

Planning an Expedition in the Indian Himalaya

A Familiarisation for Foreign Climbers & Expeditions

The Indian Himalaya are Calling : 5 reasons why you should listen

The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), extending over 2,500 kms between the Indus and Brahmaputra river systems, a geographical coverage of over 5.3 lakh sq kms, stands at a whopping 16.2% of India's total geographical area. The ranges include the **Greater Himalaya** or **Himadri**, **Lesser Himalaya** or **Himanchal**, **Outer Himalaya** or the **Shiwaliks**, the **Trans-Himalaya** comprising of the **Eastern Karakoram** (a sub-group of Karakoram, comprising the **Siachen**, **Rimo** and **Saser Muztaghs**), **Ladakh** and **Zaskar** ranges, and the **Eastern Himalaya** or **Purvanchal** range. These ranges extend almost uninterrupted throughout, covered by snow-clad peaks, glaciers of the higher Himalaya and dense forest cover of mid-Himalaya – a veritable smorgasbord of thrilling opportunities, calling out to adventure lovers with varying skill sets and interests. And here are 5 reasons, out of a Million of them, why you should listen!

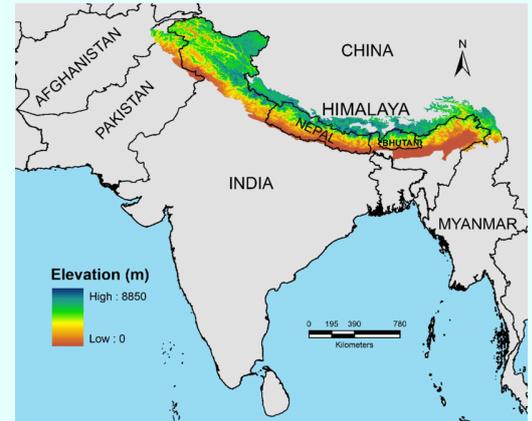


Image courtesy: researchgate.net

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1. More than 70% of the Himalaya lie within India

As per the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE), Department of Science and Technology, Govt. of India, starting from the foot-hills in the south (the Shiwaliks) till the Tibetan plateau in the north (the Trans-Himalaya), the Indian Himalayan Region extends across 13 administrative regions of India, including 11 hill states/union territories, and 2 partial hill states.

State/Union Territory	Area within IHR (sq kms)	Highest Peak within the area and its Climbing status with IMF
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743 sq km	Kangto (7,060m), Eastern Himalaya – Virgin peak – Open for climbing
Ladakh	59,146 sq km	Saltoro Kangri (7,742), Siachen region of Saltoro range – Open for climbing
Himachal Pradesh	55,673 sq km	Leo Pargial (6,816m), Kinnaur, Western Himalaya – Open for climbing
Uttarakhand	53,483 sq km	Nanda Devi (7,816m), Garhwal Himalaya – Closed for climbing
Jammu & Kashmir	42,241 sq km	Bharanzar or Sickle Moon (6,574m), Kishtwar Himalaya – Open for climbing
Meghalaya	22,270 sq km	Shillong peak (1,965m), Khasi Hills, Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak
Manipur	22,327 sq km	Mt. Tempu or Mt. Iso (2,994m), Naga Hills, Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak
Mizoram	21,081 sq km	Phawngpui or Blue Mountain (2,157m), Lushai Hills, Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak
Nagaland	16,579 sq km	Mt. Saramati (3,826m), Naga Hills, Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak
Tripura	10,048 sq km	Betlingchip or Thaidawr peak (930m), Jampui Hills, Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak
Sikkim	7,096 sq km	Kangchenjunga (8,586m), Eastern Himalaya – Closed for climbing
The two partial hill states include:		
Assam (North Cachar & Karbi Anglong)	15,322 sq km	Thumchang (1,866m), Borail range of Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak
West Bengal (Darjeeling Hills)	2,092 sq km	Sandakphu (3,636m), Singalila ridge in Darjeeling Hills, Eastern Himalaya – Open trekking peak

2. Sheer Variety of Climbing Options

The sheer range of climbing options within the 11 hill states and 2 partial hill states is unparalleled in the world. From several 7,000ers to interesting trekking peaks, each state offers an astounding variety of climbing and exploratory opportunities, with the maximum number of unclimbed and technically challenging peaks in the world existing in east Karakoram and Garhwal regions.

Arunachal Pradesh, Eastern Himalaya (Purvanchal Range)

Arunachal falls within the Eastern Himalayan range, one of the most magnificent and beautiful portions of the entire Himalaya. The rugged inhospitable terrain with thick forests, the remoteness of the region and, most importantly, the entry restrictions, have ensured that the Arunachal area continues to remain the least explored of all Himalayan regions in India. The state boasts of several beautiful mountains and the climbing potential is yet to be fully realised. The two highest peaks are Kangto (7,042m) and Nyengyi Kansang (6,983m) with Gori Chen (6,858m) being the most frequented, and Chomo I (6,878m) and Chomo II (6,710m) lying further east. Other interesting peaks include the holy peak of Takpa Siri (5,735m), Tsangdhar (4,965m), Dapha Bum (4,570m), Kelingon (4,370m), Komal (4,207m) and Komdi (3,908m). Geshila is another peak (elevation unknown). Most of these peaks remain unclimbed from the Indian side.



Image courtesy: Harish Kapadia



Image courtesy: Harish Kapadia

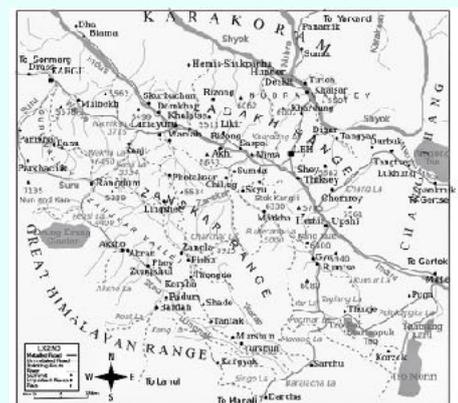
Kangto (7,042m), Arunachal Pradesh

Kangto, the tallest peak in the state, is one of seven peaks in the Kangto range, located in the Sawa circle of East Kameng district, within a gigantic curve running roughly west-southwest and east-northeast between the passes of the Tulung la and Keshong la. The peaks rise from the head of the Pachuk Valley and lie on the McMahon Line. Kangto remains unclimbed from the Indian side, with a Japanese team claiming first ascent from the Tibetan side in 1988. In

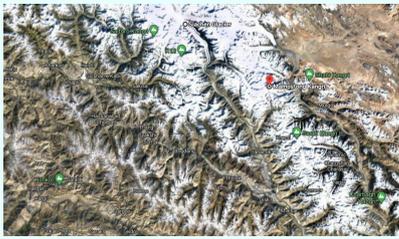
1913, a joint Indo-British expedition explored this region. In 1930, a British team attempted an ascent but failed. In 2016, a joint Indo-Tibetan Border Police and IMF expedition became the first to reach the base of Kangto. Six of the seven peaks of the Kangto massif remain unclimbed, with Kangto Six (6,060m) recently summited in 2019 by a team from NIMAS, Dirang.

