

Holy Lakes of India
Nainital | Gurudongmar | Hemkund | Manimahesh

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India, being one of the most ancient civilizations of the world, is rich in art, culture, mythology and traditions. With its diverse population and innumerable schools of religious and philosophical thought, it also abounds with vastly different and colourful rituals and ceremonies. Indians have great respect not only for their deities and other divine beings, but also for pilgrimage sites, holy mountains, springs, rivers and lakes, which are sometimes considered to be as sacred as the Gods themselves.

In our previous post, we brought you a list of some of the most important and sacred lakes of India. This month, we bring you Part II of our article, "Holy Lakes of India". This time, we bring you a detailed feature on Nainital, Gurudongmar, Hemkund and finally, the majestic Manimahesh.

Nainital

Nainital, also referred to as Naini Tal, is a popular hill station in Uttarakhand in the Kumaon foothills of the outer Himalayas. Located at a height of 2,084 meters above sea level, this picturesque place is set in a valley, surrounded by mountains, and containing an eye-shaped lake, about 2 miles in circumference. The highest point closest is Naina Peak or China Peak, with an elevation of 2,619 meters.

Nainital is considered to be one of the most brilliant diamonds of the Himalayan Belt. This city has 3 major lakes, which contribute to keeping the place cool and serene all through the year.

Legend

According to legend, Naini Lake is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas. After the death of Goddess Sati (an earlier manifestation of Goddess Parvati), her Consort; Lord Shiva was heartbroken and in a rage. She had gone to attend her father, Daksha's yagna, against her husband's wishes. Daksha was always against her marrying Shiva. When she reached his palace, he insulted her and her husband. Unable to bear his harsh words, Sati jumped into the yagnakunda (sacrificial fire) and gave up her life.



Shiva with Sati's Corpse
on His Shoulders

When Shiva came to know what had happened, he reached the venue of the yagna and destroyed it. He then gathered Sati's lifeless body in his arms and roamed all over the Universe. Looking at his state, Vishnu suggested that he would cut up Sati's body into several pieces and assured Shiva that each place where a body part fell would become some of the holiest places in the world.

Using his Sudarshana Chakra (Discus), Vishnu then cut up her body into 52 pieces. True to his promise, each place on Earth where her body part fell went on to become a sacred site, where devotees continue to pay homage till the present day.



Lord Vishnu
(Laminated Wall Hanging)

The place where Devi Sati's eyes (Nain) fell became Nain-tal, or the eye of the Lake. Goddess Sati is worshipped here at that Naina Devi Temple. She is known as Naini Mata. The Temple is located on the North shore of Nainital Lake.

The Kumaon Hills

The Kumaon Hills came under the British rule around 1814-16. The hill station as we know it today was founded only in 1841. In September 1882, a major landslide at the north end of the town took the lives of 151 residents, including Indian and British nationals. Then, the area was rebuilt and a new temple too was constructed in place of the old one. In order to prevent further such incidents, storm water drains were built all around and bylaws were made stricter.

In 1869, the All Saints' College was established, close to the present-day High Court of Uttarakhand. By the early 1900's, more schools and colleges were established around the area.

Places of Interest

Nainital has a number of interesting tourist spots, including the main Nainital Lake, Naina Devi Temple, Naina Peak, Himalaya Darshan, Snow View Point, Hanumangarhi and Pt. G.B.Pant High Altitude Zoo.

Naina Devi Temple

Being one of the Shakti Peethas, as mentioned above, the Naina Devi Temple is regarded as one of the most sacred temples in India. The Goddess in this temple is represented by her two eyes. This temple attracts scores of devotees from all over the world.

While the legend of Sati is mainly associated with the Naina Devi Temple, there are several other legends as well. According to one tale, a Gujjar boy was once grazing his cattle and observed that a white cow was showering milk from her udders, onto a stone. This happened over the next several days. He then got a dream one night, where the Goddess appeared before him and told him that the stone was her pindi. The boy narrated all this to Raja Bir Chand, who also witnessed this miracle and immediately decided to build a temple on that spot.

