



श्री गुरुभयो नमः

Uttarakhand – Gharwal & Kumaon Tour, Feb 15 – 26, 2013

"Uttarakhand is the heartland of the Himalayas. A wide expanse between the Himalayas in the north and the Shivalik range in the south, it offers the most breathtaking views of the mighty peaks; mist covered deep gorges and verdant valleys. Uttarakhand is a popular spot amongst pilgrims and nature lovers.

This state is also popularly known as the 'Abode of Gods' as it includes many shrines and places of pilgrimage." 'Chardham', the four most sacred and revered Hindu temples - Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri have always been hot favorites during summer. The route is blessed with magnificent glaciers, majestic snow-clad mountains, gigantic peaks, valley of flowers and dense forests which attract all ages.

Besides Charidham in Garhwal Himalayas - Mussoorie, Dhanaulty, Lansdowne, Harsil and in Kumaon Himalayas – Munsiyari, Chaukori, Binsar, Jageshwar, Mukteshwar, are also known for their pristine beauty. Nature is something to feel and absorb so the only travel tip for those who are planning to visit Uttarakhand is to travel less and stay more. Stroll around the hills, breathe pure air to rejuvenate the inner self, go for a trek, visit local temples and see the mists encircling the town with its mysterious sound at any sudden hour of the day. Just unwind, to recharge your energy."

On February 26th, 2013, our team of four Suddhatma, my Brother-in-law, my Sister, & myself - Samata, returned from a twelve-day trip to Uttarakhand - Gharwal & Kumaon. I present below a brief account of our most memorable winter (an off season!) sojourn. But first, we would like to thank our Beloved SwamiJi, without whose blessings and unconditional love none of this would have been possible. I would then like to thank our Driver MempalJi, who drove us around those treacherous mountain roads, flawlessly for those twelve long days with a smile and courage. We are extremely grateful to him for being our 'Saarathi' in the real sense. In fact, he was very much a part of our expedition team.

This was a part of our Kumaon tour map, Baijnath onwards.



The Itinerary & Travel log

February 15, 2013 – We boarded Spice Jet Airlines for Delhi from Pune airport, at around 7.20a.m. Our driver Nivas was there at our door step of 'Prime Panache', sharp at 4.30am to leave us at the Lohgaon airport Pune.

February 15 – Reached New Delhi around 9.15am. Mempelji was waiting outside the airport with the vehicle to pick us up. It was a new gleaming white Innova, which we had rented for the next eleven days. We started off for Rishikesh right away, our journey towards the great Himalayas; via Gaziabad, Modi Nagar, Meerut, Muzaffar Nagar, Roorkee, Haridwar to Swami Dayananda Ashram, Rishikesh. En route Rishikesh, we stopped at Bikanerwala, Gaziabad for a mouth-watering multi cuisine breakfast. Later, around 2.00pm we took another break at The Moolchand's at Muzaffar Nagar for a light yet filling lunch. We reached Rishikesh Ashram by the Ganga around 6.15pm. Checked into our rooms in that biting cold, met with Pujya Swami Ji and then had some nice Bhiksha at night.



Dayananda Ashram is on the banks of Ganga in Purani Jhadi area of Rishikesh.

It was a rainy cold day and partially a wash out. Yet, Mempelji drove us down to Lakshman Jhula and later dropped us at Ram Jhula. From here we took on our Rishikesh excursion walking across the Ram Jhula through the market place to several Ashrams on the bank of Ganga. We returned back by afternoon and spent rest of the evening in the Gurukulam, meeting Pujya Swami Ji and others.



February 16 – We had decided to take on our Gurusthanam, ऋषिकेश. **Rishikesh** is a city in Dehradun district now in Uttarakhand. Located in the foothills of the Himalayas in northern India, it is known as 'The Gateway to the lofty Himalayas'. Rishikesh is surrounded by three other districts namely Tehri Garhwal, Pauri Garhwal and Haridwar. It is located approximately 20kms north of the holy city of Haridwar. Swami



February 17 – It was a clear day and morning we again took on our Rishikesh tour from where we had left the previous noon. It was a better day for taking pictures and window shopping. We returned to the Gurukulam after visiting the Gita Press, Gita Mandir, Parmarth Niketan and their Ghats. After lunch we left for Haridwar.

