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# DEPARTURES



*The* Hotels *Issue*



The river-view pool at Taj Rishikesh Resort and Spa. Opposite: A Ganga Aarti ceremony in Rishikesh.

# WHERE MOUNTAIN



The Ganges has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries, from the Brahmins to the Beatles. Now, as a collection of modern retreats opens, the next generation of soul seekers is discovering the timeless and transformational power of India's most sacred waters.

by **MARCIA DESANCTIS**  
Photographs by **TOM PARKER**

# MEETS RIVER

## The Ganges was an emerald brushstroke

under the morning haze in the holy city of Devprayag, India. Sulfur-colored light cast a muted hue on the weathered stone streets, which seemed to carry the thick patina of centuries of history. Down in the shallows of the river, a dozen or so men were immersed, dousing their faces and limbs, devout and dutiful in their every gesture.

I observed all of this quietly as I inched my way down the slick sandstone stairs leading to the riverbank. At the bottom, I removed my sneakers, rolled up my pants, and took one, then two steps in. The icy shock stung my ankles. I turned around to face my guide, Azad, who was brandishing a bag of towels and looking quizzically at me. "You are not going to bathe?" he asked. Like millions of pilgrims, travelers, saints, and sages before me, I had come here to wash myself in this sacred stretch of the Ganges, where it is believed that the goddess Maa Ganga wipes away the impurities of all who enter. But I was no sage or saint—just a

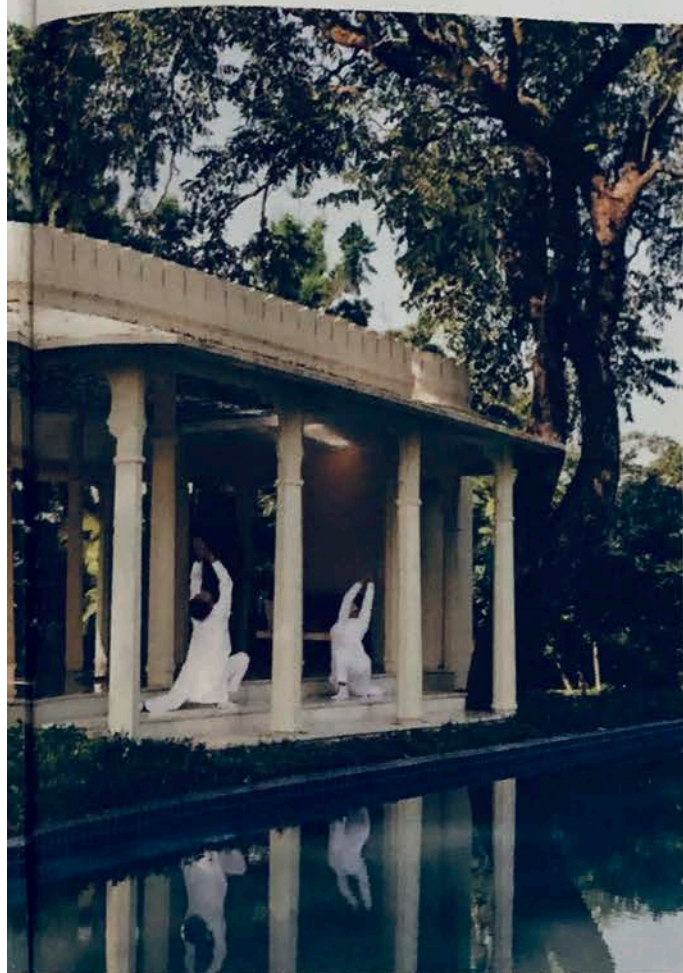
failed Catholic from Boston. The river wasn't mine to bathe in, I thought. "No," I responded to Azad. "Not this time."

I had been transfixed by the Ganges since the moment I'd first seen it from my hotel balcony a few days earlier, shortly after I arrived in Rishikesh, in the northern state of Uttarakhand. I had come to India to explore this once-remote corner of the country, now a 50-minute hop from New Delhi thanks to the 2008 expansion of Dehradun Airport. Until recently known mostly by backpackers, seekers, and penitents, the region has become fertile ground for entrepreneurs who, drawn to its ancient spirituality in this ever-more-alienating digital age, are creating new luxury retreats, all connected by the most sacred river in Hinduism.

The Ganges winds more than 1,500 miles through the plains of India and Bangladesh before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. It merges with the Chandrabhaga River at Rishikesh, a temple city that serves as the base for pilgrimages to four Hindu sites, known as Char Dham Yatra, in the Himalayas. The purpose of the treks is to reenact the



Left: A mural at the Beatles Ashram. Opposite, from left: Yoga at Ananda in the Himalayas; the Viceregal Suite at Ananda.



suffering of one's life, and to seek atonement in preparation for the next one. For as long as history has been recorded, Rishikesh has been an entry point for that enlightenment.

But in 1968, Rishikesh suddenly got popular—and it was all because of the Beatles. Experiencing colossal fame and its consequent psychic toll, the world's most famous band arrived at the ashram of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (the creator of Transcendental Meditation) with their wives and girlfriends to expand their consciousness and, of course, to make music. There were others who came too: Mike Love of the Beach Boys, the Scottish singer and songwriter Donovan, and actress Mia Farrow, who was still married to Frank Sinatra at the time.

Life at the ashram was stripped down to its essence. "It was very peaceful and uncomplicated," says Canadian filmmaker Paul Saltzman, who, at 24, journeyed to Rishikesh to learn to meditate and unwittingly found himself breaking bread with the four most famous men in the world. "We relaxed, meditated, hung out at the table by the cliff overlooking the Ganges. There was never any talk whatsoever about them being, you know, the Beatles."

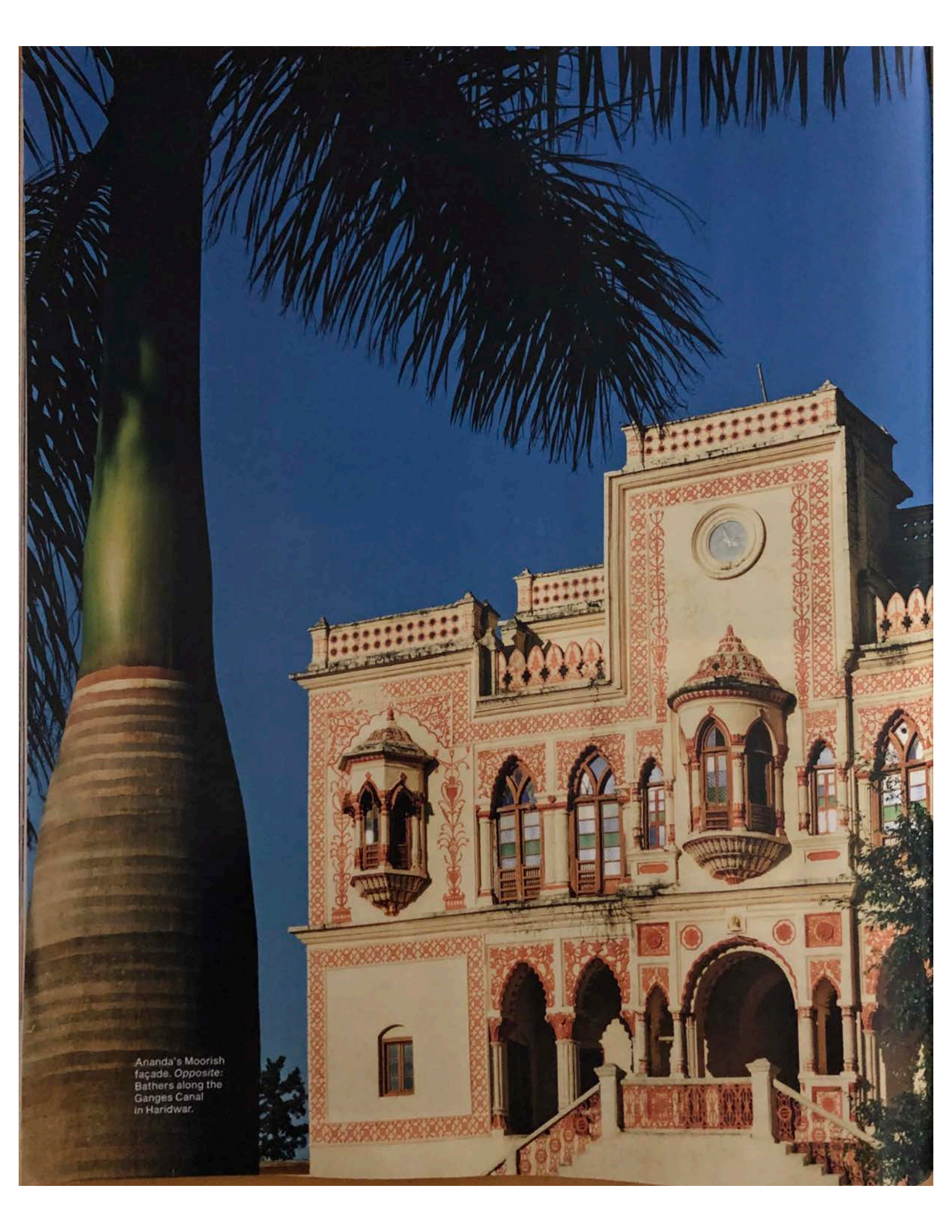
It was, by most accounts, a period of unparalleled creativity. While there, the Fab Four wrote almost 50 songs, including most of the *White Album* and "Dear Prudence," which



was inspired by Farrow's sister, who was also visiting the ashram. One day, Paul McCartney and John Lennon were strumming out the beginnings of what would become "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" on the steps of their bungalow. Saltzman grabbed his camera and clicked.

The band's time in India was a turning point for 20th-century spiritual thought. "The Beatles going to Rishikesh was absolutely monumental," says author Philip Goldberg, who explores how their visit catapulted Indian practices of yoga and meditation into Western awareness in his book *American Veda*. "I've said, not entirely joking, that it was the most consequential spiritual retreat since Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness."

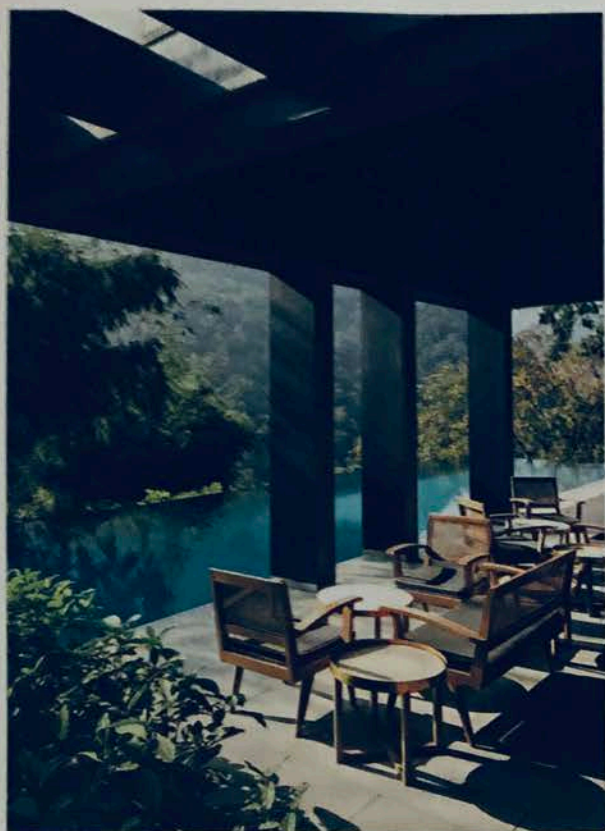
Today, the Beatles Ashram is more of a tourist site than a spiritual retreat. After crossing the Ganges in the center of Rishikesh, I was dropped by a taxi at its decaying ruins, covered in vines and rotted cement in the middle of the jungle. In the only restored building, Saltzman's iconic photographs are on permanent display: The Beatles playing guitar in white kurta pajamas. The Beatles sitting cross-legged, draped in marigolds. The Beatles lounging on the banks of the Ganges in folding chairs. Now visitors make their own pilgrimages to this place, to revisit the cultural moment these musical legends defined and to snap pictures with

A photograph of a grand, multi-story building with a Moorish architectural style. The facade is light-colored with intricate red and white geometric and floral patterns. It features several arched windows, some with decorative balconies, and a large arched entrance at the ground level. A large palm tree trunk is visible on the left side of the frame, and its fronds are silhouetted against the blue sky. The building is set against a clear blue sky.

Ananda's Moorish  
façade. *Opposite:*  
Bathers along the  
Ganges Canal  
in Haridwar.



**My dip in the Ganges brought to mind the Greek concept of hierophany, in which the sacred isn't chosen but rather something that manifests itself in us.**



From top: The pool at the Roseate Ganges; local, organic cuisine at the Roseate's Chidya Ghar restaurant.

Opposite: A stretch of the Ganges upriver from Rishikesh near the town of Byasi.

giant murals of the band, covered with graffiti here, joined with drawings of the Hindu gods Brahma and Shiva there.

In its own way, the fabled ashram is no less sacred than any of the hundreds of other ashrams that line the Ganges in Rishikesh. The city, self-dubbed "the yoga capital of the world," can feel like a caricature of an Indian spiritual mecca with its massive annual yoga festival and narrow streets of pandemonium. Auto-rickshaws, motorbikes, and cows weaved in and out of throngs of Lululemon-clad tourists, while bearded holy men, their foreheads slicked with vermilion paint, sat meditatively on stoops. Clouds of popcorn burst from copper kettles at every corner, and I bought a bag for a penny.

## The setting

was decidedly less chaotic a dozen miles north into the foothills, at Ananda in the Himalayas. Opened in 2000, the resort was the first of a new generation of wellness retreats in Uttarakhand. Owner Ashok Khanna conceived of the property in response to the spiritual crisis that descended upon India when information-technology culture arrived in the early 1990s. A grandson of the hotel magnate M. S. Oberoi, Khanna was urged to action when two of his classmates from Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration committed suicide. Initially, he set out to build an ashram, but decided that something more was called for in these dire times. "People need healing and rejuvenation," he told me over tea.

After scouring India for a location, Khanna learned that his father's old friend Manabendra Shah, at the time the reigning maharaja in the district of Teri Garhwal, was pleading with him to do something with his dilapidated dwelling. "I arrived during the monsoons, and it looked like a fairy castle," Khanna said. "I got very good vibrations. I felt I had arrived."

In my room, I changed into the traditional garb of cotton kurta pajamas and explored the grounds by the not-so-traditional means of golf cart. Peacocks strutted on the path as I cut across manicured lawns to open-air pavilions, one of which, the Wind Palace, was where the maharaja's wife used to cool herself off on hot days. Blooming poinsettia trees blazed red along the walkways. In the kitchen garden, I found hundreds of Ayurvedic plants: Moringa, cardamom, curry, and tulsi (holy basil).

Khanna grounded his wellness resort in India's indigenous systems of healing—Ayurveda, meditation, and hatha yoga, among them. At Ananda's 24,000-square-foot spa, I







lay down to a massage where two women chanted by the light of a *diya*, or oil lamp. Four hands lathered my body with Himalayan salt and what seemed like quarts of sesame oil, infused with cardamom, ginger, and black pepper, all grown on the property. My Ayurvedic doctor, upon determining my dosha, or constitution, prescribed me coriander, cumin, and fennel tea, which was prepared for me at every meal and served with dosas and Garhwali thali, bowls of native Himalayan lentils, and grains and spices.

The sweeping godliness of Ananda's surroundings was laid bare before me the following morning on a six-mile hike up to Kunjapuri Temple, devoted to a revered female deity. My guide, Dinesh Singh Dhanai, picked a giant lemon called a *galgal*; gathered hibiscus flowers that, if pulverized, would add luster to my hair; and showed me how to suck a drop of nectar from the lantana blossoms that made the air smell like passion-fruit punch. "Isn't it sweet?" he asked. Soon, we reached a hilltop and gazed at a great wall of snow-clad Himalayan peaks.

My journey continued that afternoon with a drive along the Char Dham Highway—but it hardly felt like a pilgrimage. The road is a pet project of India's Hindu-nationalist

prime minister Narendra Modi that, though months delayed, aims to improve access to the Ganges and all the region's holy sites. Dust coated everything—even the poor monkeys, who skittered along the side of the road—as my driver followed the twisting road east toward the Roseate Ganges. The resort opened in 2019 on the lip of a bluff overlooking one of the most picturesque stretches of the river. For the Roseate's owner, Ankur Bhatia, it's also one of the most spiritual parts of the Ganges. "When you feel the energy down at the river, it's extraordinary," he said.

The Roseate Ganges is a small village of concrete structures: minimalist cabins with pale beechwood furniture draped with super-soft woolen charcoal throws. Though architecturally modern—and the kind of stylish place that draws very wealthy Indians from Mumbai and New Delhi—the resort follows ancient principles when it comes to cuisine. Chef Chetan Singh Rana's mostly organic, all-local menu reflects the agricultural richness of this subsistence-farming region. The diet is based on lentils and other beans, grains such as finger millet (used in a delicious mandua roti), and vegetables like beet and pumpkin. I couldn't help but notice that several of the ingredients in vogue at home in

the States—quinoa, barley, amaranth—are also an integral part of modern Himalayan cooking.

The next morning, I rose early, lured by the view of the Ganges from my terrace. It was my birthday, and I could think of no better way to start another year of life than with a dip in its waters. Led by a hotel guard with a flashlight, I descended the steps to an empty white-sand beach and crouched down to plunge my fingers in. It was freezing. The river coursed loudly yet calmly. Once again, I hesitated.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” I asked the guard.

“Maa Ganga is everyone’s mother,” he said.

The water raced by, the sun shone fire on the ridge, and I waded up to my ankles. Maybe it was the cold, the rushing current, or the predawn darkness, but I didn’t dare go farther.

## The next day,

I followed the river to my final stop, zigging and zagging nine miles up to the Taj Rishikesh Resort and Spa, which presented yet another rendition of pioneering Himalayan style. The setting, wedged between mountains and river, was near-electrifying, and though I was tempted to join the yoga class in a pavilion under the open sky, I decided instead to have a quiet moment alone on my balcony, taking in the views and the fresh air. Sharp peaks dotted with barking deer spiked into the horizon, dipping precipitously into valleys so dense with vegetation they seemed to be covered with a green cloak. The hills across the water were striped with an ancient pilgrim road, one of the Char Dham Yatra paths. Sunrays shot daggers of light straight through to the Ganges below. I couldn’t look away.

“It could be a function of civilization, of the landscape, of thousands of years of history and all that devotion,” Sudipta Sen, author of the 2019 best seller *Ganges*, posited later, when I asked him why the river was so beguiling. “It definitely has a magnetic pull that is hard to explain.”

Taj Rishikesh’s owner, Arjun Mehra, knows that pull well. The son of a prominent Indian businessman who had emigrated to Montreal, Mehra left a career in journalism to devote himself to the hotel, which he opened in 2019. “The bones of the area are incredibly strong,” Mehra told me over a masala chai. He had agreed to accompany me down to the Ganges in one more attempt to submerge myself in its enigmatic waters.

On my last evening, I had followed the jasmine-scented path that led down to the river for the hotel’s private Ganga Aarti. Each night, in Rishikesh as well as nearby Haridwar and distant Varanasi, crowds gather along the Ganges for

## Rishikesh Essentials

### ARRIVE

Shalmali Rao Paterson of Wild Frontiers can curate an itinerary through Uttarakhand’s diverse luxury properties, with a day in Rishikesh. The best time to visit is just before or after the hot season, from March to April and September to October. From New Delhi, take **Spice Jet’s** ([spicejet.com](http://spicejet.com)) 50-minute flight to Dehradun Airport, which is a 30-mile drive from Rishikesh.

### STAY

A former maharaja’s palace is the centerpiece of **Ananda in the Himalayas** (*five-night stays from \$3,650; [anandaspa.com](http://anandaspa.com)*), a 100-acre resort located about 30 minutes from Rishikesh. The 78-room property designs bespoke wellness programs ranging from intense multi-week detoxes to de-stressing yoga retreats. Twenty miles east, overlooking a white-sand beach, the **Roseate Ganges** (*from \$265; [roseatehotels.com](http://roseatehotels.com)*) has 16 modernist cottages, a small Ayurvedic spa, and terrific organic cuisine by chef Chetan Singh Rana. The elegant **Taj Rishikesh Resort and Spa** (*from \$240; [tajhotels.com](http://tajhotels.com)*), set in the Himalayan foothills overlooking the Ganges, is a place for practicing yoga as well as hiking the nearby mountains and visiting Hindu temples.

this ceremony to light camphor-scented candles in flowered leaf baskets and then release them onto the river in devotion, while priests trace circles of incense smoke and chant praise to Maa Ganga. I had attended one in Rishikesh, and it was hypnotic—and packed with tourists. The version at the Taj was intimate, and the memory of it had pulled me toward the river all night so that, by the time Mehra and I arrived on the rocks, I tossed my cover-up aside without hesitation and jumped in. The current was swift, the water was as frigid as ever, and the sand underfoot was soft as clay.

My dip was brief but powerful. It brought to mind the Greek concept of hierophany, in which the sacred isn’t chosen or purposely arrived at but rather something that manifests itself in us. Maybe what I was looking for in the Ganges was what I was projecting onto it: a ray of hope, a moment of clarity, a sense of the sublime not unlike what I seek when I enter a great cathedral in Europe. And yet the river was an element of the universe, just as I was—pure, present, and always evolving. The river flowed, leading somewhere and everywhere, as I walked back up the stone steps, leaving behind a trail of wet footprints soon to disappear. ☐

Yoga in the  
pavilion at Taj  
Bhakesh Resort  
and Spa



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY