



THE TRAIL ORGANISER

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It's incredibly satisfying when, sometimes, you run into treks that are hardly known but spring that total surprise when you embark on them. That's when the 'discovery' turns into an 'odyssey' and every part of your emotion and intellect is stretched to points you didn't think possible. This is the stuff books are written about, poets and adventurers romanticise and wanderers throw to legend.

In my days trekking all over India, Hatu Peak is one such romantic trek. It is a day hike, but packs in everything that you hope to get in a full-fledged Himalayan trek. Dark pine forests, super mountain views, enchanting clearings and the thrill of scaling a summit. If you time it right—normally in early March—you get virgin snow-covered trails to walk on, too. The trek starts from Narkanda, 63 km from Shimla, so it is perfect for those looking for a weekend trek out of Delhi or a city in the north of India. From Narkanda, you take the road that goes to Thanedar. You walk and grunt for about a kilometre until you get to a junction. This is where it gets interesting... you take the narrow road in the middle that climbs up into the pine forest. All signboards that show you the way become obscure and melt into mere distraction.

The beauty of a pine forest strikes you the moment you get a whiff of its muskiness or hear the gentle sigh as you tread upon the omnipresent pine needles. Pines stand impressively tall and majestic, and you can gather that a forest is many centuries old by the sheer girth of the trees' trunks. En route to Hatu, light does not touch the surface of the road at

times, so dense is the forest. As the road veers towards the east and continues its gradual upward climb, you're struck by the sense of calm, which is distinct from a sense of loneliness that every traveller has witnessed at one time or another. An hour and three kilometres into the trek, the path pops out to a small clearing to reveal its first grand views of the snow-covered greater Himalayas. As you revel in the glory of these magnificent mountains, the road switches back to climb into a larger clearing that's marked by a few flat-roofed shepherds'

huts. This is Gujjar Kotha. The modest village turns ethereal when you gaze upon a superb view of the mountain ranges that rise up from a small gold-streaked pond. But that's the character of the mountain—tame one second, brutal the next.

Continue on the road for another kilometre until it suddenly makes a wide turn to the south. This is where you leave the comfort of the unpaved road and take the little foot-trail that climbs up to the ridge on your right. But the trail is especially well-marked and meets the road several times as it continues its steep ascent. Sometimes, the trail

falls off the ridge and hugs the mountainside, but always continues to climb steadily towards Hatu. As the 11,000-foot mark arrives, and you're out of breath, the trail opens out to the top. You can take in the place, or you can thank the deity at the Hatu *Mata* temple. Or you can look around and be amazed by the feeling that you're on top of the world. And that everything around you is an extension of you. If nothing else, a trek should help you become one with the trail. That'll make it easier to take the motor road back to Narkanda. **D**

AS THE TRAIL VEERS THROUGH DARK FORESTS AND GOLDEN, SUN-KISSED PONDS, YOU'RE STRUCK BY A CALM THAT'S DISTINCT FROM LONELINESS. BECAUSE YOU FEEL ONE WITH THE TRAIL.