

TREK TO **Auli Bugyal**

The gentle trek to this pristine hill spot is a refreshing and rejuvenating experience. The only problem one faces here is having to spend hours to get a permit from the obstinate forest officials. ■ by Murli Menon

I write this sitting in a wooden log cabin at Auli, in the Uttarakhand Himalayas. It is 6 a.m. and I can see the sun's rays emanating from behind the snow-clad mountains. It is the middle of May. While the rest

of India experiences sweltering heat, it is extremely cold in Auli.

The eight-hour drive from Rishikesh to Gopeshwar along the Ganges, with short stops at Srinagar and Rudrapur, was rejuvenating.

I reached Gopeshwar by 3 p.m. The nearest international airport to reach Auli is New Delhi. From New Delhi one can drive down to Rishikesh, which is 250 km away. Alternately, one can take the Dehradun Shatabdi



train in the wee hours of the morning, from New Delhi and land at Rishikesh by noon.

You could spend the evening at Rishikesh visiting the numerous temples that dot the banks of the Ganges or take a boat cruise, and start early next morning, for the 225-km-long, winding, uphill drive from Rishikesh. This drive can take experienced motorists about six hours.

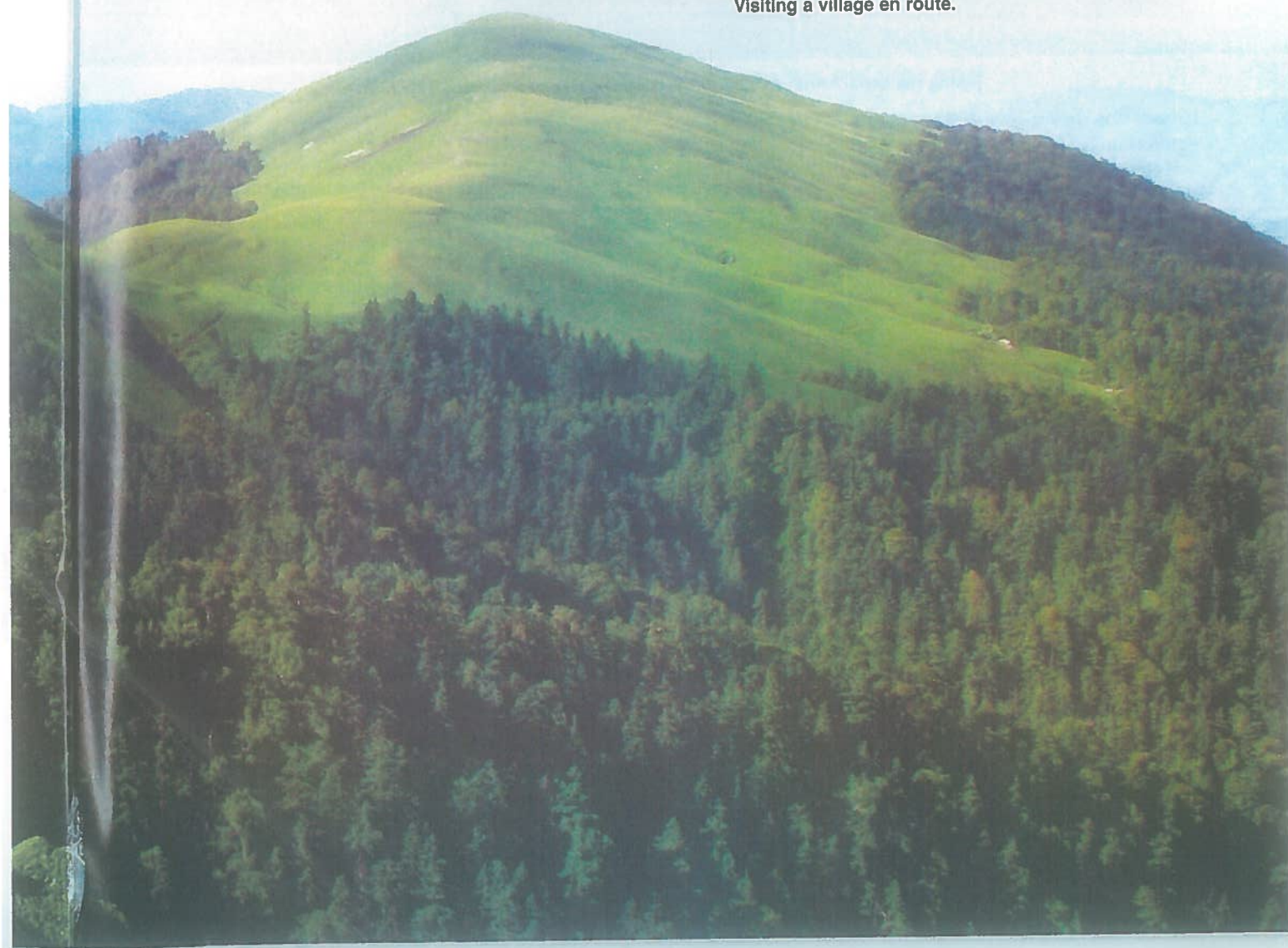
We stopped at Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam's (GMVN) guest house at Gopeshwar for a night before proceeding to Auli via Joshimath. Joshimath is 62 km from Gopeshwar but this drive takes all of three hours. Auli is a further 16 km from Joshimath on the Tapovan route. We checked into the wooden cottages run by GMVN at Auli, which is also the starting-point for boarding the ropeway



