



I have been visiting this holy shrine for almost 20 years now. Not a very regular devotee in the past decade but in Dec 2007 I just managed to find time to visit this place.

The trip was made along with my jijaji (brother-in-law). I must admit that this trip was the most luxurious I have ever made till now. All this is now possible because of the commercialization of this holy place. Facilities offered come at a good price.

We started our journey on a low budget note with a train journey from Delhi to Jammu reaching at 7:30 am. Darshan at the holy shrine generally takes a long time in peak season so we had arranged for special VIP passes courtesy my uncle who retired from Indian Air Force.

Day 1:

After getting off the train and collecting our VIP passes we headed to Jammu bus stand for a bus to Katra. The bus stand is walking distance from railway station. Katra is the place from where the trekking to holy shrine starts off.

We had heard of a new 5 star hotel which had recently opened in Katra and had booked it for our 1 day stay at Katra. The bus dropped us close to the hotel and we walked till reception. Getting a valley view room was quite exciting for me. The stewardess withdrew the drapes and I could see snow clad Pirpanjal ranges quite clear. We decided to freshen up and get ready for trek to shrine as it is a trek of 12km. I have always trekked till the top since I was about 4 odd years old, if I remember correctly. Now there are much more comfortable rides like a helicopter ride to top which takes about 10 min.

The hotel had arranged for a drop to the trekking start point called BanGanga. We collected our tickets for darshan and got the pass exchanged for another government certified document. A lot of process has been introduced in the whole journey to top as it is under constant militancy threat. Throughout our journey till top I think we were physically frisked about 10 times.

We started our journey at around 1:45 pm. We did a good pace and covered the whole journey in about 3 hours reaching top at 5 pm. We halted at 3 places on way to get some refreshments. We had expected the temperature to be low as the whole trek is at a high altitude, but the weather was quite hot. With sun about to set the temperature was dropping quite fast.





For Darshan, devotees cannot carry anything except for the prasad. Everything else needed to be kept at a cloak room. All the leather wearable items need to be removed like Wallet, belt, wrist watch. For security reasons the coconut inside Prasad is withheld in exchange for a token.

We had to exchange the government certified document for the final pass which will allow us entry to the VIP gate. Once we entered it took us about 15 min to reach the place of idols. The idols are not actually idols but 3

pinds which symbolize Maa Kali, Vaishno Mata and Saraswati mata. The Darshan is for a fraction of second as there is long queue behind you.

This holy place is expected to get third highest offering in the world after Vatican and Tirupati.

Once Darshan got over we ventured out to find a good place to eat something on our way down. We found a Nescafe counter where we had Maggie. It seemed a very good eating option at that moment.

We waited for some more time to relax our muscles, finally starting our trek down at 6:00 pm. By this time it had become quite cold. We had taken out the warm clothing which we were carrying in a small bag. We stopped at Café Coffee day to have some sandwiches. Throughout the trek, there are fresh cut carrot and radish available which my favorite eatery is. I like it with a little bit of lemon and a salt based mixture applied to it. Trust me, it really tastes good.

Once we were at BanGanga, we called the hotel for a pickup. By this time we were quite tired and I jumped into bed to catch up on some news. It was already 10pm by then. Biggest news was the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. I dozed off to sleep while watching TV only to wake up at 5:30 am.

Day 2:

Getting a good sleep was really important after a hectic journey up and down. I walked to the view window to see the surrounding valley view in morning. I could still see the snow clad mountains but this time I could see them much clearly. Took some photographs to make sure the memories are there with me and not lost.

We got ready to have some lavish Buffet breakfast offered by hotel. As the hotel was attracting new customers, the breakfast was



on house. We packed our stomachs to limit and headed to Jammu Airport. The hotel had yet again arranged for a cab till Airport. It took us about 1.5 hr to reach there. We checked in to see our flight delayed by roughly 1.5 hours.

It has never happened to me that the flight being boarded by me flies on time. I have boarded the best rated and worst rated flight but the flying time has always changed when they had me as one of their passengers.

After waiting and eating some complimentary snacks by airlines we boarded the aircraft to reach Delhi by 5:30 pm.