



# I KISS THE SKY

In the footsteps of the gods on the roof of the world, **Amruta Slee** discovers the joys of village life in the majestic Indian Himalayas.

INDIA SPECIALISES IN sights for which no amount of background reading can prepare. There's the marble magnificence of Agra's Taj Mahal, the sublime loveliness of Humayun's Tomb and the crimson splendour of the Red Fort in Delhi. Then there is one of nature's trump cards, the snow-clad peaks of the Himalayan mountain range, some 2900km of sheer rock forming a natural border between the subcontinent and its neighbours.

Kumaon, in the country's north-eastern state of Uttarakhand, is billed as one of the best places from which to see the Indian Himalayas. On a spring day, with the sky bright-blue overhead and an unseasonal snowfall covering the ground, it is living up to the promise. As the car winds up through the ▶

360° Leti

## HIKING HIMALAYAS

hills, eucalyptus, neem and banyan trees give way to pine, oak and rhododendron. Below, terraced vegetable fields ribbon the hillsides. Then a break in the foothills reveals the headline act: piles of white and pink looming up to touch the horizon. "There is Nanda Devi," says the guide as I fumble for my hopelessly inadequate camera. "There are better views up ahead."

This is a mountain that has captivated sightseers and adventurers over the years, so much so that mountaineer Willi Unsoeld named his daughter after her. That tale ends badly – during an attempted summit of her namesake in 1976, the daughter was killed. The 7187m Nanda Devi (which translates as "bliss-giving goddess") proved one of the most difficult mountains in the world to scale. In 1934, a British expedition led by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman finally managed to find a passage into the "inner sanctuary" at the base of the mountain. Tilman finally climbed India's second-largest mountain in 1936 as part of an Anglo-American expedition. Others followed, so many others, all leaving such a mess behind, that eventually the government declared the mountain off-limits. The area is now largely a biosphere reserve.

Perhaps because of this, and perhaps because Uttarakhand's bigger attraction is the New Age haven of Rishikesh, where the Beatles dallied with Eastern religion in the 1960s, Kumaon is some-

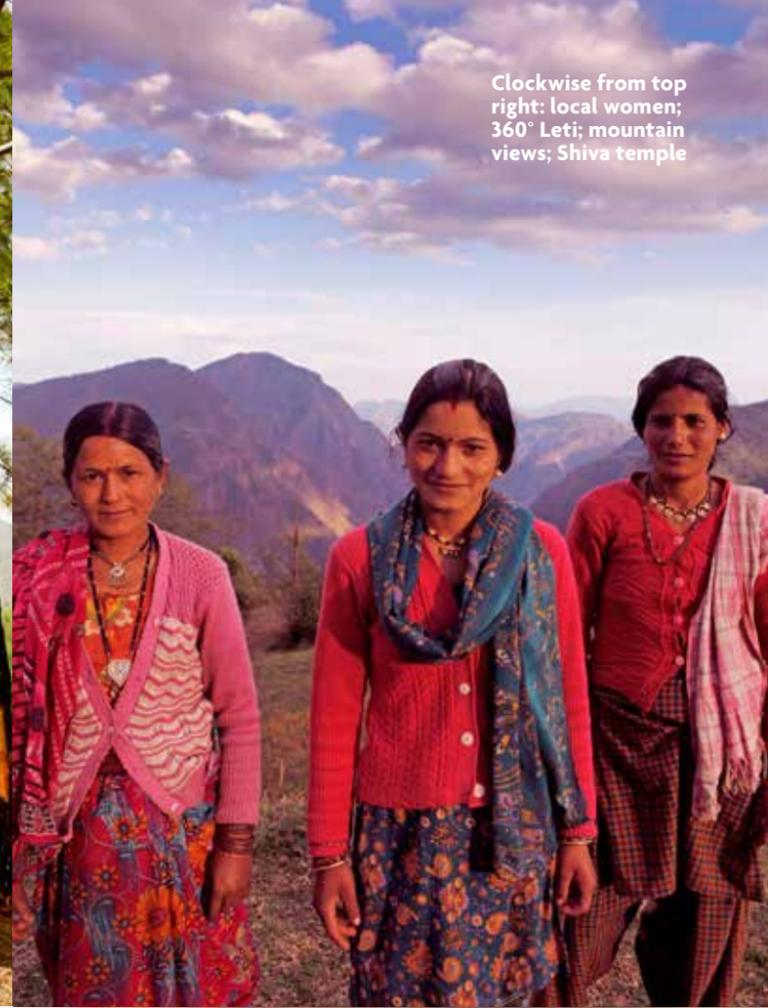
what off the beaten tourist track. Hotels are being rapidly built around various attractions such as the deep green lakes and in the hills. Around them, the small, neat villages remain largely untouched.

