

A Walk among the Flowers in India

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From Jammu & Kashmir to Tamil Nadu and from Maharashtra to Arunachal Pradesh, India is home to over 15,000 species of flowering plants including Roses, Orchids, Rhododendrons, Wild Flowers, Lilies, Lotus Blooms, The legendary Brahma Kamal and more.

The sight of trees with birds in their foliage, the comfort of their shade, the delight of their fruits, and the music of their rustling leaves is a balm for the senses. Add to this the sight of flowers on trees, and the joys of nature are multiplied manifold.

India is home to over 40,000 species of plants including over 15,000 species of flowering plants. Some of the flowers can be spotted in solitary splendour, others in swathes; some are perennial, others annual, and still others flower once in several years. Some draw sustenance from the soil, some from other plants, and still some from the atmosphere. Many of these flowers grow in their natural habitat, enhancing the experience of seeing them and enjoying their beauty.

KAAS PLATEAU, SATARA (MAHARASHTRA)

Solitary flowers, clusters of flowering plants, and carpets of flowers saturate the senses with their beauty at Kaas plateau during the monsoons. Located 1,200 m above sea level in the Western Ghats, near Satara, Maharashtra, this plateau spread across 1,792 hectares comes alive in the rainy season as it receives an average annual rainfall of 2,000 to 2,500 mm, which sets off a chain of mass flowering.

Nearly 1,500 species of plants including grass, herbs, medicinal plants, wild flowers, orchids, creepers and more grow at and around the plateau. Of these, over 450 species of wild flowers bloom in the monsoon, delighting visitors. Kaas Plateau is a UNESCO World Heritage Site under the natural heritage criteria.

SESSA ORCHID SANCTUARY (ARUNACHAL PRADESH)

From single flower plants to stalks clustered with blooms and from pale to brightly coloured, plain to elaborate, regular flowers to those that look like an insect or a lady's slipper—the beauty and form of these orchids takes the breath away. Home to more than 600 species of orchids, Arunachal Pradesh is often called Orchid Paradise.

Get to know more about these flowers at the Orchid Research and Development Centre and Sessa Orchid Sanctuary, Tipi, Arunachal Pradesh. The sanctuary houses nearly

200 species of orchids. Being seasonal, different varieties bloom at different times of the year; the best months to visit Tipi to see the orchids would be from October to April.

THE NILGIRIS (TAMILNADU)

The Nilgiris or the Blue Mountains of Tamil Nadu fall under the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme owing to their biodiversity. Interestingly, the region is said to derive its name from the beautiful blue flowers of Neelakurinji or *Strobilanthes kunthiana*, which blooms only once in 12 years, breathing new life into the place.

Typically Neelakurinji flowers between July and December with peak flowering in August and September. The genus has different species with varying flowering cycles that grow in different areas such as Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu and Munnar in Kerala.

BARSEY RHODODENDRON SANCTUARY (SIKKIM)

In parts of the Himalayas, flowering of rhododendrons heralds the onset of spring. The burst of beautiful flowers in exuberant colours is one of nature's most eloquent expressions of the season.

Among the most scenic places to experience the exquisiteness of rhododendrons is Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, located at an altitude of 2,000 to 4,100m in west Sikkim.

The rhododendron season is from around end March to early May. The invigorating air, nature trails, a wide variety of rhododendrons flowering in the forests, the uniqueness of each species, and panoramic views make for an unparalleled tryst with nature.

NUBRA VALLEY, LADAKH (JAMMU & KASHMIR)

A cold desert has its own rhythm of life. Like the trans-Himalayan Ladakh region, comprising districts of Leh and Kargil, and spread across valleys, mountains, glaciers and large tracts of land rendered inaccessible by the harsh winters.

However, with winter gone, the melting snow serves as food for a rich variety of vegetation. The mountain slopes and meadows breathe anew with a burst of flowering plants including medicinal and aromatic plants.

Take in views of the flowers at Nubra Valley (the word Nubra is believed to stem from Ldumra which means Valley of Flowers) during the flowering season from June to Sep-

tember; August is recommended for viewing flora.

