



The Flight of the

Hornbill

Come December, Nagaland turns into a riot of colour.





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THE LITTLE lad sitting in front of us in the stands of the Naga Heritage Village stadium, huddled in his mother's protective embrace. A pregnant hush quivered over the crowd as the head hunters of Nagaland, their bodies covered with tattoos, marched in a single file into the arena. The mere mention of the fierce tribe that inhabited the North East reaches of the country was enough to send a shiver of apprehension through the packed arena where the annual Hornbill Festival was being held. For even though the fierce, give-no-quarter warriors had renounced their head-hunting ways, their reputation preceded them. Our neighbour in the audience leaned over and whispered conspiratorially that in certain parts of the state our heads could well end up as trophies in a warrior's hut.

This troop of head hunters spared us the blood and prepared to entertain us with a simple tribal game of feeding their partners a paste made of rice. However, there was one little catch: everyone would be wearing blindfolds. What followed was a hilarious farce as the participants staggered around the arena trying to find the mouths of their partners. One 'nasty' warrior in particular seemed to stuff sticky rice in every possible part of his partner's body except his mouth. The once feared warriors had the entire stadium, including the little boy in front of us, rocking with laughter.

If there was one moment that captured the spirit of the Hornbill Festival, that was it. The event, held each year over the first week of December at Heritage Village, 10 km outside the state capital Kohima, showcases the proud heritage and cultural diversity of the state with a generous sprinkling of fun and laughter.

Troops of Naga dancers in the ceremonial regalia of tribal warriors—plumed headbands, faces and bodies painted in war paint, animal fang necklaces, menacing spears and daggers—set the stadium alight with

War dances by Naga men typically comprise erect postures with unbent knees; while the leg movements are complex, the hand movements are simple. The dancers hold silver, brass and iron ornaments to make their act more riveting.



Through a combination of traditional dance performances, crafts, parades, games and sports, food fairs, and religious ceremonies the Hornbill Festival brings to fore the culture and tradition of the tribes of Nagaland.



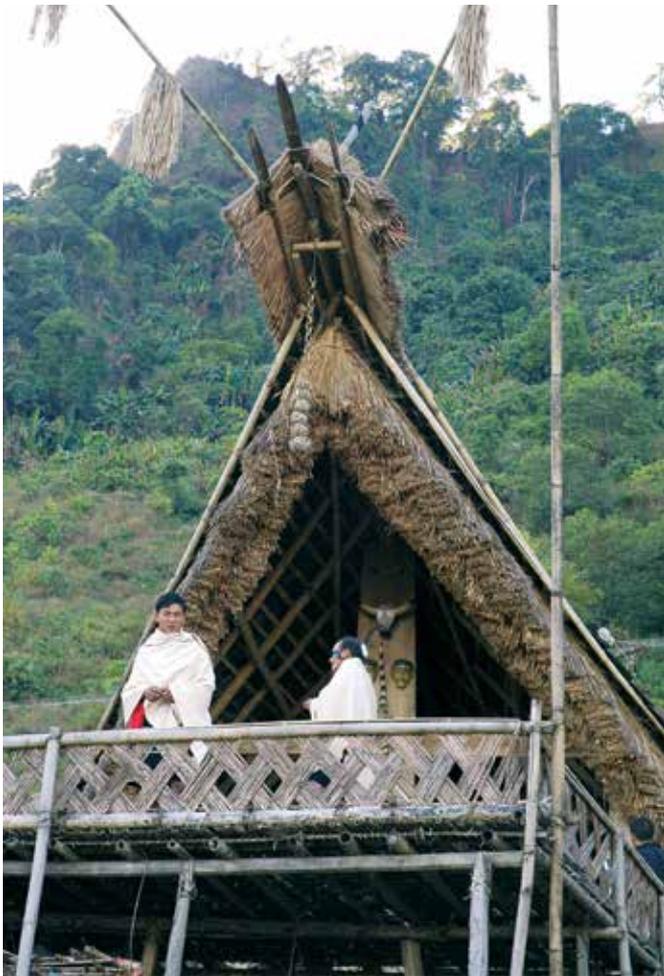
whooping chants and mock battle cries. Dancers, including dewy-eyed maidens, from all parts of the state peppered the stands as they waited their turn to take centre stage; the brilliance of their costumes adding colour to the festivities.

And strut their stuff they did! Some portrayed the lifestyle of the region: the communal ploughing of the fields, the initiation rites of a youth to adulthood, mock wedding ceremonies, simple tribal games, hunting parties foraging through the forest.

