

Sunday Herald travel

The city with changing names

It's Leeuwarden in The Netherlands. Also called Ljouwert and Liwwadden, it has at least 220 variants, collected over the centuries, in its name bank.

HIDE & SEEK



DIP YOUR FEET The road from Gangtok to Yuksam is dotted with dozens of lush waterfalls.

**Will she see it?
Will she not?
Playful weather
veils CHARUKESI
RAMADURAI'S
wish to take in
the splendour of
the Kanchenjunga
range from the
Sikkim town of
Yuksam**

Yuksam is everything we expect it to be — quiet, pretty and back-of-beyond. Given that it has been raining on and off since we left Gangtok early in the morning, it is not surprising that Yuksam is under a thick cloud cover when we reach. Our hotel manager points to some invisible spot in the distance, claiming that Mount Kabru can be seen on good days.

By the time we finish lunch, it buckets down. Since we can't step out in the heavy rain, we lounge in the balcony of our room, while the mountaintops play hide-and-seek with the clouds.

Cut to a couple of days ago. Everyone in Gangtok is puzzled when we mention our plans to visit Yuksam. Are we avid trekkers? No way. Then why do we want to spend time in that tiny village with "nothing to see or do?" Someone suggests Pelling and others loudly second that choice. But the large hotels and the tourist crowds that Pelling promises are precisely why my husband and I have decided on Yuksam instead.

No hurry

Our grand plan is to zip in and out of Pelling — after Yuksam — for ringside views of the mighty Himalayan peaks said to be clearly visible from that town, particularly the Kanchenjunga (also spelled locally as Kanchendzonga). But here we are, playing Scrabble and drinking *chai* instead, waiting for the rain to stop.

Later that evening, we head out towards the single main road that passes through the village of Yuksam. The few tea shops that also double up as restaurants and rendezvous points for all visitors are buzzing with action. We walk into Guptaji's little nook and order tea and chilli-cheese toast, the perfect rain snack.

Kanchenjunga DREAMS



NOT CROWDED HERE (Clockwise from left) The bridge to Khecheopalri Lake. The lake is considered a sacred spot among locals; snow-covered peaks; Yuksam is the perfect getaway from the tourist crowds of more popular towns in Sikkim, such as Gangtok and Pelling. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Over *chai*, we chat with a long-bearded, long-haired foreigner in flowing saffron robes. Puri, Varanasi, Gokarna, Goa, everywhere in India, I come across such foreigners, most of them in search of their own personal *nirvana*. As it turns out, Greg is an American artist who spent several years in France before moving to Varanasi. And at Yuksam, he says he has found the sense of peace that has eluded him so far in chaotic India.

We then resume our walk down the road till the end of the village, stopping and being stopped by small children who stare with unbridled curiosity, the bolder ones practising their English with a tentative "Good Evening! Where you come from?" We pass several small restaurants offering genuine Italian food (fresh salads and home-made pasta in the middle of nowhere) and travel agencies providing trekking assistance. Yuksam is the starting point for the trek to Dzongri and Gochala

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through the Kanchenjunga National Park. The next morning, the hotel is a beehive of activity, as porters pack things for the large group just starting off on the arduous seven-day trek. We wave the intrepid trekkers off with cheery words of encouragement and walk back to Guptaji's. As the lazy morning of more tea and toast morphs into another rainy afternoon, we decide to pack our bags and head on towards Pelling after all.

No prying eyes

On the way, there is a quick detour to Khecheopalri (also called Khechubar) lake. Also known as the wishing lake, it is held sacred by both Hindus and Buddhists. Unlike other lakes like Changu (Tsomgo) closer to Gangtok, there are no tourist traps around here; no yak rides, no wheeling vendors, no trinket stalls.

The copper bells hanging near the entrance point and the prayer wheels on ei-

ther side of the path feel welcoming. While several people are offering silent prayers at the lake, a solitary priest is sternly instructing a woman on the ritual she is supposed to be performing. It is still heavily clouded and the sky is a white blanket, the lake a lifeless green with feeble reflections of prayer flags along the edges.

After the peace and quiet of Yuksam, Pelling does not seem inviting at all, and so we drive further down to Yangte. Though Yangte is a pleasant hamlet, we are in for a disappointment again, since the mountains which seem within touching distance from our hotel are all covered in cloud and mist. It is only later in the evening that the magic happens; the mist lifts suddenly as if the clouds have been blown away by the mighty puff of an invisible giant.

In the distant mountains, it snows. And the peaks, so far gray hazy shapes, slowly turn white in front of our eyes. Narsing, Pandim, even the Kabru that eluded us



IT'S THE WEEKEND Buyers at the Sunday market in Geyzing, a buzz of activity; (below) local produce at the market.



Fact File

Getting there

- Fly into Bagdogra in West Bengal, or take a train from Kolkata to New Jalpaiguri, from where Pelling (roughly 140 km) is five hours by cab.

Best season

- The winter months between October & March offer clear skies and great visibility for Kanchenjunga and the other peaks.

in Yuksam, all the peaks glitter in the late evening sunlight. Alas, the Kanchenjunga is not visible from Yangte, but it is so perfect in every other way that we do not think about it for now. The next day dawns bright and sunny for our trip to Pelling; our last chance to see the Kanchenjunga, especially with such clear skies. On the way, we stop at Geyzing village, the headquarters of the West district, where the weekly Sunday market is on in full swing. It is here that I meet the woman with the perfect attitude; she beckons me over and lights a *beedi* slowly and purposefully. It is less a pose and more a performance, as I try to capture her insouciance on my camera. Photo-session over, she dismisses me with a smile and gets back to the gossip session with her two friends.

However, someone somewhere is playing a cruel joke on us and just as we reach Pelling, the rain comes down with a ferocity we have not seen in our last few days in Sikkim. We take shelter under the awning of a local restaurant and watch local boys carry on with their football match, unmindful of the torrent. After 10 minutes, they too quit and run home, and we are left wondering in dismay if the rain would ever stop. An hour later, we give up and find a cab willing to take us back to Yangte despite the downpour.

Needless to say, by the time we near Yangte, the rain begins to let up and the skies clear, the sun peeps out shyly. Kanchenjunga has eluded us again, and we are disappointed. But hey, whoever said the best things in life come easy?