

bon voyage

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the land of mystic mountains

Tucked away between the Himalyan kingdom of Nepal and Bhutan is Sikkim. Rita Sawhney had been told that this mysterious land of monasteries, orchids, high-altitude mountains and lakes would take her breath away... and it did! The sobriquet befits the state adequately, she says.

A scenic view of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a steep, rocky hillside covered in yellowish-green vegetation slopes down towards a winding road. The road curves along the edge of a calm, blue lake. In the background, a small village with colorful houses is nestled in the valley, surrounded by steep, rugged mountains under a clear blue sky. The title 'E monasteries' is written in a stylized, cursive font across the top of the image.

E monasteries

The flight took us directly along the majesty of the highest mountains of the world... I rattle off the glorious names of the mountain ranges in my mind as we pass them, Sheeshapangma, Gauri Shanker, Choyu, Everest, Lhoste, Nuptse, Makalu, ... Soon, we drop height to land with a sharp swoop at the feet of the Kanchenjunga massif at the Bagdogra airport.

The recollection of the perilous five-hour drive to Gangtok from Bagdogra recedes as the hill-station comes into view and I see the departing sun paint a vivid sunset on the Kanchenjunga. At first glance Gangtok is like any other hill-station, but the singular beauty of the landscape soon grabs you. For starters, an orchid flower show is being held at the Town Hall. Not only are the colours unique, but also the names, such as *Oklahoma*, *September Sunset*, *Christmas Beauty* and *Pompadour*. The nearby park has a plethora of exotic plants that look like giant umbrellas of green ferns against the azure sky. Walking in the park, I notice the

cleanliness; I later learn that plastic is banned in Sikkim.

Next morning, we wake up at an unearthly hour and drive a few kms from Gangtok to see the most stunning view of the Kanchenjunga and its satellite peaks from **Tashi View Point**. I take care to wear dark shades as the strong reflections from the snow can be blinding, and one tends to stare at the awesome beauty. I savour the view, sipping steaming ginger tea in the morning mist. Our hotel informs us of the other attractions nearby, like the Nathu-La Pass and Rumtek monastery. Permissions and formalities over - Nathu-La is an Army-protected zone - we set off.

Of the several passes connecting India with Tibet is **Nathu La** (Pass of the Listening Ear), which is a part of the original Silk Route. Driving up this remote but historic route we reach **Tsomgo**, a sparkling blue high-altitude lake. We ride along a road festooned with prayer flags atop sturdy, pointy horned

yaks encased in warm covers and snack on *churpi*, the desiccated yak cheese available at local shops. At 12,400-feet, the Tsomgo is as stunning in winter as in summer, and come winter, the entire lake freezes. In spring, wild flowers like primulas and irises cover the hillsides in profusion.

ON THE DIVIDING LINE

At the army camp we are treated to hot

avoid cereals or fatty food as your digestion needs lots of oxygen. Only have soup, sweets and chocolates for energy. After a day or two you will be fine.

On the Pass, the magnificent view stretches all the way to Bhutan and the massive and holy mountain, the **Chomalhari**. The Chinese soldiers look comfortable in their fur greatcoats; they readily exchange soiled currency with us. As the crow flies, Lhasa is 500 miles after the

tea and fresh *samosas*, and then escorted up to **Zero Point**, at 14,500-feet where only an inconspicuous barbed wire fence separates us from the Chinese territory. The rarefied air and high altitude make climbing difficult but the troops hand out invigorating drinks and vitamin C tablets. That helps!

Altitude sickness is very uncomfortable but can be easily tackled. Spend the first 24 hours at over 8,000 feet without exertion. Do not even get out a breath and



Sikkim at Gyalshing (140-kms from Gangtok); Enchey in Gangtok; Phensang monastery that was gutted in a fire in 1947 and rebuilt a year later; Tashiding, about 40-kms from Gyalshing; Sanga Chelling, situated about 7 kms from Pemayangste, said to be the oldest monastery in Sikkim. Dubdi monastery was built in 1700 and is located near Yuksum on a hilltop. One has to travel by foot to reach it. Dalling, Yangyang, Namchi, Kwezing, Simik are among the other monasteries that the follower and holidayer alike can explore.

Lakes & Monasteries of Sikkim

On the face of it, one would not expect to find lakes on such a rugged terrain. But surprisingly, Sikkim does have several pretty lakes though not very large in size. These lakes are both spring-fed as well as river-fed. Besides Tsomgo Lake, Khecheopalri is another well known lake that lies on the bifurcation of the route between Gyalshing and Yuksum. Menmecho, Green, Cholamu, Bidan Chu, Lakshmi Pokhari and Samiti are some other beautiful lakes. Sikkim's nearly 200 monasteries, or *Gompas*, belonging to the Nyingma and Kagyu order have not only influenced the cultural heritage and lifestyle of the people, but also demonstrate the ancient rituals in practice.

