

TRAVEL
BACK

TIME



BEAUTIFUL AND
CREATIVE STUFF



Char-Dham Yatra – Mind Over Matter

Hey Maa Ganga...
Your beauty is mesmerizing
Your energy enigmatic
Your sheer presence is mind blowing!!

Recently, Me and My Wife had been on an expedition to Char-Dham. Few even call it “Choti Char Dham” as well. It was a 12-day trip, starting from Delhi and going up to Kedarnath covering many holy places en-route like Hardwar, Rishikesh, Yamunotri, Gangotri Badarinath etc.

Along with us, it was group of 19 more young people with an average age of just 68Yrs! Isn't it already fun... ;-)

Our trip started from Delhi and after 12 days and covering many places we will all finally come back to Delhi and disperse from here. I had directly flown from Mumbai to Delhi and there I met my wife, Sushma and the other members of the group who had arrived from Bangalore.

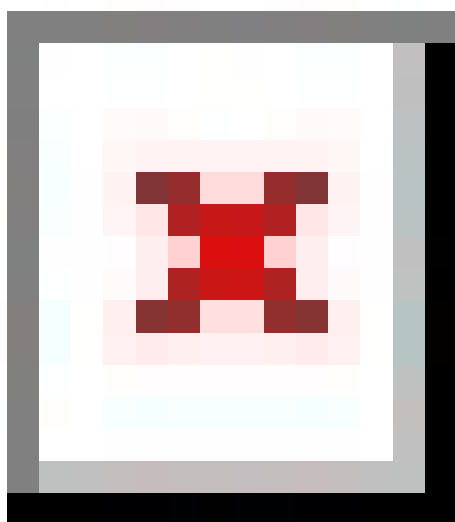
Next day, from Delhi we all reached Hardwar in an AC bus and from there we started towards our first Dham Yamunotri the following day.

We started our journey to pay tribute to one of the most pious river of India – River Yamuna. So let's go ...

Ranachetti – Day 2.

After almost 11 hrs of journey (Including breaks for lunch/ tea etc.) and covering 230Kms from Hardwar, we reached Ranachetti. Our first sighting of the Himalayan range was from this place and that sight will stay with us for this lifetime. You will see the mountain playing with clouds and sunlight giving you a joy beyond what my words can explain. Setting sunlight giving the ice capped mountain the golden hue making it even more attractive, for us this was the first time we came face to face with Himalayas and the experience was simply magnetic and we kept going to the balcony to see the mountains, every time we come out to watch, there was something new to see as passing clouds kept revealing the range layer by layer telling us that's there always more than that meets our eye.

View of the Himalayan range from our Hotel.....





Yamunotri –

***Kalindigiri mastake patadamanda purojwalaa,
Vilásagamanolásat prakataganda shailonnata
Saghoshagatidantura samadhiroodhadolottamaa,
Mukunda rativardhini jayati padmabandhoh suta***

Appearing from the heart of Narayana, Yamuna cascades from the summit of the Kalindi mountain with brilliance.

She descends the rocky sides of the Kalindi with dalliance, her waters roaring as She appears to be swaying in a lovely swing.

Glories to Yamuna, the daughter of the sun, Who increases the divine love for Mukunda

Journey to Yamunotri starts from **Rana chetti**, where most of the pilgrims stay over previous night and start to **Janaki Chetti** early next day. Its around 12Km and during peak seasons it usually takes around 2 hours to cover this distance that too if you are lucky enough.

Situated at around 10800 ft., this dham is dedicated to goddess Yamuna. We parked our bus at Janaki Chetti, base of the mountain from where the trek begins. Had hot breakfast and a tea before we ventured out into an unknown trek. It was a first-time visit for everyone in our group, and in my point of view, it was an advantage, since no one could scare us of what lay ahead!

For those in our group, who could not trek, we made arrangements on either doli's or horses which would carry them to the shrine and back to the base. For balance 11 of us, we started

the trek.

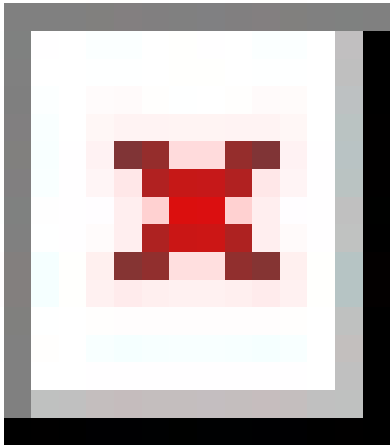
Day 3, 8:30 AM:

It's a 5Km trek from the base, a 74-year-old, young grandmother was our team lead. She literally led us from the front. She was with us in spite of almost everyone advising her to take up a doli. Her grit and confidence and her statement that "I'm Fit, are you? Was our motivation to take up what lay ahead. Renting a walking stick is the first thing that all the trekkers do, it's a must have possession and comes in very handy during the trek. So don't miss that...

Initial 500M looks all easy and gives you confidence that you can complete it within 1.5 or 2 hrs. After trekking for 1.5 Hours you realize you have completed only half the way and your energy levels are down by 80%, you would have gulped 3 - 4 tea's, 2 - 3 nimbu soda apart from 2 liters of water and whatnot and suddenly you are left thinking how to cover the remaining 2.5 Km with just 20% energy remaining. This is when you do not know that the balance trek is just getting steep and on top of it, porters will keep asking if you would need horse or doli and it is so tempting at that time that many people opt for it at a discounted rate as opposed to the full price from the base. For those who continue to trek on foot, this is where your mind takes over the body. Mind is more powerful than you might know and these situations actually brings out that strait from inside of you.



The path is serpentine and steep all at the same time. In certain places, path is so narrow that people have to hug the the mountain rocks on one side to make way for the people and horses that are going down. Inevitable these horses are brushing against us as though they are cleaning themselves up! Efforts put by the horses and the people carrying the doli is admirable. On one side we are so drawn by our own difficulties but on the other side we see horses and people carrying other people on their backs which is very very difficult task and only trained people can do that.





Finally, after trekking for nearly 3 1/2 Hours, brushing against every horse that is going up and going down you will reach a point where the Yamunotri temple reveals itself at a not-so-distant sight! Standing on the bridge you can see the marvelous and mighty Yamuna river dancing down from the hill top and gushing below the bridge.

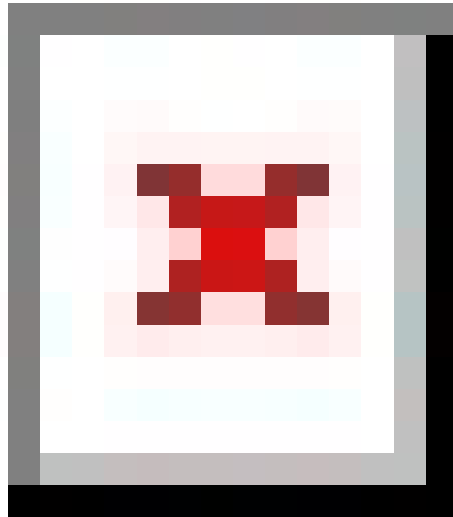
From here you just have to follow the trail, keep shouting slogans, cheer for your fellow pilgrims and reach to the place where you can comfortably stand on one of the rocks and pray to Yamuna Miyya before dipping your feet into the chilled water. Suddenly, you are refreshed, you feel energetic, you are mesmerized in her beauty that you don't even remember all the fatigue you were feeling just 10 min's back. That's how powerful the place is and the river Yamuna is. There are scores of people daring the chilled water and taking a dip and many others who do not dare that and just sprinkle the holy water on their head and dip their feet into the water and pray to her. Water coming from the glacier is so super chilled that you will not dare dip your feet into the river for more than just 10 minutes but you will notice that there are others who are bathing and immersed in that chilled water and yet they don't even shiver – Matter of Mind over body?

Temple itself is a very simple construction with Yamuna Miyya right in the middle of the small gopuram and many of her sisters are placed all across the center podium. You will find

yourself immersed in people shouting slogans “Yamuna Miyya Ki jai” That chorus will reverberate in your ears for a long long time. Energy levels are high and you are in a state of ecstasy and at the same time you are also pushing people all around you, fighting your way to the front to get that proper glimpse of the deity. At the end, you have travelled miles from your house and walked all the way up, braved all the adversaries on the way and now finally you are at the sanctum wanting to see Yamuna and pray to her to wash away all your sins. That is only if I’m a sinner... ;-)

After completing the darshan at the age old temple and seeking blessings from her, you will notice another miracle right next to the temple– Hot water springs! This is another common thing that you will find at all the four dham’s. Amidst the chilling water streams that run down from the Himalayas you will find one small pond at each of these locations with steaming hot water.

At Yamunotri, legend is, you will give raw rice to the pundit there, which he will quickly wrap it in a piece of cloth and dip it into the hot water pond, by the time you finish your prayers and do a small puja there, pundit will give your rice back but now it’s cooked rice. All this in less than 10 minutes. How amazing! After this you walk down the stairs on your right and you will find another hot water pond where hundreds of people are taking bath in this holy water. Every pond is built with an entry point from where the hot water flows into the pond and an exit point through which the water exits to merge with the river streams. You will be amazed at the phenomenon of how this real HOT water keeps flowing into the pond continuously even though it is covered in ice capped mountains from all sides. There are mythological stories behind this and there are scientific explanations to this irrespective of what you choose, you will still be amazed at this.

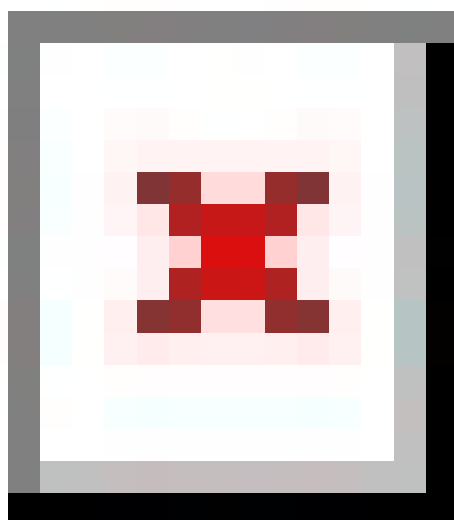


2:30 PM

After spending some more time at the temple absorbing everything that we could, we started our journey back to the base – Janaki Chetti. Just when we started, we realized how hungry we were! We found many make shift hotels offering many varieties of vegetarian foods. Taking a quick bite of a samosa and a cup of refreshing hot tea, we continued our trek down. Return was much less strenuous and less crowded as well which is a welcome change. On our way back we were also blessed with light showers here and there making it little more joyous. We reached down in 2.5 hrs with just 4 or 5 pit stops en-route. These included stops at chai wala, soda wala and vendors selling kesar, hing etc. and also at spots where you would just like to sit for few minutes and absorb the sheer beauty all around you.