The Naina Devi Temple is also known as Mahishapeetha, because the Goddess defeated the terrible demon Mahishasura. He had received the boon of immortality from Lord Brahma himself. Brahma had blessed him saying that he could be killed only by a woman. The arrogant and egoistic demon started troubling all the Devas. Finally, the Devi decided to put an end to his tyranny and, accepting all the Devas' weapons, assumed the form of Mahishasuramardini. After a long battle with Mahisha, she vanquished and killed him, also taking out both his eyes. Thus, she got the name "Naina Devi".

Naina Peak

Naina Peak is the highest hilltop in Nainital. Also called the China Peak or the Cheena Peak, it offers a stunning view of the surroundings and is one of the most sought-after tourist spots in the region.

This peak bestows a brilliant bird's eye view of the Nainital town, the Himalayas and also the vast expanse of the Kumaon Hills.

Himalaya Darshan

The Himalaya View Point is situated about 5 kilometers away from Nainital, on the way to Kilbury. It is at a height of 2300 meters above sea level. This point gives visitors a glimpse of the mighty Himalayan ranges, the hills and valleys nestling close by and the vast forested ridges. This breathtaking location can be reached by taxi, on horseback or even by foot, for those who would like to trek the distance.



Himalayan Peaks

(Poster)

Snow View Point

The Snow View Point is the highest point after Naini Peak. Though it does not offer such a stunning view of the Himalayas, you get to see the entire Naini Lake in all its glory. The other attraction here is the ropeway, which is also quite popular among tourists.

Hanumangarhi

Hanumangarhi is a Temple of Lord Hanuman in Nainital. This is often visited by a local saint, Neem Karoli Baba. Situated at a height of 1,951 meters, the temple complex is about 3.5 kilometers from the Talital bus stop. The presiding deity, Lord Hanuman, is depicted here as tearing open his chest to reveal Rama and Sita seated in the chambers of his heart. Hanumangarhi also offers fabulous views of the rising and setting sun.

High Altitude Zoo

Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant High Altitude Zoo was established in 1984 and opened to public in 1995. At a height of 2,100 meters, it is spread out over 4.6 hectares and is the only high altitude zoo in North India, besides Sikkim and Darjeeling. It has a forest cover of evergreen oak, cupressus and some other varieties of oak. Incidentally, this zoo was home to India's only Siberian tiger, till it died in 2011.

The zoo features several endangered species of animals in the Himalayas. You can find animals such as the Royal Bengal Tiger, Tibetan wolves, sambar, leopards, bears and a variety of birds like the kalij pheasant, Lady Amherst pheasant, rose ringed parakeet, red junglefowl and more. The zoo has night shelters and other forms of protection for the animals and birds.

It is located about 2 kilometers uphill from the Talital Bus Station and can be reached via a steep motorable road or a trek up to the spot. The zoo is open from 9:30am to 4:30pm.

Gurudongmar

Gurudongmar Lake is one of the highest lakes in India and in the world. Located at an altitude of 17,800 feet in Sikkim, it is considered to be one of the holiest lakes by Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. This lake is named after Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, the founder of Buddhism, who visited in the 8th century. It is said that this lake was also blessed by Guru Nanak, when he visited the area.

Location

Gurudongmar Lake is located about 190 kilometers away from Gangtok and lies about 5 kilometers south of the Tibetan border. It can be accessed by road from Lachen via Thangu. While Indian citizens can easily visit the area, foreigners need to get a special permit from the Ministry of Home Affairs in Delhi.



Gurudongmar Lake

(Photo Print)

Gurudongmar Lake

Gurudongmar Lake, which flows to the north of the Kangchengyao Range, is fed by glaciers. It provides one of the source streams, which joins Tso Lahmu and then forms the source of the Teesta River. It is completely frozen during winter months, from November to almost mid-May.

The lake is spread over an area of 118 hectares and is 5.34 kilometers in peripheral length. However, it appears smaller, due to the fact that it is partially not visible, due to the vast hilly terrain obstructing its full view. The area around it is inhabited by yaks, blue sheep and other high altitude wildlife.

Originally a freshwater lake having crystal clear waters, it is now sort of muddy, due to the pollution and rise of tourists in the area.

