

AVANI
VOLUNTEER AND GUEST GUIDE

Welcome to Avani. Are you considering to volunteer with us? Then read further to find out more about life in and around our centers so as to better prepare for your stay with us. Here you will find important information and tips concerning travel, accommodation and the local way of life so that you settle in comfortably and safely in the given socio-cultural context and spirit of Avani.

If you still have unanswered questions after having read this document, don't hesitate to contact us, by e-mail or by phone.

Upon your arrival at our main center in Tripuradevi, you will be welcomed by those living here, working here, and volunteering here. One person will be provided with the task of guiding you through the center: your guide will show you the layout of the facilities, discuss the schedule of the day, will explain the regulations and functioning of the community, and can answer any questions about the local customs and norms.

PREPARATORY OVERVIEW

TRAVEL:

For Our International Volunteers: Be aware that exit and re-entry to India on a 'Tourist Visa' may present complications if volunteering at Avani is your only agenda in India or if you are volunteering at Avani for more than ten days of your entire stay in India. Please check with the Indian consulate in your country for the specific visa type you should obtain in these instances.

Avani is located in the small village of Tripuradevi in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand. The fastest and most comfortable way of getting here is by taking a train from Old Delhi station (Delhi) to Katgodham railway station (Uttarakhand) from where you can either book a cab to Avani.

There are also several trains plying between Delhi and Katgodham. We recommend you take the night train (Ranikhet Express), as this will bring you to Katgodham early in the morning and your onward journey to Avani will be completed by noon.

Airports: Delhi is the closest international and domestic airport for onward journeys in the Kumaon Himalayas where Avani is located.

Railway Station: The closest railway stations are located in Katgodham and Haldwani, both of which are located on the same railway line approximately 5km apart. Both cities are at a distance of about 200 kms from Avani.

Bus station: The town of Haldwani has a large bus station from where several government state transport and private buses ply frequently into and out of Uttarakhand.

More details about travelling to Avani from Delhi are provided below.

ACCOMMODATION:

We provide two types of accommodation facilities – private guestrooms or dormitories. In the dormitory 2-4 people share a room. Generally the different sexes are separated; however, couples are able to stay together in a guest room and their privacy is respected. Not only volunteers, but also trainees, workers and staff and their respective families live at the center. We live like a big family and there is very little personal space. You need to like living in a community!

We recommend volunteers to take up a bed in the dormitory as it facilitates wonderful interaction with our staff that lives on campus.

All meals and tea are cooked and served in the cafeteria on campus. Volunteers are required to remain aware of the mess timings.

Accommodation costs include lodging and three meals a day. You will need to make a cash donation to Avani to cover the cost of accommodation in addition to the maintenance of general facilities such as the water supply and washing machines. The donation amount will depend on factors such as whether the volunteer is an Indian or foreign national, and whether

or not they are receiving external funding (e.g. through a fellowship/scholarship). Please confirm current rates with staff at Avani.

MEDICAL PRECAUTIONS:

Vaccinations - Consult with your local physician or with a travel clinic in your area about which vaccinations you should take before traveling to India. You should check the Indian embassy website for any vaccinations that are required for your country of origin.

Medications - Generally, nearly all medications are available in Delhi, and a fair variety is also available in the larger towns of Almora (4 hours from Avani) and Berinag (30 mins from Avani) in closer proximity. Be sure to pack a sufficient supply of any medications you require if you prefer familiar brands from your home country. Bringing a first-aid kit, including bandages, antibiotics, etc., however remains a good idea while traveling anywhere in India.

Mosquito repellent -- While Avani is not situated in a malarial region, there are mosquitoes in Avani, especially around the monsoon season. We recommend bringing a familiar brand of mosquito repellent with you when you travel.

Insurance - You may wish to purchase a Traveler's Insurance if it is available in your country. Typically this will supplement any existing medical coverage, may provide for medical evacuation if necessary, often provides some death benefits, may cover theft incidents, and may refund ticket costs should you require medical evacuation.

