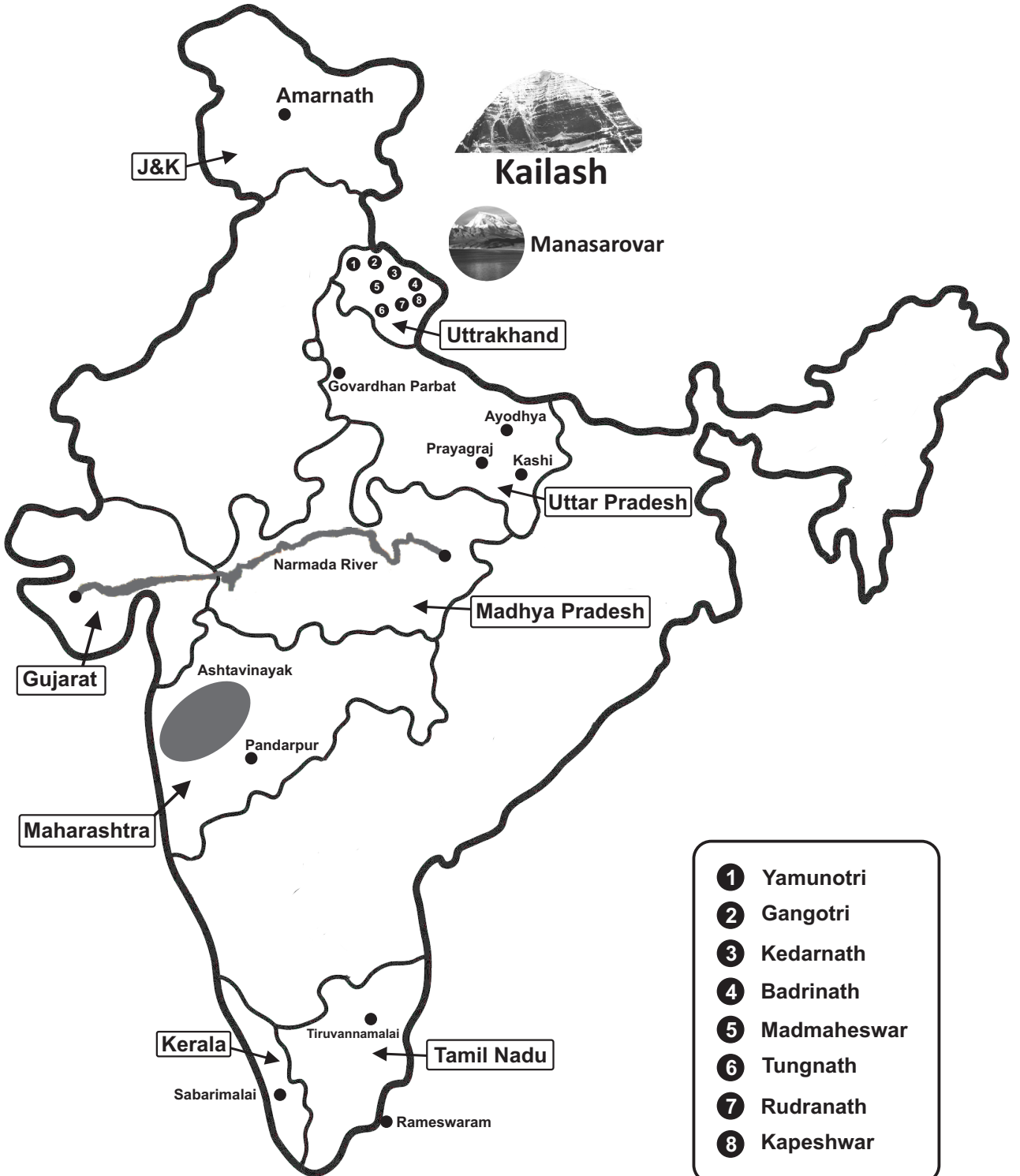


Sri Kamakshi Seva Samithi

Booklet on Tirtha Yatras

(Supplement with Viśvāvasu Calender 2025-2026)



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Introduction

The word Yatra signifies both movement and liberation; it is a movement to find the true purpose of one's life and attain liberation from the profane and move towards the sacred. Yatras have always been a part of Indian tradition and culture. Adi Sankara walked the length and breadth of India on His Padayatra. A religious Yatra is termed a Thirth Yatra to distinguish it from the mundane nonreligious Yatras, like a Yatra for unity etc. The Yatra can be a Parikrama (Circumambulatory) like the Kailash Parikrama or a movement from one sacred space to another like the Char Dham Yatra. The Yatra is a test for the self, a test of physical and mental endurance, and promises to be a transformative experience. The Yatri, or one undertaking the Yatra, in a traditional Padayatra, puts one foot in front of another and does this day after day until he/she completes the Yatra. This very act of walking, connects one with the earth, makes one more attuned to the environment and of a shared humanity. While walking, the mind needs to focus on God and repeat His name. The Yatri forgoes luxury, walks with minimal or no possessions, survives on the kindness of strangers and learns to let go of all worldly wealth and ultimately of the ego. When that happens, there is bliss, peace and self realization.

Today, our Yatras have changed with the times. While Padayatras are still undertaken by some, many now use speedier transport options to complete their Yatra. But the core nature of the Yatra remains unchanged. The discipline of following the rituals associated with the Yatra, the communion with the sacred along with countless others, is cathartic. The Yatra retains the same objective and the Yatri

continues to invoke God, introspect and return from the Yatra a better and more contemplative person.

This booklet, an extension of the **Viśvāvasu** calendar, is an attempt to introduce the reader to some known and some less known Thirth Yatras. The booklet is not comprehensive and does not claim to document these Yatras in detail. However, salient features of the Yatras have been mentioned hoping that it encourages the reader to undertake further research.

1. Kailash Manasarovar Yatra

The **Kailash Manasarovar Yatra** is considered the holiest and most sacred of Yatras not just for Hindus, but also for Jains, Buddhists, and the Bons (followers of an ancient Tibetan religion). This Yatra demands high mental and physical endurance, as one would need to traverse on pony or on foot, steep, rocky paths at a high altitude. A Parikrama of the Holy Mount Kailash and a Snan in the pristine divine clear waters of Lake Manasarovar and a Havan on its banks is a sublime spiritual unmissable experience that one wishes could be repeated many times.

This Yatra originally took around 40 days, as one could also do a Parikrama of Lake Manasarovar. Unfortunately, the Parikrama of the Lake is now only to be completed in a vehicle. Both Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar are in Occupied Tibet and accessible from India, Nepal or by flying directly into Ladakh in Occupied Tibet. The last option is mainly favoured by Westerners and is more expensive than the other two options.

Whichever route one takes to enter the Autonomous region of Tibet, the Parikrama begins from Yam Dwar about 30km from Darchen where Yatris usually halt for a night. Buses drop the Yatris at Yam Dwar in the morning of the first day of the Parikrama. Yam Dwar literally means 'the door of Yama', the God of Death. It is a stupa-like structure with two doors, one for entry and the other to exit. Yatris enter through one door and exit through the other without looking behind them. Passing through these doors symbolises the Yatris letting go of all their worldly connections behind with exclusive focus on the Parikrama and on Lord Shiva.

Day 1: Yam Dwar to Dirapukh is a trek of 12 km with gradually increasing altitude and some steep inclines. The path is picturesque and the South Face of Mount Kailash is visible practically throughout. Those who find it difficult to walk can hire ponies from Yam Dwar. There is an overnight halt at Dirapukh where the facilities are just about average or below par.

At Dirapukh, the North Face of Kailash becomes visible and many Yatris perform a small Havan near their campsite, overlooking the mountain. A few also undertake a further 5 km challenging trek to touch the feet(base) of Mt Kailash, Charan Sparsh.

Day 2: An early start from Dirapukh is needed as the day's journey will cover a distance of 27km, including the ascent to and descent from Dolma La, the highest point of the Yatra at nearly 19,000 ft. The path today is steep and rocky and much caution is advised. While much of the ascent can be undertaken on ponies, the descent has to be on foot. Gauri Kund can be seen while descending from the Pass. The waters are crystal clear and those Yatris who are agile and nimble footed, go down the rocky and steep path to collect the water from the Kund. It is believed that Devi Parvathi used to have her Snan here.

Once the descent is completed, it is a long and straight path to Zutulpuk where the Yatris halt for the night.

Day 3: After the strenuous trek of the first 2 days of the Parikrama, the third day is an easy walk of 6km to a spot where once again buses pick up the Yatris and drop them at a previously arranged place of stay on the banks of the Lake Manasarovar. The Parikrama is complete.

The Yatris however stay a further night or two besides Manasarovar, have a Snan in its Holy clear waters and continue to feast their eyes on Mount Kailash and perform havan.

This 3 day Parikrama is called the Outer Parikrama or Outer Kora of Mount Kailash. The Inner Parikrama of Kailash takes 5 days and is extremely challenging and only the very fit and experienced Yatris choose to complete it. The Inner Parikrama gives one the opportunity to glimpse the divine Asthapad Mountain, which is very sacred to the Jains and the Saptarishi Caves as well.

Kailash Mansarovar Yatra from India

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) ,in collaboration with the Kumaon Vikas Mandal Nigam (KMVN) conducts the Kailash Yatra in 18 batches through 2 routes : through Lipu Pass in Uttarakand and the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim. The Yatra organised by the MEA is open only to Indian citizens aged 18 to 70 years and holding a passport. The MEA advertises the dates of the Yatra in major newspapers and its website and those interested, if eligible can apply, specifying their preference for the route they wish to take. A computerised draw is held to pick the final list of Yatris and the Yatris are further divided into batches. Once a batch has been allotted, the Yatri has to make a token payment to reserve his/her place.

Yatris are then required to report at Delhi 4 days before the start of their Yatra. A stringent medical check up at the Delhi Heart

and Lung Institute must be then undergone by all those interested in going on the Yatra. Further payment according to schedule needs to be made at this point. Accommodation and food for the stay in Delhi is organised by the MEA. Good vegetarian food without onion and garlic is provided for the entire duration of the Yatra. Post medical clearance, the Yatri either proceed by road to Dharchula if they choose the Lipu Pass route or fly into Gangtok if they choose the Nathu La Pass route. Both the routes are scenic but the Lipu Pass route in Uttarakhand, allows one to have a darshan of the Om Parvat, a peak where snow spells out the primordial symbol 'Om'.

Once the Yatri cross the border into Tibet, they begin a Parikrama of Lake Mansarovar and are then taken to suitable accommodation to begin their Parikrama of Mt Kailash after acclimatising for a day.

The Kailash Parikrama conducted by the MEA has been suspended since 2020 but the MEA is hopeful of resuming it this year. There is a liaison officer from the Indian government who accompanies each batch of Yatri.

Kailash Parikrama from Nepal

Nepal is also a base for the Kailash yatra as it shares a long border with Tibet. Yatri either fly into or go to the border by road. There are many agencies that organise the Yatra. The agent organises the visa, accommodation, food for the entire duration and usually a representative of the agent accompanies each group of Yatri. The Yatri need to have a valid passport.

Points to Note

Medical and Physical Fitness is very important as the Yatri is exposed to high altitude, cold weather and steep and rocky paths.

Please check the bona fides of the agency if going through a travel agent.

It is good to carry ready to eat healthy protein bars, a flask for hot water and sachets of energy drinks, ready to eat upma or other ready to eat food as one may not be able to have breakfast and lunch on the second day of the Parikrama.

One must listen to one's body and immediately report any signs of altitude sickness like headache, nausea etc to the Group Leader

A personal medical kit with common OTC medicines plus regular medication, if any, should be packed as they will not be available

Warm clothes and a good well broken trekking shoes are essential

2. Amarnath Yatra

The Amarnath Yatra in Kashmir, is held from June/July to end August. The Sri Amarnathji Shrine Board which manages the Yatra, announces the opening and closing dates of the Yatra and the opening date of registration for the same. The dates are however weather dependent and is subject to change.

The destination of the Yatri is the Holy Cave, at an altitude of around 12,800ft. The Cave has a beautifully formed Ice Lingam. The cave, where Shiva is said to have revealed the secret of immortality to Parvathi, is situated at a high altitude and hence a medical checkup from authorised medical personnel is essential before embarking on the Yatra. This certificate needs to be uploaded while registering for the Yatra. The Yatra is not open to those over 70 years of age. Registering for the Yatra is compulsory and without it, one cannot access the personal RFID Card which is an absolute must to proceed on the Yatra. The RFID Card has the personal details and itinerary of the individual Yatri and should be collected from designated centres in Jammu or the Kashmir divisions. Registration for the Yatra can be

completed on the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board, once the dates are announced. While the Yatra commences in end June usually, registration for the same begins earlier.

There are two routes to reach the Holy Cave: The Baltal Route and the Pahalgam Route. The former, though shorter, is much steeper.

A. Pahalgam Route

Lord Shiva is said to have reached the Cave through Pahalgam. Pahalgam, situated around 96km from Srinagar is easily accessible by road. Amarnath is situated around 32km from Pahalgam. The Yatri has the option of trekking from here or taking a mini bus to Chandanwari and cover half the distance. There is then a trek to Sheshnag and a halt for the night.

The next day the Yatri has to cross the high altitude Mahagunas pass and descend to Panjatarni to halt for the night.

The next day, the Yatri reaches Amarnath and has a darshan of the Lord before returning to the camp site at Panjatarini/ Pahalgam or Baltal according to the time available and the weather.

B. Baltal Route

From Srinagar, one reaches Baltal which is around 95 km by road. Yatris halt for the night at the Base Camp here. The Holy Cave is only 14km from Baltal but it is a steep trek and only the fittest can complete the climb and the descent on the same day.

C. Points to Note

The trek to Amarnath demands a good level of physical and mental fitness. Those who find it difficult can hire a use the pony/pithu or palki services to reach the Cave. Helicopter services are also available.

Booking for the helicopter can be done online and advance reservation is recommended as demand outstrips supply. However, the last 7 km from the helipad will

need to be done on foot or one can use the services of a palki.

Most Yatris prefer to travel in a group and there are many registered agents organising the trip to Amarnath. However, one can also travel and arrange individually. Accommodation is in tents the rates of which are fixed by the government each year. Free food is available at the many langars along the route. Pahalgam has good luxury accommodation as well. Prepaid sim cards from other States do not work in Jammu and Kashmir. One can however purchase local Sim cards at the Base Camp.

3. Chardham Yatra

As the name signifies, this Yatra is a journey to the 4 Dhams or abodes: Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath, all in Uttarakand, among the holiest of places in India. A Yatra to these Pavitra Stan can only be undertaken for around 6 months of the year, from late April or early May to end October/ early November. The opening and closing dates of the temples are announced sometime in February, by the Chardham Committee along with the Kedarnath Badrinath Mandir Committee. All the four Dhams are at a high altitude but accessibility is good. All the four Dhams have a winter seat for the deities, as these four Dhams are inaccessible during the winter months.

The base point for the Chardham Yatra is Delhi/ Haridwar, though quite a few Yatris also begin the Yatra from Dehra Dun. The yatra is undertaken by road from one of these points, though some may avail of a helicopter service from Dehra Dun. Registration for the Yatra has been made compulsory now but a medical fitness certificate has not been made mandatory yet. Prospective Yatris should register on the Uttarakand Government tourist registration site for Char Dham. The Yatri is required to give dates of travel along with mode of travel and personal details. These registration

certificates are scanned at check points to the Dhams. Darshan of the 4 Dhams begins with Yamunotri, followed by Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Some Yatris choose to visit only two of the Dhams. Many private agents all over India help in organising the Yatra. In fact, a Yatri can connect with an agent at his/her place of residence and avail of services from point of departure to return. The Garhwal Vikas Nigam Limited (GMVN), a State Govt of Uttarakhand undertaking, also organises the Yatra and details are available on their website. The Yatra route is very scenic and besides the 4 Dhams, darshan can be had at many other temples and Prayags or confluences of rivers, for Uttarakhand is Dev Bhoomi or the Land of the Gods.

A. Yamunotri

Situated at an altitude of around 10800ft above sea level, Yamunotri is the source of the River Yamuna. The Base Camp for Yamunotri is Barkot, but there is a motorable road upto Janaki Chatti. Yamunotri is around 6km from here and can be reached on foot or pony or Doli. The path is steep. There is a small temple to Goddess Yamuna. The actual source of the River Yamuna is a Km away from the temple but it is not easily approachable. There is a hot water spring here, the Surya Kund where Yatris can have a dip. The Gauri Kund has tepid water. The waters of the river are milky white here. The winter seat of Goddess Yamuna is at Kharsali.

B. Gangotri

The distance between Yamunotri and Gangotri is around 230 Km and can be covered in one day. There is a motorable road to Gangotri and no trekking or pony is required. Gangotri at 10,200 ft is at a slightly lower altitude than Yamunotri. Around 19km from Gangotri is Gaumukh, the origin of the River Baghirathi, which joins the Alaknanda at Dev Prayag and becomes the Ganga. Those who are physically fit, can avail

of special permission to trek to the source. The River falls with ferocious force and noise into Surya Kund , which is barricaded as it is dangerous. Those who wish to bathe in the waters of the River Baghirathi at this sacred place, are advised to pour water over themselves from a container rather than stepping into the river as the current is very strong. There is a beautiful temple to Ganga at Gangotri. The evening Aarti here takes place after the Aarti beside the River. Devotees can buy tickets for the privilege of performing Aarti to the River. Goddess Ganga from Gangotri, rests at Mukha in winters and is taken back to Gangotri when the temple opens again.

C. Kedarnath

The distance from Gangotri to Kedarnath is around 400 km and the road passes through RudraPrayag, where there is a Sangam of the Rivers Mandakini and the Alaknanda. Yatris usually halt for the night at Guptkashi or SonPrayag, depending on their itinerary before going upto Kedarnath. Gaurikund is the base for the trek to Kedarnath. Those who plan to go up by helicopter need to make their way to the helipads near Guptkashi/ Sonprayag. The temple is a little over half a kilometer distance from the helipad in Kedarnath. Dolis are available for those who wish to avail of the service.

Many Yatris take a shared Cab to Gaurikund, and trek around 19km to Kedarnath. There are ponies and Dolis available as well and need to be arranged at the base. Those who choose to trek will be treated to some beautiful scenery and hear the River Mandakini, which has its source in the Chorabari glacier, on the way. Yatris who choose to walk, should remember to start early. No one is allowed to go up from the base after 1:30pm. There are good facilities for food, rest, rest rooms and medical facilities as well enroute.

The Kedarnath temple at an altitude of

around 11,500 ft is set against the background of the snow-covered Kedarnath peak and is both austere and beautiful. There is a beautiful statue of Adi Sankara, behind the temple. In winters, the seat of the Kedarnath temple is Ukimath, about 30km away from Kedarnath.

D. Badrinath

The last of the four Dhams, Badrinath, at an altitude of 11,300 ft situated on the banks of the River Alaknanda, is around 240km from Kedarnath and there is a motorable road all the way, though helicopter services are available if one wishes to avoid road travel. The Badrinath temple here is beautiful and painted in vivid colours. Adi Sankara is believed to have established Badrinath as a place of pilgrimage. There are 3kunds here and most Yatis have a Snan in Tapt Kund before visiting the temple for darshan. The beautiful Neelkanth peak and the Nar and Narayana peaks are visible from Badrinath.

On the way to Badrinath, Yatis worship the Kalpa Vruksh in Joshimath where Adi Sankara is said to have meditated. From Badrinath, most Yatis proceed to Mana village stopping at Vyasa Gufa on the way. Vyasa Rishi is said to have meditated here. The River Saraswathi had its origins near Mana. The mother of Lord Badrinath is worshipped at the Mata Murti mandir in Mana and each year the Lord is taken to Mana to visit His mother, and a Mela is held to mark the occasion. The winter seat of Badrinath is Joshimath.

E. Points to Note

As the Chardham Yatra is open only for 6 months, the temples and routes are crowded. It is advisable to book accommodation and helicopter tickets in advance.

Weather can play a spoil sport, as rain and landslides lead to delays.

Helicopter take off is weather dependent

Only registered Yatis can book helicopters

The trekking route to Kedarnath is very narrow and teeming with Yatis trekking, ponies and dolis. One must exercise caution while trekking as the path is often slippery.

4. Govardhan Parikrama

The day after Deepavali, is Govardhan Pooja in the land of Krishna. The day is celebrated by devotees, who cook 56 types of dishes, literally a mountain of food (annakoota) and then undertake a 21km Parikrama of the sacred Giriraj Hill or Govardhan Parvat. The Parikrama of Govardhan begins at Manasi Ganga Kund and covers sacred spots of Danghati Temple, Chakreshwar Mahadev Temple, Mukharvind, Radhe and Shyam Kund. The Parikrama ends at Ganga Kund when the Yatri circumambulates back to the starting point.

The Parikrama is considered more auspicious if performed, by carrying a clay pot, having a hole at the bottom and filled with milk, in one hand and a pot with Dhoop in the other hand. The pot with milk is filled as it empties and hence the Yatri walks with an ever flowing pot of milk around the Parikrama route.

Some Yatis undertake the even more difficult Dandavata Parikrama, where the Yatri prostrates fully on the ground, marks the spot where his/her finger was placed and prostrates from that spot again, until the whole Mountain is circumnavigated.

Yatis also choose to either do the full Parikrama, the big Parikrama of 21 km or the small one of 9 km. While Govardhan Pooja sees a large number of Yatis undertake the Parikrama, Govardhan parikrama can be done at any time of the year. It is however better to avoid the summer months. It is also considered more sacred to undertake this Parikrama on Gurupoornima and Poornima Ekadasi.

Vehicles are also available for those who cannot walk.

5. Ashta Vinayak Yatra

This Yatra refers to the journey undertaken to have a darshan of Lord Vinayaka in 8 temples. All the temples are situated in the Pune and Raigad districts of Maharashtra. The deities in all the 8 temples are Swayambhu. Each temple has a story associated with it. The form of Lord Vinayak is different in each temple. The temples are easily accessible and good motorable roads make the Yatra comfortable. Lenyadri temple may be difficult to access for those with knee issues as it involves a climb of around 250 steps. The temples can be accessed at any time of the year though it is good to bear in mind that the summer months are hot and humid. There are innumerable travel agents organising this Yatra which takes 3 days to complete. Yatri usually choose Pune as the base for overnight stay.

The sequence of the Yatra is traditionally as follows:

Mayureshwar in Morgaon; Siddhivinayak in Siddhatek; Ballaleshwar in Pali; Varadvinayak in Varad; Chintamani in Theur; Girijatmai in Lenyadri; Vigneshwar in Ozar and Mahaganapati in Ranjangaon.

The Yatri then goes back to Morgaon and the Parikrama is complete.

6. Panch Kedar Yatra

Panch Kedar refers to the five Shiva temples set amidst the Himalayas in Uttarakand. These temples are : Kedarnath, Madhmaheshwar, Tungnath, Rudranath and Kalpeshwar. The temples have their origin in the Mahabaratha. Shiva denied the Pandavas His Darshan in Kashi and manifested as a bull in the Himalayas in Garhwal. The Pandavas reached there and Bhima caught hold of the hump. Shiva then disappeared into the earth and parts of the bull appeared at 5 places. The Pandavas established a Shiva temple at each of these places.

Except Kalpeshwar, all the other temples are open only for 6 months of the year, May to October. While Yatri do visit the temples in any order, traditionally the sequence of going to these temples is in the following order: Kedarnath, Madhmaheshwar, Tungnath, Rudranath, and Kalpeshwar. All the temples are at a high altitude and involves varying levels of trekking. The highest Shiva temple on this Yatra is at Tungnath where the shoulders and forearms of the Lord appeared.

The Yatra begins from Haridwar or Delhi/ Dehra Dun to Guptakashi near Kedarnath, where the hump of the Lord manifested itself. As the Kedarnath trek is covered in the Char Dham Yatra, it is not being repeated here. From Kedarnath, the Yatri proceeds to Ukimath and then to Ransi from where the difficult 16km trek to Madhmaheshwar begins. Ponies are also available. The navel of the Lord appeared in Madhmaheshwar.

After darshan here, the Yatri returns to Ukimath and proceeds to Chopta, the base for Tungnath. Tungnath is a short but challenging trek of 4km from Chopta. The shoulders and forearms of the Lord appeared here.

Back to Chopta and on to Sagar, the base for the trek to Rudranath temple where the face of the Lord appeared. The trek covers, a distance, of 20km. Yatri who complete this steep and challenging trek are rewarded both with the darshan of Lord Shiva and stunningly beautiful Himalayan vistas enroute. Ponies are not available for hire here so the trek has to be done on foot.

The fifth and the last temple on this Parikrama is Kalpeshwar, which can be reached by trekking only 2km from the motor accessible Urghum Valley. The hair of the Lord is worshipped here. This temple is open throughout the year.

A. Points to Note

All the 5 temples are situated in remote areas and except Kedarnath, helicopter services are not available.

The Yatri should be prepared for delays due to bad weather or landslides.

A minimum of 10 days will be required to complete the Yatra, depending on the point of origin of the Yatri.

A very good level of physical fitness is essential.

7. Pandarpur Wari

The Pandarpur Wari is a divine journey undertaken to honour and pay obeisance to Lord Vithoba at Pandarpur. Lakhs of devotees walk to Pandarpur. The Wari is organised by the Warkari Sampradayas in different parts of Maharashtra. The procession begins from the Samadhis of Sant Dhyaneswar and Sant Tukaram, which are in Alandi and Dehu. The Padukas of these Sants are carried in ornately decorated palanquins and the air resonates with the songs venerating and worshipping Lord Vithoba. Those participating in the Wari are known as Warkaris and they are dressed simply and austere, follow a strict and spartan routine for the duration of the Wari. Groups of Warkaris come together and are called a Dindi. The Warkari registers himself/herself with a Dindi which takes care of the food and accommodation of all the individuals who are a part of its procession. All the Dindis from all parts of Maharashtra, congregate in Pandarpur. The Wari lasts for around 21 days and as the Warkaris move from village to village, more and more devotees join in and the procession swells. On the way to Pandarpur, the Warkaris pray at the Samadhis of Muktabai (sister of Sant Dhyaneswar and a Bhakti Poet) and at that of Sant Namdev.

There are 4 Waris: the Chaitri Yatra (March-April), the Ashadhi Wari (June-July), the

Karthiki Yatra and the Maghi Yatra. Of these, the main Wari happens in the Ashad (June-July) month and culminates on Ashad Shukla Ekadasi.

8. Kashi Rameshwaram Yatra

Since time immemorial, the Kashi Rameshwaram Yatra has been a sacred one. This Yatra used to be undertaken after the Gruhasta had completed his family responsibilities. Yatri went to Kashi to live out their last days in prayer and contemplation. But all that has changed now. What used to be a long and perilous Yatra, has now metamorphosed into a regular convenient one, but the importance and sanctity of the Yatra remains undiminished. There is a specific procedure that needs to be followed to complete the Yatra. The procedure varies regionally, but even those who set out on this Parikrama more than once, will follow all the procedures at least once in their lifetime.

In South India, the Yatra begins with a visit to Rameshwaram and includes a bath in the Agni Theertham and the 22 wells at the Ramanathaswamy temple, Visit to Dhanuskodi and Ram Sethu, making three lingams out of sand, dissolving two in Danushkodi and taking the third Lingam, the Veni Madhava Lingam to dissolve at Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj.

The visit to Rameshwaram is followed by a visit to Kashi and Triveni Sangam where the Veni Madhava Lingam is dissolved. Theertha is then collected from the Sangam and from the Ganga at Kashi to be taken to Rameshwaram for the Ganga Jalam Abhishegam of the Murthi there.

Many Yatri choose to combine this Yatra to perform Shraddha Rituals to propitiate the souls of their ancestors. Those who wish to do so, perform Shraddham at Kashi, offer Pindam at all the Ghats and further journey to Gaya to offer Pindam. These are extra rituals they perform in addition to those

already mentioned.

The last step in the Yatra is to perform a Samaradhani Pooja at home and offer the sacred Teertham to near and dear ones.

This Yatra, besides allowing the Yatri to perform ancient and sacred rituals, also gives him/her the opportunity to have Darshan of Lord Ramanathaswamy, Parvathavaradhini Amman and Kodandamar in Rameshwaram and Lord Vishwanath, Kala Bhairavar, Goddess Annapoorni and Visalakshi in Kashi.

Depending on the mode of travel and the rituals the Yatri wishes to perform, the Yatra can take around 4 to 10 days.

9. Girivalam

Girivalam, (Giri = mountain and Vallam=Walk) refers to the Parikrama of the Holy Arunachala Mountain in Thiruvannamalai. It is a 14km long circuitous path around the Mountain as the Lord Himself is the mountain. What was once a rugged, forested path strewn with rocks and stones where devotees trod barefoot unmindful of the thorns that pricked them, is now transformed into a route that weaves its way into the lanes and by lanes of the bustling town of Thiruvannamalai. The Yatri's first worship at the Arunachaleswarar temple and walk in a clockwise direction, with the mountain to the right. Girivalam usually happens on Pournami, though it can be done on other days as well. Of all the Pournamis, the full moon in the month of Karthigai (November-December) is considered the most auspicious for Girivalam. Devotees should walk barefoot though some use socks. There are facilities along the Parikrama route for rest and refreshments. Those who are unable to walk, use a vehicle for the Pradakshina.

During the circumambulation of Arunachala Mountain, the Yatri's stop to worship at Surya and Chandra Lingams besides having a

darshan of the 8 Shiva Lingams, each of which is situated in one of the cardinal directions facing the Mountain. Each Lingam is supposed to bestow good attributes to one's life and to ease the burdens that one carries. The Pradikshina takes an average of 4 to 5 hrs to complete.

10. Ramayana Yatra

The Ramayana Yatra can be considered more of a modern Yatra, that has become popular in recent years, after the IRCTC began to offer economical train packages to visit the sacred places associated with the Ramayana. While devotees have always been going to and paying homage at the various spots made divine with the footprints of Rama, there was now an itinerary and a schedule covering most of such spots in India and Nepal. The Yatra by train takes 20 days to complete, more if the Yatri chooses to go to Sri Lanka and visit the places associated with the Ramayana there.

Today, post the IRCTC's introduction of this yatra package, many individuals have begun to organise this on their own or through travel agents. The tour usually begins from Ayodhya, the birth place of Rama and moves on to cover Nandigram where Bharat lived during Lord Rama's exile. From here the Yatri visits:

Prayagraj and Chitrakoot where Rama spent much of His exile

Janakpur in Nepal, Sita's birthplace and where Rama and Sita got married

Sita Samahit Sthal between Prayagraj and Varanasi. It is at this spot that Sita gave herself up to Bhumi Devi

Nasik and Panchavati

Hampi once called Kishkinda

Rameshwaram and Danushkodi, the Ram Sethu here

Bhadrachalam known as the Ayodhya of the

South and part of the Dandakaranya Forest which Rama is said to have visited during His Exile

Lepakshi where Jatayu tried to save Sita

Yatris also have the option of continuing their Yatra by going to Sri Lanka and visiting sacred places associated with the Ramayana there.

A Yatra of this nature is flexible and Yatris have the added advantage of visiting more Kshetrams, like Varanasi, Kancheepuram etc on their journey for these cities will be on the Yatra route. As there is no necessity to visit any of these places in a sequential order, the Yatri can begin from any spot of his/her convenience, but always mindful of the divinity associated with the places visited.

11. Panchakroshi Yatra

Those who complete the Panchakroshi Yatra in Kashi, are said to have circled the world for to circle Kashi is to circle the world. They are also absolved of all the sins they have committed in their lives. Panch means 5 and Krosha is an ancient unit of measurement where one Krosha is equivalent to about 3.7 km. The Yatri covers 5 Kroshas each day over 5 days to complete his yatra. Hence the name Pancha Kroshi. The most auspicious time to embark on the Yatra is during an intercalary month (what is commonly called malamasa or adhi-maasa: the month added to align the calendar to the solar year) and is held every third year. The next such month is expected to occur in 2026. However, one can embark on this Yatra at other times too. The rituals and practices associated with the Yatra are delineated in Kashi Mahatmaya, written in the 12th Century. There is also an annual truncated day long Yatra when Yatris complete this Yatra with the means of a vehicle. Many devotees, begin this Yatra before Shivratri and complete it on Shivratri. This is an annual ritual.

For those unable to go on this Yatra, there is a Panchakrosh Temple in Kashi, where 108 deities of the Panchakroshi Yatra path are depicted. The Yatri can seek solace by worshipping here. The temple is situated in Gola Gali.

Kashi is a microcosm representing the cosmos. The city is like a mandala with innumerable sacred spaces in the centre and on the periphery. The Panchakroshi Yatri, moves from the centre of this mandala to the circumference and comes back to the centre again. There are 108 sacred shrines to Shiva and Devi along the Yatra route where the Yatris stop to pray. There are four halts along the route, where the Yatris stop for the night, at Kardameshwara, Bhimachandi, Rameshwara and Kapiladhara. While these are the traditional night halts, Yatris today move on ahead to stop at other places along the route.

The Yatra begins with a dip at Manikarnika Ghat and after worshipping Lord Vishwanath, Goddess Annapurni and Dundhiraja Ganapathy, follow the Ganga to Asi Ghat and on to Kardameshwara, the first halt. There is a beautiful and ancient temple here and this was considered to be the centre of Kashi in ancient times. The next night's halt is at Bhimachandi, named after a fierce form of the Devi. There is a temple here. The Yatra path on the third day passes by the temple of Dehali Vinayaka at the Western gate of Kashi. The night halt is at Rameshwara, named after Lord Rama who is believed to have visited this place. The next day, the Yatris follow the route to Kapiladhara, stopping at the temple of Pancha Pandava, which has 5 Lingams said to have been established by the Pandavas. Kapiladhara, named after Kapila Rishi is an ancient sacred space in Kashi. Lord Shiva is said to have assembled with all the Gods here. From Kapiladhara, the Yatri crosses the Varana River to follow the path back to the sacred centre, Vishwanatha Temple, stopping at Manikarnika Ghat again to have a bath. The Parikrama is complete.