Visiting a village en route.

g
s

he
ch
lhi
sh,
ly,
di





Taking the aerial route: A flight in the rope car gives an exciting experience.



On top of the hill: The grassy slopes provide much-needed relief to your eyes.

towards the bugyals (grasslands).

Auli is a ski resort in winter, with long slopes, a ropeway and ski instructors. However, in May, there is no snow and the ropeway takes you 3 kms uphill, from where the trek to Auli Bugyal starts.

Snow-clad peaks surround this

picturesque guest house, nestled in a canopy of green. The Nanda Devi and Trishul peaks can be seen from close quarters on cloudless mornings. You can enjoy this majestic spectacle if the weather allows during your stay at GMVN, Auli.

After alighting from the ropeway,

you have to trek along the fringes of thick, evergreen forests, criss-crossing several mountain streams and through thick woods full of oaks, conifers, pines and rhododendrons. The initial 2-km trek is across plain land, but the walk becomes difficult, after one crosses the forest gate.

Double standards

The district forest officer of Nanda Devi National Park has imposed an entry fee for all Indian tourists trekking towards the Bugyals. However, they allowed several foreign trekkers without batting an eyelid. This needs to be checked by the Uttarakhand government, if it would like domestic tourists to travel to Auli. One can take three-, five- or seven day treks from Auli.

The trek into the forest is uphill over dried leaves, pebbles, gravel and stones. One has to step over rocks to cross several cascading mountain streams, *en route*. As one climbs higher,



Auli in winter: Thick snow and gentle slopes make it an ideal skiing resort.

the view becomes more picturesque: Snow-capped peaks in the distance; a canopy of green forests on the foothills; and grassy knolls beyond the forests.

Several shades of green cover stretch from one end of the horizon to the other. The climb becomes easier once you cross the forests and enter the grasslands. After about 30 minutes of trekking along gentle slopes,

one can see the snow. It is pleasantly cold here in mid-May. If one is lucky, one can even experience gentle snowfall here.

A small temple dedicated to the local deity crowns Auli Bugyal. It is an extremely de-stressing experience to stretch your legs and enjoy the bounties of nature while breathing in the fresh, pine-scented mountain air. The

verdant patch of green, surrounded by Himalayan peaks, beckons nature-walks. Children can enjoy themselves by playing in the snow. Serious trekkers can continue their treks to the hot-water springs, which are a two-day trek away from Auli Bugyal.

After spending a few hours communing with nature, we reluctantly began the descent to return to the base camp. This gentle trek is a naturalist's delight and is suited for trekkers ranging from children to seniors. As the altitude is below 10,000 feet, oxygen-levels are steady and one does not develop symptoms of high-altitude sickness.

The gentle trek to Auli Bugyal is a refreshing and rejuvenating experience for all souls trying to steal a few moments of tranquility and serenity, away from the vagaries of modern life, which is becoming increasingly stressful. The only problem one faces is having to spend hours to get a permit from the obstinate forest officials of Nanda Devi National Park. ■

How to get there

Dehradun has an airport and is connected by air to New Delhi.

The nearest railhead is Dehradun or Rishikesh. Auli is a 285-km drive from Dehradun. Shared taxis are available at Rs.250 per passenger, from Rishman Pul at Dehradun.

Where to stay

Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam's Auli Ski Resort is a comfortable place to stay. It is ideally located. Mornings are extremely musical, with birds singing melodious tunes,

under the canopy of green surrounding this picturesque resort.

Where to eat

Lots of small restaurants serving Indian, Chinese and *pahari* cuisine dot Joshimath. You get freshly-steamed vegetable *momos* with green coriander chutney at the restaurant opposite GMVN, Auli. The food at GMVN, Auli, is only for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Fresh fruits including litchees, plums, apricots and berries (*kaphal*) are available at the local market.