

## Overview

Uttarakhand is the Indian state located north east of Delhi, bordering Nepal to the east and Tibet to the north. Located in the Himalayan foothills, the rivers are fast and continuous higher up the valleys and become bigger volume and slower as you get lower down (similar style to Nepal).

## When to go

You can kayak in Uttarakhand all year round. The best season to choose will depend on what you are looking to get out of your trip. I was there in June and September which are the pre- and post-monsoon seasons. Water levels on the classic runs were high and pushy, and swims could potentially be long and serious. Going in July and August would put you at the height of monsoon and would open up a lot of other options, including exploratory potential. The best months for first timers and people looking for grade 3/4 Himalayan classics would be October, November, March and April. December to February would be a bit cold with lower water levels.

## Access and logistics

Rishikesh is about 6 hours away from Delhi and is the best place to base yourself at the start. You can leave excess kit with your hotel when you go off on longer trips. You can get the bus to Rishikesh but will most likely have to haggle about the cost of your boat - as a starting point, half the cost of your ticket price is standard. The fancier buses which are more common for these journeys do not have roof racks but you can fit your boat in the luggage compartment under the bus. If you're in a big group it would be better to organise private transport. Maybe contact one of the Rishikesh rafting companies to help before you go (there are 300 of them but some of the bigger ones such as Wet N Wild or Red Chilli would be a good starting point).

Once you are in Uttarakhand local buses are the cheapest way to travel and usually have roof racks for your kayaks - bring straps with you or you'll be stuck with their dodgy rope. Private vehicles are also possible and will require haggling on price. Also, be aware that if you want to stay in a guest house you should always carry either your passport or a photocopy of your passport and visa. We almost had a night out in the rain because of this!

I recommend buying a map from a book shop. The "Guide Map of Uttarakhand, approved by Survey of India" is great as all of the rivers are marked.



*Flying over waves on the Ganga. Photo by Nick Bennett*

## Rivers

Please note there are plenty of other rivers than those mentioned here – these are just the ones we paddled.

### Ganga

Shivpuri to Ram Jhula

Time: a couple of hours depending on how much you play

Grade: 3

This is the main highlights section of the Ganga which includes most of the best rapids and minimises the flat. A great warm-up section with plenty of waves and eddy lines to play on. You could paddle it in under an hour but it's definitely worth taking your time, especially as the water is warm! There are 2 bigger rapids, which are fun grade 3 wave trains and are particularly awesome when the raft companies have deemed the water level too high to raft on.

If you wanted to add a slightly more challenging rapid (3+) and more flat to your trip then start above "The Wall".

You can paddle all the way down from Srinagar (or Kirtinagar which provides easier access). This section has a lot of flat on it - definitely worthwhile when the river is really high and it is generally better than sitting on the bus if you are not pushed for time and have come from the tributaries higher up the valley.

### Alaknanda

Chamoli to Nandaprayag

Time: 1 day (we did it in 2 half days after getting the 6 hour bus up from Rishikesh in the morning)

Grade: 4/4+

We had pretty high water levels when we did this section. It was a powerful and pushy mid-volume river, mostly continuous grade 4 with some big moves to make and holes to avoid. There were several harder rapids which required scouting for us. In more normal levels I imagine this section would be a lovely grade 4 boulder garden run. When you go through Nandaprayag you reach the Hillary Step rapid (apparently the furthest up the river that Hillary made, which is pretty impressive!) where you have to find your way through the holes. We were told this was the last major rapid but a bit further downstream we found one with a massive pour-over taking up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the width of the river. If the boulder which formed the pour-over was not covered this rapid probably would be fairly insignificant.

You can apparently get on higher up than Chamoli for a few more bigger rapids.

Nandaprayag to Rudraprayag

Time: 1 day

Grade: 3/4 (4+)

After Nandaprayag the river eases in gradient and difficulty. We mostly had grade 3 big wave trains, with a few massive holes to avoid. There are also a couple of bigger rapids to keep you on your toes. The Pindar joins at Karnaprayag and increases the volume. Before Rudraprayag there is one more significant rapid which is worth a scout. The river narrows through a gorge and the water pushes through into whirlpools and an undercut wall on the left at the entrance to the gorge. Downstream is flat and it is possible to portage with a slightly sketchy seal launch on river right.

When we were staying at Shivanandi we ran the section from Karnaprayag back to Shivanandi as an afternoon blast – 1 hour on the bus and 1.5 hours to paddle back down (we almost finished in the dark a couple of times!)

### Pindar

Tharali to Karnaprayag

Time: 1 to 2 days

Grade: 3/4

This is the classic section on the Pindar. We once again had high water levels on this and although it was lower volume than the Alaknanda, there were many powerful grade 3 and 4 rapids, with some fairly continuous rapids followed by flatter sections. The river could definitely take more water and would be quite full-on if all

the massive boulders were covered! In lower water I would imagine this would be grade 3 boulder rapids; a good warm up to the Chamoli section of the Alaknanda.

Kathi to Tharali

Time: 2 to 4 days on the river

Grade: 3/4 (5)

If you fancy a real adventure then the upper section of the Pindar is for you! It took us 1.5 days to travel from Shivanandi to Kathi. We were joined by a local paddler who was invaluable for logistics! We had to get multiple buses and jeeps to Bageshwar, where we stayed overnight before hiring a private jeep to take us to the end of the road (maybe Gwara?). We hired porters for the 5km walk to Kathi, from where you can walk down to the river.

The river at the start is narrow, fast and continuous; we described it as “grade 3, don’t swim”. Trees are a major hazard and we erred on the side of caution at the start and had a few long scouts to check the river was clear. As a few tributaries join, the volume increases slightly and the rapids start to become more defined, with a few harder ones to look out for. There is a long section of grade 5 which we reached on our 2<sup>nd</sup> day on the river. Some of it looked runnable but some sections were completely blocked by trees. You can portage the whole lot on river left, where there is a path that goes high above the river. We had been told that the portage was 500m, however it was significantly longer and the path back down to the river had been washed away. 4 hours and a lot of rope work later we finally made it back down to the river knackered, sweaty and eaten alive by leeches!

After about 45km of totally non-stop whitewater, you come out of the gorge and have a long but still fast-moving grade 2/3 float down to Tharali.



*Grade 3 don't swim at the top of the Pindar. Photo by Nick Bennett*

**Mandakini**

Tilwara to Rudraprayag

Time: a few hours

Grade: 3/3+

You can get on at the village rubbish tip in Tilwara. It is also possible to paddle higher up but we didn't do this so I don't know much about it. The river is mostly low-ish volume grade 3, depending on levels, with a short gorge section which is harder.

**Baghirathi**

Koteshwar dam to Devaprayag

Time: a few hours

Grade: 3

A lot of flat with a few really fun sections. I think you need to get a private jeep to the dam, but make sure they're clear which dam you want to go to! The river is a bit of an unnatural blue colour and is in a beautiful gorge. Don't fall asleep because the hardest rapid is saved for last just above the Ganga confluence!

**Nandakini**

Ghat to Nandaprayag

Time: 1 to 2 days

Grade: 3/4

Not recommended. The river feels very alpine; continuous low volume and fairly chossy in places. There are 2 dams which pipe water out of the river and return it further downstream. We camped just downstream of the dam in a cloudburst and then got robbed overnight which has somewhat tainted my views of the river. Apparently the upper section is grade 4/5 and much better (although not one we fancied attempting as a pair in pushy water levels).



*The beautiful Shivanandi River Lodge. Photo by Nick Bennett*