Trip to Auli: A Riveting Experience

We were planning a trip to Auli (a popular ski and winter sports destination in Chamoli, Uttrakhand) since quite some time, but were never able to finalize our travel plans. Everytime one or the other reason played showstopper but finally everything got materialized last weekend. So we booked our train tickets, packed our bags and left Delhi on 21st January. First, a few important tidbits about Auli (via Wikipedia):

**Auli**, (alt. 2915 mts-3049 mts) is an important ski destination in the Himalayan mountains of Uttarakhand, India. Auli is known as 'Bugyal' in the regional language which means meadow. In fact some French and Australian experts opine that Auli is one of the best ski resorts in the world. Auli is less known ski destination than Shimla, Gulmarg or Manali. It was only in the recent time,
after the creation of new state Uttarakhand(formerly Uttaranchal) carved out from Uttar Pradesh, Auli was marketed as Tourist Destination. The state is called "Dev Bhoomi" which means "Land of Gods" as there are important pilgrimage destination in this state mainly the 'CHAR DHAM' (Gangotri-Yamunotri-Kedarnath-Badrinath).

Being religiously agnostic and the short duration of our trip (4 days), I was more excited to trek and learn skiing and snowboarding in Auli rather than visit the plethora of temples and other religious centers (or maths). We boarded a train from Delhi to Haridwar and had planned to take a private taxi till Joshimath. From Joshimath, the road to Auli is closed in Winters, so the only accessible route is via the cable car ropeway, which, to our surprise, is the longest ropeway in Asia. The roads to Badrinath, Kedarnath and Hemkund Sahib (Gurudwara at Hemkund) are closed in Winters. So the crowd is sparse during winter time as only snow/ski enthusiasts visit this beautiful place, but in summers it can get quite crowded with the bulk of tourists heading to the religious centers. Also during summers, you can also visit the Valley of flowers, Bugyal and Tapovan, all of these places are quite close to Joshimath.

Delhi to Haridwar Dehradoon: A tale of sleeping travellers

Our train journey from Delhi to Haridwar was very comfortable (Dehradoon AC special express) but we missed our station. We kept on snoring and by the time we woke up, the train had already left Haridwar and was en-rotue to its last station, Dehradoon. We reached Dehradoon at 6:30 AM and decided to take a cab to Joshimath but only options near the station were rickety old Ambassadors from the taxi stand. The union guys there kind of hagged us and persistently tried to convince to take one of their Ambassadors (for Rs. 4500), but the thought of travelling for 12 hours and 300 kms of mountain journey with our bags was not at all comforting. We finally decided to ask a driver of a private Xylo taxi (Kishan) who was waiting for someone. Kishan willingly offered to take us to Joshimath for Rs 6500, quite a good deal for us given that the Xylo was brand new and looked very comfortable. We decided to hire this cab but as soon as we started putting our bags in the car, some Union guys (from the ambassador taxi stand) came from nowhere and told us that we can only hire
taxis from them as long as we are in the railway station. We were taken aback by their rude behavior. Later we learnt that "outside" private taxi cars are not allowed to pick passengers from the station. They asked our driver to come with them and pay a fine for trying to pick us illegally. So we decided to go out and wait for some time so that Kishan can pick us from outside the station.

We decided to have breakfast meanwhile and then reach the office where Kishan worked so that we can hire the car from there itself. Finally we left Dehradoon at 9:30 AM.

**Dehradoon to Joshimath**

After leaving Dehradoon, we reached Rishikesh in about an hour. From Rishikesh we kept on travelling on NH 58, and passed through Devaprayag -> Srinagar -> Rudraprayag -> Karnaprayag -> Nandaprayag and Pipalkoti. In case you are wondering, "prayag" is a Sanskrit word which means "a place of sacrifice". The road journey was quite comfortable, though there were many rough patches in between where the road had completely vanished in the rubble
of landslides. Though landslides are quite common throughout the highway, but there are two stretches which are more prone to landslides and there are road signs advising drivers to continue quickly without stopping anywhere in those stretches. The roads were nicely maintained, there were absolutely no potholes but it was only due to landslides that some stretches felt like roller coaster rides, testing the suspension of our Xylo.

While on the road, you cannot help noticing the beautiful mustard fields and tributaries meandering through the rocky mountain valleys.
We finally reached Joshimath at 6:30 PM. It took us around 9 hours to travel 300 kms. We took a hotel near the ropeway so that we do not have to travel much in the morning. We quickly dumped our bags in the room, and headed out for dinner. Joshimath is quite a small town, and most shops pull down shutters by 8 PM. Just near our hotel we found two dhabas, both were offering marwari food. We decided to check one of them, and noticed that they had only vegetarian options in their menu. We asked if they had any non-veg items, and the guy said yes, its "on-demand". Since joshimath is a religious place, most eating joints do not publicly advertise non-vegetarian food in their menu. But my palate could not be satiated with vegetarian food, specially after travelling so much during the day! I ordered a spicy hot plate of chicken curry :). The food was quite nice and most of it was feshly prepared. We retired to bed as we had to wake up early tomorrow to catch the cable car to Auli.

