



Majestic Darjeeling

Sandip Hor travels back in time to the days of the British Raj

In the late 18th century, the British colonisers established Calcutta – as it was then known – as the capital of their empire, but soon found the heat of the Gangetic Plain unbearable during summer. So they picked Darjeeling – a cooler region, at the foothills of the Himalayas – as their summer sanctuary. By virtue of its pleasant climate, gracious lifestyle and spectacular scenery – dominated by the snow-capped Kanchenjunga, the third-highest mountain peak in the world – it was titled ‘Queen of Hills,’ and soon became a sought-after destination.

Darjeeling grew up with a typical Victorian character. At 2,076 metres above sea level, the hilly landscape was soon filled with palaces for the British Governor General and Indian Maharajas, colonial office buildings and ornately gabled bungalows for the affluent. Alongside them were hotels, restaurants, clubs and shops that flanked winding thoroughfares.

The European missionaries found its serenity an ideal base for education, and they built boarding schools.

Then, Scottish and English tea planters moved in, to make Darjeeling synonymous with tea, like French wine and Swiss chocolate.

Even after one-and-a-half centuries, not much has changed here, other than

the increasing number of visitors, and touches of modernisation in infrastructure and lifestyle. The crest of Kanchenjunga still turns golden at dawn, and its sighting often ranks at the top of any visitor's itinerary. The supreme view is captured from Tiger Hill, about 600 metres above Darjeeling.

Miles of rolling hillsides covered with red rhododendrons, sparkling white magnolias, lush green tea plantations and exotic pine forests, all gleaming under the blue sky, randomly flecked with rising mist and falling clouds... yes, they haven't changed much, either.

Today, this vista can be enjoyed from a pretty long ropeway system that is fitted with passenger cable cars. As the tea business continues to enjoy boom times, modern-day planters don't mind hanging out at the Planters Club, built in 1868, while elite schools like St. Paul's and St. Joseph's still draw talented students from India and abroad.

Unquestionably nature's awe dominates any Darjeeling visit, but there are other attractions to relish as well.

Most rewarding is a visit to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute. A pilgrimage for hiking enthusiasts, it was established in honour of Nepalese-born Indian Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay, after he and Sir Edmund Hillary conquered Mount Everest, in 1953.

