



## Seeking out Sikkim

BY JEREMY TORR

**W**ant some living history in your travel? Simply take a trip far north, to Sikkim, and you can curl your toes under a duvet like the Sikkimputtee Raja did back in the 1800s, in the Elgin Mount Pandim hotel. Not only that, you can also sit by a real fire, sip a nice cup of tea and relax while gossiping about your day spent spotting birds and plants, just like any Victorian botanist would have done 150 years ago. It's like being transported back in time.

The Elgin Mount Pandim, on the

outskirts of Pelling, served as one of the recreation spots the Raja and his family would escape to when the affairs of state got a tad tiresome. Just as then, turbaned waiters hover and pour tea from silver pots, a uniformed gardener adjusts the sunbeds so that, should you wish, you can watch the sun turn Kanchendzonga (the third highest peak in the world) into a glittering iced-cake show just across the valley. At least it looks like it's just across the valley because the air is so clear. It's actually more than 50 kilometres away.

But getting access to all this delightfully colonial pampering takes a certain degree of determination and perseverance. To reach Sikkim, the nearest airport is at Bagdogra, West Bengal. Trains get you to New Jalpaiguri. Then hire a jeep or car.

My companion, Jayne, described the road as "quite bumpy." She's quite right—it is very bumpy in places; in other places it doesn't really exist. Avalanches are common. Local road-mending teams are assured of plenty of work patching things up, and the Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department follows closely behind them, planting azaleas, poinsettias, rhododendrons and primulas at the side of the road to create a brilliantly coloured backdrop as you drive.

The journey to Pelling from Bagdogra takes over four hours, although the distance is just over 150 kilometres. The scenery along the way is breathtaking. You can only wonder at the stamina of those Rajas and British botanists who would have done the trip without the luxury of jeeps, as we did. The road snakes out of river valleys, over thousand-metre ridges, back into the next valley and so on until you have no idea which direction you are going.

Luckily there are so few roads you can't get lost, and eventually you arrive in Pelling, hungry (there are no food stops—this is wild country) and utterly amazed at the way tiny collections of houses cling to almost

perpendicular valley walls at regular intervals along the way.

T.B. Subba, local climate change expert and general secretary of the Hee Bermiok Tourism Development & Heritage Conservation Society, tells us that most of the people live outside towns and don't have roads leading to their houses. This means they have to walk everywhere; there are connecting paths between houses. "It keeps the people very fit," he points out unnecessarily.

This also means they have to carry everything home—doors, tables, roofing sheets, pots, food, goats, sheep and so on. Because of this, the people of Sikkim are very careful about waste—there is virtually no litter, since nothing is thrown away and everything is recycled. Most people are almost completely self sufficient, even any food waste goes to the local pig and its manure to the vegetable garden.

Once you have accepted the fact that you will need to do plenty of climbing and walking, Sikkim offers history, botany, geography and culture like almost nowhere else. Not far from the Elgin Mount Pandim is the 300-year-old Sanga-Choling Monastery, where acolyte monks blow traditional horns and drum a welcome to the morning's sunshine whilst sipping masala tea.

Further down the road is Rabdentse, one of the ancient Chogyal capitals of Sikkim. Dating from the late 17th century, it still sits squat and forbidding on its hilltop, oozing history



The snow-covered Kanchendzonga mountain is the third highest mountain in the world.

and ancient power struggles. Stroll back downhill (for a rest) and your path will wind through patches of cardamom, rice, potatoes, onions, even oranges and bananas. And there's all the mighty snows of Kanchendzonga over the horizon. Truly amazing.

"The beauty of this place is that it still offers remote, unspoiled destinations," says Raj, who runs Help Tourism, a company that works to involve local people in making tourists welcome. "If we can encourage the kind of tourists who like all the things Sikkim has to offer, that will help stop people moving away into towns and elsewhere," he says.

Which, if you like sipping tea and

### Need to Know

**Getting there:** By air to Bagdogra, West Bengal, then jeep or car.

**Cost:** Elgin Mount Pandim, approximately Rs15,000 per night including dinner and breakfast (includes a comforting porridge!).

**Seasons:** Five! Spring (Mar-May), Summer (June-Sept), Autumn (Sept-Oct), Winter (Nov-Feb), Monsoon (Oct-Nov). The best time is late March-June or September-December.

watching mighty Himalayan snows with a dash of history thrown in, can only be a good thing. It may not be an easy journey, but it's definitely worth the trip.