Haridwar is just 25kms down Rishikesh, towards Delhi. हरिद्वार is an important pilgrimage city in the Haridwar district of Uttarakhand. The River Ganga, after flowing for 253kms (157 mi) from its source at Gaumukh at the edge of the Gangotri Glacier, enters the Indo-Gangetic Plains of North India for the first time at Haridwar. This gave the city its ancient name, Gangadwara. Haridwar is regarded as one of the seven holiest places for Hindus. According to the Samudra manthan, Haridwar along with Ujjain, Nasik and Allahabad is one of the four sites where drops of Amrit, the elixir of immortality, accidentally spilled over from the pitcher while being carried by the celestial bird Garuda. This is manifested in the Kumbha Mela being celebrated every 3 years in one of the 4 places, and thus every 12 years in Haridwar.



On the way we stopped at Saraswati Niketan to pay our respects to Swami Tarananda Ji's Samadhi. We then



went up to **Manasa Devi** temple by the rope way. After darshan we had tea and some munchies to eat, which goes unsaid! Next Mempelji drove us down to Chamunda Hill, from where we took a rope way up to the **Chamunda Devi** temple. Indeed an exciting scenic ride up the mountains that gave a panoramic view of the Ganga flowing below. On landing from the rope way we picked up some Puja items and Prasadam for rituals. However, the harassment from the Monkeys in this part of the Himalayas is worth a mention. The moment they spot you with a bag... they are after you, waiting for a chance to snatch it.



From there we went to **Daksha Prajapati** temple where Sati's father 'Prajapati Daksha' had arranged for a 'Sahastra Yaag' to insult Shiva by not inviting him. This is the place where Sati immolated herself owing to Daksha, her father's caustic remarks demeaning Shiva, her husband. After having Darshan we proceeded to 'Har ki Pauri' but we were late for the 'Ganga Arati' and did Arati on our own. We ate at the famous Paratha galli of Haridwar and reached Rishikesh pretty late. Had our dinner once again and then called it a day as we were to leave next day for a long Himalayan tour.



February 18 – It was a nice bright day and we were ready in the early hours to go see Puja Swami Ji. We took our travel plan and went to Swami Ji for his blessings. Puja Swami Ji intently looked at my map, asked me a few questions and said, "Half of these places she mentioned, I don't even know of." He showed his concerns and I quivered, "Swami Ji please don't say that! We need your blessings." I touched his feet with the itinerary and the map in my hand and said "let all go well with your blessings." He laughed and said, "Yes, all will go well, keep these oranges they will be helpful for the windy mountain road journey." With his blessings we were ready to leave after the 'Rahu Kaalam' and a nice breakfast.

Baggage all tied up on the carrier overhead, we were all ready to leave.....motivated, anxious and EXCITED! Our first stop of the day was going to be a popular local pilgrimage, called



'Vasishtha Guha' literally meaning the Cave of sage Vasishtha, it is 21kms up from Rishikesh amidst Deodar forest, by the Ganga. This is a place huddled in the middle of high range hills all around with Ganga flowing to the right of the cave. There was complete silence interspersed by the crackling sound of leaves dropping on the ground and chirping of the birds. Historically the great sage Vashishta was said to have done 'tapas' penance here some 3,000 years ago. The entrance of the cave does not give any hint of what is there inside.

When we entered through the door we were completely engulfed by darkness not able to see anything around. This sustained for about a minute during which I felt the presence of someone else around, besides us! As my eyes got adjusted slowly, I started seeing things around. The cave was about 20 feet long, 10 feet wide at the entrance but slowly tapering down and the height was about 7 feet. In other words, this was a huge cave. At the furthest end of the cave, there was a Shivlinga with an oil lamp nearby. I had read on the internet that this cave stretched quite a way inside the mountain, but was walled off at this point for the public. There lingered a meditative peace and a feeling of completeness by just being there for a few minutes, what to talk of actually being able to spend some time in meditation here! After spending some quality time here with the care takers of the place and the local resident Swami, we proceeded to our next stop... 'Kaudiyala' 32kms from Rishikesh.



