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Off Track



YANA BEY

Jack of all adventure sports

How does one train to become a professional or trainer in adventure sports? I want to excel in various adventure sports like rafting, parasailing, hang gliding and parachuting. I also want to perform stunts in cars.

SAURABH TYAGI, NEW DELHI

You must do a course to become a professional in any adventure sport. If you want to do a number of adventure sports, you will have to do the courses one at a time. At the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Mountaineering and Allied Sports, Manali (01902-252342, 250337, 253789), you can do rock climbing, mountaineering, skiing and paragliding courses.

To learn rafting, whitewater kayaking and mountain biking, contact Team4adventure (9818525928). For diving, go to Goa (see www.baracadiving.com and www.goadiving.com) as it is cheaper than going to the Andamans or Lakshadweep.

For skydiving, contact the Directorate of Air Force Adventure at 011-23793603. Their course reserves two seats for civilians. The world's best stunt driving school, Bobby Ore Motorsports (www.bobbyoresports.com), is in the US. India has no such school, but there are self-taught stunt drivers in Bollywood and you can learn by being an understudy.



As you try out various sports, you will find that one or two touch your heart in a special way. Pursue those with passion and your reward will be a lifetime of exhilaration.

What weekend river rafting options do I have near Mumbai?

RAVI D, MUMBAI

During the monsoon, the Kundalika river near Kolad, off the Mumbai-Goa highway, becomes a playground for rafting. The put-in point is a little over two hours by road from Mumbai. You can contact a tour operator who will look after the logistics of transport, food, raft and gear. Contact Nature Knights (9821081566), Wild River Adventures (9986091762) or Nature Trails (9987345155).

TALK TO US

Write to our adventure expert Yana with your queries on rush@hindustantimes.com



■ Rafting over the Middle Tons
PHOTO COURTESY: DAVID PROTHRO, AQUATERRA ADVENTURES

Up your ante

RISHIKESH IS passé. In a country riddled with rivers, there's no dearth of places where you can test your mettle tackling white water

Dhamini Ratnam

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Aparna Khera, 26, went to Rishikesh a year ago for a white water rafting trip. All it took was three hours on a raft with seven strangers to get her addicted. "I was hooked to the rush. Although the rapids weren't that tough, the whole experience of paddling through a gushing river was something else altogether," she says. A few months later she revisited Rishikesh, this time with friends. But by the end of it, she knew she needed more.

John Pollard, founder of Southern River Adventures & Sports Private Limited knows this feeling all too well. A Britisher settled in India for the past 17 years, Pollard was one of the first to offer rafting on the Kali River in Dandeli, near Goa, simply because he knew it was time enthusiasts like Khera explored other rivers in the country.

"If I had a penny for every time I heard someone talk of rafting in Rishikesh as if it was something new, I would be a millionaire," he says. "There are far better rafting trips going on in the country."

Better, maybe; tougher, definitely. So, like Khera, if you too are looking for a more challenging and gruelling white water experience, let's see where you should be heading.

TAKE THINGS UP A NOTCH

Rapids are graded depending on how hard it is to negotiate them and the ease of rescue operations in the area. Typical

day trips on the Rishikesh take beginners through class 2 to 3 rapids — the easiest of the lot. But for some real fun, Khera needs to face a river with lots of rocks. For that, we point the compass southwards to Kali in Dandeli, Coorg and Kundalika in Kolad and hand Khera her helmet and paddle.

Created by the waters let off from a dam, the Kundalika is just the river to raft on, especially during the monsoon. The waters are impatient and the rivers have more rock formations. Which means that when you're not busy getting yourself out of rapids, you're definitely occupied in saving your raft from the jagged edges of rocks that dot your path. All the while, of course, you're also required to do as the instructor says and paddle with all your might to make sure you don't cause the boat to capsize.

Such rivers are known as technical rivers, and even for someone like Prateek Kanodia, 28, who has rafted on the world's highest commercially rafted rapids in Kaituna River in New Zealand, they're quite gruelling. Kanodia has rafted on Kali and Coorg and describes his experience as nothing short of exhilarating. "You don't know if you can do it, and there's only one way to find out. The thrill of knowing you've accomplished rafting on it is something else altogether," he says.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SHUNTING DOWNSTREAM ON THESE FAST-FLOWING RIVERS IS HEIGHTENED BY THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE BUT SPLIT SECONDS TO DECIDE HOW TO TACKLE A RAPID

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FIND A CHALLENGE

If you, like Khera, master the rocky rivers down South and still want more, it's time to head to a river with class 4 and 4+ rapids, freezing cold water and a couple of gorges thrown in for good measure.

There are many options to choose from. We could direct her to Beas in Punjab or Teesta in Sikkim to tackle some continuous rapids. And for some class 4+ rapids, she could head to fast flowing rivers like the Tons, bordering Himachal Pradesh, the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda, both tributaries of the Ganges, in Uttaranchal, and the Zaskar in Leh.

The experience of shunting downstream on these rivers is heightened by the fact that you have but split seconds to decide how to tackle an approaching rapid.

"You have to decide your point of entry, the main line, or path through the rapid, and the point of exit for every single rapid," says Akshay Kumar, CEO of Mercury Himalayan Explorations, Delhi.

More than a fall, it's the freezing cold temperatures that are a real cause of concern, points out Avilash Bisht, owner of Aquaterra Adventures, a Delhi-based adventure sports company.

TOO AMBITIOUS?

Many rivers like the Brahmaputra, the Zaskar and the upper Ganges have class 5 rapids too, but they require a good deal of experience and knowledge of different paddle strokes and rescue mechanisms before you tackle them. "Most touring companies don't offer them commercially," says Bisht. What about the highest grade of rapids — class 6? "To put it simply," says Bisht explaining what a class 6 rapid means, "if you tackle it and come out alive, the rapid will have to be reclassified."

KEEP IT GOING

Now that we've given Khera, and you, a whole bunch of options, here's our suggestion — don't do this over the weekend. There's no just cause to limit the rush to only three hours on a Saturday.

Many touring companies organise 10-14 day trips on the Zaskar and the Brahmaputra, where you'll not only encounter varying classes of rapids but you'll also get to travel through dense forests, deep gorges and picturesque villages with your camping equipment and baggage on the raft. How does that sound for an adventure?

GO BEYOND THE RAFT



There's a whole lot more that you can do on the rapids. Read on

CANOERING

Canoes are like elongated rafts that seat 2-3 people. You sit in a kneeling position and paddle with a single bladed paddle. They're best for flat water like lakes and oceans but many like to ride them on white waters like in Coorg or Dandeli for the thrill of tackling rapids with fewer people. If you're canoeing on rapids, safety equipment includes a lifejacket, rescue ropes, a helmet and a first aid kit. Who offers it: Southern River Adventures & Sports Private Limited (www.southernriveradventures.com)

KAYAKING

Quite similar to canoeing, except that the boat is smaller and narrower and you sit your legs straight out in front of you, and paddle with a double-bladed paddle. Kayaks, like rafts have a safe line — a rope you can hold on to — running along the entire boat. Who offers it: Mercury Himalayan Explorations (www.himalayanadventure.com)

RUBBER DUCKY

A rubber ducky is an inflatable kayak, which is designed specifically for white water. It's also more stable than a canoe and a kayak, as it is very light. And it's lots more fun. Who offers it: Aquaterra Adventures (<http://www.treknraft.com>)

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GETTING DIRTY

On muddy trails

FOR AVID trekkers, the Sahyadris in the monsoon offer great weekend escapades

Aalap Deboor

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If green's your thing, then trekking in the monsoon is a must-do. However, your usual haunt in the Lower Himalayas isn't the easiest place to conquer in the rains. Don't mope. Just head west to the Sahyadris that are crisscrossed with cool brooks and spectacular waterfalls at this time of the year. Like the Himalayas, the Sahyadris have a tribe of loyal trekkers who spend every free weekend exploring any of the 300 forts that pepper the hills.

"On the Rajmachi trek, there are just so many waterfalls around you that you tend to lose count," says trekker Aditya Madanapalle. Many trek to Harishchandragarh just to catch a sight of the 'indravajra', a disc-shaped rainbow that forms all

around you, when the clouds are low. Here's our pick of 10 treks, some familiar, some lesser-trodden paths, that are must-dos.

LOHGAD

This is one of the most grandiose forts in the Sahyadris and has managed to retain its impenetrable fortifications till date. The village at its base is about 5 km from the Malavali station near Lonavla. The climb is easy even in torrential rains.

RAJMACHI

You can see the Shrivardhan and Manoranjan fortresses when you scale the Rajmachi cliff. You can also explore many monuments, caves and old temples here. The climb is easy, and you can take a break at Uhdewadi, a small village en route to the top.



The climb to Peth Fort is another easy trek.

PHOTO: ADITYA MADANAPALLE

RAJGAD

Rajgad is one of the bigger forts and is well known for its architecture. In the monsoon, a thick fog shrouds the peak, with the fort barely visible. Experts suggest making this a two-day trek.

NANEGHAT

This thumb-shaped peak is well known amongst trekkers for its enormous caves. The clouds hang literally above your head and trying to spot far-off

places becomes difficult. There's a small stream on top that has potable water during the monsoon.

RATANGAD

Go to Ratangad for just one reason — its unobstructed view of the sprawling Bhandardhara dam. That apart, the three most difficult peaks in the Sahyadris — the Alang, Kulang and Madan — are visible here. This is a two-day, moderately-difficult trek.

WANT TO TREK THE SAHYADRIS

... but don't know who to call? Just cut this out and keep it safe.

GIRIVIHAR
Rahul Natu - 9322597788

GREEN CARPET
Mangesh Halbe - 9920246746

TREK SHITIZ
Kiran Kannadkar - 9860800958

DONGRI ADVENTURES
Sagar Shende - 9920850066

CHAKRAM HIKERS
Sudeep Barve - 9869355982

HARISHCHANDRAGAD

Seasoned trekkers call the space around the fort 'a classic manifestation of the human perception of heaven'. The Kokankada cliff, where the breeze is overpowering, can be seen majestically spread out 2,200 feet above sea level. You can start off from Khreshwar and finish the trek in two days.

VYAGRESHWAR

This nondescript place is near Pen, after

you turn right at Sapoli Phata. It doesn't attract too many trekkers and is marked by an expanse of lush greenery. An ideal one-day trek.

SHINDOLA FORT

This climb is easy, save for a few jagged areas in between, which get slippery. The shallow trenches that the main plateau is riddled with are a saving grace in heavy rainfall. The Nalichi Vat, the tougher of two ways to get to Harishchandragad, is visible. And it is scary!

KALAVANTIN

This one's a renowned pinnacle right next to Prabalgad Fort. The way up is short and easy. Small creatures like crabs and snakes scurry about, giving photography enthusiasts some good shooting opportunities.

KALSUBAI

And lastly, Kalsubai, or the 'Mount Everest of the Sahyadris', as the trekkers call it, is famous as the tallest peak of the Sahyadris in Maharashtra, standing 1,646 metres above sea level. Don't let its height intimidate you, it is one of the easier treks because of its well-developed trails.

Let the sheer ecstasy of being at the top inspire you.