



## Holy flight

NEETI NIGAM takes you on a spiritual journey to Vaishno Devi aboard Pawan Hans



about 20 minutes from the shrine. I was accompanied by Ashok Kumar, deputy general manager (F&A) at Pawan Hans, who told me how a helicopter took off every four minutes, giving an amazing 360 degree view of the magnificent Pir Panjal range. Just four minutes into the flight and I was at Sanjichat.

The moment the chopper landed, I felt the mesmerising power of the goddess. I bathed at the *ghat* before offering prayers. The atmosphere was serene, pious and rejuvenating. I got a glance of the *pindis* for five seconds. Then I took a pony to the Bhairon temple, a one-and-a-half kilometre trek, as it is believed that your pilgrimage is incomplete without visiting this shrine. Back at the helipad, I got to know that Pawan Hans flies 65-70 sorties during season and almost 50 sorties in the lean season. There are four to six pilots on rotational duty (each for 15-20 days) and it is the same with base managers. The company is now planning to build a heliport where seating arrangements for passengers will be made, along with a waiting area.

RK Tyagi, Chairman and Managing Director, Pawan Hans Helicopter Services, said, "We started services to Vaishno Devi in April 2008 and have flown 1,00,969 passengers till date. We have services to Kedarnath and are planning to have feeder runs to Amarnath and Hemkunt Sahib. Pilots are given specialised training for these flights like VFR courses and CRM (Cockpit Resources Management) training. Additionally they are sent for one week to France, where emergencies are created on simulators and last but not the least they are sent to HUET, which is a management training in Mumbai. Our selection of service areas is based on national priority. We helped out in tsunami-hit areas and flood-affected Bihar. We help out in oil exploration expeditions and provide search and rescue helicopter services to ONGC. In collaboration with state governments, we provide services in the far-flung areas of Northeastern states, Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshwadeep islands. We plan to have a heliport in Delhi, preferably before the Commonwealth Games, and off the Mumbai seacoast." □

### Getting there

Katra is the base for the trek up, 50 km from Jammu. Air India operates daily flights to Jammu from Srinagar and Delhi; Air India also has two weekly flights from Leh to Jammu. A large number of trains links Jammu to major Indian cities, including Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bhopal, Mumbai and Hyderabad. Similarly, an extensive network of roads links Jammu to other parts of the country.

**T**hey say you question beliefs unless they come true for you. For over seven years, I had been trying to visit the cave shrine of Vaishno Devi but somehow the trip never materialised.

Finally, I started believing that nobody could go on this pilgrimage unless the goddess wanted you. Turned out I was blessed. For last month, I got an unexpected opportunity to fly to the shrine instead of undertaking the arduous 14-km trek. Pawan Hans was a divine intervention.

Hiring a *palki* can be an expensive alternative as it costs Rs 3,600 while a two-way helicopter ride costs Rs 2,700. And in the bargain, you get priority *darshan*. From Delhi, it was an hour's flight to Jammu. From there, I took the Pawan Hans helicopter that runs from Katra till Sanjichat, which is