



The rafting adventure captured the essence of Rishikesh: a serene refuge for rishis and evolved souls, and a playground for adventurers craving an adrenaline rush.



river and our karma dictate the pace of our white-water rafting adventure. And then we heard a roar downstream. An angry, frothing cascade loomed ahead. We plunged our oars

in the water and battled with the river that spat icy-cold water at us as it thrashed about and hurled our raft around. Its fury spent, the river released its grip and dumped us again in placid waters. We floated around a hillock and the pilgrim city of Rishikesh opened its arms to receive us.



that oscillates between its many avatars. Over a period of two days, we rode the city's cross-currents. We would wake up each day to birdsong at our resort, The Roseate Ganges — snuggled in the forested folds of the Himalayan foothills — and walk down to the riverbank for a yoga session. We launched our Rishikesh adventure with a wild rafting adventure that culminated with us floating past soaring temples, under

RISHIKESH UNPLUGGED

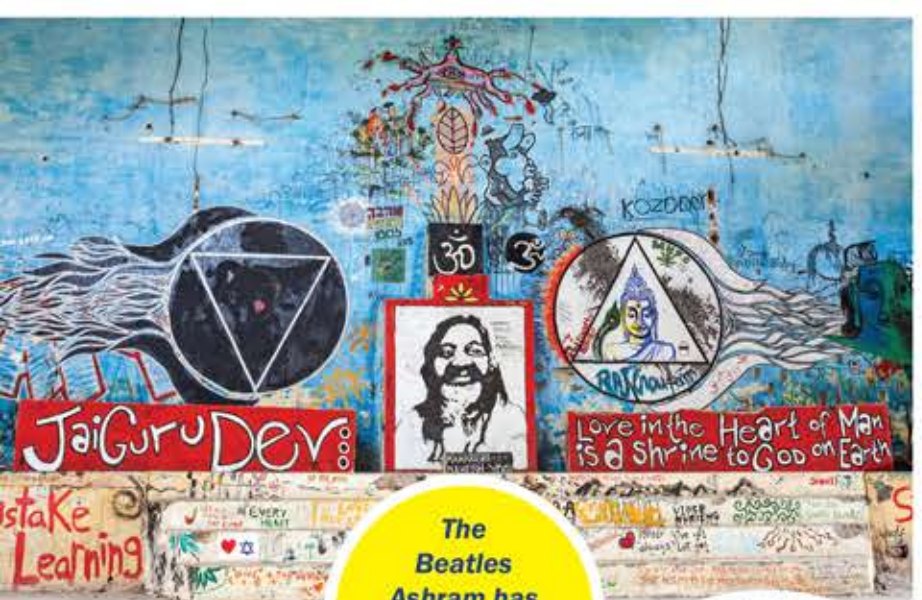
The Beatles sought to reboot mind-body-spirit in Rishikesh and Hollywood star Brad Pitt hurtled into a rafting adventure. Here, battling the rapids can be interspersed with meditation by the Ganga.

Text and Photographs | GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI

Gently flowed the Ganga. A soft breeze caressed us like a soothing balm as we floated down the emerald waters in a dinghy. But for the murmur of the river and the whispers of an untamed forest that draped the rugged slopes hemming the Himalayan waterway, all was quiet. We shouldered the oars and let the



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UK — John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr. They stayed at the Chaurasi Kutia Ashram (later called the Beatles Ashram) in Rishikesh in February 1968 to learn Transcendental Meditation from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Overnight, Rishikesh became the holy grail for those in quest of instant nirvana. The brief stay of the Fab Four there had transformed the face of the city forever.

When we had stopped by the ashram (abandoned in the early 2000s) on an earlier visit, its grounds had been reclaimed by the Forest Department. Pop art and graffiti covered the walls of crumbling buildings, and meditation pods were snared in the vice-like grip of creepers and vines. Today, the grounds have been cleared, though the dilapidated buildings remain, and the Beatles Ashram has been reopened as a tourist attraction. Strains of the band's classic songs and ballads unspooled in our minds and swept us back to the past.

We encountered a flock of spiritual seekers who had gathered on the



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apparently to a thatched enclosed pavilion from where dance music began to throb and pulse. That was a meditation of sorts, we were told, essentially a fun ritual whereby devotees dance their blues away.

Soon after, we treated ourselves to the ultimate indulgence: a spa treatment at The Roseate Ganges. The distant hum of the fast-flowing river — a silvery blue slash in the valley below — and the rustle of the forest provided a pleasing soundtrack.

Our phone trilled. Our driver called to check if we would like to attend the Ganga Aarti at Triveni Ghat. "Take the rest of the day off," we informed him.

This time around, we planned to be at nature's altar.



ghat outside Parmarth Niketan Ashram (the largest in Rishikesh) to participate in the evening Ganga Aarti. The Ganga Aarti was a beautifully orchestrated ritual: Puja Swami Chidanand Saraswati, the spiritual head of the ashram, with a cordless mike in hand, launched into a bhajan. We closed our eyes and surrendered ourselves

to the magic of the moment. Next, we went ashram-hopping. The riverfront Osho Gangadham ashram is in the middle of a forest, a 15-minute drive from Rishikesh. Initially, we saw a few inmates drifting around in a daze while a couple of them were contorting their bodies, doing yogasanas on a lawn. They all melted away,

its two iconic suspension bridges, Ram Jhula and Lakshman Jhula, and into the city's embrace.

We entered the 1960s-themed 60's Cafe Delmar aka Beatles Cafe, where brunch was served with a commanding view of Lakshman Jhula that reached out to the Trayambakeshwar Temple. Below us, pilgrims took a spiritually purifying dip in the river. Long-haired holy men laid out saffron robes to dry, a mural on the walls of a building gazed back at us... The memorabilia that adorned the café's walls was a tribute to the four mop-haired lads from Liverpool,