Legends

Legend has it that, when Guru Padmasambhava visited the lake on his way back from Tibet, he felt the divinity and heightened spiritual vibration there and decided that he should offer his respects to the lake. The lake was frozen most of the year and so, the people living there did not get enough water to fulfill their every day needs. They appealed to the Guru to help them.



Padmasambhava
(Brass Sculpture)

The Guru agreed to help and placed his hands on a small part of the lake. This little portion stopped freezing even during winter, thereby becoming a source of water all year round. Ever since then, Gurudongmar Lake has been considered sacred and devotees carry a little water from here back home.

According to another tale, when Guru Padmasambhava visited the lake, he witnessed a set of auspicious phenomena, which made him realize that it was sacred to enter the mainland of Sikkim, which was then referred to as Demojong.

Some stories narrate that in the 15th century, Sikh Guru Nanak Dev Ji passed through this lake on his return from Tibet. The people of the village requested him to make the frozen lake a source of drinking water during winter months, when it would lie completely frozen. The Guru touched part of the lake with his walking stick, thus making this part usable for the villagers throughout the year. He also declared that those who drank from this lake would gain strength and virility.



Guru Nanak
(Glitter Poster)

Dispute

An Indian Army regiment of Sikhs, located at the border with China, constructed a Gurudwara here in 1997-98. This angered the Sikkimese locals, who considered the Gurudwara to be an illegal structure. They believed that their Guru, Padmasambhava, had sanctified the lake.

The Government of India then created a committee to examine the issue and submit a report. It was later decided that this region had great relevance as a Buddhist religious place. The building constructed by the Sikh regiment was handed over to the Lachen Monastery in July 2001. The monastery placed a Lama, whose duty was to watch over the lake and maintain it as well.

How to Get Here

You can access this location by road, air and rail. The nearest domestic airport is Bagdogra Airport, which is around a four-and-a-half hour drive from Lachen. Taxis at the airport will take you up to the lake. Lachen can be easily accessed by road from anywhere in Sikkim. The nearest railway station from the lake is the Darjeeling Railway Station, which also connects to all the cities of Sikkim.

It is advisable to stay overnight at Lachen or Gangtok and then visit the lake in the morning. You can choose from a variety of budget or regular hotels, which offer you a comfortable stay and other facilities.

Tourist Attractions

- Sarva Dharma Sthal: This famous Gurudwara, previously built only for the Sikhs, is a major tourist attraction here. It is located very close to Gurudongmar Lake.
- Tso Lhamo Lake: The 14th highest lake located near Gurudongmar Lake, it offers a breathtaking view of Mother Nature's bounty.
- Lachen Monastery: Apart from the lake and its surroundings, the Lachen Monastery is one of the most frequently visited places and is one of the most beautiful examples of Tibetan architecture.
- Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary: This sanctuary features a vast collection of the Rhododendron species, also offering a fantastic view of the Himalayan ranges.
- Thangu Valley: This high-altitude valley is covered in a beautiful blanket of snow almost throughout the year and offers amazing views to tourists.
- Chopta Valley: It is situated close to Thangu valley and is the most picturesque valley of North Sikkim. Offering a view of the Himalaya's snow-capped peaks, it is one of the most popular trekking destinations.

Hemkund

Hemkund Sahib, also spelt as Hemkunt, is a Gurudwara or Sikh place of worship and a highly revered pilgrimage site for Sikhs. Formerly called Gurudwara Shri Hemkund Sahib Ji, this is located in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. Dedicated to the worship of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Sikh Guru, it is a stunning locale, featuring a glacial lake surrounded by seven imposing mountain peaks, each one adorned by a Nishan Sahib on its cliff.

The name, "Hemkund" is derived from the Sanskrit words, "Hem", meaning "Snow" and "Kund", meaning "Bowl". According to Dasam Granth, this was the place where Pandu Raja practiced Yoga. The Dasam Granth also states that God ordered Guru Gobind Singh to take a bath while he was in deep meditation on Hemkund. This place is situated at an elevation of 4,632 meters above sea level.

Hemkund Lake

The stunning Hemkund Lake is one of the highlights of this region, as also one of the holiest lakes of India. Situated very close the Hemkund Sahib shrine, it is also known as the "Lake of Snow".



