CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF GEELI MITTI; ABHINAV TRIVEDI; COURTESY OF HIMALAYAN WRITING RETREAT

Clockwise from here: The Kumaon community invites instant slowing down, rest, and artistic indulgence; the Himalayan Writing Retreat combines workshops with time to yourself and nature; at Geeli Mitti, the focus is on working with the hands and building with creative instinct.

At the Cusp in Kumaon

On a journey through its retreats and residencies, **Ria Gupta** discovers the contours of a new creative address forming in the mountains.

I AM STANDING ON A RIDGE by Kasar Devi Temple when I first realise why people keep coming back here. The Himalayas hide behind the treeline, and the atmosphere has that high-altitude stillness that makes you aware of just how much noise has been living inside you. It's in moments like these, when everything quietens, that I'm able to hear myself. Is this the energy that the greats have sought all this while?

I keep thinking about who else has stood here. Swami Vivekananda meditated at Kasar Devi in the 1890s. After him came D.H. Lawrence, Bob Dylan, and George Harrison. The ridge sits on the Van Allen Belt, famed for its magnetic energy. It was also named Hippie Hill: a place where seekers of every kind understood that something in this landscape aligned with what was inside. Now, the oak forests of Kumaon are becoming a permanent home to a new generation of artists.

The Metamorphosis

The region sits in eastern Uttarakhand, long famous for scenic destinations such as Nainital and Munsyari. But Chetan Mahajan, who founded the **Himalayan Writing Retreat** (*himalayanwritingretreat.com*) in the village of Satkhol, witnessed this parallel tide taking shape. **Himalayan Village Sonapani** (*@himalayanvillagesonapanibytgh*), a heritage hotel that once drew patrons of art to meet and create under one roof, had long hosted the region's most buzzing film festivals, music gatherings, and cooking fetes until a decade ago. "Unfortunately, that died as management changed hands," he says. What has risen in its wake is quieter, and as I find, more dispersed.

My first stop is Chetan's creative writing workshop, where a four-day crash course moves between sessions of dramatic discussions and hushed writing, punctuated by long hours around his home turf. Aspiring writers have come from as far as Karnataka—some seeking community over days of deep shared work, others drawn by what this landscape offers: unending views, tree-shaded quietude, and a dissociation from daily life to process one's work and learning. His wife, career psychologist Dr Vandita Dubey, runs workshops in writing as a means of healing. "Part of it is the exercises you do," she tells me. "But part of it is just being here. Nature can be very healing, and often does half the work."

Nearby, **Spacehouse Himalayas** (*spacehousehimalayas.com*), a residency space built by Priti Rao over 15 years, welcomes artists who seek to create or unwind in an easy ambience. At **Geeli Mitti** (*geelimitti.in*) in Pangot, hand building reveals another means of catharsis. Founder and head of the cohort, Shagun Singh, tells me that the

Clockwise from above: For those starting their journey in art, Aikkya Farms offers music and art retreats; the way to a Himalayan Baithak at Solitude by the River allows an opportunity to be guided by nature, ready for the music; Music Tours by Amarrass Records works with the vision to spotlight the region's craft.

people who arrive here are rarely there to just learn natural building. "Those who come to us are often at a crossroads. This journey is about everything in their life changing to emulate a new way of living."

For these adopted locals, the location became the inspiration and guided what they built. For others, creating something in Kumaon has been a conscious effort to spotlight the region's craft. For Ashutosh Sharma, the idea of taking **Music Tours by Amarrass Records** (*musictours.co.in*) to the hills took shape during COVID. The inspiration for Himalayan Baithaks was his exposure to local knowledge and the belief that "some of India's most beautiful musical cultures are also among its least represented."

