

Shivling and the Source of the Ganges

A 14-day trip to one of the holiest and most dramatic places on earth

Shivling is a 21,467 ft. (6,543 m) mountain peak in the Garhwal Himalaya Range in Uttarakhand, India. It is one of the most stunning peaks in the world, a huge granite tooth topped with ice and snow that is often compared to the beauty of the Matterhorn and Ama Dablam. It is the sacred symbol of the God, Lord Shiva and takes its name from him.

The Ganga, or River Ganges, is not just a river, but a mother, a goddess, a tradition, a culture and much more. Some Hindus also believe life is incomplete without bathing in the Ganga at least once in one's lifetime. Many Hindu families keep a vial of water from the Ganga in their house. This is done because it is prestigious to have water of the Holy Ganga in the house, and also so that if someone is dying, that person will be able to drink its water. Many Hindus believe that the water from the Ganga can cleanse a person's soul of all past sins, and that it can also cure the ill.

This trek follows the Ganges back towards its source with a plethora of temples lining its banks for the many pilgrims who make the same journey. Sadhus (holy men) reside by the river eking out an existence, relying on the generosity of those who pass by. The scenery is stunning and increasingly more dramatic as we near the source. 18km beyond the last town of Gangotri we find the gaping cave of the Gangotri Glacier from which the river emerges. Towering above is the dramatic peak of Shivling.

The detailed itinerary is as follows:

Day 1: Depart UK on an overnight international flight to Delhi.

Day 2: On arrival we will be met by our guide, Hira and his team, and taken to our hotel where we will be able to rest before having an afternoon tour of some of Delhi's most prominent landmarks, India Gate, the Jama Masjid Mosque, the Red Fort, Gandhi's Tomb and hopefully with time for a rickshaw ride through the busy and narrow streets of Chandra Chowk, a vibrant market. Dinner and overnight in Hotel Jypee Sidartha, Delhi. B&B

Day 3: We have an early morning transfer to the railway station to catch the express train to Haridwar, a journey of approximately 4 hours. From Haridwar, we have a short drive to Rishikesh on the banks of the Ganges, where we check in at our hotel. In the afternoon we can visit some of the temples of this holy town and in the evening we will witness the Aarti ceremony, with lamps floated on the river. Hotel Basundhara Palace. B&B

Day 4: We have a day of spectacular scenery as we drive (6 hours) through the foothills of the Himalaya to Uttarkashi, an important pilgrimage town in the Bhagirathi Valley. Here, we check in at a simple lodge. The rest of the day is free to explore this fascinating town. Overnight Hotel Shivalinga D,B&B

Packed lunch.

Day 5: We complete our road journey this morning, driving deeper into the steep-sided Bhagirathi Valley to reach the pilgrimage site of Gangotri (3050m). After checking in to our lodge we spend the afternoon visiting the various temples, which draw pilgrims from across the continent, including many colourful Sadhus, whom our guide will introduce us to so that we make the most of the experience. We will take lunch in Harshil. Overnight in simple guest house in Gangotri.

Day 6: Our trek begins with a relatively easy ascent through forests of oak and pine to (3600m), which we will reach in time for a hot lunch. We continue trekking through the forest and up above the tree-line into more open alpine meadows. After little more than 2 hours trekking we reach our next campsite at Bhujbasa (3800m). B,L,D

Day 7: Acclimatisation and exploration of Bhojbasa. From here, we make a 3-hour round trip up to Gaumukh, the legendary source of the Ganges. (See picture on page 1) Overnight at Bhujbasa. 5 hours walking in total. B,L,D

Day 8: From Bhujbasa we trek a little way towards Gaumukh before turning towards Nandavan on the glacier. We make a steep ascent to Nandavan, which is the basecamp for climbing the Bhagirathi peaks. We then continue to Tapovan (4500m) a large meadow surrounded by the icy peaks of the Bhagirathi range and with a truly spectacular view of Shivaling. Approximately 4 to 5 hours walking. B,L,D

Day 9: We have a day for rest or exploration at Tapovan. This is a very atmospheric place if rest and quiet contemplation is required. Alternatively, it is well worth the 2 hour return trek up to the sacred lake of Gandhava (4350m) for views back across the Gangotri Glacier. We spend a second night at Tapovan. Optional 2 hours walking. B,L,D

Day 10: We begin our return to civilisation today, trekking down the valley and passing the roadside 'dhabas' (simple cafes) below Gaumukh. Our overnight camping place is at Bhujbasa. 5 hours walking. B,L,D

Day 11: From our camp at Bhujbasa we descend through the pine forest to Gangotri where our vehicles will be waiting to drive us to Harshil where we will be camping. 2 hours walking. B,L,D

Day 12: We have another spectacular drive (7 hours) through the middle hills of the Indian Himalaya, passing several towns and villages to reach Shivpuri Beach Camp. Here we will get a hot buffet lunch followed by free time to relax by the river or explore the surrounding jungle. In the evening we can enjoy dinner around a campfire. B,L,D

Day 13: After breakfast we take to the rafts and travel from Shivpuri to Rishikesh (16km), hitting some exciting rapids on the Ganges. On the latter section we float past temples, ashrams and ghats enjoying the riverbank life

of the Ganges.

After the excitement we drive to the railway station to catch the evening express train to Delhi, arriving there after a journey of 4 to 5 hours. Transfer to our hotel. B

Day 14: Depart on flight to UK

The cost includes:

- Hotel Jaypee Siddarth in Delhi B&B
- Hotel Vasundhara Palace in Rishikesh B&B
- Hotel Shivaling in Uttarkashi D,B&B
- The Great Ganga or another hotel just next to Gangotri Temple in Gangotri
- Camping and all the meals in Bhojbasa, Tapoban and Nandan Van
- All the ground transportations by air conditioned bus
- One night camping at Shivapuri and rafting
- Train tickets

The cost does not include:

- International flights
- Any meals not specified
- Insurance
- Tips, laundry and bar bills
- Personal kit