Ladakh

The newly formed Union Territory of Ladakh, which was part of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir till 2019, is the highest plateau region in India with an average elevation of 3,000m. The ancient Silk Road passed through this high altitude desert and caravans used to pass through Leh on the way to and from Central Asia. Ladakh falls within the formidable and impenetrable Eastern Karakoram, a part of the Great Karakoram range, the most heavily glaciated part of the planet outside the polar regions. Its 3 sub-ranges in Ladakh include the Siachen Muztagh, Rimo Muztagh and Saser Muztagh, home to several interesting peaks of varying elevations ranging above 7,000m including Saltoro Kangri (7,742m), Teram Kangri I (7,462m), Mamostong Kangri I (7,516m), Padmanabh (7,030m), Saser Kangri I (7,672m), Plateau peak (7,287m), the two icy pyramid peaks of Nun (7,135m) and Kun (7,087m), Chong Kundan I (7,071 m), Lungser Kangri (6,666m), Chhamser Kangri (6,622m) and Kakstet (6,442m) to small trekking peaks, notably Stok Kangri (6,140m). Many of these peaks are unclimbed and most of them are open for climbing. The two valleys of the region, Nubra and Shyok provide access to peaks in the area. Due to its strategic location, the area has remained closed on and off for many years, till the easing of restrictions from 2010 onwards. Indian mountaineering foundation and MHA only allow joint expeditions in many of these areas.



For information on restricted and open areas, please visit the government portal here: <https://ladakh.nic.in/tourism/>.



Mamostang Kangri I (7,516m), Ladakh

Mamostang Kangri I is the highest peak in the Rimo Muztagh, located about 30 kms from the snout of the Siachen glacier. The peak was first explored in 1907 by Arthur Neve and D. G. Oliver and in 1913–14 by Sir Filippo de Filippi's expedition. They also surveyed the Rimo glacier system, publishing what was probably one of the first maps of the area. In 1984 the Japanese members of a joint Indo–Japan expedition, led by Col. B. S. Sandhu, became the first foreign mountaineers to be allowed into this area from the Indian side, and made the first ascent of the peak via the Northeast Ridge.

Himachal Pradesh

This beautiful state rises from the Shiwalik ranges and moves higher into the mid-Himalaya, Greater Himalaya and beyond, into the trans-Himalayan vast expanse of western Tibet. In the North it is bounded by Kashmir and Ladakh, and in the South-East by Uttarakhand. It lies entirely in the Western Himalaya, with altitudes varying from 350m to above 6,500m, a complex mosaic of snow-clad peaks, valleys and hills covered with coniferous and broad-leaved forests, meadows, pastures and terraces, comprising the Dhauladhar, Pir Panjal, the Great Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan ranges, ideal for mountain climbing and trekking. Most of the high peaks in the state range between 6,000m and 5,000m, primarily in the Kullu, Kinnaur, and Lahaul & Spiti regions. The highest peak in Himachal is Leo Pargial (6,816m) in Kinnaur, with other major peaks including Shigri Parbat (6,626m), Manirang (6,593m), Kullu Pumori (6,553m), Mulkillia (6,517m), Jorkanden (6,473m), Menthosa (6,443m), Papsura (6,446m), Dibibokri (6,408m), Chau Chau Kang Nilda (6,303m), Indrasan (6,223m), Shilla (6,132m), Kinnaur Kailash (6,050m), Deo Tibba (6,001m), and the peaks of the Chandrabhaga (CB) range. The most prominent unclimbed peak is Gya (6,795m) in Spiti. For detailed information on entry guidelines, visit: <https://hplahaulspiti.nic.in/foreigner-section/>



Devachan, Papsura, Dharamsura & Shigrila
Image credit: Anshul Soni

Papsura (6,451m), Himachal Himalaya

The twin peaks of Papsura and Dharamsura (6,446m) lie in the Kullu region of Himachal within the East Tosh glacier, near where the Pir Panjal range branches off from the Great Himalayan Divide. Papsura was first climbed by a British team in 1967 with Geoffrey Hill, Colin Pritchard and Robert Pettigrew, who approached the base of the peak from the Malana Glacier in the west via the Animal Pass. A much shorter though tiring approach is taken these days via the Tosh Nala in the south, on the lateral moraines of the Tosh glacier. Papsura is generally climbed by the Southeast ridge and the Southwest ridge. The

ridge connecting Papsura and Dharamsura (Whitesail), and nearby Devachan (6,300m) and Shigrila (6,247m), extends to the west to the famous Sara Umga Pass connecting Kullu and Lahaul valleys. Multiple opportunities for exploration exist in this area.