Our 74 years old, team leader dared all this and completed the trek and returned to the base with a smile all along. Her energy was contagious to the group. Once everyone returned to the base, we started back to Ranachetti to spend the night there. It was a feeling of accomplishment for all of us to complete the first dham successfully.

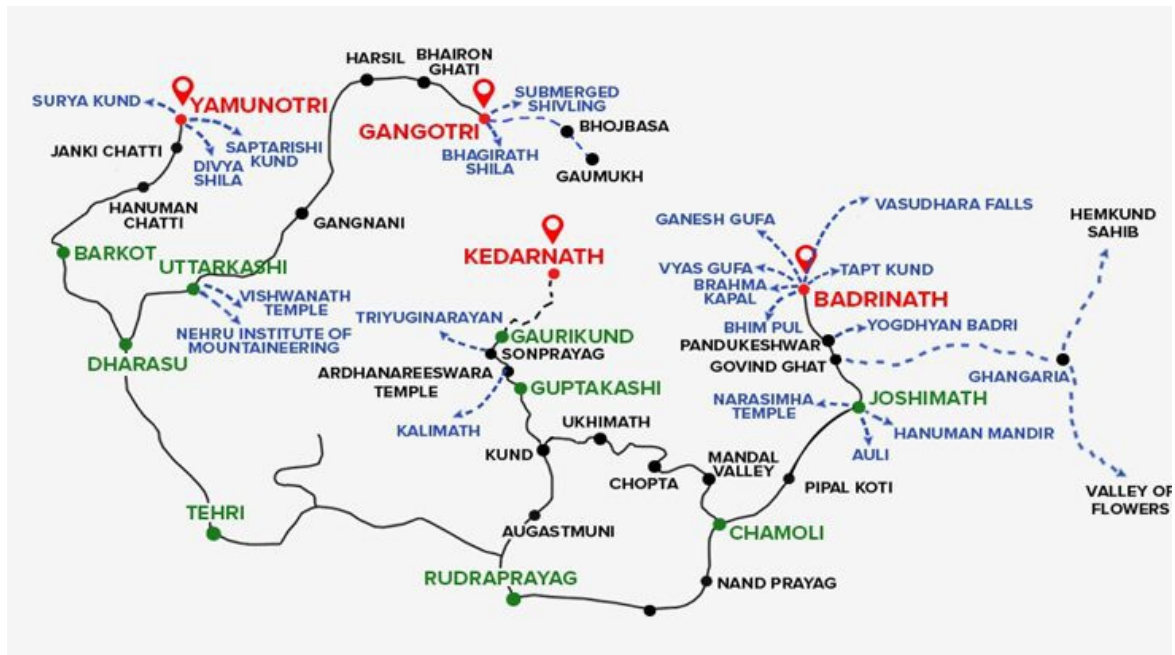
Yamuna Maiyya Ki Jai....!!



Its Gangotri time...

So here I 'am, after enjoying the success of completing the first dham Yamunotri we were all in high spirits and started our journey towards Gangotri. Our tour guide was quick to update us all that this was the easy part as the bus would go very close to the temple and it will just be a walk of around 500 meter on a plain road to the temple from the parking lot. So we were all set to welcome the journey towards the second dham, only to realize later that this journey itself would take away more energy than what we had spent climbing the Yamunotri trek.

Journey from Yamunotri to Gangotri has a mid stop at **Uttarkashi**.

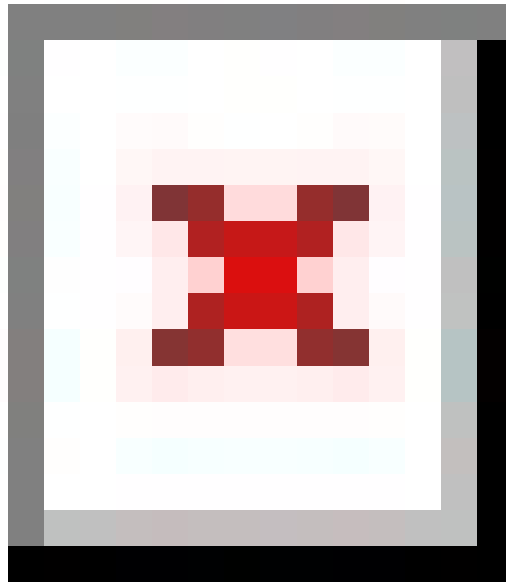


There is no direct route, so we have to re-track the whole route, come up to **Dharasu** and reach **Uttarkashi**, this itself took whole day. We started from Hanuman Chetti at 8AM and reached Uttarkashi at 6Pm in the evening which is around 10 hrs of journey just to cover 120 Kms. We took a break in between at 1 Pm for lunch and we had to wait for more than 2 hrs there itself for the traffic to start moving again. At most of the places, it is single roads and heavy traffic on both sides leading to huge jam's bringing the traffic to a complete standstill for long hours. This is a big bottle neck for most of the travelers as most of their time goes wasted on road. This is a common scene at most of the places along these routes. Our tour operators

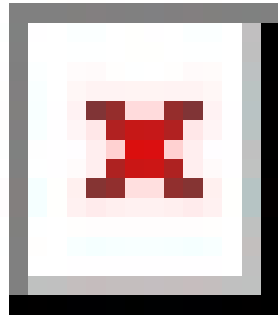
came prepared for such uncertainties and hence they had packed our breakfast and lunch before we started from Hanuman Chetti. Where ever we could get some place with shelter and water we used to disembark and finish our meals. These breaks in travel also becomes very essential after shaky – bumpy rides for hours. Stretching was never so relaxing before, believe me... Irrespective of the condition of the road, everyone would doze off during the journey post the meal break's, it is enjoyable and funny to watch people roll their heads, almost fall off their seats and wake up suddenly upon bus hitting a ditch or jumps off a road hump and again slowly going back to sleep ;-)

5:58PM – 27th May, Day 4

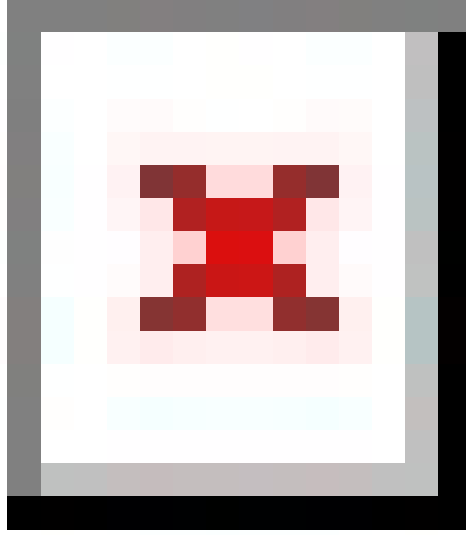
After braving all the traffic blocks through out the route and spending almost 10 hrs, we finally reached Uttarkashi. This holy place is dedicated to lord Vishwanath and this temple is on the banks of river Bhagirathi (Ganga) similar to Vishwanath temple at Varanasi.



A huge Trishul, almost 20 ft. in height, made of 5 metals (Pancha loha) is the highlight of this place. Legend is, Shiva used this Trishul to kill Vakasur at this holy place and people claim that they can feel the vibrations of the Trishul when they just touch it with their bare hands. I tried but couldn't feel it, may be I'm still not worthy enough.



We stayed over at Uttarkashi that night. The skies there were so clear. Coming from highly polluted city like Mumbai it was an amazing thing just to stand there, breathe fresh air and watch the stars. I thought I even saw shooting stars. Not sure if it was really the case but it did look like that.



Gangotri:

*Brahmandam ghandayanthi hara sirasi jata valli
mullasayanthi,*

*Swarlokadha pathanthi kanaka giri guha ganda shailal
skhalanthi,*

*Kshoni prushte lutanhi duritha chaya chamoo nirbharam
bhathsayanthi,*

*Padhadheem poorayanthi sura nagara sarith pavani na
punathu.*

*Let the pure waters of the Ganga of heaven,
Originating from the breaking the universe in to*

*two,
Watering the hair curls of Lord Shiva's head,
Falling from the heights of heaven,
Coming out of the sandal wood trees of the caves of
Meru,
Falling torrentially on the earth,
Washing away the crowds of sins,
And making full the waters of the sea,
Take care of all of us.*

4:40AM – 28th May, Day 5.

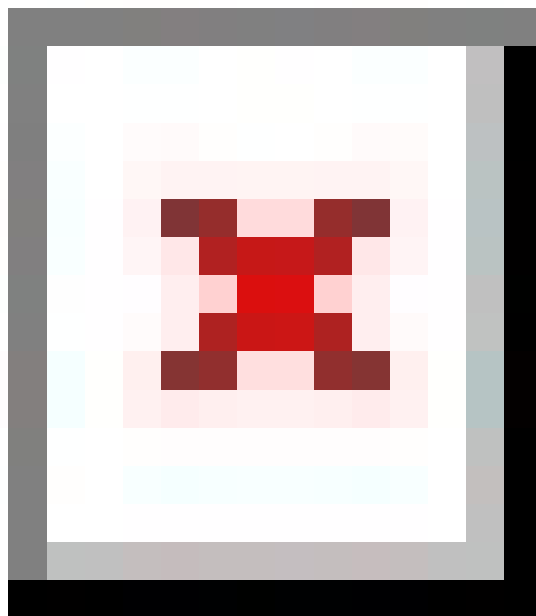
The plan was to start early and reach Gangotri as early as possible. After having an early morning cup of coffee, we all started our journey towards Gangotri, which is located around 100 Km's from our hotel. En-route we stopped at **Ganga Nani** after some 3 hrs of drive covering around 50 Km's.

8:00 AM:

Ganga nani is a sacred hot water kund and a mandatory stop for all the pilgrims travelling to Gangotri. I would have not believed if someone had said that they had bathed in hot water amidst thick Himalayan glaciers, but here I'm experiencing these wonders which keep unfolding one after another. You have to climb around 50 – 60 steps to reach the kund, there are two separate kund' for men and women. Waking up at 3 AM, sleeping all the while in the bus and then climbing these steps half awake and then dipping in this hot water kund and then suddenly all that laziness had just vanished. Bathing here was the most refreshing thing that had happened that day. Your energy levels spring up and it is like you are wondering what just happened.

