

# MUNSIYARI'S

# ELUSIVE

# HIMALAYAN

# CHARMS



Munsiyari's stunning display of Himalayan peaks is best experienced at dusk and dawn.

SITUATED AT THE EDGE OF JOHAR VALLEY, ALONG THE ANCIENT  
INDO-TIBETAN SALT ROUTE, MUNSIYARI IS AS REMOTE AS IT IS ALLURING.  
UNDISTURBED OAK FORESTS, BREATHTAKING VIEWS AND VIRGIN  
WATERFALLS LAY UNDISCOVERED TILL NOW. A NEW GLAMPING RETREAT IS  
MAKING TRAVEL IN THIS RUGGED BUT BEAUTIFUL TERRAIN POSSIBLE.

BY NEELIMA VALLANGI



# WE'D BEEN DRIVING RELENTLESSLY FOR 12 HOURS NON STOP FROM THE PLAINS OF UTTARAKHAND TOWARDS MUNSIYARI, YET THERE WAS NO SIGHT OF THE HIMALAYAN PEAKS EVEN AS WE NEARED THE MOUNTAIN TOWN.

Given that Munsiyari is the closest one can get to the big mountains of Himalayas by road, the absence of a horizon specked with pointed crests was sorely disappointing. Fatigue was setting in when heavens gates opened up. Pummeled by raindrops the size of cotton balls, I gave up all hope when Himalayas worked their elusive magic at Kalamuni mountain pass. The imposing crease of Panchachuli massif's highest peak made a glowing appearance through the gaps of clearing storm clouds. All fatigue was forgotten and adrenaline kicked in when I realised how close I was to the formidable Himalayas!

Situated at the edge of Johar Valley, along the ancient Indo-Tibetan salt route, Munsiyari is as remote as it is alluring. Since the border was sealed following the Indo-Sino war of 1962, which left people of the valley suddenly without a livelihood, Johar was abandoned en masse creating several ghost villages that stand today as a memorial to the halcyon days. A gateway of historic importance, Munsiyari is the last frontier after which the rugged mountains extend, leading all the way till Tibet. Therefore, the only people you may see here are mountaineers and a battalion of army that occasionally crosses this tiny hamlet.

Word of Munsiyari's raw Himalayan splendour had reached my ears a long time ago. But so had its reputation as a distant and rugged paradise with little tourist infrastructure. So I kept putting off my visit until recently when the area's first boutique property, Himalayan Glamping Retreat, offered a charming alternative with an inviting suggestion to gaze at the five peaks of Panchachuli range from the comforts of the bed. No sooner did I arrive, visibly exhausted from the long journey, I was whisked away to my tent perched on a high ground.

As night fell, despite being swaddled in comforts, I switched off all lights to simulate the experience of a wild camp in pitch darkness. I could see the stars twinkling in the sky and a vague silhouette of mountains through the tent's mesh entrance. The previously raucous jungle around me was cloaked in a palpable hush. A perfect antidote to the rush of city life, I thought as I drifted into deep sleep.

The next morning, the shrill calls of a resident Blue Whistling Thrush rose above the cacophony of a lush forest coming to life. Eagerly, I searched for the jagged edges of Panchachuli's five mountains but the sky was painted in a deep blue shade, full of ominous monsoon clouds. Later that afternoon, I set off to hike to Khaliya Top – a phenomenal vantage point with verdant meadows, several meters above Munsiyari.

Hiking through an oak forest with a primeval quality, I leisurely trudged up the stone pathway trailing behind my guide. Birds whose names I didn't know flitted about and the cuteness of a gamboling Pika – a mammal that looks like a miniature version of a rabbit – stopped me in my tracks. A ghostly mist ensconced me when I reached the meadows. Stuck to the luxuriant patches of green, herds of sheep looked like decorative specks on the slopes below. On the side of a craggy edge beyond, I sat down to gape at the view of the stormy sky above the stunted windswept grasslands. Upon reaching the top, we set up camp and I fervently hoped it would rain like all hell broke loose. It did.

A frightening squall of intense downpour coupled with lightning and thunder cleared up the choked valley by next morning. At dawn, I woke up to the gorgeous view of the dark contours of Himalayan peaks right in front of me. Crepuscular rays obstructed by the five prominent peaks decorated the dramatic cloud-filled sky in geometrical patterns. The panoramic view of the Kumaoni range afforded by Khalia Top was nothing like I had seen before; the proximity was overwhelming. From the elusive Nanda Devi to the picturesque Rajrambha, a whole spectrum of Himalayan peaks soaring high and their precipitous green valleys were visible in all their magnificence.

Climbing up to the massive Birthi Falls on my way out of Munsiyari the next day, I couldn't help but think how this remote hilltown implores the traveller to go the whole nine yards. Munsiyari sure doesn't serve its charms on a silver platter; it makes you work for it. Thankfully, it's absolute bang for the buck! ■

## THE DETAILS

### GETTING THERE

Take a train from Delhi to Kathgodam and halt the journey at Binsar. Drive to Munsiyari the next day.

