

SIKKIM

# Stranger in a strange land



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

**Hindi lessons and Tamil signboards notwithstanding, India's at a remove here. Celebrate the difference**

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Nancy is the local school-teacher at Lachung village in North Sikkim and has returned home recently after some years outside the state. She has been chatting non-stop with me in the darkness of the late evening about her school and students. Among other things, she says that Hindi is one of the languages taught in her school, as in all other schools in Sikkim now. In the middle of the conversation, she leans over and says confidentially: "It is for the Indian children, you know. Sikkimese children really don't need Hindi."

I am slightly taken aback but do not give it much thought. Till a few days later, when back in Gangtok, Norgye, the owner of the guest house we are staying in, tells me breezily, "Oh, but there is nothing much to shop for here in Sikkim, we do all our shopping in India".

In the time I spend in Sikkim, India truly feels far away—and it is not just about what the people say. Like everywhere else in the

country, children are out on the streets, but it is not cricket they are playing. It is football that rules here, the way it rules the streets of perhaps only Goa. It is Bhaichung Bhutia who smiles from posters and hoardings all over the market, kicking a careless ball and seeking votes for the reality dance competition he was once part of; from Soccer King to Dancing King, they proclaim.

Barely 2 hours out of Gangtok, on our way to Lachen—the base village for the trip to the high-altitude Gurudongmar Lake—we encounter groups of giggling, unformed children waving down our vehicle for a ride. Our driver finally stops to take in Shaily, who gets into the front seat with him and starts chatting rapidly in the local language. She smiles diffidently when I ask her a question in Hindi but refuses to answer. At school 7km away, she hops off with a soft "Thank you *bhaiyya*, thank you *didi*" and disappears through the gate. All along the route, we see schoolchildren getting into and out of tourist vehicles, hitching rides with perfect strangers. The city cynic in me is horrified but our driver says this is normal in Sikkim: "Children have nothing to fear, madam."

Apart from this distraction, the roads are quiet. No blaring horns, no overtaking on the hills, no stopping in the middle of the highway. I realize I am overly sensitive by this point but I keep thinking about how different Sikkim indeed is from the India I know. The "difference" is perhaps in my mind as much as it is in theirs.

For, in the general election last year, Sikkim had a record 83% voter turnout (compare this with just around 41% in Mumbai). In Gangtok, I keep meeting people who returned to their homes in towns and villages across the state just to vote. Sikkim became the 22nd Indian state in 1975, when the Chogyals (the royal family of Sikkim) gave up their right to the throne after 300 years—driven, people say, by fear of invasion from neighbouring China. It would be another 18 years before China finally gave up claims on Sikkim and accepted it as a part of India.

It's perhaps no accident that



**Paradise:** (from above) Non-existent roads on the way to Gurudongmar Lake; children on their way to school; and the army is a near-constant presence.

protective clothing we are ensconced in. Despite the acute discomfort, there is a desire to linger, but local legend has it that after noon the wind factor is so strong that stones start flying. And so we reluctantly head back towards Lachen village, and then back to Gangtok.

The next evening, I am strolling on MG Road, the cobble-stoned promenade in Gangtok where locals and visitors, young and old alike meet, shop and drink. I am here to shop for souvenirs—local tea and cherry brandy mainly—to take back to "India" with me. Kanchenjunga, the venerable protector deity, is an invisible presence in the far distance, revealing itself only in the post-monsoon winter months.

Sikkim, I learn, is known variously as *Sukhim* (new home) to the Nepalese, *Denzong* (valley of rice) to the Tibetans and *Ney Mayal Lyang* (paradise) to the Lepchas. It is the Lepcha interpretation that I agree with the most.

In the next few years, it will be possible to fly into the new airport coming up at Pakyong, close to Gangtok. Enhanced connectivity with the mainland may perhaps infuse a greater sense of belonging among locals. For now though, I have to make that long drive to Bagdogra for the return flight. Entering West Bengal, the cacophony of cab horns and traffic jams sounds unnaturally loud after two weeks of peaceful driving on Sikkim roads. Close to the airport, painted signs by the road say "Be Indian, Buy Indian". I think they could have just as easily been "Be Indian, Bye Indian".

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**CHILD-FRIENDLY RATING**  

 While Gangtok passes muster, the high-altitude conditions of North Sikkim may not be suitable for young children.



the army is omnipresent in Sikkim. Most of the state is served by the 19th regiment from south India and the signboards and slogans on the rocks are written in Tamil, perhaps to keep the soldiers motivated. In conversation with one of them (in Tamil), I get a sense that these army men feel as much strangers in this part of the country as I do; the bitter cold, language, food and terrain all unfamiliar, perhaps even inhospitable.

After a pit stop at the "The world's highest cafe at 15,000 feet", proudly managed by the army, we pass only bunker after desolate bunker on our way to Gurudongmar Lake. There are no signboards to show where we are headed. Our driver forges ahead on the rocky terrain on what seems like pure instinct. The landscape is stark and stunning, the snow-capped mountains of the Kangchengyao range seem within touching distance.

TRIP PLANNER/SIKKIM

Fly to Bagdogra from New Delhi or Kolkata (Rs6,000 and Rs 3,850 respectively for round trips on Kingfisher Ried). Or take a train from any of the major cities to New Jalpaiguri, and hire a cab (around Rs2000 for a 3.5hr ride) or ride a chopper (Rs1,500 per head for 35minutes from Bagdogra airport; bookings to be made at the Sikkim Helicopter Service booth at Bagdogra just ahead of flight. Call +91-3592-222634 or visit [www.sikkimtourmet.com](http://www.sikkimtourmet.com) for details).

Stay Do

For the best local experiences, consider homestays or small guesthouses in Gangtok. We stayed at The Shire Guesthouse (<http://theshiresikkim.com>) which has rooms for Rs1,500 upwards per night per couple, inclusive of food. The Tashi Taggy Guesthouse ([www.tashitaggy.com](http://www.tashitaggy.com)) offers excellent chowmein and local cuisine. If you are inclined towards the comfort of large hotels, options include The Oriental ([www.orientalsikkim.com](http://www.orientalsikkim.com)), doubles from Rs2,200) or the upmarket Mayfair Gangtok ([www.mayfairhotels.com](http://www.mayfairhotels.com); Rs26,999 for 3 nights and 4 days).

Take a day to visit the monasteries in and near Gangtok—Enchey, Phodong, Rumtek—and another to visit the China border in the East through Nathu La and Tsomgo Lake. Spend your evenings on the pedestrians-only mall road (Mahatma Gandhi Road). All trips to North Sikkim and Nathu La need permits which can be arranged by local travel agents along with tours.

In North Sikkim, drive on surreal lunar terrain to Gurudongmar Lake and take a picnic basket to the picturesque Yumthang Valley of Flowers, a rhododendron sanctuary. Closer to Gangtok, you can take white-water rafting expeditions on the cold waters of the Teesta. Make this another day trip from Gangtok, or as we did, stop en route to Bagdogra airport on your way out and end the trip with a bang. Of course, you get to the airport drenched and have to change before they let you into the aircraft!

GRAPHIC BY ANWID RAZA KHAN/MINT