This summer, you could

Head to these unique Himalayan shrines

Among thousands of temples scattered across Uttarakhand, several have stood out for the stories and beliefs surrounding them

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It’s known as ‘Devbhoomi’ — land of gods — but Uttarakhand is also the land of unique temples that add to the intrigue and mystique of the hills. Take for instance the Latu Devta temple in Chamoli, which opens for only one day a year on Baisakh Purnima.

Devotees are not allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Even the priest enters the shrine blindfolded. The belief is that Nagraj, the king of snakes, remains inside the temple with his ‘mani’, or jewel and one is not supposed to look at the snake king with naked eyes. Therefore, the portals of the shrine are opened for the smallest of windows, and great care and secrecy is maintained regarding its interiors.

In Vaan village, home to the Latu Devta shrine, the owner of a small ration shop, Heera Bugyali, told TOI some of the stories surrounding the temple. “It is commonly believed that Latu is the brother of mountain goddess Nanda Devi. He was once going towards Kailash Parvat to meet her, and halted his journey at Vaan village. Feeling thirsty, he asked a local woman for water. She said that water was kept in one of the three earthen pots inside the house. However, he inadvertently drank liquor kept in one of the pots and his tongue fell to the ground. Nanda Devi subsequently appeared and said his place of worship will be in this village. Since then, Latu Devta is worshiped here.” Incidentally, Vaan village is also a halting spot on the Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra, Uttarakhand’s longest pilgrimage that is undertaken on foot and held every 12 years.

Another unique temple in the Uttarakhand hills is dedicated to someone many regard as the villain of the epic ‘Mahabharata.’ The Duryodhana temple at Jakhol village in Uttarkashi is probably the only one of its kind in the country dedicated to the eldest of the 100 Kaurava brothers. Interestingly, while local historians say that the temple’s deity is Duryodhana, many villagers refuse to acknowledge it as a Kaurava shrine, instead claiming that the temple is dedicated to Lord Someshwar, a manifestation of Shiva.

Historian Prahalad Singh Rawat, who has co-authored a book on the history, culture and society of Uttarakhand, said that during excavations, a strong link to Pandavas and Kauravas has been found in the region. “It is believed that while the Kauravas stayed in areas near Jakhol, the Pandavas occupied the area of present-day Himachal Pradesh bordering Uttarakhand.” He added: “Since a negative image is associated with Duryodhana, many locals shy away from admitting that the temple is dedicated to him.”

Not very far from Jakhol is another shrine situated in Netwar village that’s dedicated to Karna, the Pandavas’ half-brother and Duryodhana’s confidant. “Karna was a mighty warrior who was known for being extremely benevolent and generous. People of the area recognise the shrine as one dedicated to him and also perform pooja there regularly,” said Rawat.
Another unique shrine is that of Lokpal, situated near Hemkund in the Garhwal Himalayas close to Badrinath. The uniqueness of this temple is that it is dedicated to Lakshman, the younger brother of Ram who is depicted here without either Ram or Sita. Lakshman is believed to have meditated on the banks of the frozen lake here after the battle of Lanka. Another belief is that this was the spot where Lakshman was brought after he was grievously injured in the battle with Ravana’s son Meghnad, and he was eventually revived on the banks of the frozen Lokpal lake.

Among the thousands of other shrines scattered across the Himalayan state, a few also stand out for the beliefs associated with them. Like the Kamleshwar Mahadev temple near Srinagar in Pauri Garhwal. The shrine, dedicated to Lord Shiva, attracts childless couples from across the world, since the belief is that those who perform rituals here with sincerity are blessed with progeny.

Providing details, Devendra Bhatt, who is a member of the temple committee, said, “During Baikunth Chaturdashi, the temple organises a three-day fair and, on the last day, the couples coming here have to hold lit earthen diyas overnight inside the temple premises. They have to thereafter take a bath in Alaknanda river, which flows nearby. There have been hundreds and thousands of couples whose prayers have been answered and they have come back to thank Lord Shiva for His blessings.” The maximum number of registration of couples for a single night was 350 in 2015 while on an average the number ranges from 200 to 250 each year.

The mythological story behind the temple is that Lord Ram had pledged to offer 1,000 flowers to Shiva at Kamleshwar but he fell short of one flower. “In order to fulfill his pledge, Ram chopped off one of his fingers. Since then, it is believed that all requests and prayers that are made sincerely here are accepted by the deity,” Bhatt said.
The Duryodhana temple (above) is named for the villain in the Mahabharata, but some locals refuse to acknowledge its Kaurava link.

The Kamleshwar temple attracts childless couples with the promise that the right rituals will bless them with children.
Shrouded in secrecy, the Latu Devta shrine only opens once a year