

ASIA SPECIAL 10 BEST PLACES FOR A UNIQUE HOLIDAY

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Bhumi Pednekar

India's Eco Angel

Paints The World
She Wants To See

ONLINE HOSPITALITY

Service With A Virtual Smile

WORK FROM HOLIDAY

A Writer Reimagines
WFH In Uttarakhand

Domestic Discoveries

JAISALMER + MALANA + JUNAGADH + TURTUK + KOCHI

40
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EXPERIENCES

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WFH: WORK FROM HOLIDAY

RADHIKA TANDON travels to an Uttarakhand resort with her kids as state borders open up. Atali Ganga not only defines the new normal for hospitality in a post-COVID world, but also paves the way for an alternative lifestyle where work, online schooling, and holidaying go hand in hand.

IT'S 3.45 AM, AND I'M DOING a pre-travel house check. Appliances unplugged, chargers packed, windows locked—we're going straight from four months of house-arrest to a road trip, and mixed in with the excitement is anxiety and guilt. Sharing our plans with friends and family has garnered mixed reactions, from envy to worry to outright disapproval. As far as travel is concerned, the world is divided into two camps. One views travel for its own sake as foolish and frivolous. The other concedes that life should go on, albeit with caution.

The resort we are headed to, Atali Ganga, is among the first to reopen in this relatively untouched valley of the Upper Ganga, about 30 kilometres north of Rishikesh. For now, I'm focussed on the first step. I want to avoid pit stops by minimising time on the

road. Hence the departure at this ungodly hour, which I am assured will get us there in about four hours. We leave on time. Whether this excursion is brave or foolish, I'm about to find out.

Step two is getting through the checkpoints. It's been a week since hotels were allowed to reopen. There are stories of chaos at state borders and people being forced into institutional quarantine. I have a pass from the Uttarakhand government, and we have fulfilled all the conditions. But the mixed reports make me nervous, with good reason as it turns out. We are stopped four times on the way. At the Haridwar checkpoint, I get embroiled in a ridiculous argument with the police, who insist that all passes from red zones were invalidated a week ago. But my pass, which states that I come from a red zone, was issued the day before, I counter. We go around in circles



▲ Clockwise from top left: The road to Atali Ganga is covered in mist during monsoon; a morning hike in the forest; the tables at the cafe are set two metres apart.

until suddenly, and good-naturedly, they give up and let me through. While the hassle was minor, I am struck by how confused everyone seems and how little coordination there appears to be between check points that are just kilometres apart. (At the time of writing this, fresh clarifications have been issued and I am told the situation is improving daily.)

When we drive up through the gates of Atali Ganga, I feel myself finally relax. Our bags are unloaded, sprayed, and

CLOCKWISE: COURTESY OF ATALI GANGA, SUMERU BAHUGUNA (2)

disinfected by gloved staff wearing face shields, before being carried directly to our cottage. Having completed contactless check-in formalities online before arrival, we are briefed on new safety protocols, such as optional turn-down service, before being handed our keys, freshly sterilised under a UV tent and proffered on a tray. I love how within the first five minutes, they manage to melt away my city-bred fears. It is reassuringly clear that a lot of thought has gone into minimising touch-points and ensuring physical distancing. A warm and competent briefing sets the tone for the week ahead.

Atali Ganga looks like it was built with physical distancing in mind. Each well-appointed cottage is set at a distance from the other, with its own private sit-out area and views on three sides. Communal areas such as the cafe and lobby are lined with glass doors, letting in light and fresh air. Everywhere I turn is the green of the dense forest where this little idyll nestles, lush now in the monsoon. It's soothing.

The White Water Cafe is an airy room with a sit-out. In pre-COVID times, it invited guests to get together at the end of a day's adventure; now it is rearranged