Uttarakhand

Divided into two administrative divisions – Garhwal and Kumaon, Uttarakhand is largely hilly with snow-covered peaks and steep slopes, glaciers, deep canyons, roaring streams, beautiful lakes, and a few patches of dusty plains in the south, sharing its borders with China and Nepal. Some of the highest mountains in the world are found in Uttarakhand and many of the peaks remain unclimbed and unnamed, with some of the most difficult climbing in the world. There are at least 15 peaks above 7,000m in elevation within the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya, with two of them – Nanda Devi (7,817m), the second highest peak in India and currently closed for climbing, and Kamet (7,756m) – taller than 7,500m.



Some of the other 7,000ers include Abi Gamin (7,355m), Mukut Parbat (7,242m), Trisul I (7,120m), Satopanth (7,075m) and Dunagiri (7,066m). Almost 89 peaks exceed 6,500m, while at least 100 other peaks exceed 6,000m in elevation, notable among them Changabang (6,864m), Rishi Pahar (6,992m), Devtoli (6,788m), Thalay Sagar (6,904m), Shivling (6,596m), Meru (6,660m), Bhagirathi peaks, Panwali Dwar (6,663m), Shivling (6,543m), Nilkanth (6,596m), the Swargarohini group and the Arwa spires.



Thalay Sagar (6,904m), Garhwal Himalaya, Uttarakhand

Thalay Sagar is reckoned to be one of the most challenging peaks in Garhwal Himalaya. Situated in the Uttarkashi district, the peak lies on the main ridge south of the Gangotri glacier, about 10 kms southwest of Gaumukh, where it is the second highest peak after Kedarnath peak (6,940m). It is a dramatic rock peak, dauntingly steep on all sides. At the base of the peak is Lake Kedartal, a stunningly beautiful triangular water body. It was first climbed in 1979 via the northwest couloir and ridge, by an Anglo-American team including Roy Kligfield, John Thackray and Pete Thexton. Since then

multiple ascents have been attempted from 9 different routes, the most challenging one being the band of shale.

Jammu & Kashmir

The Jammu and Kashmir state, recently de-merged from Ladakh, comprises of a stunningly beautiful valley surrounded by a number of interesting peaks within the Pir Panjal range and Kishtwar Himalaya, providing several climbing opportunities both for experts and amateurs. Kashmir itself is known worldwide as the Switzerland of India, and the pyramid shaped Kolahoi peak, referred to appropriately as the Indian Matterhorn. Early exploration of the Pir Panjal Range, in the south of J & K was carried out by Thomas Montgomerie and Godwin Austen in 1856. Early climbers also attempted some of the smaller peaks. The Kishtwar range, with steep rock and ice peaks, falls in Jammu district, west of Lahaul along the Chandrabhaga river which becomes the Chenab. The first exploration of Kishtwar by Europeans happened in 1939. The entire area had become off-limits during the turbulent 90s and early 2000s, with very rare climbs taking place. However, climbing has picked up in the last few years. Jammu & Kashmir is best known for these peaks – Bharanzar or Sickle Moon (6,574m) – the highest peak in J&K Himalaya, Brammah I (6,416m), Brammah II (6,485m), Hagshu (6,300m), Kishtwar Kailash (6440m) and Cerro Kishtwar (6220m). Other interesting peaks include Doda peak (6,550m), Kishtwar Kailash (6,451m), Chomochior (6,322m), Arjuna (6,250m), Barnaj-I (6,100m) and Barnaj-II (6,290m). The smaller peaks include including Kolahoi (5,425m), Crooked Finger (5,630m), Sonmarg (5,425m),), Kishtwar Shivling (5,935m), Cathedral (5,370m), the unclimbed Sirbal peak (5,235m), Haramukh (5,143m), Tatakooti peak (4,725m), Sunset peak (4,745m).