Kaudiyala is a famous river beach camp, situated on the banks of the holy River

Ganga. It is known for water sports like rafting and kayaking. We had some excellent freshly made hot lunch at Morals. 'Palak Paneer Sabji, Chole, hot Rotis and Rice were on our menu. After a little sight-seeing we started off again for our next destination of the day, Dev Prayag, 35kms further up from Kaudiyala.



Devprayag - देव प्रयाग is a town in Tehri Garhwal district in the state of Uttarakhand, and is one of the 'Pancha Prayag' (five confluences) of Alaknanda River where Alaknanda and Bhagirathi rivers meet and takes the name Ganga or Ganges River (in English). 'Devprayaga' means 'Godly Confluence' in Sanskrit. As per the Hindu scriptures, Devprayaga is the sacred event of merging of two heavenly rivers, Alakananda and Bhagirathi, to form the holy Ganga.

Our car was parked on the other side of the confluence; we had to walk across the bridge to go across the Ganga. On descending down to the confluence we fed the fish and then did 'Tarpanam' for our 'Pitris'. Now after that long walk and long rituals in the scorching Sun it was time for a tea break! We stopped by a road side

Dhaba for some hot 'Adrakwali Chai and garmaa garm 'Aloo de Parathe!' It was a worthy variation from too much of religious rituals to some mundane Munchies! Soon after being refreshed, we started off for our next destination of the day, 'Dhari Devi'.



Dhari Devi is a temple on the banks of the Alaknanda River in the Garhwal Region of Uttarakhand state. The temple is located in Kalyasaur along the Srinagar-Badrinath Highway. It is about 15kms from Srinagar-Uttarakhand, 20kms from Rudraprayag and 360km from Delhi. It houses the upper half of an idol of the goddess 'Dhari' that according to local lore, changes in appearance during the day from a girl, to a woman, and then to an old lady at night. The idol's lower half is located in Kalimath, where mata is prayed in Kali Roopa. According to the legend, one of the temples of Mata Kali was washed away during a disastrous flood in the Garhwal region.

When the Dhari idol struck a rock, it cried out, attracting local villagers to investigate. They were told to place the idol where it was found, and the temple was constructed there to honor it. The temple is a kilometer down the mountain. The descent and the climb up both were challenging due to construction of a Dam. We offered our prayers, performed some rituals at the feet of this potent deity. It was hard to hide the offerings from the local 'Hanumanas' (Monkeys), they were on a rampage all around inside the 'garbhagriha' (sanctum sanctorum). The Sun was slowly heading its way down the Horizon and we had to reach our Destination for the day, Rudraprayag. So without further delay we started for Rudraprayag.



Rudraprayag रुद्रप्रयाग is a town in Rudraprayag district in the state of Uttarakhand. Rudraprayag is one of the Pancha Prayag (five confluences) of Alaknanda River, the point of confluence of rivers Alakananda and Mandakini. Alaknanda then proceeds towards Devprayag where it joins with Bhagirathi to form the holy Ganga. Kedarnath, a Hindu holy town is located 86kms from Rudraprayag.

On reaching the city we started window shopping for a good Hotel. Eventually we settled down for Hotel Tulsi which was overlooking the valley where Ganga was flowing right below us! We checked into our rooms and placed an order for some Hot & freshly cooked Dinner. Not to forget, that we were travelling in WINTER, which is an off season, so most of the hotels were closed for the season and food was only available on orders

placed well before time. In an hour's time Roti, Aloo Gobi Sabji, Dal, Chaawal and of course the pahadi pickle were all waiting at the dining hall on the first floor. But, to climb down one huge floor in that biting February night in Himalayas can be a chore. All though well fed, we were hungry again and devoured couple of hot Rotis. After a sumptuous dinner we ordered for some Aloo Parathas, Tea and Milk for the next day's breakfast and called it a DAY! Bundled up in thick 'Rajaais' & Blankets and with heat blowers on, off we all went to sleep.

February 19- Morning we were up and ready by 8.00am. Repacked all our stuff and went for a Hot Breakfast, or rather a Brunch of Aloo Parathas and Jam-Butter Toast. As the saying goes in Hindi, 'भूखे पेट भजन न होई गोपाला' meaning – starving, one can't engage one's mind in prayers! How true! Tanks full we went to the Prayag for Darshan. On reaching Rudraprayag we went down to the confluence but there was a cremation ceremony going on at the confluence so we did not go down to the banks. On our way up, we stopped by sage Narada's 'taposhali' temple, which is on the mountain top right above the confluence.