VALLEY OF FLOWERS (UTTARAKHAND)

The Himalayas, both western and eastern, are where you can best experience the cycle of seasons. In winter, the land lies cold, often covered in snow, and flowerless but come summer and the place is transformed with scores of flowering plants.

Enjoy a rendezvous with alpine flora at the high-altitude Valley of Flowers National Park, Uttarakhand, as you trek through mountains and meadows and across streams, along with pilgrims making their way to Hemkund Sahib. Amidst orchids, lilies, poppies, saxifrages and more, spot the revered Brahma Kamal, the state flower of Uttarakhand. The flowers start blossoming as it gets warm in May and the flowering continues till September.

Tips to See Flowers

- Recommended Reading: Common Indian Wild Flowers by Isaac Kehimkar, Bombay Natural History Society, Hardcover <http://www.amazon.in/Common-Indian-Wild-Flowers-Natural/dp/0195656962>.

- Browse <http://www.flowersofindia.net> to familiarise yourself with the wonderful world of Indian flowers.

- It is best to go seeing flowers with a naturalist who will identify different species and explain their characteristics. Mornings are recommended.

- Nature India —Eco Tours <http://www.natureindiatour.blogspot.in/> organises nature trips.

- DCP Expeditions LLP organises nature trips and nature photography trips www.dcpexpeditions.com

- Do not walk on or pluck flowers.

Meghalayan Age

Name given to 4,200 yrs of Earth's Age

Stalagmites on the floors of the Krem Mawmluh caves in Meghalaya provide evidence of a distinct stage in the geologic classification of Earth's age, so say researchers who have termed this most current time-span in the planet's 4.6 bn-year-old history the 'Meghalayan Age'. These slices of time chart key events in the story of evolution of our planet and the life forms that occupy it. A look...

HADEAN 4.6-4 bn years ago. Named after Hades (Greek god of underworld), the informal eon describes hellish conditions on an Earth which has just formed.

ARCHEAN 4-2.5 bn years ago. Continents and Oceans were formed. Oldest evidence of life found on a 3.95 bn-years-old-rock formed in this period.

PROTEROZOIC EON 2.5 bn to 541m years ago. Primitive life form—bacteria and blue-green algae—flourished around shallow margins of continents formed during this period.

PHANEREZOIC EON 541m years to present. The eon of visible life, saw the development of plants and release of free oxygen that helped rapid evolution of various life forms.

CAMBRIAN 541m to 485.4m years ago. Jawless vertebrates, soft-bodied organisms, animals with shell.

ORDOVICIAN 485.4m to 443.8 yrs. Rise of fish in the sea and first plants on land.

SILURIAN 443.8m to 419.2m yrs. Vascular plants (plants with food and water conducting tissues) began to colonise coastal lowlands.

DEVONIAN 419.2m to 358.9m yrs. Also known as the age of fishes due to its fish diversity, this period saw emergence of forests on land, four-legged amphibians also appeared and animal life started colonising land.

CARBONIFEROUS 358.9m to 298.9m yrs. Coal, natural gas and liquid petroleum were formed during this period.

PERMIAN 298.9m to 251.9m yrs. Terrestrial plants diversified, insects evolved rapidly, several reptile lineages appeared. The largest mass extinction in the Earth's history occurred during the latter part of this period.

TRIASSIC 251.9m to 201.3m yrs. Dinosaurs appeared at the beginning of this era. The latter part saw appearance of first mammals—tiny, fur-bearing animals derived from reptiles.

JURASSIC 201.3m to 145m yrs. On land, dinosaurs and flying pterosaurs dominated the ecosystems, and birds made their first appearance.

CRETACEOUS 145m to 66m yrs. Flowering plants arose in the beginning of this period. The period ended with a large mass extinction that finished off dinosaurs and marine and flying reptiles.

PALEOGENE 66m to 23.03m yrs. After & due to extinction of dinosaurs, mammals starting from rodent-size grew in size, number and diversity.

NEOGENE 23.03m to 2.58m yrs. Elephants, apes, rabbits, pigs, sabre-toothed cats, horses, rhinos roamed Earth.

The Meghalayan Age starts at 4,200 years ago when agricultural societies around the world experienced an abrupt and critical mega-drought.