

A trekking adventure in the foothills of the Himalayas

Stephen McClarence explores India's little-known region of Kumaon near the Tibet and Nepal borders

Late afternoon and we're on a Jeep safari trundling along a bumpy jungle track in the Himalayan foothills. In the vehicle's front seat, a naturalist, Yogan Singh Bisht ("Call me Yogi"), is giving a running commentary on the wildlife; he spots it long before we do.

A rhesus monkey over here, he says. A blue whistling thrush over there. A muntjac deer close enough to hear it nibbling leaves. A red junglefowl scuttling across the path. A langur. A spotted deer.

We reach a bridge over a swiftly flowing river. "There's a lesser fish eagle over there and..." His eyes dart to the left. "An otter...

two... three..." Sleek and sinuous, they weave through the water, overtaking each other, ever alert, sometimes climbing on to rocks and rearing on their hind legs; beautiful, muscular creatures. I've never seen one — never mind three — before and it's a moment of pure open-mouthed joy.

The safari, in Corbett National Park (India's first wildlife reserve, famed for its tigers), is one of the highlights of a memorable week my wife and I are spending in the Himalayan foothills, 150 miles or so northeast of Delhi.

At the heart of the trip are three days of leisurely trekking in the off-the-beaten-track Kumaon region — near the Tibet and Nepal borders — staying at village-

style houses. It's a lovely area: farms, orchards, distant views of snowy peaks, birdsong, literally breathtakingly fresh air; a beguiling taste of the "village India" many visitors rarely explore. And it's perfect trekking country. In the event, things take a rather different turn... but that's some way ahead as we fly into Delhi for a night at the Maidens Hotel.

We've known this venerable colonial hotel, in the northern part of the city beyond the Red Fort, for more than 20 years. Wedding-cake white and like an elegant Edwardian country house, it's a quiet retreat from Delhi's busy-ness, particularly for Raj nostalgists.

"I meet guests who came with their

grandparents and now they bring their grandchildren," Puneet Kapoor, the manager, says.

Sadly we have little time to relax here. We set the alarm clock for 3.45am and leave an hour later to catch the 6am train from New Delhi station to Kathgodam, the railhead for Kumaon.

The platforms are swathed in fog; waiting passengers are swathed in shawls, scarves, woolly hats and an air of patient resignation. "May I have your attention please," the station announcement repeats every few minutes, bringing news of delays, one of 12 hours. "Inconvenience caused is deeply regretted."

Against the odds, our train — a comfortable Shatabdi Express — is bang on time. Hooter blaring, it pulls out of Delhi, and morning tea (including a digestive biscuit



and a “refreshing tissue”) is served as we speed smoothly through the dawn.

The city gradually gives way to towns, which give way to villages; misty mountains eventually loom ahead. Almost six hours on from Delhi, the train pulls into Kathgodam and we’re greeted by Shakti Yadar, our extremely patient driver for the next week.

The roads from here twist and turn, corkscrewing as we climb above the terraced hillsides to about 6,000ft, ear-poppingly high. The afternoon sun glistens on a great panorama of distant snowy peaks and, after five hours or so, we reach Itmenaan Estate, three comfortable guest cottages and a dining room built in traditional Kumaoni style.

A 20-minute walk from the road down a steep woodland path, Itmenaan was due to be our base for two nights, with stays at two other (more basic) cottages between walks lasting between two and five hours.

However, a few days before leaving Britain, I injured my right foot (don’t ask) and now find it painful to walk more than a couple of miles. Inconvenience caused is deeply regretted, because we know what we may have to miss. Eight years ago, we spent four exhilarating days in Kumaon on a similar trip, sometimes weaving our way

across fields with hardly a house or a road in sight. We’ve talked about it ever since.

Now we sit by a wood fire on the Itmenaan terrace, sip rhododendron cordial and consider our options. Either I can hop left-footed through the Himalayan foothills or we scale down the walking. We decide to scale down and Amit Kandpal, the estate manager, accommodatingly rewrites our itinerary. It becomes the essence of “slow travel”, making the most of the local and the particular, and an antidote to headlong touristic rush. Itmenaan, after all, means “relaxation”.

As it happens, the changes chime with Amit’s outlook. Three years ago he gave up a Delhi-based job in hotel marketing to return to the Kumaon region, where he grew up. “I missed the natural beauty and the fresh air,” he says. “In Delhi everyone wants everything very fast. Life here is totally different; it’s simple. This is my home, my family is here, I’m happy here.”