Coming down, we quickly had a cup of tea and continued our journey towards Gangotri, its another 55 Km's from here and it takes approx. 2 Hrs to reach the temple. The route has few breath taking views... quite literally. Motoring in these routes is an art and we were blessed with a highly experienced and very patient driver, Raju Pundit. You have to be highly watchful of the oncoming traffic and sometimes you have to stop your vehicle at specific strategic locations, there is no way the vehicles from the opposite direction can pass through if your ego gets better off you and you

try to sneak through...That's it, you will be causing a jam which will at least eat up 30 to 40 min's of every one's time and worst a slight miss and you can go missing forever. Just not worth it.



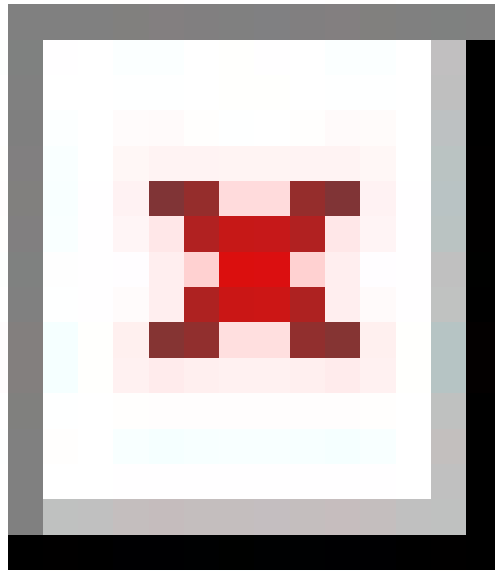
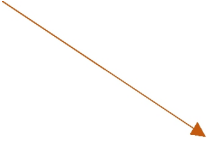
While passing through the ghats you will notice that you are in the lap of the Himalayas breathing the fresh air. For most of us going from cities like Mumbai or Bangalore fresh & pure oxygen can also be intoxicating sometimes!

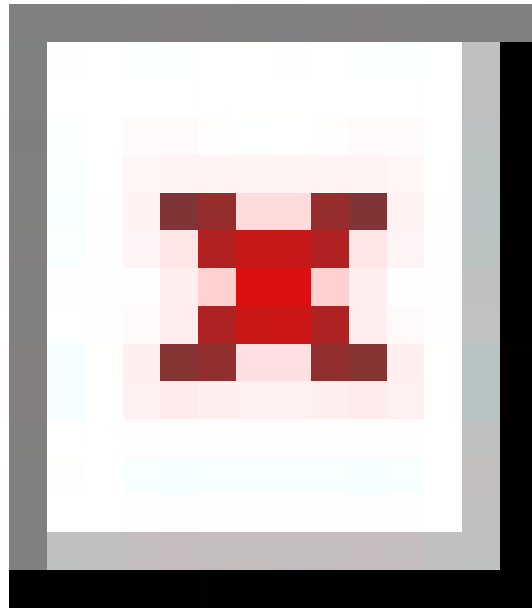
10AM – First view of Gaumukh!

2 hours after we left from Ganga-nani, we reached Gangotri. The first thing you will notice is the originating point of Maa Ganga – The Gaumukh glacier. It is named this way because from a distance it will look like a Gau (Cow) sitting atop the hill.

The legend says, this is where Bhagirathi touched down on earth when Shiva released her from his locks and she was named after the great sage Bhagiratha who conducted immense penance to bring her down to earth so that he can provide salvation to his ancestors by washing their ashes into this river and cleanse them of all their sins.

This belief continues to this day and people travel from across the country and dare the adverse climatic and geographical conditions to take a dip in this holy water.





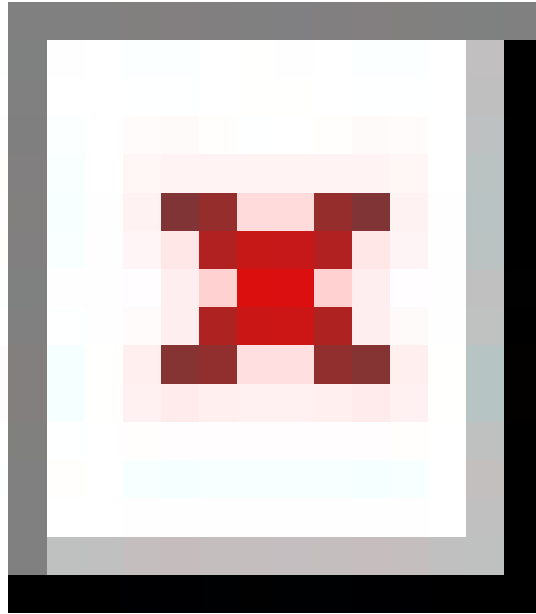
The Gaumukh: Situated around 13200 ft. above the sea level, 3000 ft. above Gangotri. It is an 18 Km trek from the base (Gangotri) and can be undertaken only after proper and prior approvals from the District Magistrate and the forest officials. You would need a guide to ensure you are not lost while trekking or to help you in case of any unforeseen adversaries. It is said that after the heavy rains that lashed Uttarkand in July 2016 regular routes had washed away and no clear path was left to guide the regular travelers. This round trek of around 40Km takes 3 to 4 days to complete and is filled with lot of physical challenges making it one of the most sought after for trekking enthusiasts from across the globe.

No one from our group took up this trek. We had other plans. ;-)



10:30 AM:

Gangotri: With parking lot completely packed, you will start noticing hundreds of tourist busses, mini bus's, tempo travelers and few private cars parked on either side while the temple is still 1.5Km's away. It takes lot of skill to maneuver around these narrow roads and keep moving forward. Our tour manager was able to get us as close to the temple as possible to avoid long walk for the elderly. Walking route is filled with small but colorful shops selling every kind of artifacts, water cans of all sizes – (People fill these cans with holy water and take it back with them) sugar candy, dates, dry fruits, coconuts, flowers, idols of various forms of Shiva and Ganga and tortoise etc. After a brief shopping at few of these stores (Yes! We also bought water cans) and a walk of about 10 – 15 min's, we reached the Gangotri temple.



The white finish of the temple makes it look serene and beautiful. It is said that the original temple is built in the 18th century by the the Gorkha Amar Singh Tahpa and later re-built by Maharaja of Jaipur.

It was over crowded and chaotic with everyone trying their best to get inside the temple. There was a separate Q for those going for Dharma (Free) Darshan and for those who were willing to pay. Free darshan Q was running for as long as our eyes could see and we estimated that it would take min couple of hours if we had to stand in that Q. So we rushed to buy the tickets from the counter and got it within few minutes and we were

assigned with the token number - 371. Temple had a system of calling out token numbers and allow only few people at a time to avoid rush inside the temple as well as to make way for the the one's who were waiting for darshan from the free line. The running token number at that time was 257! My estimates were, even here it would take minimum couple of hours before our number would be called but at least we are not standing in the line. So we decided to wait for our turn. I Clicked few pictures of the temple and other few interesting things around the temple, chatted for sometime and then we sat down. After nearly 40 Minutes it was still token number 285 and at this rate it would take at least another 120 min's more. So I decided to go have a word with the guard responsible for calling out the numbers and request him to let us in as we also had a senior citizen with us. The guard was cooperative, within few minutes he allowed us to enter the temple out of turn. He was also allowing all such people who were aged, physically weak or needed special assistance out of turn so that they need not have to wait outside. We thanked him and got merged into the ecstatic crowd. Once inside all we could hear was ***Ganga Maiyya Ki... Jai!!***

Inside the sanctum sanctorum there is an idol of Maa Ganga along with her sisters – Sarasvati, Sindhu, Sarayu, Yamuna then sage Bhāgiratha and Shiva. All are white marble stones and beautifully carved. You are just allowed to stand and pray for less than 30 secs' to make way for the incoming devotees. We stepped back from the railings to make way for the other devotees to pass through while we stood little back to have glimpses of the idols in between the moving crowd. Once we felt satisfied we followed the crowd and entered the outer periphery of the sanctum sanctorum where we sat for a while absorbing the journey so far and relishing the fact that we were inside the Gangotri temple, the second of the char dham's that we wanted to see. We wanted to do this trip for three years now for some or the other reason it was just not happening and suddenly in this moment that dream was realized. Not sure when we will make this trip again so wanted to spend as much time as possible inside the temple and just be in that moment and enjoy everything that was happening around us. These were ecstatic moments and it will stay with us for a long time.

While we were there, it is so overwhelming to see how religion / belief brings people together. There were people from all across India – south to north, west to east, all age groups – kids, youngsters middle aged, elderly

people using walkers or walking sticks, physically challenged people needing special assistance or on wheel chairs etc. What is common among all of them is the spirit and the belief. The satisfaction and the joy on their faces as they come out of the temple is something that you cannot miss.

Since we went in out of turn and were able to finish the darshan before others in our group, we still had lot of time on hand before everyone arrived. So we just sat there at one of the corners facing river Ganga with gorgeous mountains in the backdrop. While doing recap of the events so far, where we had thought Yamunotri was tough but after completing Gangotri we realized Yamunotri was fairly easy. After almost 45 min's most of our group members had arrived and we started walking back towards the bus. Revisiting some of the stores that we had seen while trekking to the temple but this time we also bought couple of artifacts as memorabilia for ourselves as well as for gifting to other group members.

2:30:PM

Walking back was easier and even before we realized we had already reached the bus. As usual the focus now shifts to your hunger...you will see everyone eagerly waiting to know when will the lunch be served. Kiran, our tour operator quickly makes a plan in consultation with the driver and we are told that there is a temple some 20 Km's away where we can park our vehicle and stop for lunch. In these roads, 20 Km is easily 1-hour drive. Once inside the bus you will see that everyone enters into the power saving (Sleep) mode for the rest of the journey ;-)

4:30 PM:

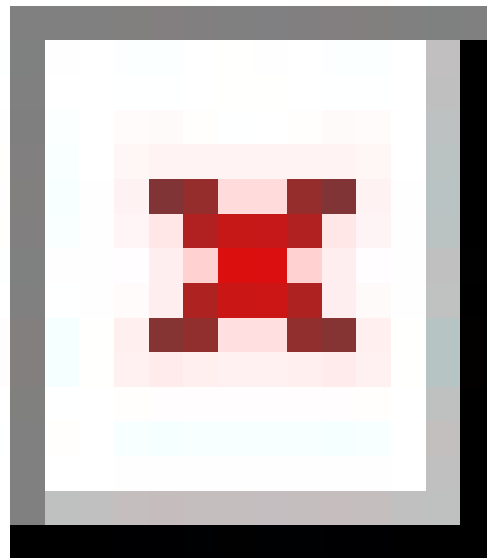
The Journey starts from Gangotri, back to Uttarkashi. Today our halt will be at Uttarkashi and tomorrow we will start the long journey, in fact the whole day we will be travelling from here to Phata. Phata is the base location for Kedarnath.