PACKING FOR YOUR TRIP

Clothing - For summer (April through October) you will want mainly light and cotton clothes, with a warm sweater for the evenings. During the monsoon season (July-September) you will want rain-clothes and/or an umbrella. During the winter, (November through March) you will want to **BRING MANY WARM CLOTHES**. Dress in layers, prepare for cold weather. While it is often not freezing, **facilities are not heated**, and it sometimes rains and there will occasionally be snow. Note that it is possible to pack lightly and buy clothing here in India, in Delhi, Almora, or even the local bazaars at Berinag or Raiagar.

Since Avani is located fairly remotely in the Kumaon Himalayas and engaged in working closely with the local community, it is necessary that all our volunteers remain sensitive to the socio-cultural context of the area. We therefore advise that you dress modestly in clothes that neither very short nor too tight.

Money -- We advise you to arrive in India with US Dollars (or Euros), which you will be able to exchange for rupees at the airport. For your own safety, it is best that you do not carry a lot of cash with you. Carry enough only for your travel! The closest ATMs to Avani are located in Berinag. Previous volunteers have found that the ATMs in Berinag and Almora tend not to accept MASTERCARD (Maestro) cards. It is therefore advisable to bring a VISA card if possible. Otherwise, we advise that you withdraw enough cash when in Delhi/Kathgodam/Haldwani to last the duration of your stay here at Avani.

Attention: No ATM or travellers cheque exchange services are provided at the airport. Moreover, banks in India are reluctant to accept travellers cheques so we advise you not to use them. Check with your bank at home, which may be able to provide you with Indian rupees before you travel. Although this is not a problem at Avani, in small town centers and larger cities small denomination rupees notes are often scarce, so it is advisable to keep some on hand for small purchases.

Flashlight with batteries -- We recommend bringing a portable flashlight with its own batteries, or which uses rechargeable batteries. There are also a number of flashlights on the market which are solar- or motion-powered.

Additional Tips:

Airports - Be careful: In both Mumbai and Delhi, the international airport is not the same as the national one.

Train stations - Larger cities will have multiple railway stations. Verify that you're at the right station for the train you're taking.

Money - Be careful when paying for the taxis yourself: 100 and 500 rupees notes may look similar to the untrained eye, so make sure that the driver knows when you are giving him a 500 rupee note. Be careful with money and belongings when travelling by train or taxi.

GETTING TO AVANI (IN TRIPURADEVI) FROM DELHI

ARRIVING AT DELHI AIRPORT

At the **Airport in Delhi** seek out a pre-paid taxi booth managed by the Delhi Police located in the Arrival Lounge of the airport before leaving the building. Booking a pre-paid taxi ensures that you pay a fixed fair to your destination, avoid haggling, and avoid the various commission scams some drivers engage in. The pre-paid taxi service is meant to drop you to the destination mentioned on the receipt. Please retain this receipt in case of any trouble.

If you are staying at a hotel in Delhi, inquire if they can arrange for an airport pickup as most hotels provide this facility.

Avani is situated in Tripuradevi far up in the Kumaon Himalayas. The nearest train stations are in Kathgodam and Haldwani (both on the same train line). This implies that the typical journey to Avani requires a few separate trips to reach the final destination. The whole journey from Delhi usually takes around 18 hours.

Tripuradevi is a small village situated on the route from Almora to Berinag. It is 4km before Berinag, on the most direct route from Almora to Berinag, and 2km from a junction town called Raiagar. When you mention Tripuradevi and Avani to bus and taxidriers they will usually know what you mean, if not, there is the big billboard outside Avani. And usually, when you pass by, you will know it's Avani!

Typically one takes a train from Delhi to Haldwani or Kathgodam, which are located on the same train line. It is possible to take a bus from Delhi, though much more rare. Taxis are also available, but the expense is significant.

