

SUNDAY MAGAZINE

Camping heights



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Ashish Kothari is impressed with the eco-consciousness at the Hornbill Camp in Uttarakhand.

It was still dark and misty at 5.30 on a cold December morning, when I reached the camp where I was to spend the next three days. A torchlight bobbed towards me, and a young man emerged from the mist. He ushered me to my tent, which was pitch dark. It was a slightly unnerving introduction to Hornbill Camp at Kyari village, near Corbett Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand. As dawn broke and more people congregated around some welcome hot tea (some campers had arrived the previous night), Naveen Upadhyaya, the young man who had greeted me, explained why there were no lights in the tents. “We want to give visitors a feel of how it is to stay in a forest, or in a village that has not seen electricity for most of its existence. We want to give you a different experience, leaving behind the luxuries of urban life.”

Over the next three days, I experienced a number of other features of Hornbill Camp that left me convinced that these guys were serious about the ‘eco’ in ecotourism. I was here for an orientation programme for about 30 birdwatching guides from various parts of Uttarakhand. Organised by the state’s Forest Department, it was part of an ongoing series of birding camps as also preparation for the forthcoming second Uttarakhand Bird Festival in February.

Accommodation is in the form of tents, rustically comfortable with simple cots and bedding, and logs for tables. The camp can accommodate about 40 persons. The loos and baths are clustered in one corner of the camp, and, with a concession to the delicate nature of tasks performed there, do have lighting! A wood-run *bhatti* provides piping hot water.

A crescent-shaped mud platform, the *dhaba*, is used to serve food and *chai*. Next to this is a circular dome-shaped *choupal*, open on all sides, tastefully built to serve both as dining hall and meeting space. Do enough people come to such a no-frills camp? Naveen said they get a lot of school kids; in fact the camp is specially oriented to providing children an exciting exposure to natural and rural experiences. Urban kids are charged camp fees; rural ones are given a free

stay. Both get the same range of activities: nature walks, birdwatching, soft adventure (rappelling, valley crossing, rafting down a canal, ladder climbing), mountain cycling. And the absence of city comforts has not been a problem at all. "We have not had a single person complaining so far," said Rajendra Prasad Sati, another team member. With the gurgling, boulder-strewn Khichri in front, a winding forest path behind, and Kyari village on the side, there is plenty to see. A half-day's walk through mixed forests can get you to Sitabani, with an ancient temple where apparently Sita rested. Much of these surrounds are part of the recently notified Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, increasingly becoming known for its plentiful wildlife. In the three days we were there, we saw over 150 species of birds, and came across evidence of tiger, elephant, bear, and other mammal life.

The youth managing the camp have set up an outfit called Mountainways Outdoors (<http://mountainwaysoutdoors.in>). Conscious of the fact that the camp should not be alienated from the village, the group has facilitated 10 households to set up homestays. It helps bring in visitors, first sensitising them to the cultural and ecological aspects of responsible visitation. There is even a special programme for corporates, to sensitise them to rural and conservation issues. Another camp at Raata village near Nainital is also integrated with the village economy and society, run by local youth Jeevan Dangwal and Birender Dangwal.

Unfortunately, not all the tourism managers are as sensitive. A few more resorts have come up in or around Kyari, and a couple are among the worst of a burgeoning, callous form of tourism that has plagued the surrounds of Corbett Tiger Reserve. One night we heard disco music blaring away at one of those resorts. The road through the village has also become a thoroughfare for tourists who have heard of Pawalgarh and are simply looking for fun, never mind at whose cost. With close links between the resorts and local or state politicians, the government appears to be unwilling to take strong action against them. Ironically, responsibly run places like Hornbill Camp find it difficult to stay on the right side of the law! For instance, to take visitors on the trails through forests, forest staff has to be constantly appeased.

If at all there was something to complain about, it was that we were mostly served standard 'north Indian' food (the ubiquitous paneer!), till our hosts heard us and gave us some local cuisine on the last day. Also, I suggested that they put up some attractive signage on local plant and animal species. Naveen promised to act on these issues soon; I trust he will!

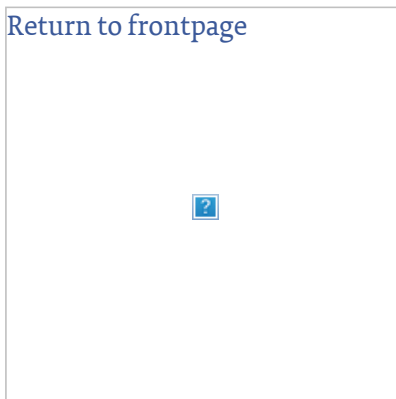
Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune.

QUICK FACTS

Directions: From Ramnagar station (8 km), on Nainital Road, take Kosi Bridge, then second left to Kyari village. From Haldwani (55 km), road

connecting to Corbett, take the cut on the right near Belgarh Forest Gate to Kyari.

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