



THE TRAIL ORGANISER

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A couple of summers ago, on a trail in Uttarakhand, I stood at the foot of a tall waterfall that fell in a series of steps to form a stream. The waters were a brilliant turquoise, and an iron bridge hung over the stream. I took a breather as I'd just descended to the lowest point of the trek, right there in the middle of the bridge. Farther on, the trail climbed into the sky over 48 switchback bends that hugged the sides of the mountain, to a pretty village perched like an eagle's nest.

Getting there seemed daunting but I trudged on and, within an hour or so, reached the last of the switchbacks. That's when I spotted a lady of the village waving her hands and beckoning me. I walked over and without so much as a word, she handed me a stainless steel glass of red fluid. She asked me to drink up. I didn't argue, and the next few minutes still stick in my mind.

The drink was fragrant, sweet, and the most refreshing I have ever had. Shamelessly, I asked for more and the lady laughingly obliged. I felt energy flow back into me like electricity—it was pure rhododendron juice, crushed and made at home. This was something I'd never had in the city.

Everyone reads about India's rich culture and curries. Our villages have recipes and ingredients that have been handed down over generations. These tastes have migrated to the cities and sometimes permeate our homes. Through these multiple handovers and translations, the flavours of India have begun to take a turn. Somehow, tastes are taking on a universal blend.

Travel around the country and see for yourself. A *dal* in Jaipur and one in Allahabad is different, but not as much as

it once was. Restaurants have similar menus. It would appear that India is slowly becoming a 'one-taste' country. Even in our homes, where there was a distinct local flavour, the lines are blurring. While this fusion is welcome and new tastes are being churned out, it makes one wonder where the 'real' taste is.

Fortunately, those who trek can still find it in the villages of the mountains. They are so far away from civilisation that the migration of recipes hasn't taken effect. The tastes are intact, sharp and different. In Ladakh, for instance, the butter tea

of the horsemen will surprise you.

Their ground grain meals are filling and keep you going for hours. In Kashmir, the shepherds eat a lovely stew of greens and potatoes, and it is a delight to taste the subtle blend of meat and aromatic herbs in Kashmiri villages. In Uttarakhand, the spinach is worth dying for. In Himachal Pradesh, the breads of Spiti can be preserved for days and in Sikkim the vegetables in a soup are wholesome and divinely tasty. You will never find these tastes in our cities.

Trekking is a sport that has many rewards—but few realise or appreciate

the gastronomical benefits. In our slowly dying culture of blended tastes, stepping out into the hills of India can pleasantly surprise your taste buds. You just have to make friends with the simple mountain folk and be thoughtful enough to leave a gift behind. In return, the food and tastes that they honour you with are simple but memorable. You'll understand why the raw ethnicity of the real taste of India is so alluring. **D**

Arjun is the founder of Indiahikes, a blogger and an experienced trekker. He takes a keen interest in training youngsters to appreciate our trails.

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