DO NOT GO TO PITHORAGARH OR TANAKPUR AS THIS IS AN UNNECESSARY LONG WINDING ROUTE TO AVANI. YOUR ROUTE TO REACH AVANI IS HALDWANI/KATHGODAM – ALMORA- BERINAG

THE TRAIN JOURNEY:

The Ranikhet Express is an overnight train which travels daily, leaving at 22:00 from the Old Delhi railway station, and arriving early the next morning in Haldwani and Kathgodam. Kathgodam is the last stop on the line, but Haldwani (the stop prior) is the point of departure for a number of buses headed up into the hills. If you miss the stop in Haldwani it's usually easy to get a taxi from Kathgodam.

There is a day train as well, called Uttaranchal Sampark express starting Delhi around 4 PM and arrives at Haldwani/Kathgodam late evening. If you take this train, you need to spend the night in Haldwani/Kathgodam. We have special tariff arrangement with one hotel and you can take advantage of this to stay in a pleasantly clean, safe and secure place before you resume your onward journey the next morning.

If you want to leave early in the morning from Delhi, you could travel by the Shatabdi Express that leaves New Delhi station at 6.15am and arrives in Kathgodam/Haldwani at about 11.50am. With this train you could either book a cab to Avani on the same day or remain in Kathgodam/Haldwani to take a shared cab to Avani the following day.

Note: Whilst we have listed the usual departure times of the trains here, it is not uncommon for the timings to change slightly or be delayed due to poor weather. We therefore advise that you check the exact departure time online ahead of your journey

You can book your ticket from any ticket reservation counter in any railway station in India. Foreign tourists can also book their tickets **in person** under the “foreign tourist quota” (often even when the train otherwise seems completely booked) from Foreign Tourist Quota offices (available in Delhi at the New Delhi railway station, Mumbai across from Churchgate Station, etc.).

If you wish to book your ticket **online**, please refer to the Indian Railways online booking sites. Additionally, Cleartrip.com and MakeMyTrip.com both offer Indian Railways bookings and are much easy to use.

Generally you need to book at least two weeks ahead. There are a limited number of seats available under the “Tatkal” quota, which goes on sale at 8am two days before the train’s departure. You ask for either a ticket to Kathgodam or to Haldwani, as sometimes one or the other ticket is available. You can travel in Sleeper class, which most people travel in and which is basically the cheapest option, or you can opt for an air-conditioned compartment (2 tier and 3 tier AC) which comes at a higher price.

JOURNEY BY ROAD - HALDWANI/KATGODHAM TO TRIPURADEVI:

BY TAXI

From either Haldwani or Katgodham you can arrange a taxi to Tripuradevi.

Hiring a private taxi will cost you anywhere between Rs. 3500 – 4000. This may seem relatively expensive when compared to travelling by shared taxi or bus; but is definitely the fastest and most comfortable way to make this long journey. Sharing taxis with friends is a common way to cut costs.

Optionally, you can also hop into one of the many shared taxis heading towards Berinag or Raiagarh or Almora. Shared taxis are available only from Haldwani. A shared taxi is likely to cost anywhere between Rs 350 – 400 and take 7-8 hours of travel time as there are frequent pit stops for tea, meals and dropping passengers. Look out for taxis that are almost full as these will depart the earliest.

If you need help with booking a cab or a reserving a seat in a shared taxi (as these are usually full), please get in touch with our administrative staff so that you can travel by a known taxi service.

Be careful when stopping in Almora, as it is difficult to find shared taxis travelling towards Berinag after noon. Throughout the morning several buses go to Raiagar and Beinag from Almora, but the last bus departure is around 1pm. You should consider staying overnight in Almora if you need more time for shopping, internet use, etc.

If you are an international volunteer, you may be overwhelmed by taxi drivers willing to take you in their taxis. It can get quite rough sometimes even with some pushing and pulling. However stay firm and negotiate well if you are travelling by shared taxi.

