the flat stretches on the mountains. There was still some time to reach the confluence of Alaknanda and Bhagirathi (which makes Ganga), so a lunch

▶ **A Roof with a View:** Dhanaulti is 24 km from Mussoorie.



▶ **Riverside Rendezvous:** Sursindhar & Jayalgarh offer great opportunities for camping, river walks, bonfires and singing and dancing by the dying embers till dawn.



▶ Enjoy a peaceful weekend holiday away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

UNDISPUTED QUEEN OF HILLS

What makes Mussoorie the Queen of Hills? For one, it boasts of Cloud's End at one end of it, and for another, it promises a mesmerising view of the majestic Himalayan ranges. An easy and picturesque 35 km drive from Dehradun, it is situated at the foothills of the Himalayas, at a height of 200m above sea level.

THE BEST TIME TO VISIT

It is easily March–June and September–November. In summer, this hill station provides an escape from the oppressive heat of the plains. With the highest temperature reaching 30 degrees Celsius and the lowest hovering at

10 degrees Celsius, summers are also the best time for trekking, rock climbing and camping.

GETTING THERE

Dehradun makes for a great base camp to do this loop and is well connected by air, train and bus from key cities of North India. Cabs are the easiest way to travel.

WHERE TO STAY

Mussoorie offers a wide choice of accommodation to the travellers—from budget to five star hotels. Take your pick after a thorough recce and select one with valley

facing room for the best view of Mussoorie. Try out the variety of cuisine on offer. Once settled, opt for a horse ride or just take a walk to enjoy the scenic vista. Sit on one of the benches and soak in pure oxygen.

INDULGE

Colourful woollens like Kullu socks, caps, mufflers and shawls make great gift items for friends back home. The Tibetan market offers a choice of sleeping bags, windcheaters, sweaters and shawls and a little further at the old cantonment area of Landour you can shop for Raj era memorabilia, silver jewellery and books.

stop at a riverside camp at Jayalgarh was imperative. Fresh leafy *saag* and some staple *daal-bhaat* later, I walked down to the river and snoozed on the lounge chairs. This Himalayan Eco Lodge camp is the first on the Srinagar-Rishikesh stretch, away from the packed campsites, as you move further ahead towards Rishikesh through Byasi. This also gives one an opportunity to experience some of the rapids on a raft on the Alaknanda, instead of the regular Ganga stretch below. The afternoon was spent clinging onto the winding roads upto Dev Prayag, where I stopped for some images. It's in this holy town that the rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi meet to emerge as Ganga. Other than the Sangam (confluence), the Raghunath temple and Dashrathshila are the two most important temple compounds. The spiritual traveller can spend a day exploring these, but it

was time for me to rush to Rishikesh before the sunlight receded—I had to catch the Ram and Lakshman Jhoolas and the customary tossing of flour balls in the river for the fish was still pending on my agenda. A Varanasi like vibe hangs in the narrow streets of Rishikesh, though less idiosyncratic. As the sounds of the day hushed and loudspeaker *aartis* took over, it was time to leave for home in Dehradun. Blame it on unwhetted travel instincts, I had never really discovered my own backyard. Now I know that I will be back again, soon! ■