At twilight we watch the distant mountains change colour, icy white gradually giving way to a rosy glow. By 7pm there’s

complete stillness. The only sounds are the crackling of the burning wood, the distant barking of dogs and children’s shrill singing echoing across the valley. The sky is soon scattered with stars. It’s hard to know where they end and the lights of faraway hilltop villages begin.

In the morning we pull back the curtains and a stunning panorama opens out. Above terraces of wheat and vegetables and whitewashed houses clinging to the hillsides, the snowy peaks of the Himalayas rear up over forests. The focus is Nanda Devi — at 23,000ft, India’s second-highest mountain — 60 miles away. The mountains look so glacially perfect, it could be a painted backdrop.

After breakfast, including *poha*, a nourishing dish of rice, peas, nuts, carrots, mustard seeds, beans, turmeric and lemon juice, we set off to walk a couple of miles to Naugaon, a village of 800 people, following quiet roads and forest tracks.

Eagles circle overhead as we pass conical stacks of drying grass (“for when the

snows come”) and a small roadside temple — scarlet, orange and white and dedicated to Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god. Women with great bundles of firewood branches on their heads weave their way down the terraces, chattering as they go, their voices carrying a good half-mile. “They are talking about cattle and goats,” says Amit. “Discussing prices.”

Here and there, modern India edges in. Cottages have satellite dishes nestling among the pumpkins drying on their roofs. The TV in a market café where we have milky sugary coffee is showing Bollywood movies.

Mostly, though, it feels pretty timeless. A man leads half a dozen donkeys, bells tinkling round their necks, to collect groceries for fellow villagers. In the sunshine, a couple are having lunch under the lemon tree in their garden.

Finally we reach Naugaon, a jumble of stone-roofed houses, yards, tight passages, cows,

byres, goats, drying chillies, playing children. We have tea at a long, wooden house, its ground floor stabling cattle, its upstairs centred on a black, smoky kitchen with firewood piled up on the stove. Then we walk back to Itmenaan.

Next day, we drive to Almora, a sprawling town with an engaging bazaar. Otherwise, we absorb ourselves in the area around the estate. On the face of it, our stay is uneventful. But it's hugely fulfilling: a lesson, if you like, in less-is-more.

The rest of the trip includes a night in the holy Hindu city of Haridwar, joining the crowds at the nightly (and noisy) Aarti ceremony. Pilgrims launch butter-lamp boats on the Ganges, priests swing flaming torches, musicians beat the living day-lights out of gongs and tourists raise selfie-

sticks.

It's much quieter at Corbett National Park, where we're staying at Paatlidun Safari Lodge, an estate of luxurious cottage suites with private bathing pools and rooftop "star-gazing beds".

The grounds are alive with birdsong. An amazing 600 species can be found here — half the Indian total — so we ask Yogi to take us on a bird-watching walk. There's another less-is-more proviso: we don't want to stray more than a hundred yards from the lodge's main buildings.

Yogi is superb. His hands dart up and down, left and right, pointing out dozens of birds, their names only marginally less colourful than their plumage.

Oriental white-eye, crimson sunbird, black-chinned babbler, grey bush-chat, red-vented bulbul...

I write them down, but can hardly keep up. Grey-crowned pygmy woodpecker, oriental magpie-robin, grey-headed canary-flycatcher: small birds with long names.

"Oh, look, look," he says excitedly. "A lesser yellow-naped woodpecker on this tree trunk. And a fulvous-breasted woodpecker on that one." The pair of them ham-

mer at the wood, like a drumming duet.

The birds are an added extra for most visitors, who come mainly for the tigers (there are about 200). "We're trying to change the mindset," says Yogi as we're overtaken by a noisy camera-touting group. "They're not enjoying it; they're only concentrating on one thing — tigers. Shooting tigers with guns has evolved into shooting them with cellphones and telephoto lenses."

For the record, we don't see any tigers, but we're not disappointed. We'll never forget the otters. Or the crimson sunbird.



Need to know

Stephen McClarence was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 3642 0861, coxandkings.co.uk), which has an 11-day, 9-night Walk through Himalayan Foothills private tour from £2,495pp, including flights, transfers and sightseeing. It features two nights' B&B at the Maidens Hotel, Delhi; four nights' full board walking

in the Kumaon region
(including Itmenaar); and
accommodation with
breakfast at Haridwar and
Paatlidun Safari Lodge in
Corbett National Park