From here on we started our journey towards the majestic Kumaon or Kumaun, which is one of the two divisions of Uttarakhand state. It's headquarter is located at beautiful lake city Nainital. Kumaon Division consists of six districts Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat, Nainital, Pithoragarh and Udham Singh Nagar .



It's cool and fresh mountain breeze, the ethereal Himalayan scenic view, tall swaying Pine and Deodar trees and the rolling cultivation of the terraced hill crops would captivate even dull hearts. Bloodshot Red and fully bloomed Rhododendrons, in contrast to the white snowy peaks in background are a sure treat to the eyes. The entire road journey is like a travel in Heaven!

We went up to Karnaprayag on NH 58, but after that we took a bifurcation into the beautiful Kumaon to take a single road route to Baijnath via Dungari, Tharali and Gwaldham. We traveled 122kms to reach Baijnath.



Baijnath is a small town on the banks of the Gomati River in the Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand. The place is most noted for its ancient temples. There is a famous Baijnath Mandir (Lord Shiva) on the banks of river Gomati, which is said to have been built by the Kumaon Katyuri king in around 1,150 A.D. The temple holds significance because, according to Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva and Parvati were married at the confluence of River Gomati and Garud Ganga. Dedicated to Siva as 'Vaidyanatha', the Lord of Physicians, the Baijnath temple is actually a temples' complex built by the Katyuri kings with the idols of Shiva, Ganesh, Parvati, Chandika, Kuber, Surya and

Brahma. Also the town of Baijnath draws its name from this temple. Situated on the left bank of the Gomati River, at an elevation of 1,126mts, the temples are constructed in stone. The main temple here houses the great Lord Baijnath in form of a Linga and right behind it is a beautiful idol of Parvati chiseled in black stone. These temples are indeed a poetry written in stone. You can hear the stones speak of our rich culture. The idols here breathe! Indeed very elevating! After having darshan we came out hungry and tired. We had hoped to find

something interesting to eat at Gwaldham, but that place turned out to be a dump! So we survived on the snacks we were carrying. Our next stop of the day was going to be Bageshwar, 2kms from Baijnath.



Bageshwar is a city in Bageshwar district in the state of Uttarakhand. The town is situated on the confluence of Gomati River with Sarju River which is a tributary of Sharda or Kali River and joins Kali at Pancheswar. The city is named after its famous temple also known as the Bageshwar temple. This temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva in form of a linga. Interestingly the Shivalinga here is stripped yellow and black and is in the shape of a tiger's face. As per a mythological legend, Sage Markandeya stayed at this holy place. He continuously meditated day and night at this very place. Every night Lord Shiva appeared before him in form of a Tiger to bless him. Owing to this legend the temple was dedicated to Lord Shiva and was named 'Bageshwar' as Bagh means Tiger.

We had some nice quiet time with the Lord here, sat beneath a tree for a while but sure enough by now we had tigers growling in our tummies. We quickly jumped into our vehicle and started our 'food hunt'. Our next and final destination for the day was pinned on 'Chaukori', which was 44kms further up. Luckily we hit upon a Dhaba cum lodge, right by the road side near Dhaulchini. It was late afternoon and past tea time too yet, the cooks here obliged us with Hot Aloo Parathas and Chana with some hot milk and Adrakwali Chai. What a blessing, to find hot freshly cooked food in these forlorn places at odd hours! Talking to some locals here we were advised to stay in Hotel Himshikhar in Chaukori. So there we started for Chaukori, our final destination of the day en-route Berinag!

Chaukori is a tiny hill station in the Pithoragarh district set among the lofty peaks, of the western Himalayan Range in the Kumaon Division of Uttarakhand, India. To the north is Tibet and to the south is Terai. The Mahakali River, running along its eastern boundary, forms the Indo-Nepal international border. Chaukori's elevation is 7,000 feet above sea level, with a spectacular view of the snowy peaks of Mrigthuni, Trishuli, Maiktoli, Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot and PanchaChuli. It is approximately 10kms from Berinag, another little hill station.



