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Homestay with a difference

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Homestay at Sarmoli above Munsiri town in Uttarakhand. Photo: Ashish Kothari

A unique tourism-conservation-livelihood initiative in Sarmoli, Uttarakhand, offers a learning experience for both visitors and villagers, say Ashish Kothari and Neema Pathak.

Even as villages offering home-stays become increasingly common in the Himalaya, there are some that are different. Sarmoli, located on the slopes above Munsiri town in Uttarakhand, offers an experience that few others can.

Sitting on the balcony of a house with a breathtaking view of the valley below and a line of snowpeaks on the horizon, we could see why Sarmoli is an ideal location for sensitive tourism. Till the mid-1990s, visitors would stay at Munsiri town or move on, providing little to the local rural economy. When Malika Viridi and E. Theophilus (a couple who came to do environmental and livelihood work) made Sarmoli their home in 1992, Malika realised the potential of running a nature-based and community-owned tourism enterprise in the valley. In 2003, on being elected sarpanch of the Van Panchayat (village forest commons), Malika helped build the capacity of several rural women to start such facilities, linking forest conservation work to tourism as a sustainable livelihood option. Many women converted an existing room into a guest room with some internal redesign. If, however, this was not available, Malika helped them get loans to build an extension. Today the village offers 15 homestays, and about 25 households are involved in tourism activities.

Uniquely, the tourism-conservation-livelihood initiative offers great opportunities to visitors to participate, learn and contribute. Homestays involve activities for tourists relating to the agricultural cycle and the forest-river dynamics. Visitors have an option to become part of the village life: sowing potatoes in April and *rajma* in June, harvesting barley, wheat and mustard in summer, then planting out the same in autumn, and cutting and stacking grass as fodder for winter through October-November. They become part of the process of growing food with inputs that are locally available: free abundant sunshine, farmyard manure and farmers' seeds and labour. They also learn to use solar energy to cook and even bake, to weave with wool, or to make bamboo artefacts for everyday use. They can collect the raw material from the surrounding forests and high-altitude pastures. And, of course, they can partake of the delicious local cuisine!

As news of the opportunities spread, visitors are coming from far and wide. Each year, the village hosts around 250 guests; so far it has had visitors from 18 countries. Young women and men from the community have become proficient at leading treks or explaining about local economy, culture, food, and wildlife. For nature lovers and trekkers, the village is a great take-off point to some of the largest 'wilderness' areas left in the Himalaya, extending well into the western ranges of Uttarakhand on one side and Nepal on the other. K. Ramnarayan or Ram, part of the original team with Malika and Theo and now with Himal Prakriti, has also made Sarmoli his home, and helps organise multi-day

treks to popular destinations like Milam, Nanda Devi east base camp and many lesser-known destinations.

A short walk above Sarmoli was enough to show us the enormous attraction the place holds for visitors. The lush forests were filled with birdcalls, and paw prints or scat of various mammals revealed a rich animal life. A pristine lake exuded calm and further up, as the forests thinned, Himalayan meadows with wildflowers took over. Rhododendrons were ablaze with blood-red flowers, contrasting brilliantly against the snow that was, as summer approached, melting into an infinite number of streams feeding the rivers below.

The village also hosts an annual summer programme where students and other interested people from various parts of India come to learn about the ecology of the mountains, in particular about the streams, rivers and their little-known fish. Local youth join them, resulting in an exchange of traditional and modern knowledge and skills. Each year the homestay families host participants of a two-month long Landscape and Lifeskills Course and the students of the National Outdoor Leadership School, a U.S.-based outdoors school. Also encouraged are exchanges with volunteers from groups such as Engineers Without Borders. One Polish woman engineer stayed with the community for four months and, along with some villagers, helped map the water sources within the village forest as well as the supply to each home within the community. Together they tested the water quality from each source, as these are often shared by the cattle and the people of the village. This led to better water supply planning by the gram sabha and water conservation initiatives within the community.

Another project on understanding the habitat of wild pheasants has given visitors an opportunity to participate in a biology conservation project, by putting their skill sets to good use. This project eventually became instrumental in collecting baseline data that led to a plan for protection of pheasant habitat.

While these experiences have been life changing for visitors, perhaps most important, says Malika, is the gradual change they have brought about in the way local people view wildlife and the forests. There is greater interest, pride, and a sense of reconnection. They have also contributed to the village women getting empowered for positive social and political change. An example of this is the organisation Maati, through which the women work for economic independence, and take part in movements against the liquor lobby, and opposing ecologically and socially damaging mega-hydro projects.

As we sat on the last day of our visit in the Maati office, amid women enthusiastically telling us their stories and showing us woollen products they are selling, we realised the potential of ecologically sensitive rural transformation across India.

Ashish and Neema are with Kalpavriksh, Pune.

Getting there

By road from Haldwani, via Bageshwar or Berinag, approx. 300 km.

Rates

Rs.750 to 1500 per person per day (from basic to rooms with connectivity) on a twin-sharing basis and meals; Day guides Rs.500 per day; For an overnight trek with the Home Stay as base, the tariff starts at Rs.2,000 per person per day.

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