



Rafting on the Mahakali; (right) Panchachuli range

## GLAMOUR + CAMPING = GLAMPING IS THE BEST WAY TO ENJOY A NATURE HOLIDAY, FINDS OUT A MEMBER OF THE t2 GIRL GANG

like oxymorons — “nearly accurate”, “partially complete”, “happily married”, “glamour camping”....

Or so I thought. Till I found myself gazing at snow-capped mountains from within a tent, still buried under a soft-white duvet, a freshly brewed pot of Darjeeling waiting outside. Next to me, a narrow stream kept up a sing-song chatter with its rocky bed, a soothing duet that had lulled me to sleep the night before.

Glamping or glamour camping is about being in the lap of nature, *without* having to climb out of the lap of luxury. So there I was, enjoying the 20,000ft Panchachuli range of the Kumaon Himalayas from the plush bed of a luxury tent, a tent that comes with a well-appointed bathroom (think running hot water, shower cubicle, western potty and fluffy bathrobe), an over-stuffed armchair, bedside lamps, a wardrobe and other such comforts. In the kitchen is a chef who can rustle up tuna cutlets, *hariyali* kebabs, bacon and eggs, Kumaoni mutton (psst: flavoured with cannabis seeds), roast chicken, all kinds of pastas and more delicacies of the plains. And when you retire for the night, you'll find the staff has slipped in a hot water bag under your blanket so that the bed is nice and warm.

All these luxuries are yours to enjoy at Himalayan Glamping Retreat, a boutique resort in Munsiyari. Perched at 7,200ft, this rural town in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand is the last frontier for the Kumaon Himalayas. There's nothing between you and the mighty Panchachuli mountains here. The five peaks are said to be named after five hearths (*chulhas*) the Pandavas lit on their way to heaven. The “way to heaven” bit I totally get.

But for all its comforts, a stay at Himalayan Glamping is really about nature. Because once you are back home, you might remember your plush tent or the hearty meals fondly but what you will really treasure are the treks and walks you'll go on, the alpine lakes you'll sit beside, the birds you'll chance upon, the green of the valley that will intoxicate you. And this is exactly what the owners of the retreat are aiming at — for the discerning visitor to have a “complete Himalayan experience”.

Former CNBC editor Udayan Mukherjee, who started Himalayan Glamping Retreat with Kumaoni wildlifer Prashant Bisht, said they are keener to host the serious nature lover rather than the weekend reveller: “Treat this not just as a destination holiday but as a Himalayan experience holiday. See various facets of the Himalayas,” is the mountain man's advice for his guests.

Udayan and Prashant also run Pancheshwar Fishing Retreat a few hours downhill and they prescribe between five and eight days for a complete river-mountain experience.

The easiest way to get to these parts is to take the early morning Shatabdi Express or the overnight Ranikhet Express from Delhi, which will bring you to Kathgodam. Here you get into a car and ride up to Pancheshwar, about five hours away. There's also the option of getting on a Bullet provided by Udayan's team at Kathgodam, if you are *that* adventurous.



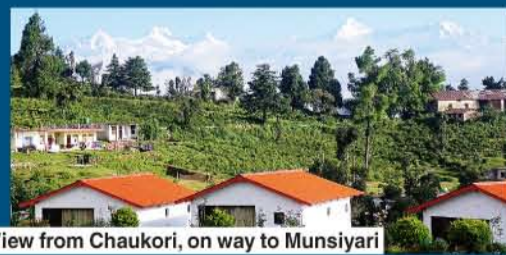
One of the tents at Himalayan Glamping



The plush interiors of the tent



Tea with the mountains



View from Chaukori, on way to Munsiyari

**What:** A Himalayan experience.

**Where:** Pancheshwar Fishing Retreat, and Himalayan Glamping Retreat, Munsiyari, Uttarakhand

**How to get there:** Take a train to Kathgodam from Delhi. Then drive up to Pancheshwar and Munsiyari

**Tariff:** Rs 6,500 per night for Pancheshwar Fishing Retreat and Rs 15,000 per night for Himalayan Glamping Retreat. All meals and beer included. Activity packages priced separately.

**Further information:** [www.himalayanglamping.com](http://www.himalayanglamping.com)  
[www.pancheshwarfishingretreat.com](http://www.pancheshwarfishingretreat.com)

### Pancheshwar

Pancheshwar Fishing Retreat is at the confluence of the Mahakali and Sarayu. There are six to 10 tents at any given time, with proper beds and the works. Where the two rivers meet, there's a small triangular beach. In the morning, you can take a raft to the island and have your breakfast served there. Udayan suggests a three-day itinerary for the beginner. **Day 1:** The Mahakali is the mightiest Kumaoni river, making it ideal for rafting. “You do a full day of rafting. The rapids are much better than at Rishikesh,” promises Udayan. A team from the retreat will organise everything and accompany you on the river.

**Day 2:** This is serious angling territory and you can try your hand at fishing for a day. The prize catch here is the golden Mahseer, a true test for a champion angler, much like the Giant Trevally in Sri Lanka. If you are a novice, there will be trained staff to guide you. Remember, this is a catch-and-release sport.

**Day 3:** A day of birding, because Pancheshwar is very, very rich birding territory. You can hope to spot the fish eagle, fork-tail, wall creeper, paradise flycatcher and scarlet minivet, among a hundred others.

For the serious, passionate, obsessive angler, the retreat offers eight-day fishing expeditions. The angler's raft is trailed by a cataraft carrying staff and equipment. At night, they will pitch a pop-up tent on a river beach and carry on the next day. Similarly, the serious rafter can cover 200km of river over eight days.

### Munsiyari

After three days of adventure, drive up to Munsiyari (or ride them Bullets, you swagmaster). In seven hours, your adrenaline holiday now becomes a mountain holiday. Here's the plan.

**Day 1:** Walk up to an alpine lake called Thamari Kund, through a forest. It's a four-hour trek. On your way back, visit the Nanda Devi temple, which is the biggest temple here. One gets fabulous views of the Panchachuli peaks and valleys from the temple complex. **Day 2:** Do the Khalia Top trek. It's a six-hour trek and it will tire you out. Back at the resort, head to the spa. “One of the reasons why we are building a spa is because when you come back exhausted from a trek, you can get a Thai or Ayurvedic massage,” explained Udayan.

**Alternate plan:** Let others trek themselves into a sweat, you plonk into one of the wicker chairs in the garden overlooking an Enid Blyton-esque picket fence and gaze into the green valley. Drink endless cups of tea infused with ginger and honey, finish an Agatha Christie omnibus.

**Day 3:** Cover some Munsiyari sights. Go to the Madkot sulphur springs, on your way back stop at Masterji's museum. Formally called Tribal Heritage Museum, this collection of local jewellery, utensils, fabrics, coins and much more by Dr Sher Singh Pangty is an incredible repository of tribal Kumaoni culture.

One shelf had my eye. It held a range of hookahs in different shapes and sizes. “We didn't have the culture of tea. When someone came home, we offered them hookah, like we offer tea now. That's why the term ‘hookah paani’,” smiled Pangty, who is 79 years old now. He started his collection in the 1960s because he felt the tribal way of life was being lost after the 1962 war ended the India-China bonhomie.

**Day 4:** The last day, do an easy trek up to a small glacial lake called Mehsar Kund right next to the resort. In the afternoon, visit a women's self-help centre to shop for pashmina, wool and angora products made locally. Called Saras Emporium, it is just a 10-minute amble away from the retreat. If you're visiting in winter, go up to Kalamuni Top for a spot of skating. There's a Kalamuni temple too.

The retreat also caters to the serious trekker, supplying everything from porters and donkeys to tents and other equipment. There are two main treks from Munsiyari — Nanda Devi base camp and Milam glacier. Both take eight-nine days.

Udayan says Kumaon is a “physical holiday”. One suspects it can be a very romantic one too. Imagine sharing a view of snowy peaks gleaming golden against a setting sun. Or holding hands as you tell a spruce from a juniper.

**Text & pictures: Samhita Chakraborty**  
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