



TANIA BANERJEE

High on Sandakphu Peak



Photo by Sayan Banerjee

A Mani wall in the meadows of Chittrey.

The rumble of crackling thunder woke me as I tried to sleep close to the summit of Sandakphu. Through the thin, translucent nylon sheet inches from my face I saw the hazy dance of lights. Like flaming arrows they came down from the sky. The intervals between the thunder were filled by haunting silences, like those before a calamity. Rain hammered hard on the tent as the wind howled. In the dark night the only barrier between me and the raging nature outside was about to collapse.

It all started four days earlier when I disembarked at New Jalpaiguri Railway Station in West Bengal. As my car snaked along the Himalayan roads, the clouds opened up and drenched the roads and valleys. I had been thankful.

After all, I had come here to escape the scorching summer of the Indian plains.

Sandakphu, at a height of 3635 metres, is the highest peak of West Bengal and the Ilam district of Nepal. On a clear day, Sandakphu offers enthralling views of higher Himalayan peaks like Kanchenjunga, Lhotse, Makalu and even the mighty Mount Everest.

Dew drops on tea leaves were sparkling in the morning sun when I started my trek from Jaubhari the next day. Sandakphu was 30 kilometres away. I was about to gain an enormous amount of altitude on the first day, from 1950 to 2880 metres. As I began the trek through the dense forest, sunrays trickled through the intermittent openings between the pine needles, creating a dappled for-

est floor. The hollow silence was filled by my heavy breathing. The first day of a trek is always the toughest, I had heard from experienced trekkers.

A two-and-a-half-hour back-breaking climb later, I emerged from the forest into a clearing. It was the village of Chittrey, my first chai stop. Stones carved with mantras made a mani wall, like a guardian angel protecting the land. While sipping tea I watched a train of mules loaded with sacks walk past. Otherwise, the silence was disturbed only by the occasional revving of Land Rovers. The ancient vehicles had been brought in by the British, when they set up the infrastructure for the tea estates in the area. While the car model had long been upgraded elsewhere in the world, here these



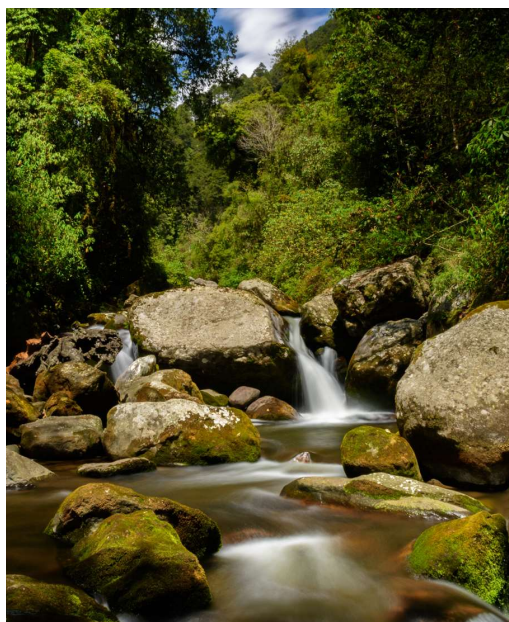


Photo by Shibayan Kayal

vintage cars remained, stuck in a time warp.

I resumed my journey through the undulating meadows. "Madam, you will be crossing over into Nepal many times now, but you will not be able to tell," said Tsangste Sherpa, my guide. The trail along the ridge gradually converged with the tar-sealed road. Bright pink and red rhododendrons adorned the trees on the slopes.

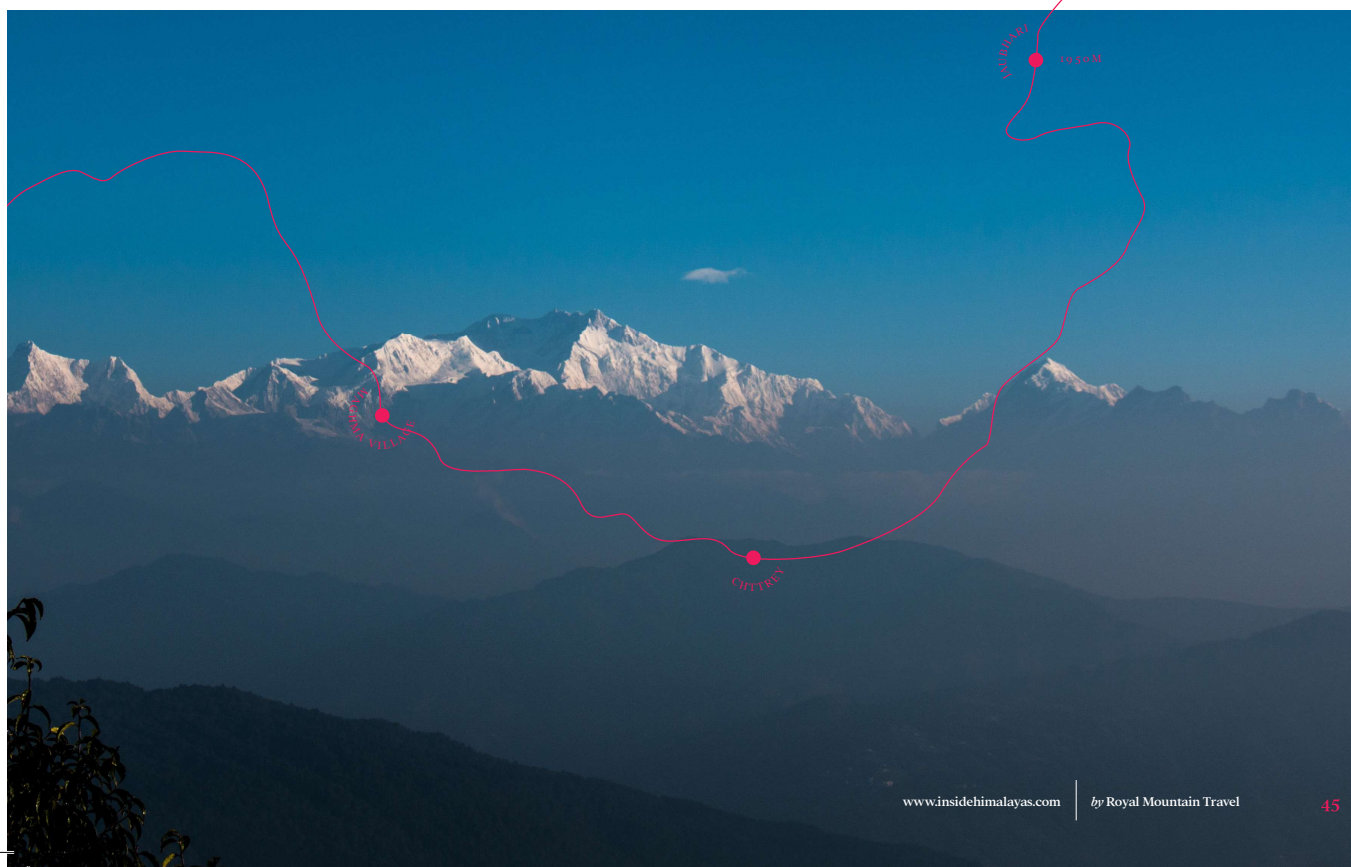
When I reached the village of Meghma, clouds were rising from the trenches of the valley, dancing in choreographed motions, wrapping me in a cold hug. Inside Meghma Dhaba a fire crackled. Phulu Sir greeted me with a warm smile. A humble lunch of rice, dal and omelette seemed like a god-send.

From Meghma I reached Tumling, my stop for the night. A clutch of trekkers' huts, or teahouses, were strung along the road. Apart from one demarcated zone along the Sandakphu Peak Trail, pitching tents is not allowed.

In my teahouse, I turned on the tap, bracing for cold water. Not a drop fell. This region suffers from an acute water crisis. However, garbage disposal is the bigger problem. In recent years, shops selling packaged food have cropped up, but as the nearest dump yard is far away in Siliguri, plastic waste is severely challenging the sensitive eco-system here. As my own small contribution I

Photo by Abhinandan Chatterjee

Kanchenjunga on the horizon.





refused packaged food like Maggi noodles, and stuck to eating omelettes and momos. I carried a waste bag with me as I walked, and every day I filled it with rubbish, from broken beer bottles to chip packets, all ugly non-biodegradable trash that should have had no place in the beautiful Himalayas.

Daybreak in the mountains happened surprisingly early. I was supposed to hike 13 kilometres and rise to an altitude of 3169 metres the next day. On a clear day, Tumling offers stupendous views of snowy peaks. But I was unlucky—the peaks were sheathed beyond a veil of clouds tinged the colour of gunpowder.

Twenty minutes after leaving Tumling I arrived at the gates of the Singalila National Park, which runs north-south through this part of the Himalayas. It is home to the endangered Red Panda, leopard, wild boar, barking deer, and more than 120 species of birds.

The trees here wore crowns of red, pink, and white flowers. I kept a fast pace on the gradual ascent along the ridge. Sometimes, a different kind of traveller here takes stealthy lifts from unsuspecting slow trekkers: the wet climate is a breeding ground for bloodsucking leeches.

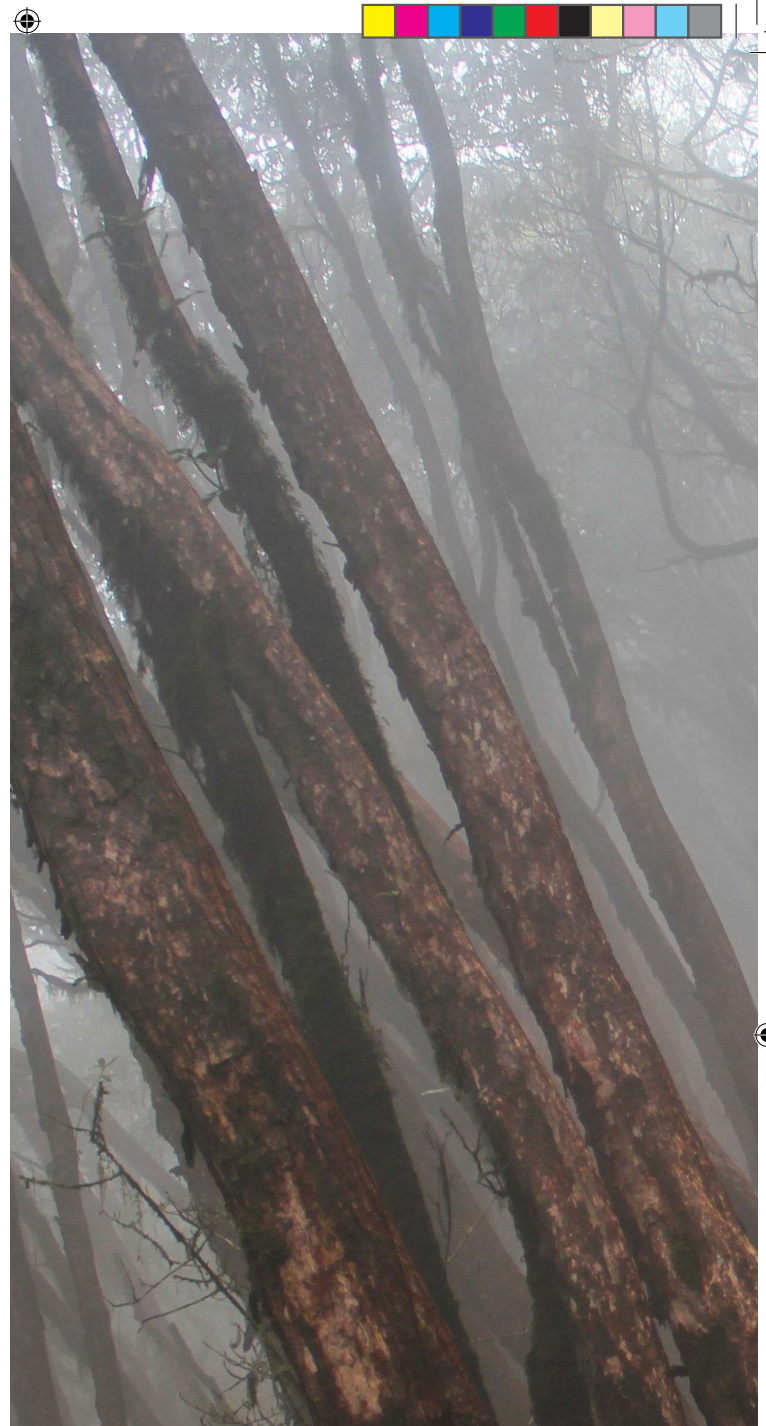
While steering through the red rhododendron foliage, I kept a sharp eye out for the elusive Red Panda. I walked over carpets of red petals strewn along the stony path. The locals here have found a unique use for these red petals. At our breakfast point in Garibas, while devouring a plateful of piping hot momos, I noticed bright pink liquid inside mottled glass bottles. Rhododendron wine, they call it. A quick sip sent a wave of warmth down my throat, and a strong pungent aftertaste lingered. I could see bits of rhododendron flower dispersed in the liquor, a litre of which costs INR 250. Red rhododendron petals are also collected and steamed inside a kettle and mixed with a local millet beer called tongba.