On One side, we had just concluded two of the important Dham's, the next Dham we were heading to was Kedarnath! We were eagerly waiting to head there and equally excited to see what lay ahead in our journey. That's it for today.

Ganga Maiyaa ki jai... Yamuna Maiyya ki Jai!!

29th May, 7AM, Day 6.

Energy was super high after a relatively relaxed yesterday. Breakfast was ready, bags packed and parked at the lobby, we were all set for the big long day, just that, most of us had still not realized how hard it can be by the day end. As usual breakfast was yummy and we could see that the lunch was already getting ready and getting packed into carriers



8:30 AM

We started from Uttarkashi and the day plan was to cover 250 Km and reach Phata by evening. Our estimate was that we should reach by 5:30 – 8 Hrs we thought was good enough to cover the distance with 1 hour to spare for lunch while the route is completely terrain and peak season only adding to more delay's. We were forced to take 2 additional breaks for tea and snacks and could only reach Phata by seven in the evening.

There were so many breathtaking movements as we moved from one hill to another but this one moment will stay with us. As usual we were stuck in a huge pile up of vehicles and we were stand still for more than 20 minutes by now and few of us were sleeping, then suddenly we all heard some loud noises outside, people were screaming and also some loud thuds. Rocks were falling off the cliffs. Our tour manager immediately alerted us and told everyone to remain calm and be inside the bus and not to get out. We saw that rocks were falling from the mountains and the vehicles behind us had got damaged. Our bus was just 3 vehicles ahead of that spot. Land slides, rocks falling from the mountains, vehicles slipping off the road and falling down the mountains are quite common in this route but so far nothing of that sort we had directly witnessed before this.

It was already dark but still as we moved closer to the hotel we could see many helipads with helicopters duly parked and covered. For us, this is a first time we will be flying in a helicopter tomorrow amidst hilly Himalayan range and that was very exiting. We could not see much of the Himalayas from the hotel where we stayed but we could feel it all along.

Believe it or not, wherever we stay overnight the first task that comes to the mind for most of the tourists in this belt is Laundry ;-)

30th May, Thursday.

Kedarnath: Om Namah Shivay!!

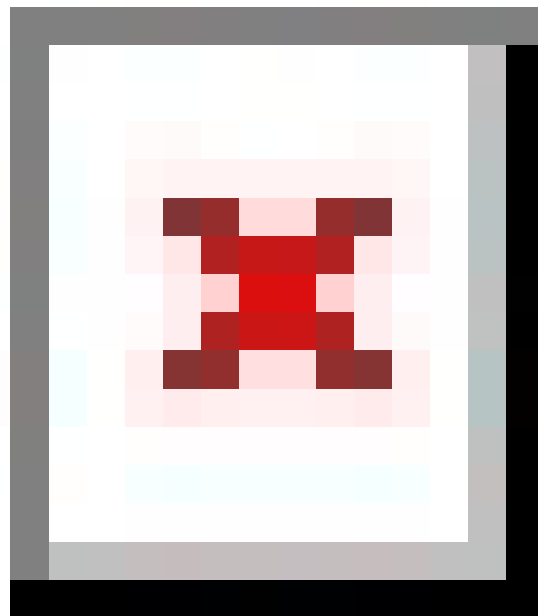
Mandakini salila chandana charchitaya
Nandhishwara pramatanarha maheshwaraya I
Mandaarapushpa Bahupushpa su poojitaaya
Tasmai makaraya namah shivaya II

Mahadri parshve cha tathe ramantham
Sampujyamaanam satatam munindraihi I
Suraasuraiyaksha mahoragadaihi
Kedaranatham shivamekameede II

Phata:

5:30 AM.

Coffee.... Coffee.... This has been our wake up alarm since the time we started our journey. The cooks knew very well that, this is the best and easy way of waking up south Bangaloreans early in the morning and no one would complain! So this guy serving the coffee everyday morning would also remind us on the assembly time so that there are no delays during start of the day. So for today, we have to be inside the bus by 6:30 AM and breakfast will be served in the bus in packed containers which we can have it later once we reach the helipads.



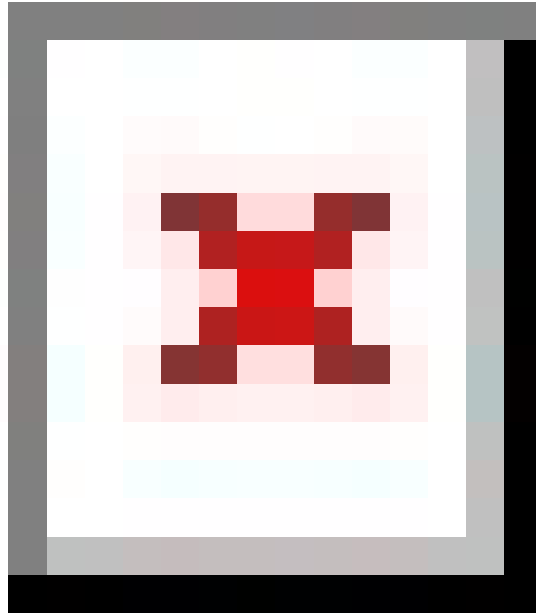
Before take Off...

6:00 AM

The day break was awesome, it was windy and chilled. Woollen gloves, woollen full face caps, woollen socks, jackets, shawl and all the other accessories that we had bought in Hardwar before starting the journey all came out now and felt insufficient. On top, there was a scarcity of hot water for bathing (Because of this weather water just doesn't get hot or may be it gets cold faster) but somehow by paying additional money we managed to get 4 buckets of warm water for the 4 of us in our room.

We were all set for the big day. We were all told not to carry any luggage in hand as we will be returning to the base (Phata) in the evening and just carry basic things like water and few snacks if required but wear warm clothes complete with gloves, coat, cap and what not. We reached the helicopter base at 7:30 Am and we were told that the counter will only open by 9AM for collecting the documents and then they would be preparing the batches for the flight. So the process is, all the pre booked people carried their tickets and the counter staff received the tickets and were told that their name will be called and they have to come for weight measurement at that time. So our tour operator gave all the tickets to the counter staff and we patiently sat at the waiting hall. Due to shortage of chairs, all the elderly people were accommodated inside and few of us sat outside along with so many others who had come from various other places. Everyone started having breakfast that were given to us before starting and that is when I realised that our packets were left behind in the bus itself! Lucky for us, there was a small tea shop outside, where he prepared parathas and maggi and that was our breakfast for the day.

Even after 30 min's after the counter opened, names of our one batch of 8 people were not called including ours. Upon checking we found that the ticket was missing from the list and we had to request them to add our names manually. This delayed our turn by almost an hour. Finally, it was almost 11AM by the time we got our chance to board the helicopter. 300kg is the upper limit including the pilot and they select 5 people who fit this criterion. So there are chances that one or two people will always get mixed up.



Amidst all these confusions, one good thing was everyone were damm exited about the helicopters coming and going and the whole experience of flying amidst Himalayan mountains where if anything goes wrong, that might very well be your last day on earth. Another base was just few meters away and they were far more efficient in managing the whole operations as they were able to do more rounds than us.

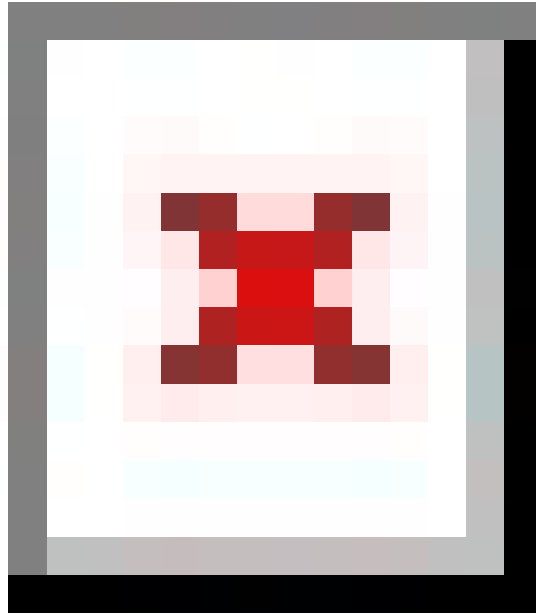


All the operators will be given specific window time for flying and for taking breaks when the neighbouring operators will fly and this alternates. This also kind of delays the whole process but makes it little safe. All the elderly people from our batch were first sent off and finally it was our turn to fly and we could see our helicopter coming to us from a far off distance. Its time to board. Me and Sushma sat with the pilot with specific instructions not to touch anything, not to shoot while flying and not to talk to pilot. Its just 14 mins' of fly time and its one of the most exhilarating experiences. We were initially little scared as well but as we went up the beauty of the Himalayas is so captivating that your mind becomes calm and peaceful and you just start enjoying the whole new sight.

Kedarnath:

Even when we landed here, we were neither aware nor ready for what awaited us but when we returned to base, we are happy how things panned out so beautifully in such an unplanned manner.

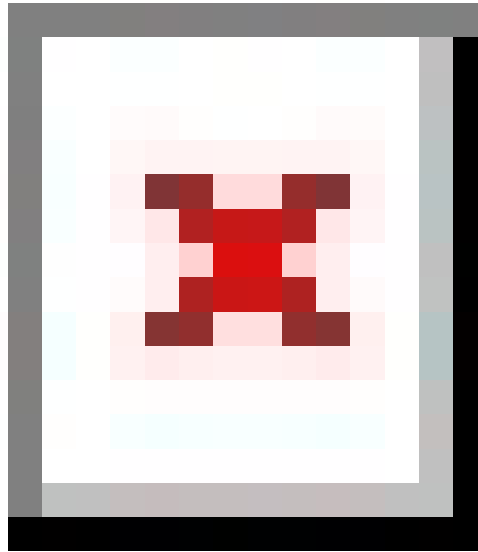
From helipad to temple it's a walk of around 750 mtr. The cold breeze welcoming us to the abode of Shiva and Shakti. You will notice huge ice clad mountains in all directions and its all so beautiful and mesmerising. For us, this is the first time and we were overwhelmed by everything around us.



