



# Peak Season: India's Trekking Trails

From the snow-dusted passes of the Himalayas to the vast meadows of Uttarakhand, the dense jungles of Chhattisgarh, and the cliff forts of the Western Ghats, **Punita Malhotra** explores why more Indians are stepping into the wild and embracing the call of the outdoors

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**I**N THE SOFT GLOW of his laptop, Kumar Nilmani pores over an Excel sheet detailing 180 trails, each meticulously mapped using Google Earth, videos, and local knowledge. Every year, he undertakes at least one high-altitude trek and, whenever possible, sneaks in solo expeditions with handpicked local guides and a small support crew. Nilmani's passion project draws inspiration from the Bengali and Maharashtrian communities, who have long been at the forefront of India's trekking culture. They are credited with rediscovering and reopening many traditional routes and mountain passes that had been abandoned—even by local inhabitants. In a land where trekking has traditionally been a labour of love tied to spiritual pilgrimage, a quiet shift is now taking place.

**Trailblazing A cross India**

As outdoor exploration gained momentum, so did accessibility. Major players like Indiahikes played a pivotal role in this transformation. With a dominant 50 per cent market share, the company boasts a catalogue of 51 treks spanning the entire country, from Himalayan high-altitude treks to Central Indian jungle expeditions and Southern trails. Founder Arjun Majumdar runs down the shift in trekking trends over the past decade. “Earlier, trekking meant gruelling expeditions to altitudes above 14,000 feet. Today, the moderate trails between 9,000 and 12,000 feet attract most trekkers,” he shares. Over the past few years, Indiahikes has

▼ Nilesch Nandoskar calls the rugged Sahyadris his ultimate playground.



added numerous new treks in Jammu & Kashmir, such as Pir Panjal Lakes, Brammah Valley, Choharnag Lakes, and Gurez Valley, destinations that were once off the map for trekkers. Today, trekking has become mainstream, fuelled by rising disposable incomes, easy access to information, and the growth of organised trekking experiences.

The Himalayas remain the crucible of Indian trekking. From the snow-capped Uttarakhand ridges to Spiti's barren valleys and the high-altitude meadows of Kashmir and Ladakh, these mountains stand as the most challenging frontier of the country's trekking map. Aquaterra Adventures, a pioneer in Himalayan trekking since 1995, has been at the forefront of commercialising challenging routes such as Auden's Col, Parang La, the Ladakh-Kashmir Traverse, and Kashmir Meadows. “While Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh have long been the cornerstones of trekking in India, regions like Ladakh, Sikkim, and Kashmir have seen a marked rise in visitors, thanks to improved connectivity,” says founder Vaibhav Kala.

**New Frontiers**

With the explosion of trekking culture over the last decade and a half, opportunities have expanded beyond traditional hotspots. “Most countries offer one or two types of treks, but India reflects the diversity of larger nations like the US, Russia, and several in Europe, thanks to its varied landscapes,” explains Majumdar. “We have 70 per cent of the Himalayas, central forests, deserts, beaches, and rivers—every corner of the country holds untapped potential.”

A prime example of trekking's expanding footprint is Bastar, Chhattisgarh. Founded in 2016 by Jeet Singh Arya, Unexplored Bastar began as a modest trekking and camping venture. “Post-COVID, as the travel demand surged, Bastar emerged as a sought-after hiking destination,” Arya shares. Popular hikes like Dholkal Ganesh, Kanger Valley National Park, and Chitrakote Waterfalls have attracted experimental travellers, especially young adventurers. With increasing government support for adventure tourism, hiking has become a key feature of nearly every tour Arya curates—around 40 per cent of his guests now opt for a trekking experience.

Next door in Madhya Pradesh, the state's 30 per cent forest cover, 11 national parks, and 9 tiger reserves continue to draw outdoor enthusiasts. In 2024, treks such as the Pench Tiger Trail and Narmada Backwaters gained traction among young travellers seeking offbeat experiences. Sheo Shekhar Shukla, Managing Director of the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board says, “We've partnered with Indiahikes to create five new trekking routes by 2025 to meet the growing demand for immersive and nature-driven travel.”

Even in a coastal favourite like Goa, travellers are seeking hiking opportunities. Rohan, Trek Lead at Adventure Breaks, notes, “Hiking was never mass tourism, but now people want it everywhere, from slow travel to cultural walks and adrenaline hikes.” Besides its multifaceted adventure experiences, the company focuses on coastal hikes, shifting to inland trails during the monsoon. “Scheduled hikes are filling up fast; guests are even willing to drive two hours for half-day hikes,” Rohan adds.



▲ Pench in Madhya Pradesh offers forest trails through teak groves and tiger country, where the wild still feels untouched.

◀ Kumar Nilmani at Budha Madhmaheshwar in Uttarakhand, a lesser-known pilgrimage trek through forests and meadows.

▼ Gurez Valley in Jammu & Kashmir reveals a quieter side of the Himalayas, with wide meadows, winding rivers, and remote village life.



BOTTOM LEFT: NILESH NANDOSKAR. RIGHT SIDE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KUMAR NILMANI; INDIAHIKES; NITESH KUMAR



► Dzongkhul in Zaskar offers trekkers a quiet spiritual retreat.

