

SIKKIM



BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE (Left) Food on a cold day; friendly locals.

Heights of tranquility

The voices ring out clear and shrill in the biting cold, “I want to walk somewhere but my feet are going somewhere else.” I can sense the bemusement in this lady’s voice as she wonders why she has trouble coordinating her movements. But it is not just her; all of us tourists here at Gurudongmar Lake are finding it tough to even think straight.

We are not — nobody can really be — prepared for the kind of disorientation that such altitude creates. Our ears are ringing, our eyes are watering, our feet are freezing and all the hot tea provided by the Army (they are present everywhere in this region) cannot make it any better. However, the sight of the turquoise waters is mesmerizing and it is possible to forget the cold for brief seconds while looking at it.

A few adventurous (of course, some would use less kind words to describe them) souls descend the 50 steep steps to the lake and even begin a circumambulation. Me, I am content to sit on the shore high up, watching the colourful prayer flags fluttering in the breeze.

Altitude attitude

Sikkim has several lakes at high altitude and the biggest and most beautiful of them, Gurudongmar Lake, is at a breathtaking (literally) altitude of over 17,000 feet. Named after Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Dongmar, this is the most sacred of all the lakes in Sikkim.

The approach is through rough, pebbled paths over arid terrain that feels partly desert and partly lunar, along the Khangchengyao range, whose snow-capped mountains feel so close, almost within touching distance. And at the end of the arduous drive, the brilliant blue patch appears as if from nowhere, with sunlight glinting off the placid water. The lake remains frozen for most of the year except the short summer months. We have woken up at 4.30 in the morning, already bright outside the tiny hotel room in Lachen. This nondescript village in North Sikkim is the base for our trip to Gurudongmar Lake. At just less than 9,000 feet, Lachen itself feels severely cold; teeth chatter, hands feel numb, but we are excited about the upcoming trip to the lake and ignore these minor inconveniences.

Gurudongmar Lake, just over 60 km from Lachen, entails a tough journey of over 4 hours on mostly non-existent roads. The first half of the drive is easy; there is a halt at Thangu village around 7 am for rest and breakfast. Thangu, at 14,000 feet, is a new dot on the Sikkim map, having appeared only after tourism towards Gurudongmar Lake opened up in the last few years. It is a small hamlet with a few homes, and being mid-way to the lake, also serves as a spot to acclimatise before carrying on towards an even higher altitude. In a tiny room in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by snowy peaks, we are fed piping hot *momos* and endless cups of tea by smiling shy locals. An hour later, there is another pit stop, this time at a small military unit which also has a café managed by the Army. “Welcome to the best-managed world’s highest café at 15,000 feet”, claims the board proudly. This is a very short break, unlike the one at Thangu, since everyone is eager to get on. Furthermore, local legend has it that it is essential to return from Gurudongmar Lake by noon, since stones start flying in the severe wind after that. And when we do leave the lake,

FACT FILE

HOW TO GET THERE:

■ Fly to Bagdogra from any of the major Indian cities, connecting via Kolkata or Delhi, from where Gangtok is just over 120 km, or 3 hours by cab. Opt for a 3-day package from a local tour operator in Gangtok for the trip up to North Sikkim, including travel, stay and food.

WHERE TO STAY

■ The Fortuna (<http://www.fortunalachung.com/>), Himalayan Residency (<http://www.himalayan-residency.com/>) and Apple Valley Inn (<http://www.applevalleyinn.in/>) are comfortable and affordable hotels; there are no luxury hotels in Lachung or Lachen.

WHAT TO EAT

■ The tour package usually comes with all meals included, either at the hotel or at local homes along the way. While on the road, be prepared for basic meals like Maggi noodles and ‘momos’.

well before noon, I am still tottering unsteadily, my brain doing its own private jig.

Valley of flowers

The next morning, we are headed to Yumthang valley and we have moved to Lachung village in preparation. After that nerve-racking ride to Gurudongmar Lake and all the discomfort caused by high altitude, we are sure that this drive is going to be easy. And so it is, comparatively speaking. For one, it is a mere 24 kilometres away from Lachung village, and Yumthang is also at a much lower altitude, just less than 12,000 feet.

This route is very pleasant, through roads lined with rhododendron trees in full bloom on either side. Dubbed “the valley of flowers”, this area comes under the protected Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary (home to over 24 species of this flower) and is especially pretty during the early summer months when the ground is covered with flowers of all colours. Herds of yaks graze peacefully along the sides, unfazed by curious visitors who point their cameras at them; the driver says that this used to be only a pasture for yaks before tourism suddenly burst onto the scene.

The Yumthang valley is the quintessential postcard panorama. Snow-capped mountains surround the valley from all sides while the Yumthang river flows placidly in the middle. Tiny flowers blossom in clumps from the green grass, with small carpets of yellow and purple as far as the eye can see. The water of the Yumthang is crystal clear, a blue-grey speckled with green that looks deceptively inviting, since it is freezing cold even in peak summer, as we discover when we tentatively step into it.

As we leave Yumthang, I turn around for one last look at this stunning pastoral scene. Like everywhere else in Sikkim, colourful prayer flags flutter in the breeze, as if waving a cheery goodbye to me.

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EXQUISITE Pristine blue waters of Gurudongmar Lake in Sikkim. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR