



THE TRAIL ORGANISER

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It surprises a lot of people to learn that winter in India sets in only in the middle of January and lasts until the first week of March. While it does get cold in December, the last week of that month is wonderful for trekking. The snow is not so thick as to discourage walking, and the all-white landscape is perfect for a trek. If you're heading out, here are my top five winter trek locations.

First off, the Kedarkantha trek in western Uttarakhand is a delight. In just four days, it packs a punch that's hard to beat. Every camp is a wonder—there are camps in clearings surrounded by gigantic pine trees, camps that offer a 360° view of mountain ranges and camps in meadows. And if that's not enough, the summit climb and the glissading descent on snow is a thrill to view as you move ahead. Plus, the trail is easy enough for first-timers.

The Har-Ki-Doon winter trail is another in the same vicinity that is hardly trekked. A crime, really, because this trek springs a surprise in the winter—it passes through a pretty glacial valley that's covered in snow, as majestic white peaks rise on either side. Walking through this snow-laden paradise is a vista straight out of a fairy tale. I rate this trek very highly.

In January, when more snow has fallen, another winter trek turns wondrous. The Dodital winter trek, again in Uttarakhand, climbs gently to a frozen lake. Around and below the lake, campsites are covered with a soft mound of powder snow. The trek almost holds your hand and leads you on, gently.

In Himachal Pradesh, tucked away near Manali, is a trail that hardly anyone has heard of. Yet, it is a winter trek worth considering. The Patalsu peak trek climbs out of Solang and

commands a stunning view of the Kullu valley, while the Dhauladhar range towers over the trail. What I really love about this trek is the superb pine forest that you pass on the way. It is a delight to climb through a carpet of snow below the pine trees. It's almost cinematic. Getting to the top of Patalsu is a bit of a chance though, as there can be too much snow for the final leg. Yet, I rate the trek among the best because it allows a splendid journey through a snowy forest.

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The mother of all winter treks, of course, is the Chadar frozen river trek in Ladakh. The voluminous Zaskar river freezes in the winter, making it a highway for locals to connect to Leh. The frozen river snakes through gorges. The sunlight barely reaches the bottom, but when it 'touches' the frozen surface of the river, it lights up the gorge in ways one cannot imagine. The scenery along the trek changes so much and so frequently that even though you're on the same trail as you trek back, it is barely recognisable. The high mountain villages on the way that eerily survive in -25°C are as awe-inspiring as they are jaw-dropping. The Chadar is not just a trek, but an experience...an experience so fascinating that nature and travel channels have hosted exclusive programmes around it. In fact, it is one of the Top 10 treks in the world.

With the winter almost upon us, it is high time trekkers plan their winter trails. Because, unlike other treks, winter offers a very small window. Seize it now. **DI**

Arjun is the founder of Indiahikes, a blogger and an experienced trekker. He takes a keen interest in training youngsters to appreciate our trails.