### HOTELS

**Himalayan Glamping Retreat** Providing a one-of-a-kind luxurious camping experience at 8000ft with plush amenities, this property offers six tastefully done tent-style cottages. [himalayanglamping.com](http://himalayanglamping.com); Doubles from ₹15000

### ACTIVITIES

**Khaliya Top** A great hike for the outdoor enthusiast

through pristine forest and meadows, Khaliya Top offers mesmerising view of the Himalayan ranges

### Mehsar Kund & Thamri Kund

lakes: Set amidst lush forest, these lakes are great for bird watching and light hiking.

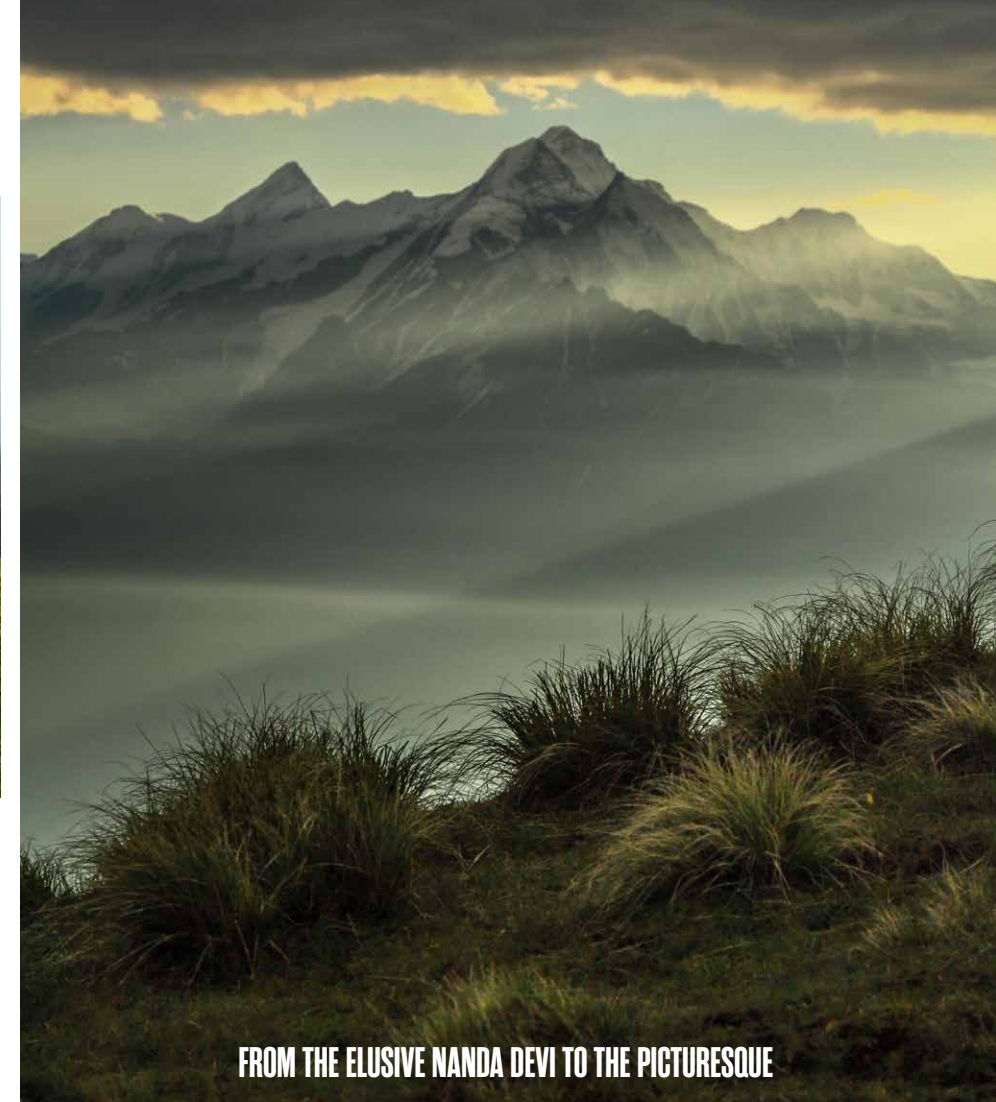
**Nanda Devi Temple:** For those who do not wish to hike, this temple offers a panoramic view of the Himalayan ranges.

### Tribal Heritage Musuem

Curated by a native of Milam village, the museum offers a nice glimpse into the region's culture and traditions.



*Clockwise: E Khalia top's verdant meadows attract hikers in summer months; the jagged pinnacles of Rajrambha; a pleasant surprise en route is the thunderous Birthi Falls right by the side of the road; narrow strips of green fields surround the houses of a tiny village on the way to Munsiyari.*



FROM THE ELUSIVE NANDA DEVI TO THE PICTURESQUE  
RAJRAMBHA, A WHOLE SPECTRUM OF HIMALAYAN  
PEAKS SOAR HIGH, THEIR PRECIPITOUS GREEN VALLEYS  
VISIBLE IN ALL THEIR MAGNIFICENCE.