The *Gompas* are adorned with life-like frescos of Buddhist legends, rare silk and brocade *thangkas*. Also preserved here are ancient Tibetan manuscripts, exquisitely carved woodwork and icons of silver and gold. Besides the Rumtek and Phodong monasteries mentioned in the feature, there are many others that the visitors can go to. These include Pemayangtse monastery in West

tiny winding track that leads down the Chumbi Valley, to the trading town of Yathung. It's 'forbidden' territory, so we retrace our steps... Driving back to Gangtok late that evening, we go up to the **Ganesh Tok** temple on a viewpoint that overlooks the city and savour the blinking town lights against the setting sun. While my eyes absorb the picture perfect experience, my ears revel in the faint strains of the ocarina played by a shepherd, somewhere in the sloping hills.

MONKS & MONASTERIES

Having covered two fascinating aspects of Sikkim, we turn our attention to Buddhism for the moment and investigate the mysteries of the monks and monasteries. **Rumtek**, an excruciating but exhilarating 20 km away, is the largest monastery of Sikkim; this colourful and artistic edifice is perched on a picturesque hill facing Gangtok. One sees monks aged anywhere between seven and 90 years, going up and down the steps, engrossed in prayers, fluttering flags, some walking to the sunny

courtyard and swinging prayer wheels. The prize possession of the monastery is a ceremonial black hat, which is a revered relic of the Karma Kaju sect at Rumtek. It is believed that after the first Karmapa meditated in a cave for several years, 10,000 fairies visited him, each carrying a strand of hair, which were woven into a black hat. This hat has been passed down the ages, and it is kept now at the monastery. It is said that the box, much like the proverbial Pandora's Box, is never opened because the monks believe that the hat may sprout wings and fly away!

Early next morning we went to two other monasteries, **Phodong**, 40-kms from Gangtok, and **Lachung**, further north. Famous for mask dances, in Phodong we saw artistically executed frescos and murals on the temple walls though the dance festival had just wound up and the monks were on a retreat. Driving further, we stopped en route at **Chungthang** for the night, hemmed in on all sides by towering snow-clad mountains. This charming hamlet has a large rock with the imprints of foot and

alleged hand of Lama Nanak (Guru Nanak, who is supposed to have visited the place an eternal spring).

We climb the 3,600-feet steep slope to Lachung the next morning, shivering in our woollens as there was a perceptible drop in temperature. Driving through cascading waterfalls and harvested fields, we were lucky to see the monks practising their dance movements for a festival at the monastery. Swaying to an ancient rhythm, with familiar ecstasy, an intangible sense of joy and buoyancy seems to accompany their dance movements... It is so infectious that we join in with wild abandon.

FORESTS & VALES

"A trip to the north is not complete if you don't visit the **Yumthang Valley**,"

Below: Bright Ponsettias against the majestic Kanchenjunga. Facing page: A blooming lady-slipper orchid (above); The Phodong monastery (below). Opening pages: The beautiful Tsomgo Lake, en route to Nathu La. Next page: Children celebrating the peppercorn harvest.

Photography: Rita Sawhney



fastfacts



Access: By Air: The nearest airport is Bagdogra, in West Bengal, 124 km from Gangtok. Indian Airlines operates 5 flights a week between Delhi and Bagdogra. The flights via Guwahati operate on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays while the direct flights are on Mondays and Fridays. There are two direct flights a week from Kolkata to Bagdogra, on Thursdays and Saturdays. Jet Airways has 10 flights from Delhi to Bagdogra. These include a direct daily and three via Guwahati, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. They also have daily connections from Kolkata to Bagdogra.

The Bagdogra Airport is connected to Gangtok by a five-seater helicopter service operated daily by Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation (03592-222634), which takes approximately 30 minutes to reach Gangtok. **By Road:** The main link between Gangtok and the rest of the country is through Siliguri (110 kms). Sikkim Nationalised Transport Services run from and to Gangtok. Taxis are available to drive up to Gangtok from Darjeeling (90 kms, 7 hrs) and Kalimpong (70 kms, 3 hrs). **By Train:** The nearest railhead is New Jalpaiguri (148 kms), in West Bengal.

Best time to visit: March to May and October-November. The mountain views are stupendous from October onwards, but the rhododendrons bloom only April onwards and fade away by August. So, choose.

What to see: Apart from the various monasteries and lakes mentioned in the main feature and in the box, there are the Saramsa Garden, Fambong Wildlife Sanctuary (25 kms from Gangtok), Deorali (orchid sanctuary), Pelling (133 kms from Siliguri, between Pemayangtse and Rimbi Waterfalls), Kanchanjunga Waterfalls, Sigshore Bridge, Dentam Bazaar, that can be explored, depending upon the time available.

