

# TEA AT THE TOP OF THE HIMALAYAS

Darjeeling might be synonymous with a certain beverage but, as **Diana Preston** reports, there is more to the region than its leaves

## Essentials

### GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies twice daily from Heathrow to Delhi from £645 return. Jet Airways (0808 101 1199; [jetairways.com](http://jetairways.com)) flies daily between Delhi and Bagdogra from £110 one way; between Bagdogra and Kolkata from £57 one way; and several times daily from Kolkata to Delhi from £115 one way. If you would prefer to avoid bumpy roads, Sikkim Tourism operates a helicopter service between Bagdogra and Gangtok (£50 for the one-hour flight).

British nationals require visas for India ([in.vfsglobal.co.uk](http://in.vfsglobal.co.uk)) and an additional permit for Sikkim. For convenience obtain your Sikkim permit in the UK at the same time as applying for your Indian visa or in Darjeeling, where it's a painless formality. You can apply at the border but will need to provide photos and copies of your passport and visa. Additional permits are required for trekking in some areas.

### PACKAGES

I travelled with Greaves Travel (020 7487 9111; [greavesindia.co.uk](http://greavesindia.co.uk)), which offers tailor-made itineraries in India. A 12-night tour to Darjeeling and Sikkim, including stays at the Glenburn Tea Estate and the Oberoi Grand Hotel in Kolkata, a return flight from the UK to Delhi on British Airways, all internal flights between Delhi, Bagdogra and Kolkata, most meals, transport and English-speaking guides, costs from £2,500 per person.



Gangtok. In Kolkata The Weavers Studio Centre for the Arts (0091 33 2440 8926; [weaversstudio.in](http://weaversstudio.in)) has revived the complex art of making chintz, which requires a separate printing for each colour.

● A walking tour of Kolkata ([calcuttawalks.com](http://calcuttawalks.com)) will open your eyes to the many facets of an extraordinary city often overlooked by visitors.

### THE BEST HOTELS

Be ready for treats, from "bed tea" first thing in the morning to snifters of local cherry brandy on arrival in quaint hotels recalling days long past. Prices vary according to the season.

### DARJEELING

#### Windamere Hotel **££**

An enchanting collection of Raj-era buildings on Observatory Hill; originally a guesthouse for planters, with pretty gardens. An excellent bolt-hole for Christmas if you find yourself in India and don't want to miss out on turkey, though the Indian food is excellent too (0091 354 225 4041/225 4042; [windamerehotel.com](http://windamerehotel.com); from £125 full board per night).

#### Glenburn Tea Estate and Boutique Hotel **£££**

Near Darjeeling, accommodation is in the original Burra Bungalow – the planter's house – or the new bungalow set among terraced gardens on the 1,600-acre estate with magnificent views of the tea terraces and the mountains (33 2288 5630; [glenburnteaestate.com](http://glenburnteaestate.com); double full board from £290

per night, including full board, chauffeur-driven car from Darjeeling, Bagdogra or Sikkim, nature walks, a tour of the tea factory and excursions).

## THE INSIDE TRACK

- The best times to visit are October/November for good views of the mountains and March/April for orchids and rhododendrons, though December to February can be lovely if chilly.
- Temperatures rise and fall steeply depending on the altitude and time of day so dress in layers and invest in a handwoven woollen shawl from one of the handicraft centres for a modest £8 or so.
- Take a good sunscreen and insect repellent – midges and mosquitoes can be a problem, especially at dusk.
- If you want to ride the toy train book well in advance. There are only 45 seats and they sell fast.
- Don't waste money on expensive imported gin but sample Indian Blue Riband. Sikkim-brewed Dansberg lager is also excellent.
- For books about the Indian Himalayas browse in the atmospheric Oxford Book and Stationery Co on Chowrasta in Darjeeling – a Himalayan Hatchards.
- To sample and buy tea try Darjeeling Tea Corner, Chowrasta, or nearby Golden Tips.
- Handicraft and curio shops are everywhere. The best are the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre on Darjeeling's Gandhi Road and The Sikkim Handloom and Handicraft Development Corporation at Zero Point in

## GANGTOK

### The Nor-Khill **££**

Built by the King of Sikkim in 1932 as his official guesthouse, with blue brocade sofas, gorgeous painted pillars and ceilings and views towards Kanchenjunga (3592 205637; elginhotels.com; from £110 double full board per night).

## PELLING

### The Elgin Mount Pandium **££**

Once owned by the Sikkim royal family, facing Mount Kanchenjunga, with lovely grounds, friendly staff and a short walk from Pemayangtse monastery (3595 250756; elginhotels.com; £100 double full board per night).

## KOLKATA

### The Oberoi Grand Hotel **£££**

Perfect peace and teak-panelled, marble floored imperial grandeur in the heart of the city with a palm-fringed pool and atmosphere in spades (33 2249 2323; oberoihotels.com; doubles from £260 per night).



# DISCOVER INDIA

My best and most panoramic view of Kanchenjunga and its surrounding peaks came in the hill resort of Pelling, another six hours to the west and just 27 miles from the mountain. After rising at dawn (again!) to watch the first rays of the sun gilding

Kanchenjunga, I followed a winding muddy track up to Sanga Choling monastery. Founded in 1642, it is not only Sikkim's second oldest monastery but also one of its loveliest, with delicate interior murals of figures dancing within rings of fire and outside the magnificent backdrop of the Himalayas.

From Pelling it was back through the foothills to

Bagdogra for the short flight to Kolkata, where the Darjeeling tea I'd been drinking throughout my journey is auctioned. The rooms where the first tea auction was held in 1861 are long gone. Today auctions are still held every Tuesday and Wednesday in Nilhat House, a tall blue and white office building, even if much dealing is done electronically.

## WHAT TO AVOID

- Never drink the tap water or even brush your teeth with it. Most hotels provide bottled mineral water in rooms.
- Don't discount what local guides say about the time it

- takes to travel between places. Distances are quite small but roads are narrow, winding and in poor condition and rain can cause landslides.
- Don't forget to change

- enough money before leaving Darjeeling. Opportunities for foreign exchange in Sikkim are limited and some hotels are reluctant to accept credit cards.