

White Out

The Chopta-Tungnath-Chandrashila route in winter is different from the easy, crowded hike it is in summer. Fresh mountain air, touch of snow, and a long and often lonely trail makes this a truly riveting trek.

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The trek starts at a height of 8,790 ft at Chopta and passes by the 1,000-year-old Tungnath Temple and ends at an altitude of 13,100 ft at the Chandrashila peak

TOP TIP

Add Deoria Tal to the mix if you are planning on staying in the region for five days. This trek is relatively easier and offers camping opportunity by the side of the Deoria Lake. Do this over a whole day and camp at the edge of the lake at night.

Temple was close—a beguiling stretch, which took more time than I thought. The last kilometre of the Chopta-Tungnath trail is flanked by open, windy meadows. In the summer, the greenery offers some variance in the scenery but in winter it felt like walking on a large white sheet. The flutter of activity was only a few priests ensuring that the temple was still functioning in the winter.

Tungnath is the highest Shiva temple in the world and is one of the five (and the highest) ‘Panch Kedar’ temples. The age of the temple is pegged at over 1,000 years and it even finds a place in Hindu mythology, associated with the Pandavas. The shrine is suffused with spiritual energy. But again, shivering at 12,073 ft in December, it is hard to distinguish between the games played on your mind by the ruthless cold or an actual divine affection.

It was the last leg of one kilometre up to the Chandrashila trek that really tested my trekking prowess. With no particular trail to follow, we just trudged up the hill with the help of prior tracks created by the trekking team from Great Indian Outdoors. I carefully followed each step to place my foot exactly where the guide did, making full

use of the hiking pole. The steep ascent was more difficult to climb than the less inclined trail of four kilometres earlier.

It took us a whole hour and more to finally emerge at the top, at 13,100 feet. An ethereal landscape unfolded before us. Himalayan giants like the Bandarpoonch, Kedar, Trishul and Chaukhamba peaks were bathed in white—as were the rows of mountains that spread along them in a long 180-degree span in the distance. The startling panorama of the serrated peaks redeemed the effort of every arduous step taken. Glued to these vistas for over half an hour, I almost forgot that I had company in the guide who had possibly done this ample number of times and felt no aura of enchanted refuge on top of this hill. Since the days are shorter, I had to leave the peak in a little time to make it to the base. With knees stiff in concentration to avert slipping, we finally reached Chopta. It was early evening—the perfect time to complete the trek in daylight. I wished I could have stayed on the top slightly longer, but agreed when the guide teased me that it was just enough for the scene to be etched in my mind forever and keep tempting me to return another time. ♦