12. Narmada Parikrama

The Narmada Parikrama is a 3500km circuitous route along the banks of the River Narmada. It is a time-honoured tradition where the Yatri venerates the River, paying homage to the River and at the many sacred spaces along the way. The Yatra is best done between the months of October and March, enabling the Yatri to avoid the harsh summer months and the monsoon when the river is in spate. It is not possible for a Yatri to complete this circumambulation in a few months. Those who wish to complete the Parikrama once they have begun, will need to, depending on their speed of walking, give up at least a year or two of their lives to it. Many also choose to complete the Parikrama in phases, devoting a month or two to it at a time and starting again from where one left off the previous time.

The Parikrama can begin at any point along the River Narmada, but usually begins from its source Amarkantak or from the Kshetrastan at Omkareshwar and proceeds to its mouth Bharuch in Gujarat where the river joins the Arabian Sea. The Yatri, walks the entire length along one bank of the River Narmada and then traverses to the other side and walks along the other bank back to where he began his/her Parikrama.

There are certain rules followed during the Parikrama:

The river must always be to one's right.

One cannot cross the river

The Yatri must walk barefoot and subsist on alms and food given by villagers along the Parikrama route.

Narmada Mata must be worshipped daily.

One must come back to the place one started the Parikrama from.

It is also advisable to register for the Parikrama and carry the ID card issued to

establish one's credentials as genuine Parikramavasi. There is as yet no central registering authority for registration, but tour operators and Ashrams do extend help to the Yatri on this. One could also check with the local Panchayat office regarding registration. This should be done before beginning the Parikrama.

However, not all these rules can be adhered to in today's times, though many still try to do so. Walking barefoot demands the ability to put up with immense physical discomfort as the terrain varies, thorny, rocky, muddy, and smooth by turns. Subsisting on the generosity of strangers is also difficult for those of us, who have had comfort at our finger tips. Yet, miracles abound and those who give of themselves completely to this Parikrama, find themselves totally transformed and more attuned to their spiritual self.

This Parikrama is best done individually or in small groups of likeminded people for the ultimate purpose of this is to discover oneself. Today, many tour operators have begun to organise the Narmada Parikrama by vehicle. This takes around 2 to 3 weeks to complete. The Madhya Pradesh State Government through its tourism division also organises the Yatra, though no details are available on their website.

13. Sabarimalai Yatra

The Sabarimalai Yatra is too well known to be documented here. The hill temple of Lord Ayappa is located, in Pattanamthitta District and is a part of the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The temple is generally open for the first 5 days of the new month in the Malayalam calendar, and for a longer duration during Vishu (in April) and during the Mandala Kalam from November to January. The Yatra begins from November and continues till the temple closes after Makara Vilakku on the day of Sankranti.

There are strict rituals to be observed before going on this Yatra. First is the Maladharana, where a Guru Swamy gives the prospective Yatri a Tulsi or Rudraksha Mala as an initiation into the Yatra. The Yatri must wear only black clothes, go barefoot, sleep on the floor, eat vegetarian food, abstain from the impure for 41 days. Post 41 days of Vratam, the actual Yatra begins, with the preparation of the Irumudi Kattu. The Irumuddi Kattu is a small bundle with offerings to Ayappa and the Yatri's personal belongings. The Yatri carries it on his head and only those with the Irumudi are allowed to climb the sacred 18 steps to the temple.

The nearest airport to Sabarimalai is Trivandrum. The nearest railway stations are Chengannur and Kottayam. Yatri's can reach either Chalakkayam or Erumeli by road to begin their trek, or go directly to Pampa. Erumeli is around 50km from Kottayam.

There are two trekking routes to Sabarimalai. One from Pampa and the other from Erumeli. Pampa is the shorter route of about 5km and Erumeli is longer (40 km) and more difficult. Erumeli is the traditional route and it is believed that Lord Ayappa Himself walked this route to kill Mahishi. The air resonates, with joyous shouts of Swamiye Charanam Ayappa and thus motivated, the Yatri soon finds himself/herself climbing the sacred steps for a darshan of the Lord.

Conclusion

A Yatra is a sacrifice, it is devotion, it is a commitment. It is a pilgrimage, it is sacred, it is faith, it is a communion. It is religious, it is atonement, it is thanking. A Yatra is austere, it is vibrant, it is an emotion, it is strength, it is devotion. A Yatra is distance, it is time, it is linear, it is circular, it is movement, it is transformation.

Going on a Yatra can be an uplifting experience. As one contemplates the sunrise over the Neelkanth Mountain in Badrinath, gaze at the austere Kedarnath Temple in the backdrop of the Himalayas, walk besides the ever flowing and life giving River Narmada, tread on the path trod by countless others in Girivalam, join in the abhangs sung by the Warkaris on their way to Pandarpur; all this links us to a vast unbroken centuries old ancient tradition and we realise that though a small cog in the wheel, we are one with the universe.

This booklet, limited though in scope of information, will, we hope to inspire and spur the reader to go on a Teerth Yatra and return rejuvenated, purged of negativities and better connected with the Divine.

Jaya Jaya Sankara Hara Hará Sankara

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Amarnath Yatra



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