Please keep in mind that you are arriving very early in the morning in Haldwani, so make sure you have eaten something before starting your drive through the mountains.

BY BUS:

There is also the option of taking an ordinary bus from Haldwani towards Berinag. Ordinary buses are very basic, and in winters it gets very cold as buses are not heavily insulated and doors open regularly. The ride can be very bumpy, and the mountain roads are very curvy. The bus may stop so that passengers can purchase chai and food. In general the bus stops regularly for meals and toilet. Buses are vastly cheaper than taxis and cost approximately Rs. 155 from Haldwani to Tripuradevi.

IT'S WORTH CHECKING WHETHER SOMEONE FROM AVANI WILL BE IN DELHI, ALMORA OR HALDWANI ON YOUR TRAVEL DATES. WE CAN MAYBE PICK YOU UP ON THE WAY OR ACCOMPANY AND GUIDE YOU ALONG THE WAY. DON'T HESITATE TO CALL US!

CAUTION!

Touts are known to be hanging around in and around the premises of the international and domestic airport, often telling passengers that their trains or buses have been cancelled and convincing them to rent taxis or hotel rooms for an exorbitant price! If you have booked a train or bus ticket to Haldwani, please cross check your booking and train timing before departure. In case of any doubt please do not accompany any stranger without first having spoken to any member of the administrative staff in Avani. You can make a phone call from the information desk at the airport or any general store. Prepaid mobile phone sim cards are available at the airport for a reasonable price. The Delhi airport has wi-fi and internet cafes can also be accessed in the market areas of Delhi.

IMPORTANT NEARBY LOCATIONS

TRIPURADEVI (WHERE AVANI IS LOCATED)

Tripuradevi is a small village offering limited postal services, small snacks, vegetables, chai, basic services: copy, fax, SIM cards, recharge cards, phone calls.

RAIAGAR (2 KMS)

Raiagar is a small village at an important roadway junction. Larger than Tripuradevi but smaller than Berinag, Raiager offers more services and goods and at a 20 minute walk is the closest stop for things you might not be able to find in Tripuradevi.

Berinag (4 kms)

Berinag is a larger bazaar (market) center which offers more services and goods, including medical services and medicines, clothing, basic postal services, a bank with ATM, basic hardware, a variety of fruits and vegetables, as well as restaurants, sweet shops, etc.

Almora (100 kms)

Almora has all necessary services. You should be able to find anything you need, including banks, internet cafes, international phone booths, markets, postal and courier services, general stores, well-equipped pharmacies, etc.

VOLUNTEERING WITH AVANI: LIFE ON AND OFF CAMPUS

India's traditions and customs are different from those in the West. Avani is situated in a traditional region very rarely visited by tourists. The locals are not very accustomed to being in contact with people from different cultures and other countries, so it is important to respect their habits and customs. Observing is often the best way to learn and to adapt yourself.

We hope that every volunteer that spends time in Avani tries to be as much as possible in harmony with the Indian culture and philosophy. We will give you some guidelines, which will help you to develop good relations with the local people and a respect for their moral standards.

DRESS CODE

We expect our volunteers to be dressed modestly and in an Indian style, as well as to appear clean and neat.

Males - Avoid going bare-chested. Men can wear t-shirt, shirts, or a kurta; as well as trousers, a dhoti, or shorts to work in. Men are required to wear long trousers when away from the center (e.g., when in Tripuradevi or Berinag), as well as at special occasions (holiday celebrations, weddings, concerts).

Females - You should wear a Salwar Kameez, a common and pretty dress. It has a long blouse down to the knees, long or short sleeves, and is worn with trousers or a long skirt underneath. Avoid tight-fitting clothing, short skirts, exposed midriffs, etc.

You can buy these clothes before leaving for India but these clothes are very cheap and available almost everywhere in India.

Please wear these clothes when you arrive at Avani. The people at Avani are used to the Indian dress, even when worn by westerners. And of course, they are not used to visible bellies and trousers that are tight fitting.