There is a small bridge that you cross before entering the main road leading to the temple. When we reached there we noticed that the long and serpentine queue for darshan is running into kilometres and we may not be able to finish the darshan and return to helipad before 4PM. That is the cut off time they had given as beyond that any time flights might get cancelled due to unpredictable weather. People from our group who had already reached before us were waiting for us to reach as well so that all of us could go together for the darshan. Seeing the group, so many people will approach with a promise to get you easy darshan with a cost. We also did

the deal and one guy took us to the main entrance of the temple but not inside!

Disappointed we searched for other options and found that a special darshan tickets were available for Rs. 2500 / person. Two of us collected the cash from everyone, except for one elderly couple, went and stood in the queue for getting the ticket but the counter was closed for lunch. Before they could open, one group of people started shouting slogans asking for equality and to stop the special darshan saying that is affecting the normal people who are waiting for long hours to get inside the temple. Looked like few of them were waiting since yesterday night braving the bone chilling cold winds and people from all age groups, women, children, elderly all eagerly waiting in the queue without proper food and water. This commotion continued for sometime and finally the district collector came to the spot and declared that no tickets will be issued. Another disappointment.



We had no other choice but to join the general queue but we were losing lot of time. While returning back we spoke to the police guarding the queue and requested her to allow at least the elderly people to join the line closer to the main entrance she asked us to approach the people standing in the line and after some negotiation we could convince them. Except for me and my wife everyone joined the queue in the middle and we were happy that this arrangement could be made. My brain was telling me that queue was running into kilometres and if we had to start from the end of line we will never get darshan but my heart was telling me that Kedareshwar will show us a way.

There were police at random intervals to prevent people from joining the queue in the middle and we were just looking for some opportunity to just

break the queue and we just spotted one. one group of people were fighting with some others preventing them from joining in and without making any noise I just merged in and pulled my wife along, lucky for us, this spot was not very far from the main entrance. Few minutes later we saw the elderly couple who had left for general queue long back coming from the opposite direction fully disappointed that they would miss the darshan today. We pulled them in and their happiness knew no bounds. GOD will always have a plan. Just believe.

Sanctum Santorum:

Before we head in, let me tell you some thing about Kedarnath temple—Straight from Wikipedia!

Kedarnath Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva. Is located on the Garhwal Himalayan range near the Mandakini river. Due to extreme weather conditions, the temple is open to the public only between Akshaya Tritiya (April) and Kartika Purnima (October). During the winters, moola vighraha is carried down to Ukhimath and where the deity is worshiped for the next six months.

The temple is not directly accessible by road and has to be reached by a 22 kilometres (14 mi) uphill trek from Gaurikund. Helicopter, Pony and doli service is available to reach the temple. According to Hindu legends, the temple was initially built by Pandavas and is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, the holiest Hindu shrines of Shiva. Pandavas were supposed to have pleased Shiva by doing penance in Kedarnath. The temple is one of the four major sites in India's Char Dham pilgrimage. This temple is the highest among the 12 Jyotirlingas.

Kedarnath was the worst affected area during the flash floods of 2013. The temple complex, surrounding areas, and Kedarnath town suffered extensive damage, but the temple structure did not suffer any "major" damage. A large rock among the debris placed itself behind the temple and acted as a barrier, protecting the temple from the flood. The surrounding premises and other buildings in the market area were heavily damaged

The temple is at a height of 11,755 ft., 3.53Km from sea level. After the Kurukshetra War, the Pandava brothers, came here to meet Shiva on the advice of the sage Vyasa, because they wanted to seek forgiveness for killing their kin during the war. However, Shiva did not want to forgive

them: so, he turned into a bull and hid among the cattle on the hill. When the Pandavas managed to track him, he tried to disappear by sinking himself head-first into the ground. Bhīma, grabbed his tail, forcing him to appear before them and forgive them. The Pandava brothers then built the first temple at Kedarnath. There is a small pillared hall in front of the temple. The first hall inside Kedarnath Temple contains statues of the five Pandava brothers, Lord Krishna, Nandi and Virabhadra, one of the guards of Shiva. Statue of Draupadi and other deities are also installed in the main hall.

Adi Shankaracharya was believed to have revived this temple, along with Badrinath and other temples of Uttarkhand; he is believed to have attained Mahasamadhi at Kedarnath. Behind the temple is the Samadhi Mandir of Adi Shankaracharya. The head priest (Raval) of the Kedarnath temple belongs to the Veerashaiva community from Karnataka

Coming back...

Once inside, you will just merge with the people and let the wave of devotion take over. You will see the statues of all the pandavas, Draupadi, Krishna and finally you will reach the sanctum sanctorum where the main Jyotirlinga is situated. All the efforts and all the prayers finally culminate here. This lingam is in a triangular shape and has a small hump on the top. People offer bilva leaves and smear ghee to the lingam. Om Namah Shivay... Bom Bom Bhole...har har mahadev... just reverberates in your ears long after you are out of the temple, such is the energy. People who are so old and unable to walk, few even handicapped are all part of the crowd but that does not impact their spirit, their smile and sense of satisfaction on their face know no bounds. My experience inside cannot be described in words. The spiritual awakening you will experience here is of a different level and you just have to have an open mind and let the energy take over.

All of us had beautiful darshan and everyone were happy and satisfied that after all the initial issues we had, finally had a great darshan of the jyotirlingam and completed our third dham successfully.



3:30 - 4PM

So let's have a cup of coffee or tea...the next immediate thought in everyone's mind! Food was scarce and not many hotels were available and the place was extremely crowded. Each half cup of coffee was selling for 50Rs and tea for 20Rs. Since we were already late we thought we will eat at the helipad and there were constant announcements that helicopter services will be stalled soon due to bad weather. The same process continued, they will check your ticket, weigh you and put you into the queue. There were roomers that the services will be stopped soon due to oath taking ceremony of our PM. We were all waiting and wanted to send elderly people first and the situation was getting chaotic as they started announcing that there will only be two more rounds and there were many awaiting their turn. Next batch of people went and we were still 15 people left, one more round and were still 12 people left and then suddenly the announcement came that due to DGCA directives helicopters will no longer come back but we could still see that helicopters of other service providers were running so went and

requested for just one more round and they obliged and we managed to send 3 more people from our batch and still 9 of us got stuck and had no idea on what next. Apart with me and Sushma all others were 65+ and we were highly ill prepared for spending the night there.

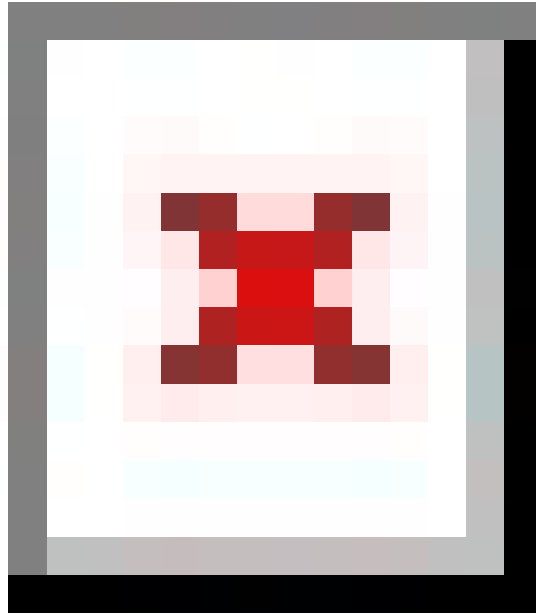
5:30PM.

No food, no shelter and as sun went down, there was scarcity of oxygen as well. Slowly but steadily temperature started dropping and cold winds sent chills down the spine. Including my wife almost everyone started shivering. Quickly we had to do something. Mr Vijay Kumar one of our group member and me went from one place to another in search of some dormitory, some shelter, some shared space, something... But nothing, everything was over crowded and people had already occupied even common places. This was extremely worrisome and we had no plan B. We had left everyone in an open place and started our search, we might have walked for more than 3 - 4 km's daring that chill wind, lack of oxygen, taking small and periodic breaks, even continuous walking was a challenge. Some one gave us an idea that the pundits near the temple can give us shelter in their house and that gave us some hope and we had to walk back all the way again. We came back to the place where we had left the others.

7:PM

Together we again started towards the temple and lucky for us, en-route we found a guy who was ready to give us an accommodation but was charging 10k for just one night but that did not matter. It was a great relief, without a roof on top we could have not survived the night. The place was in some remote corner but the guy was courteous enough to give us adequate quilts and beds so that we could sleep at night. We accommodated mostly everyone on the cots and found our comfort on the beds arranged on the floor. After all this we were too tired to venture out but the spirit of the 75yr old ajji was great. She and two others from our group went and had a second darshan of the Kedareshwar. I surely missed it.

31st May, 6AM



Seeing the mountains and the temple during the early morning was a feast to the eyes. You will never find such serene beauty anywhere else in the world. Overnight the ice caps had covered the some more areas in the mountains and even the roads it's all so white and such pure air, there is nothing else you would need.

me and another uncle Rama Krishna reached helipad to get the the token number. first flight was scheduled for 7AM and yet 2 more people were already in the queue. Finally, by 8:30 we departed from Kedarnath and reached Phata in two batches. We know in our hearts that we will come back here many more times. The energy and the beauty is such that you will

never be satisfied by just one visit. God has to just call us. We hope and pray that he calls us back soon.

Har Har Mahadev.... Om Nahah Shivay!!

**31st May. 10AM. –
Triyuginarayan**

A group that had left on foot had not returned back and hence we had time in the morning. All of us decided a visit a place called Triyugi-narayan. This was some 25 Km's from the base, located on a hill station in Rudraprayag district and you have to take small ghat road to reach the top. Though it is only 25Km's, it took more than 3 hrs for us to reach there. On the way we even picked up our group members who were coming back on foot and they were sharing their experience of the trek.