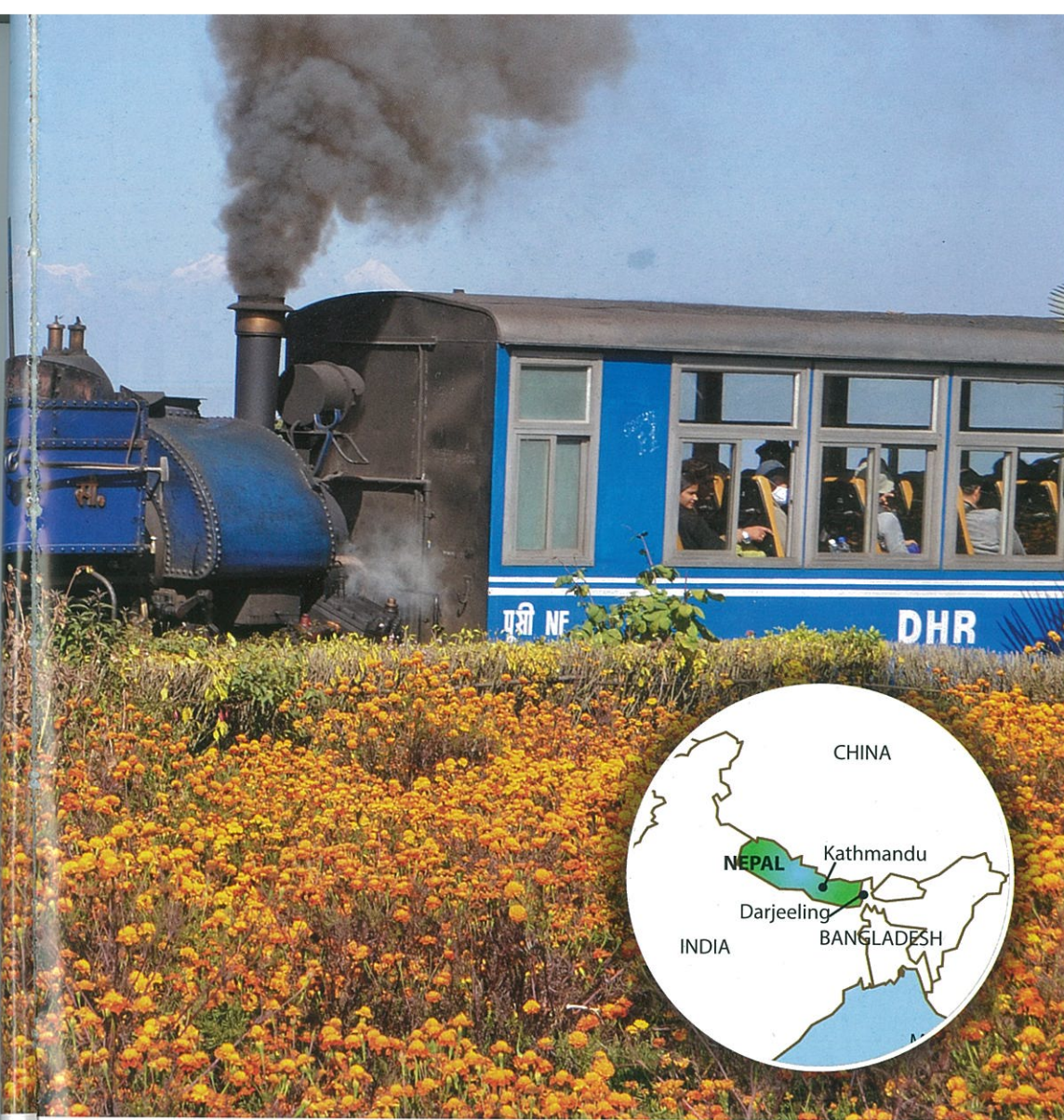


DARJEELING PICKS

STAY Heritage plays an important role, when discovering Darjeeling. This is best experienced by spending a few nights at the Elgin Hotel. Built in 1887, as a summer retreat for the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, the hotel is a living celebration of the elegance and grace of the British Raj era. Restored to its original grandeur with etchings of Douglas, lithographs of Daniel and period Burma teak furniture, a stay at the Elgin adds an enthralling flavour to the Darjeeling experience.

EAT Savouring a meal at the 100-year-old Glenary's Restaurant, a landmark in Darjeeling, is a ritual in itself. Though continental cuisine is its speciality, the bakery products here are equally inspiring. Another venue worth visiting is Keventer, which is famous for its hot chocolate milk and cold meat cuts.

RIDE A ride on the Toy Train – which connects New Jalpaiguri, in the plains, to Darjeeling – is an experience that shouldn't be missed. Fuelled by steam locomotives, this World Heritage listed railway has run since 1881. It takes seven hours to complete the 50-mile route. Run by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway on narrow gauge, the journey offers scenic splendour and glimpses of local life, as it steams through rolling hills and tea gardens. Shorter distance travel is possible as well.



While the institute is a training ground for mountaineering students, the lure is a museum stocked with artefacts and climbing displays that recount thrilling stories of many expeditions to Himalayan mountain summits. Next door is a zoo, which is home to rare species like Red Pandas, Snow Leopards and Tibetan Wolves that live in the snow-clad regions of the upper Himalayas.

The ethnic population of Darjeeling comprises people from neighbouring Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan, who call their land 'Dorji Ling' (the land of the thunderbolt). Their religion is Buddhism, so the quarter is home to many Buddhist temples, monasteries and stupas. Some of them are pretty expansive, and showcase an extensive range of artwork.

The most famous is Yiga Choeling Monastery, which exhibits wonderful murals and is home to some 30 monks from the Gelug School. Built in 1850, the monastery enshrines a five-metre high statue of *Jampa* (Future Buddha) and 300 beautifully bound Tibetan texts.

It is located at Ghum, eight kilometres southwest of the Darjeeling town centre, called the Mall. Surrounded by myriad shops selling locally made winter garments and handicrafts, it is the domain where tourists and locals laze around and socialise in the sun, while children ride ponies. At the top of a hill is Mahakal Temple, a revered shrine for Hindus which is visited by local Buddhists as well.

The sheer beauty of Darjeeling enthralled writers, artists, painters and photographers. Celebrity visitors included Rabindranath Tagore, Mark Twain and Edward Lear. Their creations have certainly contributed to Darjeeling's popularity.

Lear's painting *Kanchenjunga* from Darjeeling, which is displayed at a gallery in the US, inspires many foreigners to visit Darjeeling.

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