

MYSTERIES FROM 90 FEET UNDER



At the ancient cave temple of Patal Bhuvaneshwar, **Sandy & Vyjay** encounter myths and mythological characters who come alive through fascinating rock formations

The clouds formed mystical shapes against the clear blue sky. On the left, the ground sloped towards the valley which was carpeted in green, with towering Pine and Deodhar trees. The serene tableaux created by nature lifted the spirit in waves of inexplicable euphoria.

A narrow path, offering a ring side view of the valley, snaked towards an ancient temple which awaited with myths, mysteries and thrills to welcome all who entered its fold. The ancient cave temple of Patal Bhuvaneshwar, housed in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, bears a board which says, "This awesome cave is believed to be as old as the earth itself".

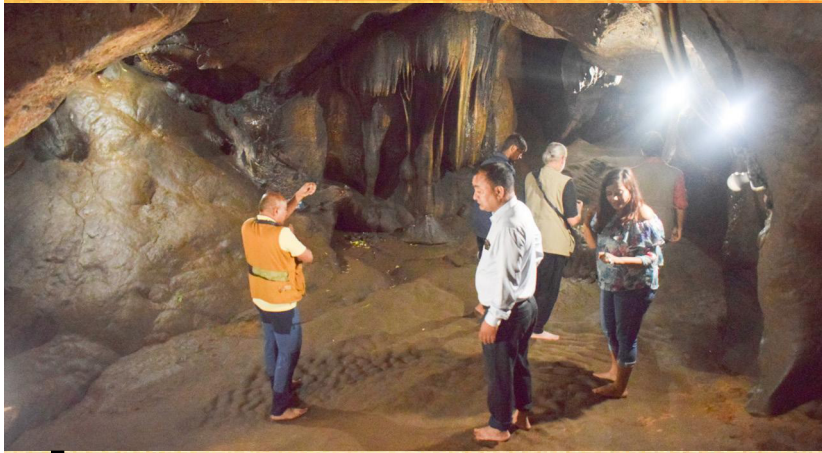
As you enter a small gate, temple bells strung along the path sway in the wind, and one cannot resist the temptation to ring them. You pass through a small counter where footwear and gadgets can be handed over for safe keeping. A signboard, in Hindi, sounds an ominous warning: oxygen levels inside the cave could be low, and authorities would not be responsible for any untoward incident. People with health issues like heart disease, blood pressure, diabetes and claustrophobia are advised not to enter the cave temple.

By this time, pumping adrenaline and the scent of adventure draws us to the entrance of the cave temple. We peer

PHOTO: UPENDRA SWAMI



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down a dark hole which has iron chains dropping down into the caverns below - this narrow tunnel leads to the cave temple of Patal Bhuvaneshwar, which is located 90 feet below the ground. Only one person can make their way at a time, and they need to squeeze, wriggle, slide down vertically and even crawl to reach this intriguing temple.

We take a deep breath, grip the iron chains, and start descending slowly in single file. The ones in front shout instructions to the ones at the back, as we follow our guide into the caverns of the earth. Underground electric lights add a mysterious glow to the place.

As you hit terra firma, you feel a sense of relief. A blast of cold air hits you. You breathe a little heavily because of the descent, as well as the paucity of oxygen. Once you compose yourself, the surreal sight of the world beneath the caves awaits you.

The history and mysteries of the cave

It is believed that the cave temple is as old as the earth itself, and Lord Shiva himself stayed here and was worshipped by the 33 crore Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. The cave temple finds mention in the ancient Hindu text Skanda Purana. It is said that the 160 meter cave was first discovered by the human race in the Treta Yuga by king Rituparna who accidentally stumbled upon it. He is said to have had some supernatural experiences in



the cave, where he watched Lord Shiva being worshipped by all the Gods and Goddesses. The cave was subsequently lost to mankind, only to be rediscovered in the Dwapara Yuga by the Pandavas. It is said that the Pandavas prayed to Lord

continuous line of priests at the temple.