In other places, new studios and retreats are catering to visiting and local artists alike. **Roohaniyat** (*@roohaniyatresidency*), which gives artists the luxury of booking a jam pad at reasonable rates in the hills, was started by Angad Katari. Shivani and Avijeet of **Aikkya Farms** (@aikkyafarms) host music and art retreats for a beginner-friendly brush with the arts in the mountains. Rohit Bayana, a musician who set up base in Mukteshwar in 2017, has been volunteering in local schools, working with Bhimtal-based musicians, and helping artists with sound design at his space. Artist Kiran Sandhu, who's made a career in the art of indigo dyeing through **Tarai Blue** (*indigodesign.in*), hosts multi-day workshops in destinations such as Nainital. Apart from the Kasar Devi walk I booked with them, **The Kumaon** (*thekumaon.com*) also takes heritage tours through Tamta Colony. This is where guests can watch local artisans create brass handicrafts that Almora is famous for.

The Road Less Walked

The lack of a creative community in this region was why writers like Pragya Bhagat would once leave. "I had moved to Uttarakhand in 2016 because I wanted a distraction-free life to work on my craft. While living here till 2019, I came to recognise that I do crave creative and social connection. It takes a certain kind of person to be truly okay with that much solitude," she tells me. While the circle here is still scattered, it has taken shape in pockets where one can now find everything from guidance and camaraderie to space for making the most of the silence these mountains afford. Now, such seekers are once again finding inspiration to stay.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF AIKKYA FARMS; KAISU WALTER (2)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF METRORES TRUST; COURTESY OF THE MARY BUDDEN ESTATE; COURTESY OF TARAI BLUE

Clockwise from above: The Mary Budden Estate is photographer Serena Gupta's escape as she witnesses over-tourism creep in; workshops allow for the light to shine on local crafts; the Metrores Trust works to foster self-sustaining rural communities with their business and education initiatives.

Anjali Nabiyal has worked with co-founder Pankaj Wadhwa to build rural entrepreneurship, artist capacity, and opportunity among young local artists in Uttarakhand through Udhyam and Metores Trust. "In certain places, locals are benefitting in terms of better infrastructure, opportunity, and connection," she says. "But resources are depleting because there are too many users now."

Photographer Serena Chopra, who moved into Mary Budden Estate around 1990, found her greatest muse in the forests of Binsar. Over the years, she has witnessed over-tourism slowly take away some of the charm that all this infrastructure was built to access. Every time a new space opens, it creates a possibility for replication and attracting more crowds to an otherwise untouched location. "This kind of development is good for the region, but there has to be some kind of discipline that respects the environment," she says, suggesting limits on tourist numbers and encouraging more conscious journeys into the mountains.

I spend my last days in Kumaon picking fruits with city dwellers starved for tactile experience, sometimes swapping stories of setting base as outsiders with the people who built these spaces. There are fragments of hope that this new landscape is attracting local youth back with newer opportunities. But one thing is clear: for anything to take real root, you have to understand the land and build with its community.

Kumaon is becoming what Auroville has been to South India, or what Goa was to independent creatives in the late 2000s. But Goa's story has a second chapter now, and anyone paying attention knows how it reads. The question worth sitting with—on that ridge, in that stillness—is not whether Kumaon will become India's next serious creative address, for that's imminent. The harder question that gives me my next story is, how can we get it right this time? 🌐

GETTING THERE

IndiGo (*goindigo.in*) operates flights from major cities including Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata to Pantnagar Airport.

Kathgodam, the last town before the mountains begin, is connected to Delhi by **Shatabdi Express** and to Mumbai by **Mumbai Central–Kathgodam Superfast Express** (*indianrail.gov.in*).

Road transfers can be booked via all major retreats and hotels as well as aggregators like MakeMyTrip.

STAY

The Kumaon in Almora is a high-end hospitality option in the Greater Himalayas with views of peaks like Nanda Devi. *Doubles from ₹39,000*; *thekumaon.com*

Sitla Estate is a 40-acre estate with 12 recently revamped suites and rooms for a fresh take on slow living. *Doubles from ₹10,450*; *sitlaestate.com*.