

# Bliss in the Hills!

Gangtok, Sikkim's capital, does not impress at first sight. It rather grows on you—teasing you with its ancient monasteries, magnificent waterfalls, misty trekking paths, and the promise of sighting the elusive Kanchenjunga.

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As one enters Gangtok after a long drive through winding mountain roads flanked by giant coniferous trees, eclectic sights greet you—colourful Buddhist prayer flags, groups of maroon-robed monks going about their daily business, playgrounds filled with football enthusiasts, promenades packed to the hilt with shoppers looking for a good bargain, and tourists queuing up to eat piping hot *thukpa* and *momos*.

## Sights and sounds

To experience Nature at her best, head to the glacial Tsongmo lake, around 40 km away from Gangtok; its name means 'source of lakes' in the Bhutia dialect. Soak

in the serenity of the place, click photographs, or ride a yak. From the Tashi viewpoint, a picnic spot, spectacular views of Mount Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga) can be enjoyed best.

Those interested in wildlife should not miss the Deer Park, which is close to the new Secretariat building. It is home to several animals native to the region. Deer, red panda, and the Himalayan bear can be spotted in the huge, open enclosure here.

If you are in Gangtok during the monsoon, the Seven Sisters Falls is worth the 32-km drive. It is a charming

sight—seven waterfalls gliding gracefully, and the gurgling, crystal-like waters creating their own symphony.

One of the best of its kind in India, the Temi Tea Estate is known for both its light, aromatic tea and spectacular views. Sipping a hot cuppa of this organic *chai* and enjoying the view of cherry blossoms can be a blissful experience.

If interested in day trips, then head for Yumthang or Pelling. Located 140 km away from Gangtok is the breathtaking expanse of the Yumthang valley, which stands bathed in the glory of rhododendrons, primulas, orchids, and various other flora. Pelling is approximately 117 km from Gangtok. Soul-soothing, gorgeous views of the mountains make it a relaxing retreat.

### Pilgrim's progress

Gangtok is known for its Buddhist monasteries, the most famous being the 200-year-old Enchey monastery. The deities here are the Buddha, Loki Sharia, and Guru Padmasambhava. From here, you can catch a kaleidoscopic view of Mount Kanchenjunga as well. In West Sikkim is situated the Dubdi monastery that offers a peep into the rich legacy of Buddhist culture.

Another place worth visiting is Norbugang Park. This magnificent complex has a huge prayer wheel, a temple, and a throne that is believed to be the original coronation throne (*norbugang*) of the first *chogyal* or King of Sikkim.

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology is a towering example of Tibetan architecture. The museum attached to it has a huge collection of Tibetan art, manuscripts, architecture, and books. It is visited by researchers on Buddhism from across the globe.

### Bushwalker's backyard

Sikkim is as much a paradise for adventure-seekers and water sports enthusiasts as it is for Nature lovers. River rafting, trekking, mountain biking, hang gliding, and yak safari are the various adventure options. North Sikkim is often explored by mountain bikers, and the turbulent waters of the Teesta and Rangeet rivers offer a thrilling challenge to rafting enthusiasts. The banks of both the rivers are lined by thick forests, and small villages ideal for setting up camps.

With an altitude ranging between nearly 6,000 ft. and 28,000 ft., the Kanchenjunga National Park is a trekking enthusiast's delight. Walking down the course of the Bhusuk river or up to the Tashi viewpoint too provide a refreshing break.

### Native flavours

If you are a keen shopper, you could pick up knick-knacks from Mahatma Gandhi Marg, Kandoika, Lall Market, and New Market. You could pick up many a souvenir here—a



*The serene Seven Sisters Falls located at the historic site of Kabi Lungchok in North Sikkim.*



*Enchey Monastery, literally meaning 'the solitary temple', is one of the oldest monasteries situated 3 km northeast of Gangtok.*



*White stupa at Yumthang, the 'valley of flowers,' which is located at a height of 11,800 ft above sea level.*





*River rafting down the white waters of the Teesta.*

*Enjoy a yak safari along the Tsongmo lake.*



## Summer Carnival

Since 1981, the Sikkim Department of Tourism has been organising a tourism festival in May every year. The White Hall in Gangtok hosts festivities ranging from traditional Sikkimese dances and music programmes and films to exotic flower shows and art and craft exhibitions. An ethnic food festival, yak safari and river rafting, as well as various competitions make the event a mixed bouquet.

dragon set; *Thangka* paintings; Tibetan woollen carpets; small wooden, carved tables called *choktses*; jewellery or gems; tea from Temi Tea Estate; alpine cheese, a sweet and fruit-flavoured cheese made from pure cow's milk; fresh jams and juices; or Sikkim Fireball special brandy, a fruit-based alcoholic beverage uniquely packaged for you.

Food lovers will have a wide variety of specialities to choose from—*thukpa* or *gya thuk*, which is Tibetan-styled noodles in soup; momos; *kinema*, a fermented soya bean dish; and *sishnu* soup made from edible varieties of nettle.

So pack your bags for an exotic, fun-filled holiday at Gangtok. Glimpses of natural beauty and cultural richness are sure to make your trip memorable.