What to do: Mountain-biking, Hang-gliding, yak safari, white water rafting and kayaking on Teesta and Rangeet Rivers, special interest activities like study of orchids, wildlife and butterflies. **Trekking:** Trekkers huts are located at Pemayangtse, Khecopalri, Yuksam, Tsokha, Dzongri, Thangshing, Zemathang, Chaurigang, Tashiding, Varsey, Yangang, Rabongla, Sang and Sikip. Some of the well-mapped trekking circuits include the Monastic Trek, Rhododendron Trek, Khanchendzong Trek and Coronation Trek. **Driveways:** Siliguri-Gangtok, Gangtok-Rumtek, Gangtok-Tsorno-Nathu La. **Mountain Flights:** Sikkim Helicopter Service (SHS) runs five-seater helicopters for Yumthang, Khangchendzonga and Gangtok.

Getting around: The best way to commute in Gangtok is on foot. Unmetered taxis are available in the town.

Accommodation (STD code 03592): High range: Hotel Norkhill, Palzor Stadium Road. Ph: 225637, 220064-65. Fax: 225639. Email: newelgin@cal.vsnl.net.in. Hotel Tashi Delek, M.G. Marg. Ph: 222991, 224156-58. Email: slg_htdelek@sancharnet.in. Netuk House, Tibet Road. Ph: 222374, 226778. Fax: 224802. Email: netuk@sikkim.org. Tibet, Palzor Stadium Road. Ph: 222523, 223468. Fax: 226233. Email: htltibet@yahoo.com. Central, National Highway 31 A. Ph: 222105, 222553. Fax: 222240. Email: central@dte.vsnl.net.in. Martam Village Resort, Gangkha (5 kms beyond Rumtek). Ph: 222314, 236843. Fax: 224391. Email: martam@dte.vsnl.net.in. Shambhala Mountain Resort, Rumtek (23 kms from Gangtok). Ph: 252240, 252243. Fax: 252275. Email: sikkim@ahmedindia.com. Hidden Forest Retreat: Lower Sichey Busty, Gangtok. Ph: 205197. Email: enquiry@hiddenforestretreat.com. Website: www.hiddenforestretreat.com. Chungthang and Lachung: Lodges and small hotels in the small village.

Eating out: Specialities like the Tibetan Thupka and Momos. 'Cchang' and 'Thongba' (hot drink from fermented millet), are the local beverages to be sampled. The eating out options include Metro Fast Food, Blue Sheep, Khoochi, Parivar Restaurant (Pure Veg.), House of Bamboo and Coks Inn (M.G. Marg), Porky's (National Highway), Yak's Restaurant & Bar (Tibet Road), Snow Lion (Hotel Tibet), Oberoi's Barbeque (New Market), Wild Orchid Restaurant (Hotel Central, 31A NH).

What to buy: The state emporium is a good place to buy hand-woven carpets, *chokees* (finely carved tables), *thangkas*, bamboo and cane crafts. Temi tea, Alpine 'GOUDA' cheese, and cardamoms are must-buys. If you like yak cheese, you can add it to your list. Silver 'Dragon Rings' available with most jewellery/ souvenir shops are a popular buy. Try to visit the Directorate of Handicrafts, in the heart of the bazaar, and watch craftsmen working on handicrafts. Main shopping areas include the Lal Bazaar, Super market, New Market. **Festivals:** Loosong-Sikkimese New Year (Dec.), Teesta Tea & Tourism festival in winter, the dance festival of Chaam and Loosar Tibetan New Year (Feb.), Saga Dawa (May/June), Drukpa Tseshi (July).

Travel Tips: Foreigners need an Inner Line Permit to enter Sikkim. Do not stay at high altitudes, unless acclimatised. Carry sunscreens and hats, as sunrays are sharp at high altitudes. Drink copious amounts of water.

Sikkim Tourist Information Centre: Sikkim: Mahatma Gandhi Marg, Gangtok. Ph: 03592-222064, 223425, 225277. Fax: 225647.

New Delhi: New Sikkim House, 14, Panchsheel Marg, Chanakyapuri. Ph. 011-26115346.

says: Tsering, our local guide, "particularly the Singba Forest Reserve at 12,000-feet, and some 25 kms away from Lachung." Weary to the bone, we still decide not to miss this marvel, it is truly a sight to behold. Rhododendrons of every hue fill the valley; dwarf

varieties coexist alongside tall trees, and to top it all, there are therapeutic hot springs to soak ourselves in, to thaw the cold and tired limbs. As a farewell salute to the sacredness of the area, we bow our heads at the Shiva Temple, at the farthest end of the valley, and give in to

the soothing stillness of the night. Ecologically a sensitive area, the wild beauty of Yumthang enthralls, yet one cannot tarry for long. As the sun goes down, cold winds grip us, and we hurry back to the more hospitable terrain, contemplating... ●