Zinal Doshi, banker-turned-entrepreneur and founder of the all-women travel company The Flapper Life, explains, “Eighty per cent of our trips now include nature-focused activities. Women are increasingly eager to step out of their comfort zones.” One of their most popular offerings is the ‘Healing Hike’—a unique experience that blends art therapy, breathwork, and open conversation, and continues to draw strong interest.

Soul Side

Nature-starved city-dwellers are chasing refills on repeat, closer to home turf. Ashok Kumar, a retired TCS professional and veteran of over 500 treks, believes Bengaluru has earned its place as India’s trekking capital. “Heading to the hills for a quick reset has become a weekend ritual,” he says. Meanwhile, seasoned hikers like Mumbai-based Nilesh Nandoskar have been on the trails for 30 years. “The Sahyadris are my ultimate playground, with their ancient hill forts, crumbling paths, and exposed rock faces. Once you embrace the discomfort of trekking, there’s no looking back,” he admits.

Arnab Das, an ex-corporate professional, traded boardrooms for backtrails in 2021. His boutique outfitter, Little Green Tent, operates in remote areas of Tirthan Valley and Kinnaur in Himachal, Garhwal Himalayas (Uttarakhand), Kashmir and Ladakh. With group sizes ranging from one to nine, Arnab’s treks involve cooking with locals, walking through farms, harvesting, and sharing stories with shepherds. “Above all, my effort is to keep the offbeat, offbeat,” he smiles.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HIMALAYAN LOCALS; KUMAR NILMANI; ARNAB DAS; HIMALAYAN LOCALS



▲ Kalh Jot in Himachal Pradesh is a high mountain pass still walked by villagers, carrying stories and traditions across generations.

With over 50 countries under her boots, solo traveller Pallavi is drawn to trails accessible on foot. On a 10-day journey with Himalayan Locals, she explored Himachal’s remote Pangi Valley, hiked to Dzongkhul Monastery, and shared *chai* with monks. The trekking company she travelled with nurtures community-led, low-impact trekking in Zaskar, Pangi, and Chumathang (Ladakh). “You pack in the morning, hike six to seven hours, picnic with villagers and return to your basecamp comforts,” says founder Akshay Singh Anand.

With the rise in experiential travel, more people are seeking cultural immersion opportunities through trekking. “In Kedarkantha and Har Ki Dun, you can stay in remote villages and see earthquake-resistant wooden homes, while the Chopta–Chandrashila trail is perfect for spotting Himalayan Monal birds and rhododendrons,” shares R. Venkat Ramanan, operations manager at Himalayan Daredevil.

For many, these trails are pilgrimages—into nature and into themselves. Newbie hiker Sharada Prajna felt a profound connection with the mountains during the Deoriatal–Chandrashila trek. Several treks and volunteering opportunities later, she remains rooted in nature, indulging in birding, nature walks, and weekend hikes. Snowflakes were still a fantasy for Dr Sreelakshmi T until Kedarkantha happened. That first trek left her hooked. Today, with 12 Himalayan treks under her belt, she likens hiking to a mirror, “You learn who you are and what you could be.” And then there’s the poetic trekker Nilmani, who traces rivers, identifies peaks, and maps ranges. His favourite route? A rugged stretch from Dharamshala to Chamba, crossing the Indrhar Jot and Kalah Jot (mountain passes), where villagers still travel for weddings and festivals. For him and his tribe, it’s not escape they seek—it’s homecoming.

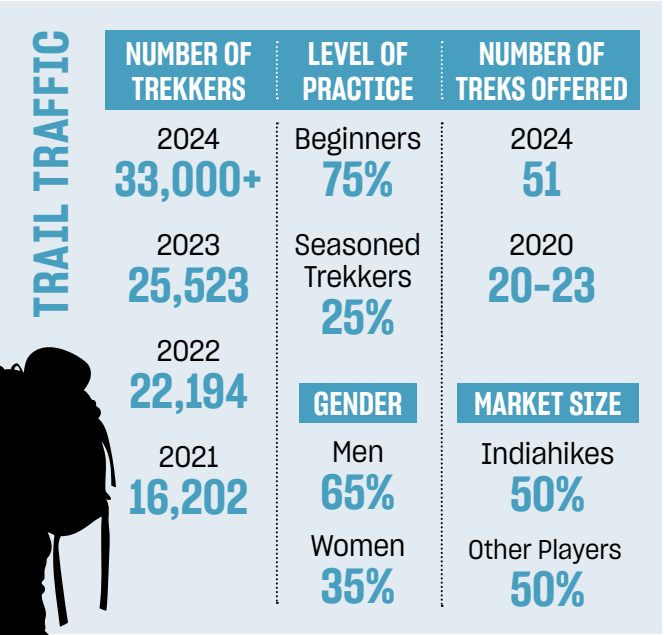
Keeping The Wild, Wild

As the hunger for remote adventure grows, even trails once considered offbeat are grappling with congestion. Looking ahead, Kala advocates for guardrails before it’s too late. India’s iconic trekking regions can survive the tourism boom only with locally led, low-impact travel. Or else, the landscapes that draw us in may be the first to vanish. 🌐



◀ Pangi Valley in Himachal Pradesh is explored through community-led treks by Himalayan Locals.

▲ Little Green Tent offers offbeat treks with local experiences in remote Himalayan regions including Ladakh.



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