Please remove any visible piercings apart from nose and earrings.

CODE OF CONDUCT

WITHIN AVANI:

Alcohol, drugs and tobacco are forbidden at Avani. Volunteers who choose to smoke to do so discretely, on the look out for curious visitors and children.

A non-violent approach, verbal and physical, towards children and other people is absolutely necessary. We can only achieve this through patience and lots of love. When problems occur with other people, talk about it with the responsible person.

Respect is essential for all the people who live and work in the center (workers, employees, volunteers, visitors, persons in charge).

Avani is a public place, open for everybody. Several people often come and visit without notice. This is typical for Indian culture. Visitors stay all day, sometimes several days. Respect for our visitors and the way we receive them is important for the relations of the project. For the same reasons it is also important to keep the premises of the center, including the rooms and workshops, clean.

If you would like to give small gifts to the people in Avani, we strongly recommend not giving money! This is necessary to keep human relations outside of any monetary expectations. After all, it's not gifts that people need the most. Love is the most beautiful gift that you can give them, and you will get lots of it in return.

Always feel free to share your doubts and problems with the people in charge.

OUTSIDE AVANI:

Outsiders, those visiting from a foreign country or an Indian city, (westerners) who pass through the surrounding villages are usually automatically associated with Avani. This is why we request that the rules that apply inside our centers (dress, substance use, etc.) are also applicable outside our centers. We must be careful about the way we behave in Berinag or in the villages we visit.

It is important to note that the local people living within this region have fairly traditional attitudes and it is generally not considered culturally acceptable for people (particularly women) to be seen wandering around the streets at night. For this reason, we kindly ask that volunteers refrain from leaving the Avani campus after sunset.

Feet - In India, shoes are removed before entering most buildings (houses, holy places). This tradition persists of course in Avani also. Never stretch your legs towards someone while you are being seated on the ground, as this is considered very rude. We keep our feet to ourselves, sitting cross-legged like an Indian.

Eating - Wash your hands before every meal, as this is considered very important for personal hygiene. We eat the Indian way, with our hands - specifically the right hand please! Some people prefer to eat with a spoon, however. Many people wash their hands and rinse out their mouths after each meal.

Languages - The most spoken languages are the local language Kumaoni (or Pahari) and Hindi. The use of English is limited and mostly spoken by staff. However everybody is willing to learn and will be happy to speak in their basic English to you!

BEING INVOLVED:

We welcome volunteers with specific areas of expertise or interest that can enrich the work we do at Avani. Please work with us to discuss specific projects you might undertake during your time with us.

Chores – It is expected of all volunteers here at Avani to join in the daily outdoor work for one hour at the center (known as “Shramdaan”), or in food prep work in our community kitchen. Furthermore, all volunteers residing within the dorms are required to clean the communal dorm toilets at least once a week.

CATERING - Meals are served three times a day. The food is normally seasonal, vegetarian and, of course, Indian. At the end of every meal, we wash our plates ourselves. We first remove any food left on the plate in order to prevent it from getting stuck in the wash basins. After that we rinse the plate before rubbing and cleaning it with soap using a plastic sponge.

WATER USAGE - Water is very scarce on the Avani premises. We capture and recycle as much water as possible, with some amount of our potable water being trucked in from afar. We urge you to conserve as much water as possible. Warm water is available at certain times during the day thanks to solar water heaters.

DRINKING WATER - Filtered drinking water is available from taps inside and outside the kitchen. In the winters it is advised to drink hot water (“garam pani”) to avoid falling sick. Warm water is always kept ready in a big tank in the kitchen.

TOILETS - Toilet paper is not common in India. Because our septic tanks are Indian they are not able to deal with receiving toilet paper. If you use toilet paper you will have to bring it to the compost pit rather than throwing it in the toilet. Menstrual pads or tampons would need to be tied in secure plastic bags and brought to the non-biodegradable garbage to be disposed off.