I am here to experience Kumaon Village Walks, which take guests by foot and road through the region, winding up at a mountain top retreat, 360° Leti. The brainchild of Jamshyd Sethna, a Mumbai-based psychoanalyst, former tea planter, and now travel industry entrepreneur, the concept arose out of a trek he once made to the area. As he tells it, everything that could go wrong, did, from leaking tents to bad food to incompetent guides. "I was missing my espresso and fresh fruit," he relates. "But I thought, we're in the most beautiful part of the world, how do I get my friends to come up here and give them a sophisticated experience?"

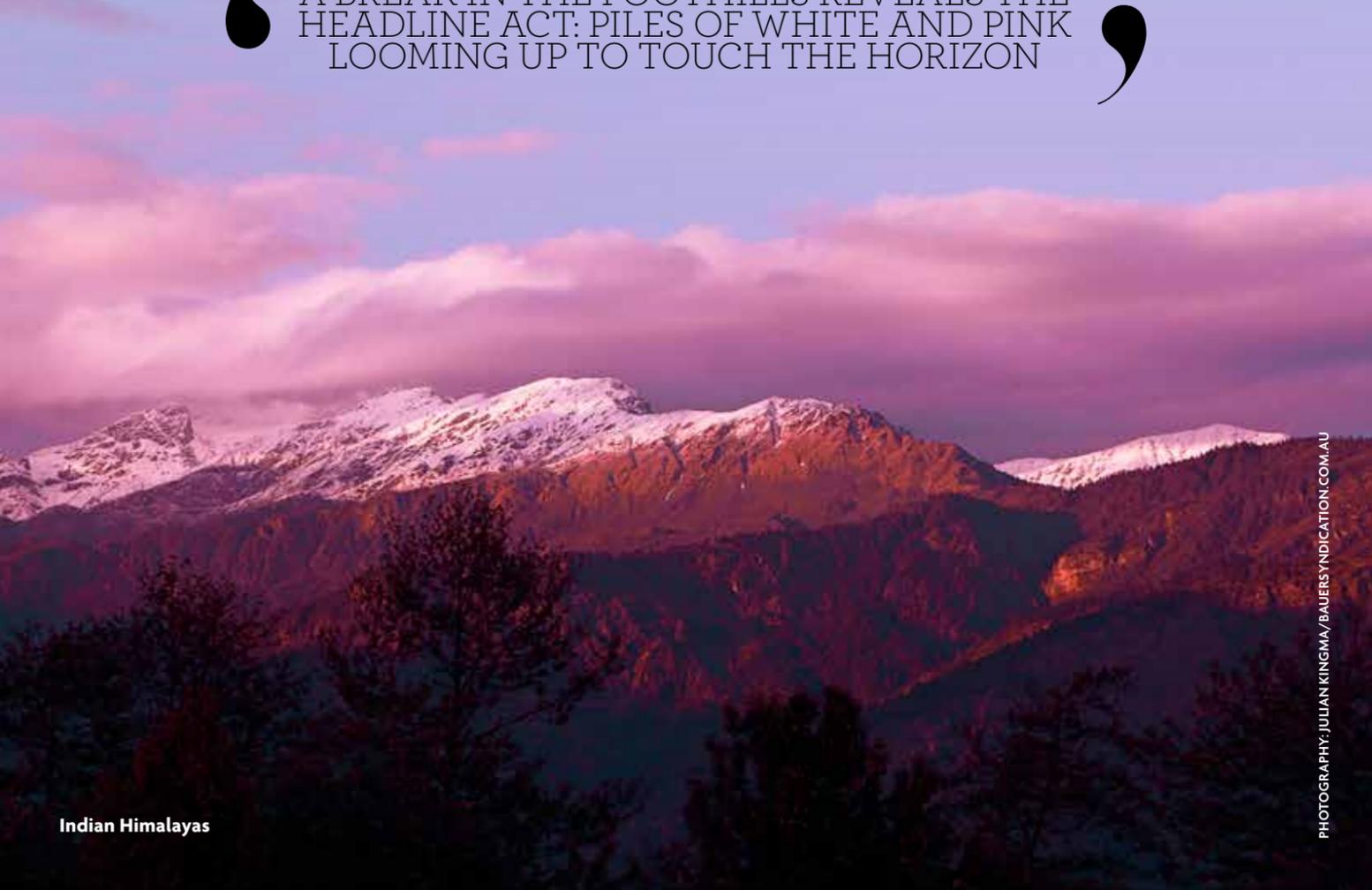
Under the auspices of his high-end tour company, Banyan, he created Shakti Himalaya, bespoke walking tours through Kumaon, Sikkim and Ladakh that are thoughtful, sustainable, small in scale, high in style and tremendously enjoyable.

**THE PATH TO LETI STARTS**, for most people, in Delhi, with a train ride to Kathgodam, a town at the base of the foothills. It is not a promising start: plastic-filled rubbish dumps and slums, all the detritus of India's rapid modernisation, line the rail route. ➤

A BREAK IN THE FOOTHILLS REVEALS THE HEADLINE ACT: PILES OF WHITE AND PINK LOOMING UP TO TOUCH THE HORIZON



Clockwise from top right: local women; 360° Leti; mountain views; Shiva temple



Clockwise from left: outdoor breakfast at 360° Leti; chef Yeshi Lama; mountain cuisine



## A SPECTACULAR VIEW OF PEAKS AND GLACIERS, FALLING AWAY TO THE VAST VALLEYS FAR BELOW

Whatever I'm expecting at Kathgodam, last stop on the line, it's not a guide called Mark [Syiemlieh] who hails from a matrilineal region near Darjeeling, a laid-back former journalist who greets me with a glass of fresh rhododendron juice and a hot towel.

