



A priest sits beside a *shivling* at the Bhimashankar temple.

To the heart of the Ghats

Nestled in the Sahyadri mountain range, the Bhimashankar temple offers a scenic combination of natural splendour and rejuvenation. Aditi Carapurcar treks to the site and experiences the Western Ghats in their full rain-soaked glory.

In the Western Ghats, July is the season of lush greenery as far as the eye can see. A trek to Bhimashankar temple near Pune at this time of the year is a wonderfully counter-intuitive combination of thrill and serenity. With rolling fields, gushing waterfalls and a dramatic sky for company, it is one of the best solo

trips you can take, with the right guide, of course. I wasn't much of a trekker before I decided to set out for this one, but several friends of mine had recommended it as an ideal excursion in July, what with monsoon having arrived in Maharashtra a month earlier.

A trek best enjoyed during the rainy season? The premise was



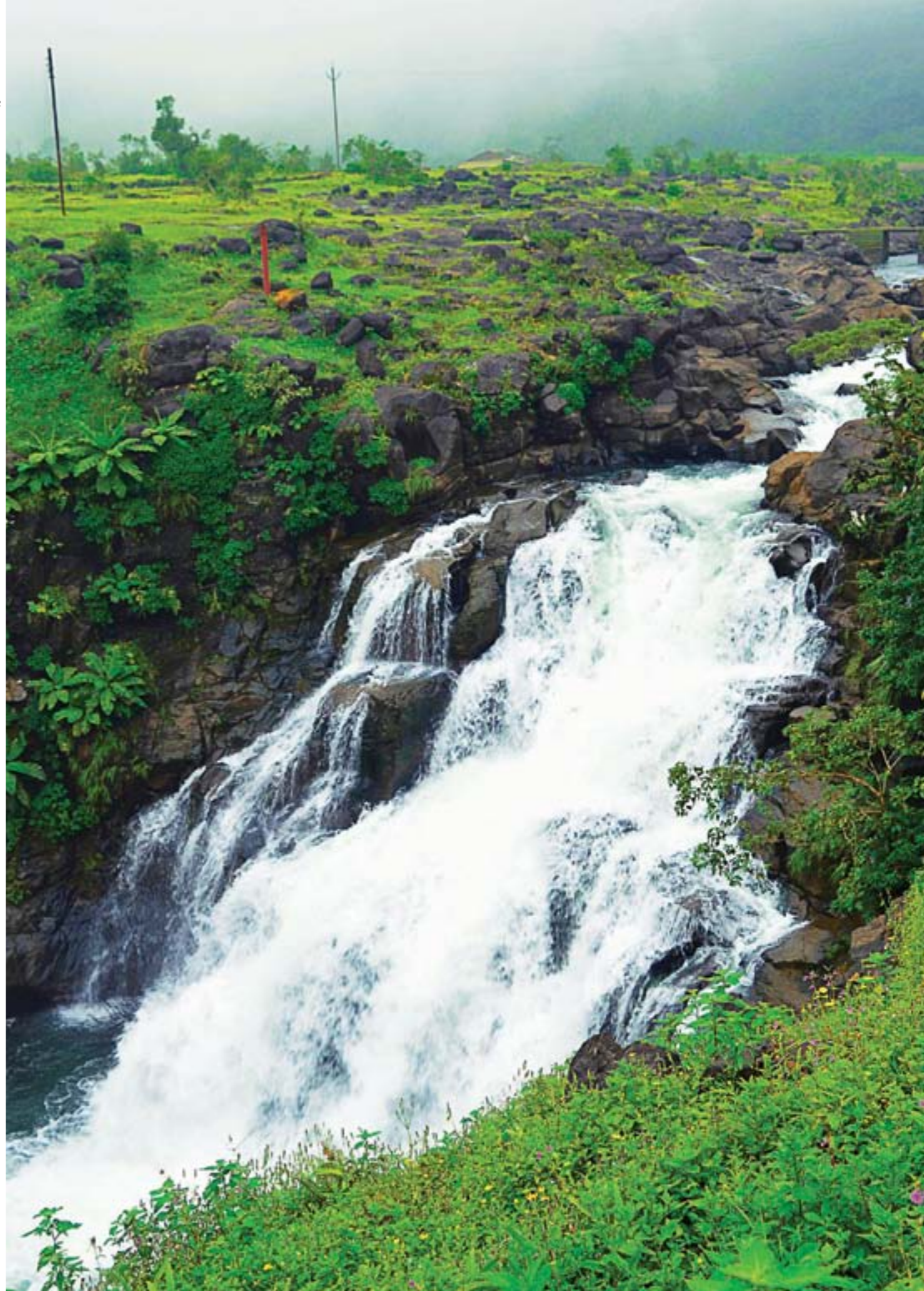
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intriguing enough to get me going. This, and the prospect of hiking through thick forests towards a series of not two or three, but more than 10 waterfalls side by side! I had heard a lot about the route I was going to take to the temple; it was an easier trail, I had been told, through the heart of Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary in the Sahyadri mountain range. The sanctuary, which has been recognised as one of the 12 biodiversity hotspots of the world, is frequented by lovers of nature and wildlife during these months for its rich variety of endemic flora and fauna. The rivers Ghod and Bhima flow through it, and if you're lucky, you might even spot a *shekru*, the giant flying squirrel that is also Maharashtra's state animal!

For my trek, I made my way from Pune by rail and then road to Khandas, a village that became my base camp. It had rained on the morning of the day I arrived, and I could feel the chill in the breeze. My fellow trekkers suggested that we halt at a local tea stall for a piping hot cuppa. Before I knew it, I was perched on a rock overlooking the meadows, sipping the best chai I have ever tasted. This is one of the reasons why I love travelling solo - as daunting as it might seem at first, it lets you introspect like never before and makes you more confident about the decisions you take even after the trip is over. It is all about wandering and exploring as much as you can, and as I would find out soon enough, this trek offers you plenty of opportunities to do so.

"With rolling fields, gushing waterfalls and a dramatic sky for company, the trek to Bhimashankar temple is one of the best solo trips you can take."

1. The elusive *shekru*, a flying squirrel that is also Maharashtra's state animal. 2. The trekking route to Bhimashankar temple is peppered with gushing streams and waterfalls.



About the Author



Aditi Carapurcar is a wanderlust-driven young girl from Goa who has been travelling the world since she was a child. You can read her blog at: goangirlzindagi.com

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Once you start moving uphill from Khandas, there are two prominent trails that can take you to your destination; one goes via Ganesh Ghat and the other via Shidi Ghat. While both routes comprise moderate climbing and a fair amount of walking, the Shidi Ghat route is more challenging while the Ganesh Ghat route is easier, but longer. Most locals and trekkers use the latter, for obvious reasons - it offers you scenic views, is not too demanding physically and is fairly well-marked by hikers of yore. Not surprisingly, this was the route I chose. I can safely attest that the climb through the forest is the most enjoyable part of this route. It consumed the first hour of my journey into the mountains and brought quite a few streams along my path too! Soon, I had my first glimpse of Paddar Killa, a well-known fort that towered above us. It isn't the only edifice of its kind in the vicinity. In fact, you can take a few detours and visit any of the several forts nearby - Shivneri, Kothaligad, Padargad or Siddhagad.

As I approached the halfway mark, a flat plateau began to emerge. The trail eases out from this point onwards and eventually merges with the Shidi Ghat route. Trekkers coming via the latter told me that they had crossed several steep rocks and climbed multiple ladders to get here, and I was more than glad I had chosen Ganesh Ghat instead!



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1. A signboard announces that you have arrived at the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary along the trek route. 2. Refreshments like lemon juice and buttermilk are available for sale outside the Bhimashankar temple. 3. Oil lamps are lit by devotees at the temple as markers of prayer. 4. Aditi Carapurcar during the trek.



uphill to Gupt Bhimashankar. I decided to make the most of where I was, however, and stayed put. The trek had consumed almost an entire day, but I felt more exhilarated than exhausted as I took more deep breaths, trying to fill my lungs with as much of the fresh air as I could. I knew the city lay below, but I didn't want to think about it just then. I was in a place that combined my love for the worldly – how I was feeling and what I was seeing – with an introduction to something more spiritual than religious. There is an energy around the repository of faith that is Bhimashankar that I cannot quite describe. But it is an energy I took back home with me that day and it continues to hold a place in my heart, alongside memories of my unforgettable journey. 📍

GETTING THERE
AirAsia India connects to Pune from several cities. airasia.com