Image credit: www.mykishtwar.com

Brammah I (6,416m), Kishtwar Himalaya, J & K

Brammah I is the second highest peak within the Brammah group of four peaks, Brammah II (6,485m) being the tallest, lying to the east of Kishtwar town between the Kibar nullah and the Nanth nullah in the Kishtwar district. Explorations to the peak had been undertaken by British expeditions in 1965 and 1969, followed by an unsuccessful attempt led by Charles Clarke in 1971, which had to be abandoned 100m from the summit due to bad weather. The acclaimed British mountaineer Chris Bonington, along with Nick Estcourt, made the first ascent of Brammah I in 1973 via the Southeast ridge, which begins from a col in the snow basin above the Kibar

ice-fall. Estcourt notes that "it is not the highest peak in Kishtwar, but it is the most obvious and elegant." The peak saw its second ascent in 1978 by another British team.

Sikkim

“In no other country on earth can one find such a variety of micro-climates within such a short distance as Sikkim”, Joseph Hooker, eminent English botanist and explorer in his Himalayan Journals (1854).

The charming state of Sikkim shares a mountainous border with Nepal in the west and north, and China in the north. All the early expeditions went through Sikkim to cross over to Tibet on their way to Everest, including Francis Younghusband. Doug Freshfield and C.R. Cook were among the first mountaineers who undertook climbs to peaks of North and West Sikkim areas. Kangchenjunga, the highest peak in Sikkim and in India, was first climbed by the Indian Army team in 1977. Many peaks remain unclimbed from the Sikkim side, such as Talung peak and many have been closed for climbing. As per government notification, about 14 sacred peaks will remain closed to climbers including Kangchenjunga (8,598m), Kangchenjunga South (8,474m), Kabru North (7,338m), Kabru South (7,317m), Kabru Dome (6,640m), Forked Peak (6,108m), Guicha Peak (6,118m), Pandim (6,691m), Simvo (6,811m), Simvo II (6,812m), Siniolchu (6,888m), and Narsing (5,825m).

Sikkim continues to be less visited than the other Himalayan states and thus peaks and trekking trails are less frequented, providing more possibilities for first ascents and new routes. Interesting peaks open for climbing include Cloud peak (7,416m), Talung (7,349m), Nepal peak (7,168m), Tent peak (7,363m), Pauhunri (7,128m), Rathong (6,679m), Chomo Yummo (6,829m), Sentinel peak (6,490m), Pyramid Peak (6,211m) and Kokthang (6,147m). Smaller peaks include Frey peak (5,889m), Lama Wangden (5,868m), Brumkhangse (5,868m) and Tenchenkhang (6,010m), which are designated “Alpine Peaks”.

Information on Restricted Area Permits for visiting Sikkim may be accessed at: <http://sikkimtourism.gov.in/Public/TravellerEssentials/pap> and apply for Travel Card here: <http://sikkimtourism.gov.in/Public/PublicMandates/TravellingMandates>.



Image courtesy: Sikkim Tourism, Govt. of Sikkim



Rathong (6,679m), West Sikkim

Rathong lies at Indo–Nepal border, with the Kabru group and Kangchenjunga to its north, Kokthang to the south and Pandim further east. The Rathong glacier stretches at the foot of the peak, feeding the Rathong river. The nearest road head is at Dzongri (4,030m). The usual climbing route is via the col between Kabru South and Rathong and the north ridge. The peak was first climbed from the West Rathong glacier by an Indian expedition in 1964 and the second in 1987 via the West Rathong Glacier and icefall. The steep mixed south face of Rathong has some serac

hazards, and the southeast ridge is a technical challenge. Kokthang has a long corniced summit ridge and, according to Harish Kapadia, “the true high point, lying at the northernmost end, remains to be climbed.”

3. Virgin Peaks and Unclimbed Routes

There are some truly exciting opportunities to claim a first ascent or a new route in the Indian Himalaya. Peaks have remained unscaled due to many reasons. It could be the sheer remoteness of the region or political obstructions/government restrictions. Sometimes it is due to technical factors, such as charting of the route, a tedious and expensive undertaking. Often climbers prefer to climb higher altitude peaks, ignoring smaller under 6,000m peaks, which may be more challenging with steep, icy summits.

There are still hundreds of virgin unexplored peaks and uncharted routes open for climbing in the Indian Himalayan Region, some more challenging than the Everest, and many of them above 7,000m.

The highest unscaled open peak within the IHR is Saltoro Kangri II (7,705m) located in Eastern Karakoram, which is also the 31st highest peak in the world. Other significant unscaled peaks include Kangto (7,060m), the highest point in Arunachal Pradesh, and Apsarasas II & III in the Siachen Muztagh.



Saltoro Range

Scaling a virgin peak and giving it a name chosen by the climbers themselves is the ultimate ambition of all mountaineers. Climbing a previously unscaled peak with adequate evidence, like photos and videos establishing a successful ascent and being recorded in the database, the climbers can request a name of their choice, as has been done with Himalayan peaks in the past. Multiple such exciting opportunities abound within the IHR, with easing up of restrictions in several areas. Recently 137 peaks have been opened up for climbing through all Himalayan states including Sikkim.

The list of unclimbed Virgin peaks, with many of them above 7,000 m, can be accessed on the IMF website on this link: <https://www.indmount.org/IMF/getPeaks?type=vp>.

4. New Infrastructure and Better Connectivity



Under construction 4-lane Highway from Gohpur Tinali (Assam) to Itanagar

Infrastructure projects have gathered very fast pace with the Government of India implementing multiple new projects to connect remote Himalayan regions, especially in Ladakh, Sikkim and the Northeastern states including Arunachal Pradesh. This includes roads, bridges, tunnels, railway projects and airports. State governments have also begun heli-services and bus services on new routes to ensure better connectivity to far flung towns and villages dotted along the Himalayan region, as well as for medical and evacuation purposes.

We, at Apex, have been regularly updating information on all such new projects and initiatives in each issue in the section titled “**In The Indian Himalaya**”, including in this issue, and will continue to do so in all future volumes.

5. Fast Track Permit Process by the IMF

Note: It is Mandatory for ALL expeditions/climbers – both Indian and International – to apply for and obtain IMF’s Permission to climb ANY PEAK in the Indian Himalayan Region, regardless of elevation, in the proper format required by the IMF. Failing this, the attempt will NOT be considered valid or verifiable.

The IMF is the regulatory authority for Mountaineering and allied sports within the entire Indian Himalayan Region, which means IMF is mandated by the Government of India with the exceedingly sensitive responsibility of regulating and monitoring all such activity in the strategically important border areas of India in the North and East, in coordination the Indian military. In order to ensure this, the Permit process has been quite cumbersome and time-consuming, especially for international expeditions. This has frequently led to delays and, at times, even cancellations due to emergence of fresh security issues in these sensitive areas – an understandably frustrating experience!

It has been a tough balancing act for the IMF to ensure the following of all due administrative process (involving a lot of paperwork), while simultaneously trying to promote the India Himalaya as an exciting destination for exploration and climbing. In order to address this issue without compromising on the security aspect, the IMF has put in place a Fast Track online permit process.

For the details of the application procedure and to Book a Peak, please visit the IMF portal <https://www.indmount.org/IMF/welcome> and Sign up in the Users section. Then log in and Book your Expedition.

The Indian Himalaya are an extraordinarily fascinating and unsurpassable amalgam of heart-stopping beauty, intensely thrilling adventure, rich culture and deep mystical experiences. And the IMF invites you to embark on the Exploration of a Lifetime!

– Mayank Vyas Singh