Legend:

According to Hindu mythology, goddess Parvati was daughter of Himavat the personification of the Himalayas. She is the rebirth of Sati, the first wife of Shiva – who sacrificed her life when her father insulted Shiva. Parvati initially tried to allure Shiva by her beauty, but fails. Finally, she won Shiva by practising rigorous penance at Gauri Kund, which is 5 km's away from Triyuginarayan. Pilgrims visiting Triyuginarayan temple also visit the Gauri Kund temple, dedicated to Parvati. Mythology states that Shiva proposed to Parvati at Guptakashi, before they got married in the small Triyuginarayan village at the confluence of Mandakini and Sone-Ganga rivers.

It was the venue of the celestial marriage of Shiva and Parvati, during the Satya Yuga, witnessed in the presence of the holy fire that still burns eternally in front of the temple in a Havana-kund or Agni-kund. Vishnu formalised the wedding and acted as Parvati's brother in the ceremonies, while the creator Brahma acted as the priest of the wedding, that was witnessed by all the sages of the times. The exact location of the wedding is marked by a stone called Brahma Shila, in front of the temple

Before the marriage ceremony, the gods are believed to have taken bath in four kund's or small ponds namely, Rudra-kund, Vishnu-kund and Brahma-kund. The inflow into the three kund's is from the Sarasvati-kund, which – according to legend – originated from Vishnu's navel. Hence, the water of these kund's is considered to cure infertility. The ashes from Havana-kund are supposed to promote conjugal bliss.

The Temple

The Triyuginarayan temple resembles the temple of Kedarnath in architectural style and hence attracts a lot of devotees. The present shrine is also called as Akhand Dhuni temple as the fire in the Havana kund has been burning for the last three yuga's. It is believed to have been built by Sri Adi Shankaracharya.

It took almost 3 hrs of drive to cover 25 Km's and we reached at 1Pm. The view of the mountains from this point was breath taking. So serene and so beautiful. The bus goes close enough and from the parking lot it takes about 10 minutes of walk to reach the main temple.

We first went inside the Vishnu kund, clear water but just knee deep. Did a small puja and sprinkled the holy water on our head? From there we next visited Vishnu Temple on the anti-clockwise direction and from there we enter the main temple where the akanda dhuni is still burning, the pundits there gave us small bunches of samit (wooden sticks) which we offered to the havan and they smeared the holy ash on our forehead. You also have Shiva – Parvati idols there. After completing a small prayer there, we exited the main gopuram. Outside there is another small temple dedicated to Annapurneshwari (Goddess of food). We finished our prayers and offered our dakshina to the pundits there. We were given one hour to complete the visit and return to the bus. So without wasting much time we started back. All of us were hungry and we knew retuning will also take lot of time so few of us had a quick bite of bread butter at a small shop just outside of the temple before dozing off in the bus.

Vishnu Kund



Vishnu Temple



Akanda Dhuni



Annapurneshwari Temple



4: 30 PM

Weather was awesome through out and we had one of the best days. We had already packed our bags before we had left in the morning as we knew we have to start off to the next destination immediately after retuning. Quickly had lunch, moved the bags to the bus and all of us were ready to explore the next dham.

Our next destination was the base of Badrinath, Piplakoti. This is around 160Km's from Phata but we knew it will take around 5 to 6 hours to reach. So dinner was not packed and they expected to quickly prepare the dinner after reaching Pipalkoti.

Most of our next half of the day was spent gazing at the beautiful mountains, dozing off and getting bored sometimes. Massive traffic jams were slowing us very badly and the way we progressed we knew we will not make it anytime soon. by 10PM, we had not even covered 100Kms.

1:00 AM:

Finally, we reached someplace closer to Pipalkoti by 1AM as no one had any energy left for further continuing the journey. We just grabbed only basic stuff required to get ready in the morning so that we can avoid wasting time securing the luggage again on top of the bus next day.

Our cooking staff were amazing and even at this hour, they quickly prepared upma and it was so tasty. By the time we hit the bed it was 2AM and Kiran, our tour manager was quick to add that we have to be ready by 8AM in the morning.

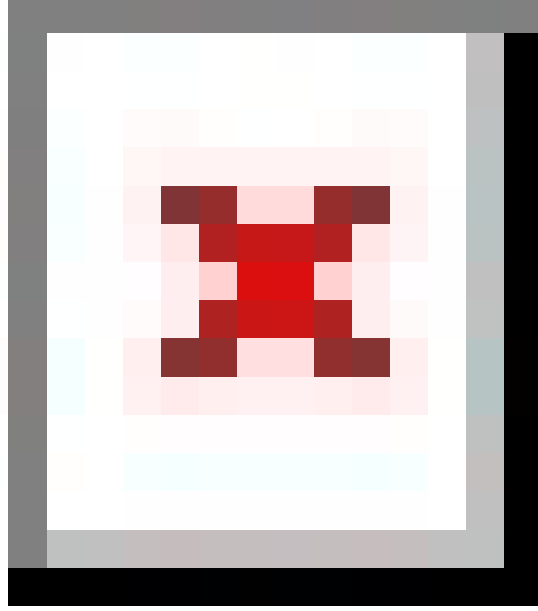
Slowly but steadily, discomfort was raising among the people in the group because of these erratic timings, specially with food as many were BP & diabetic patients and this was taking a toll on their health and energy levels.

1st June, 9AM:

All of us were ready, finished breakfast and got into the bus. There was a small tea shop next to the hotel, we had a cup of double sugar tea and started our journey to the final dham, Badrinath.

It is worthy to note here that, all the other support staff, like the tour manager, cooking staff, cleaning staff and the bus driver were all travelling with us but they had lot more to do after we get down from the bus and before we get into the bus. Not even once it has happened that because of them we got delayed, never. At least the support staff and the manager used to doze off during the journey but our driver, pundit couldn't do that. He has to be alert all the while else none of us would be alive to tell any stories.

The journey was awesome, as usual. For the first time we saw huge blocks of icy mountains and the ice caps were at least 15 to 20 ft. deep on either side of the road. With the sun going down by evening, the mountains looked even more beautiful.



Badrinath:

Shantakaram bhujagashayanam padmanabham suresham
Vishwadharam gaganasadrusham meghavarnam shubangam !
Lakshmi kantham kamalanayam yogihrudhyanagamyam
Vande vishnum bhavabayaharam sarva lokaikanatham !!

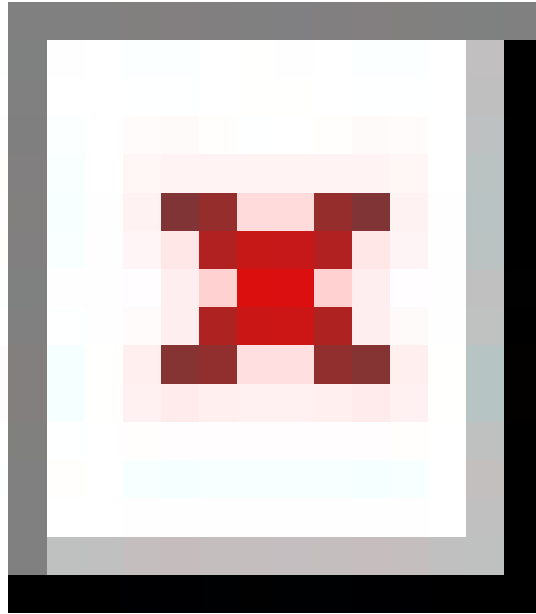
1PM:

We finally reached Badri by almost 1 PM in the afternoon. The final Dham of the Char Dham Yatra. By the time we settled down and freshened up, lunch was ready. The plan was to leave for darshan immediately post lunch and we can have some free time in the evening depending on the crowd and how much time it might take for the darshan and how soon we can return.

Post lunch we started from the hotel by foot as the temple was just about a kilometre from there. On either side of the road you will find that there are lots of shops selling all kind of stuff like artefacts made of metals, precious stones etc., idols of Shiva, Shiva lingam, Badrinarayan, Hanuman etc., few jewellery stores, small hotels and few other stores selling dates and spices. We identified couple of shops which we would visit while returning from the temple.

From this street as you take the left turn at the end of the road you will notice the main temple of Badrinarayan. This looks so different from any other temple that we had visited so far in this trip. The architecture was very different and it was painted with bright colours and carried very distinct outlook. It resembled more of a Buddhist monastery from outside.

Another thing that we immediately noticed was the crowd that was at the entrance of the temple. We knew we will have a tough time getting inside.

**Tapt Kund:**

Tapt-kund, as the name suggests is a hot water spring, which lies between Badrinath shrine and Alaknanda River. This thermal spring is situated in the Badrinath temple.

It is believed that the water carries healing qualities and a holy dip in this water can cure body ailments. It is also believed that the water imparts goodness and purifies the soul. The water of Tapt kund comes from Garur shila and flows into the tank.



We had packed one set of dress to change after taking the bath at Tapt Kund. Tapt kund is the hot water kund / tank where hot water flowed continuously from one end and filled the tank. The exit was on the other side at the top of the tank. There are two such tanks within the temple premises one for men and the other for women and the water was super hot. Amidst the icy mountains and super chilled weather outside, these hot waters gave us a much required break. One thing was certain, once you take bath in these waters, the energy levels in your body gets pumped up and it is such a lovely feeling. All the tiredness of travelling for two days just vanishes. So refreshing and rejuvenating. I had to wait for almost more than 15 minutes after coming out for my wife to join in, I' am sure she was missing the hot water bath more than me ;-)

There is also another hot water spring just after Tapt kund called Surya-kund. People take bath at both the springs before going to the temple. Even this was equally hot and heavily crowded.



Badrinath Temple: Before I get into the Main Badrinath temple, let me give you some info on the temple from Wikipedia.

WikiGyan: *The Badrinath temple is the main attraction in the town. According to legend Sri Adi Shankaracharya discovered a black stone image of Lord Badrinarayan made of Saligrama stone in the Alaknanda River. He originally enshrined it in a cave near the Tapt Kund hot springs. Later in the sixteenth century, the King of Garhwal moved the murti to the present temple.*

Badrinath was re-established as a major pilgrimage site by Adi Shankaracharya in the 7th century. In earlier days, pilgrims used to walk hundreds of miles to visit Badrinath temple.