**Joshimath to Auli: My first ropeway experience**

Next day we day we took the ropeway for Auli. The ticket cost us Rs. 500 per person (return journey included). The cable car runs only at fixed times during the day, and the last one runs at 4:30 PM. The car can take 25 passengers in one go, but will not start until it had a minimum of 10 persons on board. We took the car at 10:30 AM, and the moment the car started its upward journey, a strange sense of excitement engulfed all of us. Going up, the moment we crossed tower number 3, the kids started shouting "snow snow" as we passed through some small patches of snow on trees and roads below. The terrain slowly started turning white from dark green as we continued our journey upwards. Tall fir and pine trees, most of them covered in snow, offered us a great visual treat. Then suddenly, everything turned white below us as we passed tower number 7. And we could see great peaks like Nanda Devi (second highest peak in India after K2) on our left side, and behind our backs were the three famous peaks: The Lotus (Kamal peak), the Horse's Saddle peak, and the Elephant peak. They simply looked so majestic!
We got down from tower no. 8, people who were not staying in Auli went till tower no. 10, but those who were staying had to get down at no.8. The whole journey took us some 20 minutes. The lift at the tower was not working, so we had to go down almost 10 floors with our bags—which was quite tiring.

**Auli: Final Destination**

After we reached the base of the tower, we were greeted with fresh white snow. The first [South Asian Winter Games](#) had just finished, and the main ski slope was right next to the tower no. 8. The slope looked a bit sleep and it was quite scary at first as we had to cross it in order to take the go to our hotel (GMVN). But we crossed it without any issues, and it was fun to travel through fresh snow.

**Hotels in Auli**

There are two main hotels in Auli:

1. **Cliff Top**: this is a 3 star hotel located near to tower no. 8. We checked this out first, rooms were quite decent and given its excellent location, it offered a 270 degree view of the Himalayas. Room starts at Rs 4000 per night (double occupancy). Food up here is quite costly, almost two times than at GMVN below.
2. **GMVN (Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam)**: This government owned hotel was around 800 metres below Cliff Top. There is a cable chair car which takes you down from tower no. 8 to GMVN and the ticket costs Rs. 200 per person (return journey included). Since the winter games were over, the bookings were available at GMVN easily. Room starts at Rs 2000 per night.

After checking out both these options, we decided to stay at GMVN because it was way cheaper than Cliff Top, and offered the same facilities. We got a big room for ourselves with warm water facilities, oil heaters, coffee/tea maker and LCD TV with cable connection. Also, the food was much cheaper here than at Cliff Top. They also had a big recreation room, with table tennis, pool table and carrom boards.

We stayed for two nights at GMVN, and I must say it was one of the best holidays I have ever had. The room we booked was for Rs 3000 per day. The food was palatable, they had vegetarian and non-veg dishes, and the quality of food was good. And it was decently priced too! A meal for four of us, including non-vegetarian items, cost us around Rs 450 only. Room service was excellent, the staff being very friendly and courteous. Also, I realized that the water quality was good most of it being pure glacial water, and it rendered a certain taste in the food cooked in it. I wish we could get such pure water in Delhi! We used to ski and trek in the mornings and then used to play Table Tennis, Carrom and Pool after lunch. No wonder I am missing Auli so much now :)
Skiing in Auli

We learnt skiing for two days but realized it was not enough. Skiing is not an easy sport, but it was fun and exciting to learn. There are many instructors who offer their services at Rs 300 per person per day. You get the skiing gear and boots from them at no extra cost (except hand gloves). The instructors are quite nice, but you cannot learn skiing or snowboarding in two days. A seven day course is a must to learn beginner level skiing. GMVN offers many such courses starting Rs 10,000 upwards.

We tried our hands at skiing for only a few hours each day, at we would get tired after 3-4 hours of skiing considering low oxygen levels. We spent rest of the day trekking and exploring places. There is a man-made artificial lake near Cliff Top, touted as the highest artificial lake in the world. We were told that it is being used to create artificial snow during Winter Games if it doesn't snow enough.
**Bare Essentials**

If you plan to go to Auli during winters, here is a list of must-have's:

1. **Good water and snow proof jacket and ski pants:** I would have bought [North Face jackets](https://www.northface.com), but unfortunately they are not available anywhere in India (AFAIK). So I had no option but to opt for Mountain Black jackets. I got a good ski jacket in Delhi for Rs. 4500 which had a fleece under-layer and a solid waterproof and snow proof cover. A good jacket must cover your neck and head too so that snow particles do not creep in. Fresh snow is mostly powder like, and while rolling in snow, or just playing around, such fine snow particles can enter your clothes causing huge discomfort due to wetness. A pair of good ski pants will also help you, but since I was a novice skier, I got a pair of waterproof track pants.

2. **Boots:** Make sure you have a good mountain boots so that you don't skid off the slippery slops. Sneakers are a strict no-no if you plan to trek in snow. The mountain slopes can get very slippery so bring along a sturdy pair of mountain boots. You do not need to bring your ski boots (unless you are a professional skier) because you get them from the instructors while learning to ski.

3. **Hand gloves:** Get a thick padded waterproof pair of hand gloves. You will not regret it!
4. **Sun screen and polarized glasses:** the harmful effect of Sun's UV rays increases with elevation so a good sunscreen (SPF 20 or higher) should be used before venturing out in the Sun. And I personally recommend polarized sunglasses to cut the glare of the snow as snow reflected sunlight is quite bright and can damage your eyes.

After spending good time in Auli, we left with a somewhat heavy heart. The last cable car (to Joshimath) was at 4:30 PM. Going up the tower 10 floors was much tougher with our bags! We stayed one night at Joshimath and went back in the same Xylo to Haridwar. The return journey again was quite comfortable, thanks to Xylo. We had lunch at Rishikesh and then took a Shatabadi from the Hardiwar station and reached Delhi late night.

I enjoyed my stay at Auli so much that I plan to return soon, and join the ski-course by GMVN. Auli is indeed a beautiful pearl nestled in the arms of Greater Himalayas!

tags: auli, joshimath, travel