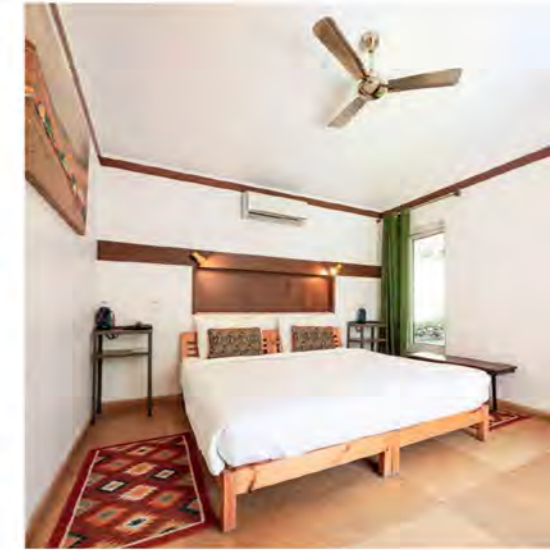


▲ From top: The high ropes course—Altitude@Atali—is a popular outdoor activity at the resort; the staff wear face shields, masks, and gloves; temperature checks are compulsory for checking in.

to facilitate bubble-dining. This is how a COVID-safe buffet works: use the hands-free sanitiser before opening the doors, while wearing a mask of course. Choose a socially-distanced table, already laid out with UV-sterilised plates and cutlery. Carry your plate to the buffet where a masked, gloved, and face-shielded attendant serves you. Then, return to the table and take off your mask to dine. I notice how quickly everyone seems to adapt to the system. We learn to recognise a smile in the eyes above the masks. Once we have exchanged travel histories and grown more comfortable, we even sit outside at an appropriate distance and chat. We learn some names, make some friends. The shift is subtle, the way we have learned in the last few months to keep a wider circle of personal space. But we are still talking and laughing and connecting. It feels normal, and normalcy feels like a blessing.

Atali Ganga hits the sweet spot between back-to-nature and comfortable luxe. All the way from the swimming pool at the lobby level to the unique high ropes course at the top of the property, it offers an array of outdoor adventures and many picturesque corners to curl up with a book. It's exactly the kind of place we were craving.

SUMERU BAHUGUNA (3)



I am carrying work, and my teenage daughter has a full school schedule of online video classes. My son, freshly graduated, is the only one of us completely on vacation. Until last year, a holiday in mid-July was unthinkable; we'd usually be settling back into routines after the summer holidays. Here, it definitely takes some self-discipline, but we find a new rhythm, one that allows us to switch back and forth between work and vacation. The days are full, productive, and packed.

My mornings start with a yoga session overlooking the river. Afterwards, I sit outside my cottage with tea and laptop, the view competing with work for my attention. My daughter, who needs a stronger Internet connection for her classes, uses the conference room with its superior connectivity. This is a glass-enclosed space perched above the lobby, with fabulous views, especially at sunset. We hike, swim, and lie around the pool, reading. We try our hand at



▲ From left: The outdoor pool at Atali Ganga; every cottage is set at a distance from the other, with its own private sit-out area. Below: The resort offers an array of outdoor activities including river rafting.

GETTING THERE

From Delhi, Atali Ganga is approximately six hours by road. Or you can fly to Dehradun airport (25 minutes), from where it is a 90-minute drive.

STAY

Atali Ganga is one of the first resorts in the country to reopen—with ample new rules and facilities in place to ensure guest safety. It offers a pool, spa, climbing wall, high ropes course, mountain biking, and guided hikes. Professionally guided rafting and kayaking trips are also offered in season. From ₹19,380 (special offers at 30–40 per cent off till September 20); ataliganga.com

the high ropes. Nine metres above the ground, up among the treetops, we push our bodies on an aerial course in ways to which they have become unaccustomed. It's exhilarating!

There are days when work gets neglected, but we reschedule. When a morning's excursion into the forest followed by a riverside picnic proves too tempting a distraction, we resolve to spend the afternoon working at the cafe. My daughter sits across the table, history and economics battling pleasantly aching limbs and a desire to just mooch. Our eyes meet and we grin, both spontaneously bursting into laughter. We can't believe this is how we're rolling now. Perhaps we will never take this kind of freedom for granted again.

I love to think that the boundaries between work and life can be dissolved. There was already an ever-growing tribe of us who opted out of the 9-to-5 lifestyle. The events of the last few months have shown that an alternative lifestyle can be a practical possibility for many more. A world where we are unchained from desks and routines. Where the stress of dealing with peak-season rush could be replaced by the freedom to just pick up and go at any time of the year. If there are silver linings to be found in this pandemic, perhaps one of them might just be a new way to travel and do life. ✦

COURTESY OF ATALI GANGA (3)