The Patal Bhuvaneshwar cave temple is not one cave but a series of caves which are interconnected. Many myths that surround the cave indicate that it leads all the way to Mount Kailash. There are four known entrances to the caves - named Randwar, Paapdwar, Dharamdwar, and Mokshdwar. Legend has it that the Paapdwar was closed after the death of Ravana and the Randwar was closed after the end of the Kurukshetra war. The two gates open now are the Dharamdwar and the Mokshdwar.

One of the most spectacular sights inside the Patal Bhuvaneshwar temple is a lustrous and colossal stalactite formation that symbolises the matted locks of Lord Shiva

Shiva in this cave before they set off on their final journey to the Himalayas. In the Kali Yuga, the cave temple of Patal Bhuvaneshwar was rediscovered by Adi Shankaracharya in the early 9th century.

Since its rediscovery, worship at the temple is being conducted by the Bhandary clan of priests. The current priest is from the 18th generation of a

The cave is lined with stalactite and stalagmite. Fascinatingly, they bear resemblance to characters from legends, myths, and mythologies. At the entrance of the cave, an impressive rock formation looks uncannily like the hood of a huge cobra. This is said to be the hood of Adishesha, the primordial serpent king on whom rests the universe. On the other side, there is a rock formation in the shape of countless hooves that almost touch the ground. "These are the

100 legs of Airavata, the mythical elephant and vehicle of Lord Indra,” explained the guide.

One of the most spectacular sights inside the Patal Bhuvaneshwar temple is a lustrous and colossal stalactite formation that symbolises the matted locks of Lord Shiva. As we walked towards the sanctum sanctorum, we passed many fascinating images from Hindu mythology. There was the headless torso of Ganesha, awaiting the transplant of the elephant head; Kamdhenu, the mythical mother of all cows; Bhagirath, who brought the Ganga to the earth; the Saptarshi Mandal, the Kalpavruksha and much more.

Our final stop in this incredible subterranean world was the place where the presiding deity is worshipped. It is said that the trinity of the Hindu pantheon - Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara - are present here in the form of three rock formations on which three jets of water trickle perpetually from the roof. There is a copper plate in the form of a Shiva Linga which covers the area around the deities. It is said that this copper plate was installed by Adi Shankaracharya. This place is considered sacred, and a visit to this cave temple is equal to a visit to the famous Char Dham pilgrimage of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunotri, and Gangotri.

Out of breath, but swept away in waves of wonder, we made our way back. We emerged from the labyrinths of the earth tired and breathless, but with a sparkle in our eyes.



Traveller's Diaries

TRAVEL IS ALL ABOUT SERENDIPITY AND ENCOUNTERING THE UNEXPECTED. THESE KINDS OF EXPERIENCES COME BY MORE OFTEN WHILE TRAVERSING ROADS LESS TRAVELLED. DURING OUR SOJOURN IN THIS UNEXPLORED REGION OF UTTARAKHAND AS PART OF THE BLOGGER BUS, AN INITIATIVE OF UTTARAKHAND TOURISM, WE HAD MANY SUCH EXPERIENCES THAT HAVE LEFT AN INDELIBLE MARK ON OUR HEARTS AND MINDS. BUT WHAT RANKS AS ONE OF THE MOST THRILLING AND MYSTICAL OF THESE EXPERIENCES IS OUR VISIT AND EXPLORATION OF THE CAVE TEMPLE OF PATAL BHUVANESHWAR.

Quick tips

- Located in Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand
- It is 506 kilometres away from Delhi
- Nearest railway station: Tanakpur at a distance of 154 kilometers
- Nearest airport: Pantnagar at a distance of about 226 kilometers
- Advisable for persons with ailments like heart disease, asthma, diabetes, hypertension, anxiety, claustrophobia, and other allied disorders, to not enter the cave temple
- Senior citizens and children below 5 years are also not advised to enter the cave temple