

GANGOTRI

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The actual source of the Ganges is Gaumukh which is a hard 19km climb from Gangotri. Bhagiratha is said to have performed penance here at Gangotri to save his relatives. The Pandavas are also said to have visited this place to atone for the sin of killing their relatives during the Kurukshetra war. At this



point the Ganges River flows north, giving this village its name, Gangotri, which means "Ganga turned north." Lord Krishna says in *Bhagavad-gita*, "Of flowing rivers I am the Ganges."

Gangotri is a pleasant town and is fairly popular. It is a nice place to stay for a while. The Bhagirathi River rushes by and is extremely loud, giving the place a peaceful atmosphere.

Gangotri is located about 250km from Rishikesh and 230km from

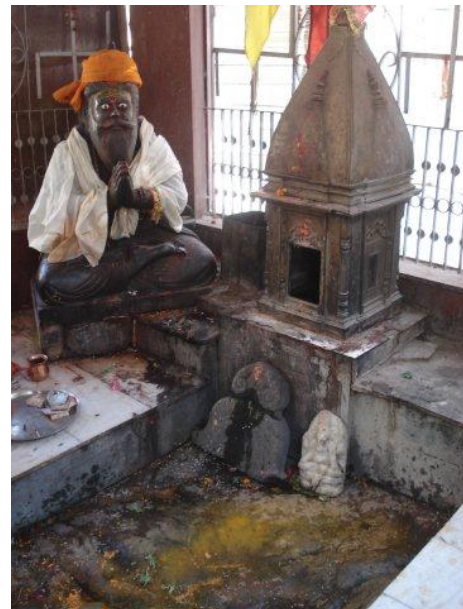
Yamunotri. The bus trip via Tehri and Uttarkashi from Rishikesh takes 10 to 12 hours.

At Gangotri the Kedar Ganga River merges with the Bhagirathi River at DevGhat, which is next to the main bridge, on the other side of the river from the temple.

Gangotri Temple

The Gangotri Temple is dedicated to the goddess Ganga. It was built in the 18th century by Amar Singh Thapa, a Gorkha general and was later renovated by the Maharaja of Jaipur. It is erected near a sacred stone, called Bhagiratha Shila, which is about 20m (65 ft) to the left of the temple. King Bhagiratha is said to have sat here to worship Siva, so Lord Siva would take the Ganges on his head. Soon after *arati* to the deities in the temple, an *arati* is performed to the holy Ganges River. The temple is open from May to early November.

There is a **Water fall** called **Sahasradhara** about 100m below this confluence. Just before the falls the river squeezes itself into a narrow gorge about one meter wide under which is





said to be a natural Shiva *Lingam*. Below the Sahasradhara Falls, only 100 meters from the bus stand, is Surya Kund. Lord Shiva was supposed to have been sitting at this Sahasradhara Falls when the Ganges came down from heaven. That is why this is considered the beginning of the river, according to tradition.

Gauri Kund is only 300 meters further downstream from the bus stand, where the Ganga can be seen flowing through narrow channels.

After Gauri Kund, one can find **Patangna**, which is two kilometers downstream from the bus stand, where it is believed the Pandavas performed their yagnas and austerities to redeem themselves from killing their relatives in their participation in the Kurukshetra war. After this along the path is a large cave with a small entrance, called the **PandavaGupha** or cave of the Pandavas.

When to Go

The temple here opens with a formal *puja* to Gangajion **Aksaya-tritya**, during the last week of April or first week of May. It closes on Diwali, in the midst of an array of oil lamps. During the winter months, Gangotri is covered with snow. When the temple is closed, there is a grand ceremony in which the priests decorate a palanquin and take the deity of the Goddess Ganga while singing the Ganga Laheri and bring her to Mookhimath in a huge procession. Then the temple doors are closed for 6 months. The worship of Ganga Devi is continued in the temple at Mookhimath until the temple at Gangotri is ready to be opened again.

Travel

Buses from Hanuman Chatti near Yamunotri (13 hr) go directly to Gangotri, via Uttarkashi. There is an early morning bus from Hanuman Chatti at 5.30am, that must be reserved the night before. After that there are a few buses that depart from Hanuman Chatti when full. There is a bus scheduled to leave at 7 am, which arrives the same day. Later buses usually stop for the night at Uttarkashi, which has plenty of places to stay.

From Haridwar or Rishikesh it takes 14 hours to get to Gangotri. From Gangotri to Kedarnath there are regular buses that take a day and a half. No matter how early you leave, you cannot travel the 334km in one day.

On the way to Gangotri

a) UTTARKASHI

Uttarkashi mean the Kashi (Varanasi) of the Uttar (north) or the "Varanasi of the north." Uttarkashi is located 100km from Gangotri.



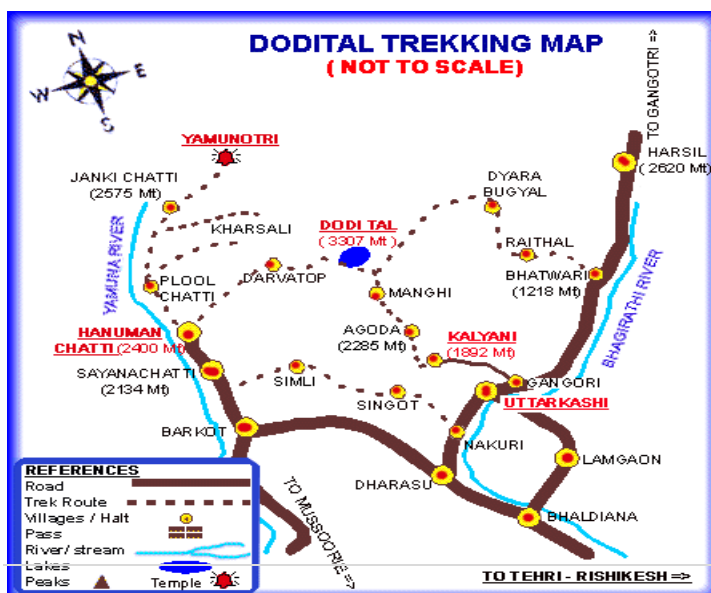
The main temples here are the **Viswanath Siva Temple** and the **Annapurna Temples**, like in Varanasi. The Kashi Viswanath temple is an ancient shrine of Lord Shiva with an ancient Shiva-linga. It is mentioned in the Vedic texts, such as the Kedarkhand of the *Skanda Purana*. Outside the Kashi Viswanath temple is a large and old pole, its depth into the ground is unknown. You can attempt to make it sway and it will not budge, but try it with faith and it will move. The day of Makar Sankranti in January is a festival attended by thousands of devotees who come to pray, worship and offer Ganga water to the *Lingam*. Different villages also bring their deities here on palanquins. The temple is only 200 meters

from the Uttarkashi bus stand.

There is also a **Parasuram temple** here. There is a helpful **Tourist Office** on the main road.

You can get a taxi from here to Gangotri. If you want to trek in the area you can hire guides and a porter.

b) DODITAL



Dodital is one place worth noting, though it is out of the way as we go toward Gangotri. It is the place considered to be where Lord Ganesha had appeared or was born. It is a beautiful lake set in a lush forest with a temple nearby. It is said that it was here where Parvati bathed and created a boy. She then requested him not to let anyone approach while she was bathing. When Lord Shiva arrived, the boy blocked his way. Shiva, not knowing the boy was his son, cut off the boy's head. When Parvati heard what had happened,

she became angry and explained the situation to Shiva.

Shiva then told his associates to bring the head of the first living being they saw. So they went searching and brought back the head of an elephant. Shiva fixed it onto the boy's body, who thus became Ganesh.

c) KEDAR TAL

Kedar Tal is the source of the KedarGanga River. It is a 17km trek from Gangotri, but the fact that you have to climb 600m (2,000 ft) makes it a hard trek, which you should be acclimatized to.



You start at Dev Ghat in Gangotri and then follow the Kedar Ganga up for about 8km until you come to BhojKharak. You then go another 4km to a KedarKharak and then proceed another 5km to Kedar Tal. When you reach Kedar Tal, there are several huge mountains including the Bhrigupanth (6770m) and Thalesagar (6900m.).



d) TRIYUGI NARAYANA

Triyugi Narayana is located on the mountain road between Gangotri and Kedarnath. Triyugi Narayana is about 5km off the main road and can be reached from Sitapur or Sonprayag. It is said that the marriage of Lord Siva and Parvati took place here at Brahma Shila during Satya-yuga. Brahma was the priest who conducted the marriage, and Lord Narayana offered his sister, Parvati, to Lord Siva. It is said that the marriage **havan (fire) kund** has been kept burning for 3 yugas. Pilgrims offer pieces of wood in the *havan kund* and take the ashes as *prasada*.

It is said that the present

Akhand Dhuni Temple was built by Adi Sankaracharya about 1,200 years ago. In this temple there is a two-



third metre (2-ft) silver deity of Lord Narayana (Vishnu) with Lakshmi and Saraswati on either side. There is a stone outside the temple that marks the spot where the marriage was performed. There are also four holy *kund*s here called Vishnu Kund, Rudra Kund, Brahma Kund, and Saraswati Kund.

GANGES DESCENT FROM THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

In the Vamana Avatar Lila, Lord Vamana breaks open a hole in the covering of the universe. The Viraja which encircle the material world enters in the universe and the Sacred Ganges because it touched the Lotus feet of the Lord Vamana.

The reason why King Bhagiratha desired that the Ganga descend to earth was to purify the remains of the 60,000 sons of his great grandfather, King Sagar. What happened was that during Satya-yuga, King Sagar was going to perform an *ashvamedhayajna* (a sacred horse ritual). This made the demigod Indra fearful that King Sagar may become more powerful than he. So Indra stole the horse and left it at the residence of Lord Kapila. King Sagar's 60,000 sons went to look for the horse and thought Kapiladeva stole it when they found it at his *ashrama*. Kapiladeva had been in deep meditation and when he was disturbed, he burned the 60,000 sons by the power of his glance. Only Asamanjas survived and went back to tell King Sagar what happened. Then the king's grandson, Asuman, returned to Kapiladeva and requested him to release the horse, which he did and explained that the king's sons could be saved if, their remains could be bathed in the waters of the Ganga River. But in order for this to happen, Ganga Devi would have to descend from heaven to earth.



So King Bhagiratha pleaded Ganga Devi to descend, but she explained that the force of her water descending from the heavenly region would destroy the earth. Therefore, King Bhagiratha pleaded Lord Shiva to accept the powerful force of Mother Ganges the river on his head. Thus, the Ganges descended to earth, landing on the head of the powerful Lord Shiva, and then followed King Bhagiratha who cut a deep gorge in the earth with his chariot. This gorge went all the way to the Bay of Bengal at Ganga Sagar, the island where Lord Kapiladeva resided. There, the Ganges purified the remains of the 60,000

sons of King Sagar so they could return to the spiritual world. Now, because of King Bhagiratha, so many other pilgrims can also take advantage of the holy Ganga, and visiting Gangotri is considered a most auspicious event.



GAUMUKH

This glacier is the actual source of the Ganges. Gaumukh means "cow's face," which the glacier is supposed to look like. However, because of the constant melting of the glacier, the shape is also always changing. It is a 100m (328 ft) high wall of gray snow. It is 30km (18.85 miles) long and two to four km wide. Years ago the glacier is said to have reached all the way down to Gangotri.

The best time to visit is between June to September. Before June and after the second week of October



there is too much ice and snow on the path to be able to reach it. There is a rocky path, marked white on one side. It is 19km (some say 23km) northeast of Gangotri. Mount Shivling, 6,543m (21,470 ft), towers above the source of the Ganges. The water of the Bhagirathi gushes out from the glacier with great force and cuts a fantastic gorge out of the mountains. The climb is difficult at places.

Getting there

It is 18 kilometers (though some now say 23) east from Gangotri to Gaumukh, the source of the Bhagirathi River. To reach Gaumukh you start by climbing the stairway up the hill by the Ganga Devi temple that leads you to the path. As you start out along the path through the trees, it is not too strenuous. It does not go too high or too low. You will first see Kanakgiri Ashrama, which is two kilometers from Gangotri. The first refreshment stop is Bhojgaddi, which is four kilometers out. There are many bhoj trees in the area.

After 8 km you reach **Chirbasa**, at a height of 3606 meters which is basically a few tea shops and some tents with mattresses for staying overnight. From here the path leads to mountain desert. Just pass Chirbasa, where the cliff faces has deteriorated; there have been quite a number of accidents, so you have to be really careful at this point.

Most people stay the night in **Bhojbasa**, at a height of 3792 meters above sea level, where there is no electricity. If you

plan, to cross the glacier, you can get a guide here. From Bhojbasa it is a good 5km track to Gaumukh (2 hr). The path is marked by stones, but it is not clear-cut.

Usually people take one day to reach Bhojbasa. The next day they go from Bhojbasa to Gaumukh and then

return to Bhojbasa the same day. Then the next day they return to Gangotri. Most people spend a day or two in Gangotri in order to get used to the altitude before making this trek. Past Gaumukh is Tapovan.



WARNING

There are many cases where people who did not stay in Gangotri to acclimatize and got very sick. There may also be a problem if you make the trip too quickly.

Practicalities

There is no place to stay in Gaumukh, but you can camp out there if you have proper equipment. I know of people who have stayed there for days. There are tea stalls where you can get basic food.

Five km from Gaumukh, at Bhojbasa, there is a Tourist Bungalow with four rooms, dorm beds, and two-person tents. It has a basic restaurant and hot water in a bucket for some rupee. There is also the Bhojbasa **Ashram** of Lal Baba, who provides free food and lodging for pilgrims. This is basically floor space. You should bring a warm sleeping bag, a torch (flashlight), and good shoes or boots.

TAPOVAN

Tapovan is a natural Sivaling peak that rises 6,554 metres. It is called Tapovan because *sadhus* have performed penance there to realize the Absolute Truth. If you want to go there, you should have a guide, a good tent, food, a warm sleeping bag, and warm winter clothes. To get there without a guide can be dangerous, as there can be huge holes in the glacier totally hidden by snow. But there are some people who have gone there without a guide, with no problem, except the fear of getting lost. Because of the decreased amount of oxygen in the air, one should also take it easy.

Tapovan is 4460 meters in elevation. It is a lovely meadow with natural blooming flowers. The side of the meadow has the stream called the Akash Ganga, which fades into Gaumukh. The famous Mount Sumeru is several more kilometers from Tapovan, which reaches a height of 6660 meters.

On the other side of Tapovan are Nandanvan, Rakvan, and Sundarvan which can be seen. One can reach Kalandi through Nandanvan and from Kalandi one can reach Badrinath if taking the path through the mountains. Only well-equipped mountaineers usually go past Tapovan.

Tapovan is four hours past Gaumukh (5km). There is *a sadhu who hosts visitors* in his cave at Tapovan, but you should definitely bring your own food.

The Tapovan trek takes four days.

Day 1 Gangotri to Bhojbasa	14km
Day 2 Bhojbasa to Tapovan	10km
Day 3 Tapovan to Bhojbasa	10km
Day 4 Bhojbasa to Gangotri	14km