It's a couple of hours' drive through the crisp afternoon, along hairpin-bend roads to a place where snow has built up so high that the car can't go any further – and then an hour's hike to the first of three village houses we'll be staying in.

A porter takes the luggage and vanishes up the snowy track while Syiemlieh patiently adjusts his pace to mine. A white, furry dog, like a small but friendly wolf, bounces out of the woods and joins the walk. The snow appears to have caused some chaos. Syiemlieh warns that there may not be any electricity and as our destination comes into view, I tell myself that hot showers are overrated.

But it is a needless worry. At Jwalabanj, site of the second house, another hot towel materialises, along with a hot lemon, ginger and honey drink. I'm directed to a private, dry stone wall cottage with a slate roof, and wooden windows, a piece of vernacular architecture renovated inside to allow every comfort; a huge, inviting bed, thick rugs underfoot, candle-lit lanterns that cast a buttery glow over the room, a roaring wood fire and a Western style bathroom – thankfully with hot water.

"Solar heating," Syiemlieh says. "Have a shower. There are drinks by the fire on the terrace at 6pm; what time would you like dinner?"



block-print textiles, beaten copper pots and pans. Aesthetics aside, they work. The thick walls keep the place snug in winter and cool in summer, the sloping roofs allow snow and water to slide off.

Over the next few days, a pattern is established. After coffee served in bed and a breakfast big enough to feed a small army, we walk; Syiemlieh, me, a second guide, Kailash, carrying a pack of snacks and drinks, and the white wolf dog who has apparently become part of the family. We walk up hills, through valleys, along riverbanks, through forests and small farms, past goats, cows and Hindu temples dating from the eighth century.

The dog leaps ahead, Syiemlieh and Kailash glide, I puff in their wake (scoffing all seven courses of breakfast is not the best idea). Occasionally, a village woman sails past, clad in thongs and cotton sari, carrying half an oak tree on her head.

Scenes of rural life unfold: a woman shaking her head over the fact that monkeys have eaten her spinach crop, people stacking wood, washing clothes, giving the buffalo a bath. We pass fields >



Rice terraces outside Almora (left); village house at Kasar Devi (above)

of corn, mustard and, rather more unexpectedly, the first sprouts of marijuana. “It’s legal to grow here,” Syiemlieh says. “They use it to make hemp for bags and rope. If times are tough they’ll feed it to the goats.” No doubt that explains the contented air of the local animals.

At some point, a car will pick us up. At another point, a picnic lunch – four or five courses – awaits in an idyllic spot. Towards late afternoon, we’ll arrive at another exquisite village house. A gin and tonic precedes a six-course dinner, prepared in an immaculate kitchen; then to a bed pre-warmed by hot-water bottles. Wolf dog, adopted by the staff, snuggles down outside. A day or two in the embrace of this well-oiled machine and the real world starts to drop away.

**ANYONE WHO HAS** travelled in India can appreciate the organisation that’s gone into the village walks, but 360° Leti takes organisational skills to a new level. A few years back there was absolutely nothing on this mountaintop, some 2400m above sea level – no roads, buildings, electricity or running water. What there was, for any adventurer who completed the five-hour ascent from Leti village, was a spectacular view of the peaks and glaciers of Nanda Devi and mountains falling away to the vast valleys far below.

The view is still there, but a transformation has taken place. Originally, the idea was to set up grand Raj-style canvas tents, but erratic weather makes that impractical. Instead, architect Bijoy Jain has designed four contemporary versions of the village houses. To construct them, all the stone, glass and fittings were carted up the mountain by porters. A recent welcome addition – a new road – means food, wine and other essentials can be delivered with more ease. A main house with a dining and living room beckons if it rains; at all other times meals are taken outside.

There are walks to be had – small ones down into the villages on the other side, a day-long stroll to a nearby waterfall, or a challenging scramble to the top of a ridge where you come face to face with Nanda herself. For the really fit, there’s a four-day hike with camping, if weather permits. There is excellent food and cooking lessons; books, games of cricket and carom billiards on offer. Or there’s simply hanging around contemplating the moment.

At one of the Hindu temples below, Syiemlieh had related the local legend of when Shiva came here to meditate. His presence enchanted the wives of local sages, who were so enraged they issued a curse, throwing the world into darkness. But Vishnu gathered up the darkness and Shiva’s eternal light shone out, marking the start of the mortal world. You can well believe this is where it all began. When the sun comes up, illuminating the majesty of the Himalayas, and absolute peace reigns, it is truly the Kingdom of the Gods. 🌐

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