From the store I could see the road that had cut the village into two countries: India and Nepal. Garibas is a peaceful village shared between the two. There are no rigorous checks here, no soldiers or sense of insecurity, as there are in some other Indian border regions.

Satisfying my hunger and quenching my thirst, I hiked up the slopes again for an hour. The rattling of my breath scared me. At that moment of pain, I secretly cursed myself for wanting to know what a land without borders looks like.

Clouds hanging low in Singalila National Park.

Photo by Sayan Banerjee



It was almost evening when I reached Kalipokhari, a village around a lake of the same name. In the wooden dining hut, trekkers made merry. Sushant, an employee, ran in and out of the kitchen, often singing Hindi songs with us, and once started dancing to the tune of 'Resham Phiriri', a popular Nepali song. Entranced by the rhythm of the drizzle outside, I sang songs alongside Sushant, making most of the rainy evening somewhere between Nepal and India.

The weather was still dull on the summit day. I set out on the last leg of the trail, a mere six-and-a-half kilometres, apparently

the shortest stretch. In the valleys below, India and Nepal converged and diverged. The route uphill from Bhikeybhanjan became very steep. My legs protested. Two hours later, I could see the summit was already populated with trekkers, cheering others on as they took their last steps to the top. My body was ready to give up, but I held on to my willpower. With every step, the cheering grew louder, as did the tension in my muscles.

Tears streamed from my eyes when I took the last victorious step, the claps and cheers drowning out the noise of my pounding heart. I was finally at the top. On



Photo by Shibayan Kaya

two sides of the road were two signboards signifying the respective countries, India and Nepal. Kanchenjunga was still sheathed in clouds.

After summiting, I descended to my campsite. On a grassy meadow I set up my tent near a gazebo, the only concrete structure in my otherwise wild surroundings. A few metres ahead of my campsite was a timber hut housing a Nepali family. They kept me well fed and provided me with drinking water. In the evening, the fire burning in their hearth kept me warm. As the night became windy, I retired to my tent and curled up inside my

sleeping bag, only to wake up to nature's full fury. I had to be evacuated from my tent that night, and ran through the screaming gale to safety in the wooden hut.

A shaft of light streamed through the window in the morning. The sky was an azure blue, the clouds no longer grey. In the thin air I stood in the open field and there, finally, peeking through the puffy clouds, were the white peaks of the Kanchenjunga family of the Himalayas, known as the Sleeping Buddha.

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