The temple has been repeatedly destroyed by earthquakes and avalanches. As late as the First World War, the town consisted only of the 20-odd huts used by the temple's staff, but the site drew thousands each year and up to 50,000 on its duo decennial festivals (every twelve years). In recent years

its popularity has increased still more, with an estimated 12 lac pilgrims visiting during the 2019 season, compared to 90,676 in 1961. The temple in Badrinath is also a sacred pilgrimage site for Vaishnavites. Badrinath is also gateway to several mountaineering expeditions headed to mountains like Nilkantha

According to the Bhagavata Purana, "In Badrikashram, the supreme being (Vishnu), in his incarnation as the sages Nara and Narayana, had been undergoing great penance since time immemorial for the welfare of all living entities." It is a place sacred to Vishnu, particularly in Vishnu's dual form of Nara-Narayana.

The main shrine houses the 1 ft. (0.30 m) Saligrama (black stone) idol of Lord Badrinarayana, which is housed in a gold canopy under a Badri Tree. The idol of Lord Badrinarayana shows Him holding a Shankha (conch) and a Chakra (wheel) in two of His arms in a lifted posture and the other two arms resting on His lap in a Yoga mudra (Padmasana) posture. The sanctum also houses images of the god of wealth—Kubera, sage Narada, Uddhava, Nar and Narayan. There are fifteen more images that are also worshipped around the temple. These include that of Lakshmi (the consort of Vishnu), Garuda (the vahana of Narayan), and Navadurga, the manifestation of Durga in nine different forms. The temple also has shrines of Lakshmi Narasimha and for saints Adi Shankara (ad 788-820), Nar and Narayan, Ghantakarna, Vedanta Desika and Ramanujacharya. All the idols of the temple are made of black stone (Saligrama stone)

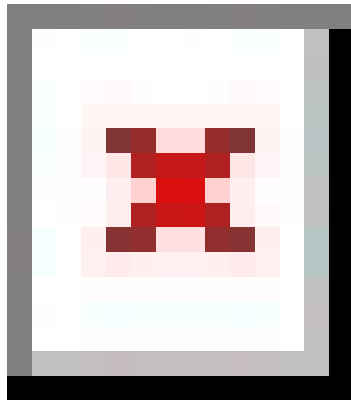
4PM:

Almost everyone had already finished their bath and had moved on. The main gate was flooded with people with Queue running into kilometres here as well like Kedarnath, but here it was very well organised with proper barricades and strict police vigilance. There was no way we could join in the middle or anything like that. Kiran our tour operator was waiting for us and the moment we were ready, he took us to the back gate of the temple through some internal roads.

There were not many people waiting there and we could make some arrangements with the guard who let us in and made us merge with the

queue that was already going inside the temple. Within 10 to 15 min's we could manage to be inside the sanctum sanctorum.

Inside of the temple, it was quite spacious, idols were placed on a big marble podium so all the pilgrims could easily have darshan. Main Badrinarayan was at the middle with the badri tree in the background, Kubera on his right and Narada muni on his left and few more idols are also placed on the podium. Since the idols were made of black mailgram stone and they were all decked up in flowers and garlands etc. it was not easy to spot the actual shape of the moola vigraha which is supposed to be in the padmasana posture. We could spend enough time inside the temple praying and resonating with the sheer energy of the place. Amidst the chaos and the crowd, the pundits inside were kind enough to explain who all were present on the podium and do a small aarati. After paying dakshina at the hundi we exited with only one wish and prayed to the god to bless us with punar (Repeat) darshana and get us back here soon again.



After coming out, we visited the Lakshmi temple, this was also made of saligrama stone and hanuman mandir which were just outside the main temple.

It was already closing time and they were stopping the queue at the main entrance to the mandir. This reduced the number the people inside and gave us few extra moments to spend peacefully. By the time we finished the darshan, most of the others had already left and so we had to hurry up and catch up with them.

On the way back, it was nice cold weather and we had time to go around the market and do some window shopping as well. One of the major selling item was Shiva lingam made of spatika stone with many stores selling thus and giving you 100% guarantee that it is all original. You have to be sure that you are buying the real one as mostly these shops sell lot of fake items at much cheaper rate. As a layman you will not be able to differentiate a spatika from a glass unless you check it thoroughly. We also bought couple of Shiva lingam for gifting purpose along with few more items like jute bags etc.

The area around the temple is highly commercial with hundreds of shops with every shop full of customers and brings that festive mood into the pilgrims. Since most of these shops only operate for 6 months in a year, they have to make the best out of that time to ensure livelihood for the balance 6 months when there will be no one here.

During winters, from October – Last day of dasara – Vijaya dashami the moola murthy gets shifted to Joshi mutt at the base and the daily rituals are carried out there for the rest of the year before bringing it back during April when the temple opens again on the Akshaya Tritiya day.

With this, all the four dham's are completed and I must say we had an awesome time through out. We had been planning for this trip for the last two years but some how we could not do it owing to timing, money, our son being too young to be left alone etc. but this time, with the grace of God we did it. The memories that are created in the last 15 days will stay with us for our lifetime. There was no doubt few tiring, stressful and strenuous moments but those are nothing in front of the beautiful moments that all of us rejoiced. The excitement of seeing all the new places not knowing what to expect next and the sense of pride and achievement we experienced after completing each dham is extraordinary.

We were also blessed with a very good group of people. Since most of the time during these 18 days are spent with these people it is important that the group has mutual respect for each other and steps up for each other when

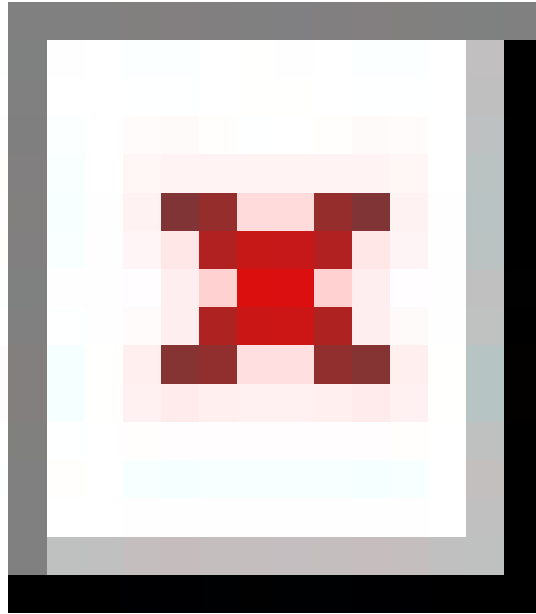
needed. All the members were quite jovial and highly energetic and carried good team spirit and helped each other where ever needed. Most of the time inside the bus was spent sharing informational stories of all these places and what are the things to be done while we are there. Most of us had carried few home made snacks for the trip and everyone was sharing their specialities. Apart from that when ever the bus stopped for lunch or snacks someone would sponsor the tea and snacks and also get some fruits for everyone's consumption later. Cucumber, banana, juice, nuts were few of the favourites.

When ever we took bath in the hot water springs or took bath at the holy ghats and in the Ganga or Yamuna, they guided me and asked me to complete the proper rituals to be done at these places. It is not that we can come here very often and hence it is important that we complete the required procedures properly so that we get the complete benefit of the trip. Overall we all had a great time together and took care of each other and if I have to say we were like a large family

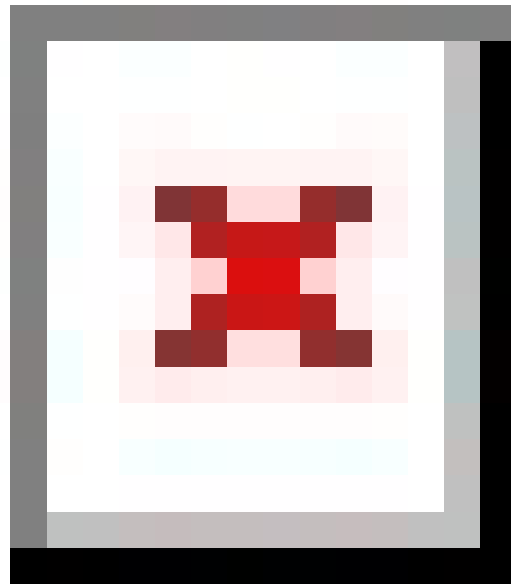
4PM:

Mana – The last village of India.

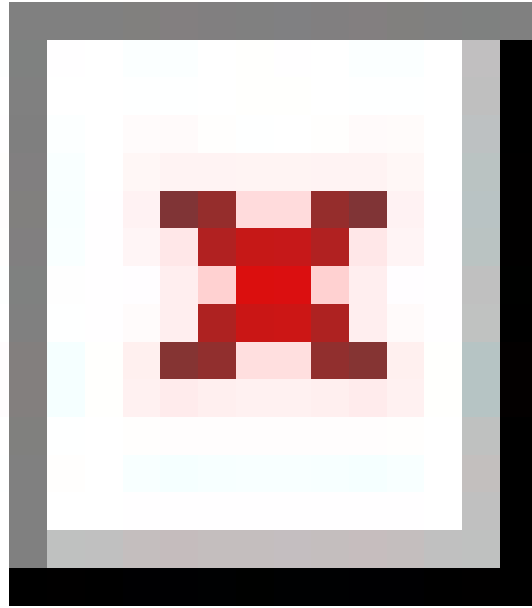
Post lunch, we all set our journey to Mana. Mana is a village in the district of Chamoli located at an altitude of 3,200 meters. Mana is the last village before the Mana Pass and is 26 kilometres from the border of India and Tibet The village is at a distance of about 3 km from Badrinath and the two places are culturally connected with each other. The village had about 558 households and a population of about 1214.



There were quite a few interesting places to see here and for us this was a surprise visit and we were not expecting to visit this. Once inside the village you can visit many historical places which carries lot of significance in our mythology.



Bhīma Pul:



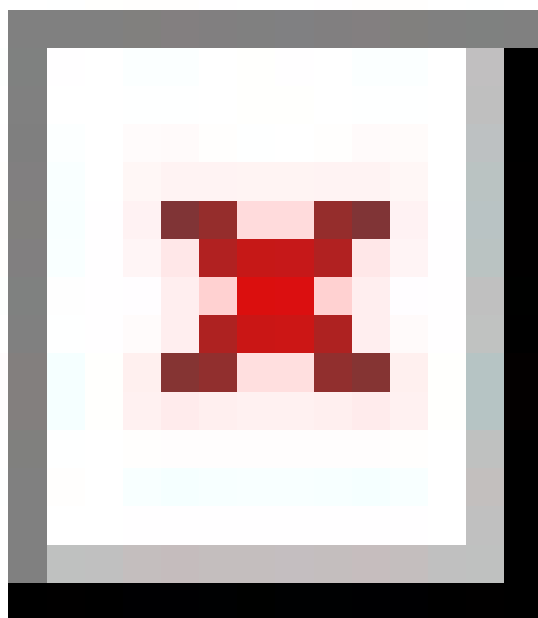
Legend is, while pandavas were trying to reach the swargarohini mountain, they had to cross the river Sarasvati. The force of maa Sarasvati river was so high that Devi Draupadi got scared and thought she will be washed away if they try to cross it and asked Bhīma to help them. Brim at that moment shifted a huge rock over the river like a bridge so that everyone could cross over the river. Just walking on this rock feels like you are experiencing part of the history and it's a legendary feeling.

