

Darjeeling:

Queen Of The Himalayas

By: Dominick A Merle

Ah, the fireplace is roaring, a hot water pouch has heated my bed and I've just drawn the twin blankets up to my chin. Oops! Forgot to make sure the windows are locked so the wild monkeys won't jump in. They've been known to slip into bed and snuggle up right next to you, some claim.

No, this is no daydream or wild hallucination. This is simply India, and India is never simple. By 10 a.m. tomorrow, I'll be down to a T-shirt and flip-flops, drenched in sunblock cream. I'm in Darjeeling, the so-called queen of the Himalayas in northeast India. On a clear day, there is a magnificent panoramic view of the entire mountain range. Just outside the city, at a spot called Tiger Hill, the tip of Mt. Everest can be seen in neighboring Nepal. The peak appears to be more a part of the sky than the Himalayas. At more than 7,000 feet above sea level, Darjeeling can be so nippy at night that hot water pouches have long been standard bed equipment. Wild monkeys are also standard burglars and potential bedmates. A sign in the room of my hotel, The Elgin, strongly advised securing the windows at bedtime to keep out the furry invaders.

Besides the unequalled sweeping view of the entire Himalayan range, Darjeeling's next claim to fame is tea, for which it is known worldwide. There are more than 75 tea gardens surrounding the city, and the tea harvested here commands the highest rates at public auctions held each week

in Calcutta and London before being exported throughout the globe. The tea pickers are

primarily women from Nepal, who earn less than \$2 a day, a paltry fee but much more than they could earn in their own land.

No. 3 on Darjeeling's tourist attractions is its 125-year-old "toy train," a steam engine awarded UNESCO's Heritage status, the only one accorded to a vehicle. One can ride the train from here to Siliguri, about two hours south, as it chugs along at elevations ranging from 500 feet to 7,000 feet.

Construction of the narrow gauge line was concluded in 1881. Prior to that, Darjeeling's only link to the rest of India was over a rugged mountain road. The original steam engines are still in use, albeit at a leisurely pace, and snake through colorfully named spots like "Agony Point" and "Sensation Corner". Throughout the trip, the Himalayas serve as a dazzling background.

But as with most cities, Darjeeling is perhaps best explored by walking. With a population of about 750,000, it has tripled in size since I last visited here 10 years ago. But the central square, called the Chowrasta, and the narrow winding roads leading down from it, haven't changed much.

I stopped at the very same bank where I exchanged money 10 ➤



Tea lady

قائفة الشاي



Tea man

صانع الشاي



Sewing man

الخياط

years ago, and had to sign what looked like the same musty blue ledger in several places before I could proceed to the next two cages upstairs and finally obtain my rupees.

Walking down the sidestreets I passed a number of familiar businesses and watched the sidewalk vendors (perhaps the same ones) switch their goods from wool caps and scarves in the early morning to sunglasses and sandals by noon.

All along the way were the "deliverymen" or "coolies" as they are known by the locals. A familiar sight throughout the Himalayas, they work as freelance couriers carrying huge sacks of supplies on their backs.

They walk hunched over with the cloth handles of the sacks over their foreheads to ease the load. You pay according to the distance and weight.

There are several monasteries on the outskirts of the city, the most famous being the Yiga Choeling Tibetan Monastery, built in 1875 and home to an enormous statue of the Buddha wearing a sublime expression. Most Tibetan versions depict him in aggressive postures.

The name Darjeeling originated at the nearby Bhutia Busty Monastery. Early monks referred

to the region as "Dorje-ling," which translates loosely to land of the thunderbolt, and the name was eventually anglicized to its present form.

While there are only about 5,000 Tibetans living in Darjeeling, their influence is strong, due mainly to the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre on the hill slopes north of the city. It opened in 1959 following the exodus of the Dalai Lama and his followers from Tibet after the Chinese takeover.

Although the production of handicrafts is the main activity, the centre also trains artisans and operates an orphanage and infirmary for the aged.

There were only four workers when the centre began, but more than 650 refugees are there today and twice that number have left to set up their own businesses in the Darjeeling area. Actor Richard Gere a well-known supporter of Tibet is a frequent visitor.

Back at the main square, the sun has set and the locals and visitors have left their benches for warmer climes. The nighttime "winter" is not far off. Time to fill the hot water bags and seal the windows.

Darjeeling was the midpoint of our travels in northeast India. Our other stops included:

SIKKIM

About three hours north of Darjeeling lies the Sikkim border. You need a special permit to visit this restricted area, in addition to an Indian visa. The capital city of Gangtok is a laid-back town (population 50,000) with houses spilling down the Himalayas. Mt. Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, dominates the landscape. Sikkim is fast becoming one of India's hottest destinations, imbued with mysticism, obscured by thick forests and guarded by a cavalcade of "holy peaks." An eco-tourism haven, it is home to over 4,000 species of plants, almost all of them rare

TRIPURA

The second smallest state in India, Tripura is practically surrounded by Bangladesh, clinging to "Mother India" by a tiny umbilical-cord strip of land. Once a separate kingdom, Tripura joined India in 1949. Of its 1.3 million inhabitants, one-third are members of hill tribes. We visited one tribe of about 500 people called Rieng. They live simple lives-go to sleep at dark, awake at sunrise and work in the hillside step gardens during the day. Each tribe has its own language and customs. Tripura's main structural ➤



Tripura fruit stand

دكان الفواكه في تريبورا

attraction is Neermahal, a fairytale palace—literally a water palace—in the middle of a lake. Built in 1930, it was the summer residence of a maharaja.

ASSAM

With a population of 32-million, Assam is the largest of the northeast destinations and is home to the one-horned rhinoceros, its state symbol. These both beautiful and ugly creatures were almost extinct in 1900. There were only eight remaining when the wife of the British Viceroy to India began a crusade to protect the animals. Today, there are almost 2,000 one-horned rhinoceros at Kaziranga National Park in central Assam. We visited the park and were scheduled for an elephant ride to view the rhinos, but were told the elephants were "not available." As it turned out, they were being used in a census to count the rhinos, and the census takers were using that lofty perch in the hunt. We managed to tour the park from a dirt roadway and could view the rhinos and elephants only in the distance. The capital city of Guwahati, population about 2.5 million, sits on the mighty Brahmaputra, one of the four largest rivers in the world. Assam's tea estates

established by the British produce over half of India's tea.

CALCUTTA

We began and ended our tour in Calcutta, that much-maligned and often-misunderstood city that practically defies description. There are neighborhoods in this city where every street corner is a festival of life. One photo frame could include someone cutting hair, someone washing clothes, a food vendor, a snake charmer, and a rickshaw puller on a tea break etc. Traffic consists of vehicles of all shapes and sizes, some looking like they were hammered together that morning, cows, goats, dogs, pedestrians, hand-pulled rickshaws—all vying for a piece of ground. Red and green lights mean the same: proceed with caution. Each drive is a continuous series of near-collisions and perhaps a few small hits. No one stops—or can stop—for a scrape or dent. Drivers simply shout something unkind to each other and continue on. Calcutta, like India, is never simple and never boring. ■

(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO:

Visas are required for North Americans. Check with your travel agent or nearest Indian High Commission.

In addition, certain border districts like Sikkim, require additional permits which can be obtained at entry points.

Pack for both tropical and cool climates if visiting the Himalayan regions.

Large temperature swings are common throughout the day.

We flew Air Canada from Montreal to India with a stop in Zurich. Many other North American airlines have services to India with a European stop.

For more information on India and any of the regions covered in this article, go to the website (www.incredibleindia.org) and follow the links.