Hemkund Sahab Lake

(Poster)

Due to its elevation and extremely cold weather condition, Hemkund is inaccessible from October to April every year. Sikhs gather here in May, in order to repair damage caused to the paths by the winter. This tradition is called Kar Seva (selfless service) and this forms an important part of the Sikh faith and tradition.

Gurudwara Hemkund Sahib

The design and construction of the Gurudwara Hemkund Sahib, as it exists today, was started in the mid-1960s, after Major General Harkirat Singh, Engineer-in-Chief, Indian Army visited this place. Architect headed Siali the entire process of construction.

The devastating floods of 2013, which occurred in North India, took a heavy toll on the route leading to Hemkund Sahib. The natural disaster also damaged part of the Gurudwara at Govindghat. The langar hall and some other walls collapsed into the river. The parking lot got swept away. As Alakananda went into spate, the only bridge above it broke, as did the building next to it. The entire footpath at 14,200 feet, which led to the Gurudwara, was also swept away in one go.

In spite of this tragedy, however, the Gurudwara Sahib, along with Sikh pilgrims, galvanized into action and immediately arranged to provide food, shelter and safety to everyone. No one looted any money from the Gurudwara. Instead, pilgrims started donating their entire money in order to save everyone else.

While the Indian Army, especially the Garhwal Scouts, incessantly braved the floods to help evacuate scores of pilgrims at the base camp of Gobind Ghat, those stuck at Gobind Dham could be reached only after about 4-5 days. The Sikh regiment of the Indian Army was particularly helpful in regaining a degree of control and offering help and support to the victims.

After a long struggle, almost 4000 pilgrims were rescued and brought back to safety. The

disaster brought out the true nature of the Sikh community, which is famous for its bravery and ability to overcome the worst imaginable hardships.

Places of Interest

Hemkund Sahib Gurudwara

The Hemkund Sahib Gurudwara is one of its kind. It has been built keeping the environment and climatic conditions of the region in mind. Incidentally, it is the only pentagonal Gurudwara in the world.

Hemkund Lake

Located in close proximity to the Gurudwara, the Hemkund Lake is pristine and clear and adds to the charm of the locale. Devotees who visit the Gurudwara also take a dip in the holy waters of this Lake.

Valley of Flowers

The famous Valley of Flowers is situated in Nanda Devi Bio Reserve and is situated about 3 kilometers from the Gurudwara. This 5-kilometer long Park can be accessed from Ghangaria, from where the trails for Hemkund Sahib and VOF diverge. This is a high-altitude National Park, which is known for its rich variety of flowers that come into full bloom during the monsoon time. Legend has it that a rare flower called Brahma-Kamal blooms here just once every 12 years.

The trek to the Valley is for advanced trekkers. The terrain can prove to be difficult, especially during the monsoons. This is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Hemkund.

How to Get Here

The nearest airport from Hemkund Sahib is the Jolly Grant Airport, which is located in Dehradun. This is about 310 kilometers away from the location.

The closest railway stations are at Dehradun and Haridwar. From here, you can take buses or cabs to reach Hemkund.

Private buses and taxis are available from Haridwar and Dehradun to reach Joshimath. Traveling by road can to Joshimath can take anywhere between 9 to 11 hours. From Joshimath, you can take buses to Govindghat, till the motorable road ends. From there on, one has to trek up till Hemkund Sahib.

Those coming from Delhi can take a train to Haridwar and then travel to Govindghat via Rishikesh. Alternatively, they can drive from Delhi to Govindghat, which is a distance of about 500 kilometers. This could take up to 18 hours by road.

The 9-kilometer trek from Govindghat to the Ghangaria village (Govind Dham) is on a fairly well-maintained path. You can also hire a pony ride to cover the distance. The Gurudwara offers shelter to pilgrims. In addition, you can find a few hotels and a campground with tents and mattresses as well. A further 6-kilometer climb on a stone-paved path leads to Hemkund.

Hemkund Sahib does not offer the facility of an overnight stay. Hence, it is necessary to leave there by 2pm, in order to make it to Govindghat by dusk.