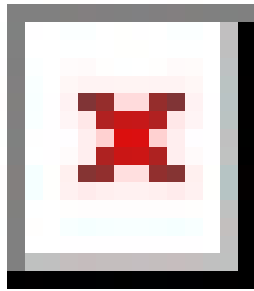
Sarasvati Dham:

Sarasvati is a gupta gamini. That means you can't see her flowing anywhere else, just a small distance from here, she gets merged with Alkananda river never to be seen separately anywhere else. The force with which it is flowing even today is mesmerising, the sound it generates gives us an idea of its brute force and we can't even imagine the force during the pandavas time. Water was pure white and so good to look at. People sell small cans of water to the tourists there who carry it back home which or else is not available anywhere else.

Ganesh Gufa and Vyasa Gufa:

Legend is, Vyasa maharishi was looking for someone to write the Mahabharata while he dictated. He identified Bala Ganesh to fulfil this job. Vyasa Maharishi had one condition that Ganesh should understand what he was saying and then write. Ganesh agreed but he also put a condition that, he should not stop and dictate continuously. To allow time for both these actions to happen, Vyasa maharishi took a gufa up the mountain and almost 250 meters below Ganesh took up another gufa. Vyasa maharishi kept dictating and Ganesh kept writing. This is the place where entire eighteen parvas of the Mahabharata were written. We went inside both the caves and sat there for few minutes just absorbing the divine experience it throws at you. These caves are more than 5000 yrs. old as per the archaeological survey and imagine maharishi's like Vyasa were staying in these caves and today you were able to put your foot into these divine places. These are not possible without the blessing by these saints. Feel truly blessed.





2ND JUNE: 9AM

This trip is not taken up just for the people doing it but also for all the souls that have departed us and are blessing us from their plane. Hence at most of the ghats or springs we just don't take bath, but also pay homage to our ancestors and pray for liberation of their souls. In that aspect it be another big day in this direction.

Brahma kapala:

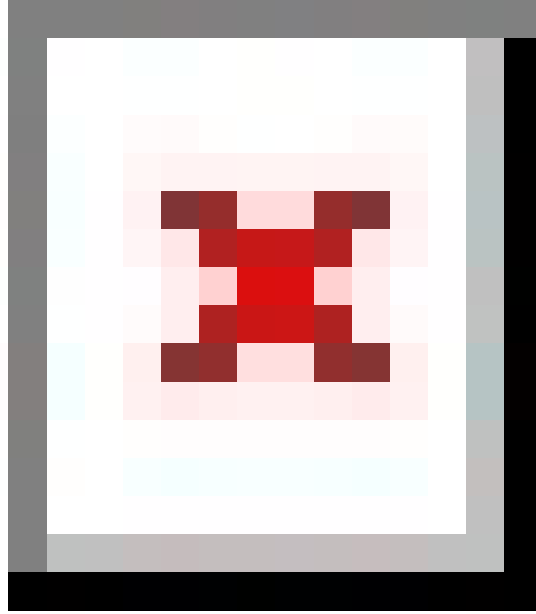
Situated on the banks of Alaknanda River, Brahma Kapala is a place in Badrinath which is of great importance for Hindus. It is here we pay homage to our ancestors. This place is located around two kilometres from the hills of Badrinath.

Situated inside this legendary site is the place where Lord Shiva was liberated from the sins of the Brahma hatya. This practice of delivering salvation to the ancestors at this place is believed to yield eight times more than the expected result. It is a popular belief that performing the ritual of Pind Daan here will free the souls of our ancestors. Not just lord Shiva, even the Pandava brothers are also believed to have achieved their freedom from the sin of committing Brahma Hatya. This place has also found its mention in the holy Vedas as well as the Puranas. Here is an interesting story related to this place:



This holy site is also associated with the origin of the entire universe. It is believed that when Brahma had approached his daughter Prithvi with wrong intentions in his mind, Lord Shiva had cut one of his heads off from his body with the help of his Trishul. Brahma's head got stuck in his Trishul and Lord Shiva then became sinful. In order to get rid of this sin Lord Shiva had to descend to the earthly realm to perform penance. Lord Shiva came to the current spot of Brahma Kapal and this was the place where Lord Shiva had separated the head of Brahma from his Trishul here. This place was also visited by the Pandava brothers who had defeated and killed their own kin during the war of Mahabharata. In order to get rid of the sin of killing their kin the Pandava brothers were on their way for their journey to heaven and they stopped here to offer their prayers to the souls of their departed ancestors. As instructed by Lord Krishna Pandavas also did the rituals of Shradh in order to attain salvation for their ancestors as well as for the people who lost their lives in the battlefield. It is said that performing deep penance here will grant your ancestors with moksha or salvation from the karmic cycle of birth and rebirth.

With the same intentions in mind, we also went to brahma kapala with a pundit. Fortunately, the pundit belonged to our place and he could talk in kannada language for the benefit of most of the group members. We went to the banks of Alkananda passing the brahma kapala.



The pundit was good and was guiding us properly to complete our rituals. It was a very heart warming and highly satisfactory that I could do this and be part of the rituals which could liberate the souls of our ancestors.

1:30 PM

We had arranged for lunch at an Udupi Mutt close to our hotel. Finished our lunch and we started back from Badrinath at around 3PM. Only plan for the rest of the day is journey.

Our final destination from here is Hardwar covering Rishikesh on the way. Badrinath to Hardwar is around 320 Km's and for today we have to reach Gharwal Srinagar, which is around 150 Km's from Badrinath. It was an ambitious target considering the way the traffic moves in these areas. From such cold conditions, by the time we reached Rishikesh, we were sweating. It was so hot.

3rd June: 12 Noon:

We were given 2 hours for completing shopping or to visit Ram Jhoola and Lakshman Jhoola. Quite honestly Me and My wife were in no mood to go anywhere so we just went for shopping and bought few stuff for gifting and during that 90 minutes, we finished 2 nimbu soda's, ice cream and finally even had some snacks and tea. Heat was too much and it was really taking a toll on us.

3PM

From here we had to reach Hardwar, which was just 25 Km's and normally, it takes around 1.5 Hrs Maximum to reach. Today was not a normal day. Today was an EPIC!

10 PM

Drinking water inside the bus was over, we were rationing water from who ever carried the bottles and the final bottle also was finished one hour back. Scene outside was not encouraging, we could see many people started walking towards Hardwar as there was absolutely no movement what so ever on the roads and this has been the condition for the last couple of hours. We were just five km's away from the hotel but we knew it will take nothing less than two more hours. We have had many more terrible journeys' in the last 15 days, but there we were prepared mentally for a gruelling journey, here we were not. May be that was leading to all the frustrations today. There were almost 3 to 4 lac people in Hardwar who had gathered from all the neighbouring villages to attend the mela. All the ghats of Manasa devi, Chanda devi were all blocked and we could see the traffic on either side of the road completely blocked and police were just standing and watching with no clue on what to do and how to manage this crowd.

2:30 AM

We had just finished our dinner and getting our bags packed so that we don't have to do that again early in the morning. Reaching at 1AM in the night, having dinner at 2AM and getting to bed at 3 Am and again getting ready at 6AM was our routine on most of the days but that was not expected for today. But today was no ordinary day.

9:00 AM

The mood was quite different, almost everyone were already wishing each other goodbye's and sharing the number to stay in touch. This is the final leg of the journey from Hardwar to Delhi and luckily we had AC bus from here. Energy in the group was high and everyone started off with Ganga Miyya Ki Jai, Yamuna Miyya Ki Jai, Har Har Mahadev. Badrinath Ki jai...

2:00 PM:

Delhi was super hot and for us the variation in temperature was from sub zero at Badrinath to 40C at Delhi. Our final stop was within a short distance from the Airport for lunch. Here we finally bid a formal farewell to our group members. Our flight was at night 9PM but others had booked flights earlier as well and hence we had to wait in the Airport for more than 4 Hours before we could finally take off and complete this wonderful trip.

Epilogue:

Coming from sales and operations background and also from a family which travelled extensively every year to new places, I have been fortunate to have visited many religious places in India including Hardwar, Rishikesh, Varanasi, Kolhapur, Triyambakeshwar, Madurai, Rameshwaram, Thiruvananthapuram and innumerable times to Tirupati. But I must say, this trip has been one of the most enriching experiences of all.

In this trip, there have been many firsts'. Apart from all the places that I visited for the first time and there were so many of them, I saw the most beautiful Himalayas for the first time, went in a helicopter for the first time but also experienced what it feels like to be amidst the nature which can be both nourishing as well as life threatening all at the same time.

This trip pushes you to go beyond your limits and test your spirits and checks how far you can go. There have been times where you will feel like giving it up but when you look around there are so many things from which

you can get inspired from like the old people who are ahead of you, physically challenged people are challenging the cliffs and making brisk progress, old people walking with oxygen cylinders to their back, kids who are still merrily running when you are grasping for breath. You feel like the challenge in front of you is nothing and you can beat it. We being the youngest in our group was an added advantage as we could draw lot of inspiration from within our group members.

Your body is pushed beyond its limits. The Cliffs of Yamunotri, the terrain route of Gangotri, the bone chilling winds at Kedarnath, the sub zero temperature at Badrinath, gruelling journeys from one place to another, lack of sleep, lack of timely food, lack of oxygen, dangerous and life threatening roads and what not to deter your spirits. The one thing that keeps you going is the determination. The spirit to see something new, to experience something new, to challenge yourself and see the magic that unfolds once you get submerged into the nature. It is not just the destination the whole route feeds you with energy. You will notice that it is your mind over body that kept you going.

I would like to wind up this book with a prayer on my lips. I pray to the Gods to bless me and my family with many more opportunities to visit each of these places in this lifetime. Any number of times you see this your heart will not be content but nothing wrong in trying though.

Har Har Mahadev!

Om namo narayanaya!!