We use the Indian method of the lota (a small bucket which is filled with water), which means that we wash ourselves instead of drying ourselves. One of the people in charge will be able to explain this to you if necessary. Be very careful to always use the left hand.

LAUNDRY AND SHOWER - Laundry is being done by hand. However on sunny days guests are allowed to use the washing machine. Please, only use ayurvedic soaps and washing powder without phosphates. You can easily find these kinds of soaps all over India. Showering consists of pouring water over your head with a lota. Out of respect for the environment and the quality of our own water resources, we ask you to wait until your arrival in India to buy ayurvedic toothpaste, shampoo, moisturizing cream, etc.

WASTE - Out of respect for nature, please avoid bringing plastic trash or chemical products to the school. You can buy cloth bags on every corner of the street in Beinag and elsewhere in India. In general, try to reduce the amount of waste you generate.

Rubbish bins – Both the male and female dormitories contain three different types of rubbish disposal bins: one for biodegradable waste, one for soft plastics (e.g. food wrappers), and one for non-recyclable waste (such as hard plastics and electrical products). If in doubt, please ask at the center about where to deposit any trash you may have.

HOLIDAYS – Sundays is the weekly day off for administrative staff and volunteers on campus at Avani. The weaving centres located at Tripuradevi and in other villages remain open seven days a week. Volunteers can go for a holiday after informing the staff, in order to avoid confusion. We recommend places like Munsiri or one of our beautiful field centers around Tripuradevi. They are often away from the road and worth a visit of several days. These places are all close to Avani (maximum 5 hours of travel). We can also help you if you would like to go off the beaten track.

HYGIENE - We live in a rather remote region, under sober and rudimentary conditions. The natural and not sanitized environment we live in may easily attract bacteria and germs. Therefore personal hygiene maintained by each and every person is extremely important. Treat your small wounds and infections as soon as they appear.

We maintain this hygiene with extra vigilance in the kitchen!

SHIPPING TO AVANI - The well-known international shipping companies (FedEx, DHL, etc.) usually can't get your package all the way to Tripuradevi (or Berinag), despite claims to the contrary, but are otherwise often a decent way to get a package to India. You're almost certainly better with a regular postal service, which usually can get things as far as Berinag (4km away) if not all the way to Tripuradevi. Let office staff at Avani know that you have a package coming so they can help make for a smoother landing. Amazon India/Indian post has been used to deliver products to the Avani campus in the past. However, in some cases retailers have been known to cancel orders due to our remote location.

SHIPPING FROM AVANI - Shipping packages internationally can end up being quite expensive. Finding packing materials can sometimes be surprisingly difficult. Ask folks at Avani for help in putting together a package to send. Sending from Avani usually requires sending out of Almora (4 hours away) via either SpeedPost or one of the large international carriers.

COMMUNICATION

Internet - The availability of internet in this area is scarce. What connectivity exists also comes and goes, working sometimes properly but sometimes not at all. There is internet connectivity available during working hours in the office at Avani itself, with a computer available for browsing or email use, and WiFi access in the office building to Avani's internet connection. Note that Avani-related work is given priority over personal internet usage. Offsite internet access can sometimes be found in Berinag, though offsite internet facilities are generally quite expensive due to the remoteness of the region. It is useful to bring a USB-stick (flash drive).

Telephone - It is easy to make international phone calls from all the major villages and towns around. Phone stands (usually proclaiming "STD / ISD / PCO" are everywhere. Typically you make your call and then pay at the end. However, calling internationally from the mountain phone booths can be expensive -- check prices.

It may also be possible to acquire a cell phone during your stay in India -- contact a local cell phone provider upon your arrival in India. We recommend either IDEA or BSNL, as they appear to provide the best signal on and around campus.

Volunteers can also receive calls at the office in case of emergency, but the use of Avani phones is primarily reserved for administrative tasks.

We wish you a pleasant and memorable stay at Avani !