The sun was slowly getting lazy over the mountain tops and my heart a little anxious trying to reach before sunset. It was pitch dark by the time we hit the out skirts of Chaukori. Bill boards were not visible and to add to our blindness, the electricity was OUT by the time we reached the main city. In the feeble lights of our car we hit upon a Hotel...and Lo! It was Hotel Himshikhar! Being an off season we were like those fishes that have gotten into an irreversible trap in the weary hours of the Himalayan forest night. The manager tried his best to get the maximum tariff from us, adding extras for the heaters etc. Later he loosened up, after knowing

that we were to stay there for two days, two nights. After deciding our dinner menu, we settled down in our rooms.



The rooms were facing the snowcapped Himalayan ranges just like this.....

The night was quiet and cold with the barometer falling down to -2 degrees Celsius. We turned some heat on in the rooms to bring in some warmth, but dare if that bite could crack down! We bundled up further and went down for dinner. Had some excellent Aloo Sabji, Moong Dal, garmaa garm Tava Rotis and mixed vegetable Pickles; Himalayan cold somehow demands something hot and spicy! Dinner is not complete for Suddha till he has some rice so...Jeera Rice was also ordered. After a perfect dinner we decided upon some mouthwatering Aloo Parathas with pickles and Toast butter - Jam for the next day's Breakfast, and walked towards our rooms. As we walked down the patio, few drizzles were coming down in slow motion. After a while it began to pour, and for the first time we witnessed the Himalayan Rains. It was like the heavens cracking down with a thumping triumph!

February 20 – We were up early to witness the sunrise from our porch of the Resort room. The rains had stopped and it was clear once again. To the chants of Gayatri we welcomed Aditya Devta over the Himalayan range. It was one of the best mornings of my life that had dawned just for me, and believe it or not this was going to be the best day of our lives. The most blessed day, that had picked four of us in this universe for an out of this world experience. Visit to Patal Bhuvaneshwar and later Kalika mata temple was on that day's itinerary. After a sumptuous breakfast of Aloo Parathas with pickles and Toast butter - Jam, Chai & Milk we started for the most awaited....Patal Bhuvaneshwar.



Patal Bhuvaneshwar temple ... reaching it is a challenging experience. If you have visited this place know that you are blessed and amongst the chosen few!!!! We started our journey for Patal Bhuvaneshwar via Berinag at 8 in the morning after a heavy breakfast. In an hour and a half we were there. Patal Bhuvaneshwar is 37kms from Chaukori and 27kms from Berinag and about 14kms from Gangolihat in Pithorgarh district in Uttarakhand. This underground cave of Patal Bhuvaneshwar has a vertical 120-metre tunnel-like path to go inside. The temple is amidst a thick forest of Oak and Deodar. This place offers a spectacular view of the Himalayan

peaks - Nanda Devi and Panchachuli. Breathtaking panorama of the Greater Himalayas, a beautiful valley below, and above all, the extraordinary Patal caves! This place turned out to be a surprise package for all of us, because this indeed is something to be experienced firsthand.

Kumao in Uttarakhand is famous for its striking natural beauty and religious beliefs. Deep inside this land, one can find many famous temples, caves which make an impact on the visitor, who is left with a sense of wonder about the creation of God. One such example of this phenomenon is Patal Bhuvaneshwar nestling between River Sarju and east Ramaganga in Pithoragarh district. It is also one of the seven subterranean wonders of the world. There is a reference in 'Manskhanda' of 'Skandapurana' about Patal Bhuvaneshwar. This is a very famous place and has an interesting legend attached to it. As the story goes.....

Once the sages asked sage Vyasa about 'Patal', - the other world. Their questions were...

1. How does Mahadeva reside there in total darkness?
2. How big is it?
3. Who are those creatures, who reside there and worship Mahadeva?
4. Who are the main Gods of Patal?
5. Who was the first person to discover this world?
6. How do the people there survive without the Sun and the Moon?

Vyasa in reply, said, "The world of Patal is similar to the world above. Even Vashishta and the other sages cannot say how far the other-world goes. They can say only that what is known by visiting Patal

continued...