Helicopter Services

Recently, an Indian airline company has commenced helicopter services between Govindghat and Ghangaria. This flight takes only about 5 minutes. This is especially helpful for those who are unable to trek the distance.

Best Time to Visit

The best time to visit Hemkund is between May and October. The snow melts at this time and the roads are cleared for travel. However, Uttarakhand experiences heavy monsoons, which could potentially pose a threat with landslides and roadblocks.

All the troubles and travails notwithstanding, Hemkund is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, which is well worth all the effort that goes into its travel.

Manimahesh

Manimahesh Lake, also called as Dal Lake, Manimahesh, is a high-altitude lake, at an elevation of 4,080 meters above sea level. Located close to the Manimahesh Kailash Peak in the Pir Panjal Range of the Himalayas, in the Bharmour subdivision of Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh, this lake is considered to be as sacred as Manasarovar in Tibet.

Manimahesh is revered by Hindus as one of the holiest places of pilgrimage. Devotees undertake treks in the months of August/September, corresponding to the month of Bhadon, according to the Hindu almanac. This falls on the eighth day of the New Moon phase. This spiritual journey, called the "Manimahesh Yatra", is of such high significance, that it has been termed as a state-level pilgrimage by the Government of Himachal Pradesh.

The name "Manimahesh" means a Mani or jewel on Mahesh's (Shiva's) crown. The locals believe that the moon-rays reflected from the jewel can be seen from Manimahesh Lake on a clear full moon night. Scientifically speaking, this phenomenon is the result of reflection of light from the glacier. This glacier adorns the peak in the form a serpent, likening it to the serpent worn around Shiva's neck.

Sometimes, lucky visitors are witness to the rare event of the Sun's first rays falling on the Manimahesh peak. This is reflected in the lake like a brilliant saffron tilak on the mountain top. This event has added more sanctity to the place and has also lent significance to the tradition of pilgrims taking a dip in the lake on Janmashtami or Radhashtami day (fifteen days after the birth of Krishna).

Legends

Legend has it that Lord Shiva created Manimahesh after he wedded Goddess Parvati in her form of Goddess Girija. Shiva performed severe penance on the banks of Manimahesh Lake. The Gaddis, the shepherd tribes of this region accepted Shiva as their deity. Gaddis are those who reside in the Gaddi Valley, which lies along the upper regions of Ravi River, where Mount Chamba Kailash is situated. Shiva, who lived in Mount Kailash, the highest mountain in the state, gifted the Gaddis with a Chuhali topi (pointed cap), which they wear along with other traditional clothing.



Lord Shiva Sitting on Bull
(Sculpture)

These Gaddis then started referring to this region as Shiv Bhumi, or the Land of Shiva. Manimahesh was also considered to be the abode of the Trimurtis, that is, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesha (Shiva). The waterfall seen at the Dhancho on the way to Manimahesh Lake, and which emanates from the Lake, is revered as Vaikuntha, the divine abode of Vishnu himself. The mound overlooking Bharmaur City is considered as the heaven of Brahma.



Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva

The Gaddis believe that Shiva resides in Kailash for a period of six months, after which he moves to the Patala (netherworld). Vishnu takes over the rule at this time. The day Shiva leaves for Patala is celebrated each year as the Janmashtami Day, the eighth day of Bhadon, which is also the birthday of Lord Krishna, the eighth avatara of Sri Maha Vishnu.

Shiva returns to Bharmaur at the end of February, on the eve of his wedding day. This day is observed as the Shivaratri Day.

Yet another legend narrates how Shiva himself was tricked. This story is linked to Dhancho, where pilgrims spend a night on their way to Manimahesh. Shiva, pleased with the devotion of Bhasmasura, a terrible demon, granted him a boon that anyone that the latter touched would immediately be burnt to ashes. Having received the boon, the arrogant demon wanted to test

it on Shiva. He ran after Shiva in order to touch him and kill the Lord himself.

Shiva managed to escape into the waterfall at Dhancho and took shelter behind a cave behind the waterfall. Bhasmasura could not get through the waterfall. Eventually, Vishnu intervened, took the form of the Divine Temptress, Mohini, and then killed the asura. Ever since, this waterfall is considered to be sacred.

Location

Manimahesh Lake is of glacial origin and lies in the upper reaches of the Ghoi Nala, which is a tributary of Budhil River. The lake is also a source of a tributary of Budhil River, known as Manimahesh Ganga. The stream emanates from the lake in the form of a waterfall at Dhancho.

The highest peak here is called Mani Mahesh Kailash, also Chamba Kailash. It is at a height of 5,656 meters and overlooks the lake. The lake, said to be a glacial depression, is fed by the melting snow from the surrounding hill slopes.

Towards the end of June, when the snow starts melting, one can see innumerable small streams breaking up everywhere, thus enriching the place's flora, resulting in a brilliant riot of colours. The snow field at the base of the mountain is called Shiva's Chaugan or his playground.

The Lake and Its Surroundings

The lake's shape is like a saucer. It has two distinct parts. The larger part has icy cold waters. It is called the Shiv Karotri (his bathing place). The smaller part, which is hidden by bushes, has lukewarm water and is called the Gauri Kund. This is believed to be the bathing place of Parvati. Therefore, men and women bathe in different parts of the lake.

In the periphery of the lake is a marble image of Shiva. This idol is called Chaumukha. The clear, calm waters reflect the snow-capped peaks, thus adding to its beauty. There is also a small temple, built in the shikhara style, which can be found close by.

Though this is a small, shallow lake, its location and its surroundings makes it truly awe-inspiring.

Manimahesh Trek

Manimahesh can be approached from three routes. Those coming from Lahaul and Spiti travel via Kugti Pass. Those from Kangra and Mandi take the Karwarsi Pass or Jalsu Pass via Tyari village. The easiest and most preferred route is from Chamba via Bharmour.

The Bhanrlour-Hadsar-Manimahesh route involves a 13-kilometer trek from Hadsar village to Manimahesh. The highest point of elevation on this route is 4,115 meters and it takes two days to cover this distance, with an overnight stay at Dhancho.

Halfway up this route is a 6-kilometer trek on open and flat meadow land to Dhancho. Tents and free food are available to pilgrims crossing this area. En route, there is a waterfall at Gauri Nallah, known as the Dhancho fall.

From here on, the climb becomes steep. The new path created a few years back is much-improved as compared to the older one, which may prove to be a bit too steep for most pilgrims. Still, some people prefer to take the old route through Bandar Ghati.

The final leg of the trek is through the glacier fields of the lake. On the way, the path goes

through a valley of flowers and wild medicinal herbs. The lake itself is located at the center of a snowy field at the base of the Manimahesh peak. On a clear day, one can get to see the reflection of Mount Kailash on the lake's surface. The place is usually desolate, with hardly any flora and fauna. A few birds can be spotted occasionally. The place comes alive only when pilgrims gather there.

Manimahesh Yatra

The Manimahesh Yatra (or journey) is heralded by a procession known as "chhari" (holy stick carried by pilgrims on their shoulders). Pilgrims and sadhus undertake this trek barefoot. The colourful chhari procession is accompanied by singing bhajans and reciting hymns in praise of Shiva. This trek follows the ancient difficult route through Bandar Ghati. To make it easier for pilgrims, transport and jeep facilities are available up to the point where the motorable road ends.

Pilgrims can also undertake a direct trek from Chamba. This is a 9-day trek and the route taken passes through Rakh, Bharmour, Hadsar, Dhancho and finally reaches Manimahesh, with a brief halt at Bhiram Ghati.

The Yatra starts from the Lakshminarayana temple and the Dashnami Akhara in Chamba town. It takes about 6 days to finish. After they arrive at the lake, ceremonies are held all through the night. On the following morning, devotees take a dip in the lake and circumambulate it three times. State priests belonging to the Bharmour family conduct pujas in all temples situated in the lake's periphery.

Because this trek offers spiritual satisfaction and fulfillment to pilgrims, it is also sometimes referred to as "Man Ka Mahesh".

Footnote

One can find many, many more holy lakes and rivers all over India. In this article, we have covered only the most sacred ones. We hope you enjoyed your read.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

Our efforts have been directed at making this article informative and refreshing for you. We will truly appreciate all forms of feedback. Please send your feedback to info@dollsofindia.com.