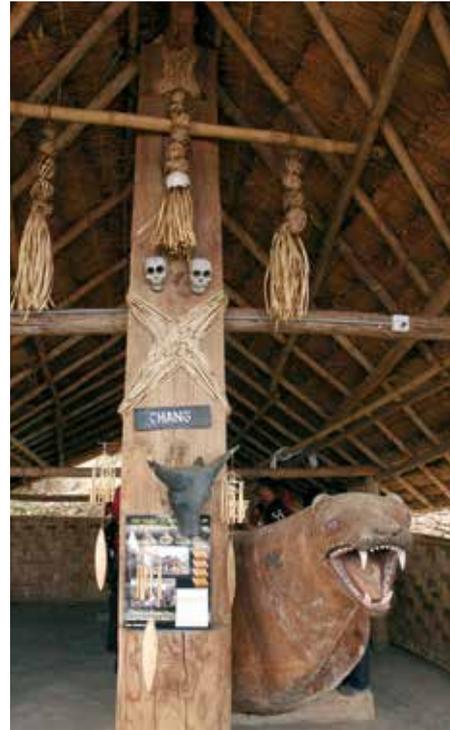
Having overdosed on culture, we strolled around the Heritage Village which exhibited the different styles of tribal Naga architecture. We were drawn, almost hypnotically, to the source of throbbing tribal drums to find a group of young boys and girls beating down in unison on the hulls of canoes that shared a thatched hut with masks, weapons, pots, pans, and the everyday utilities of a traditional home.

Pangs of hunger eventually drew us to the food court at the far end of the village. And even though the aromas emanating from the smoky wood fire kitchens got the digestive juices flowing, we entered the area with caution. This was because Nagas have exotic eating habits. They are the first to admit that they eat almost anything—dogs, monkeys, frogs. They also snack on bamboo grub, silkworm lava, and snails. So we played it safe and stayed with the vegetarian fare, washing down the spicy meals with locally-brewed rice beer served in fresh bamboo shoots.

Back at the arena, the tribal dances had made way for a traditional Naga wrestling competition where



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The Heritage Complex consists of a cluster of sixteen houses of each tribe created in the indigenous typical architectural designs and concepts with significance. The tribal house is also called 'Morung or Youth Dormitory'.

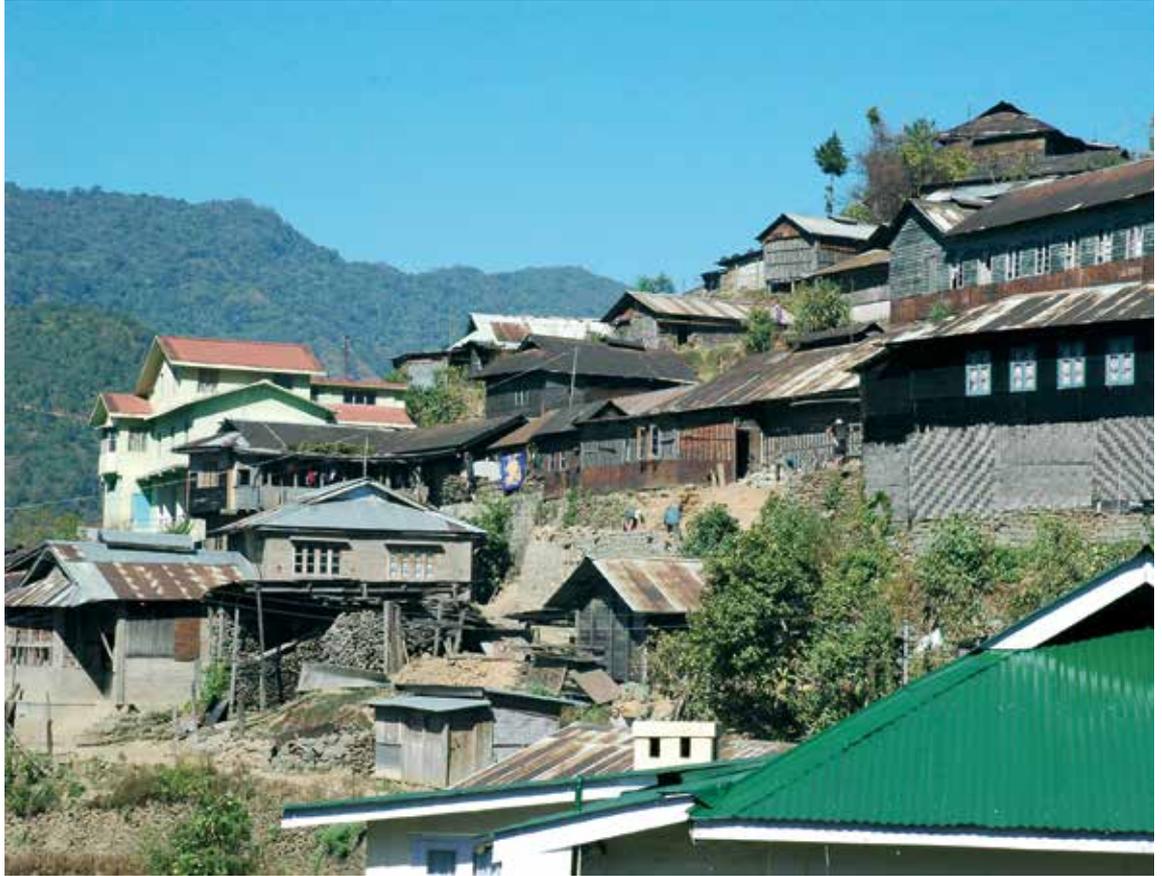
sturdy well-built men with toned muscles gripped their opponent by the waistband Sumo-style and struggled to flip them over. By dusk, after much sweat and toil accompanied by lusty cheering from the stands, a new champion had been crowned.

As darkness descended on the Heritage Village, the Hornbill Festival shifted to a hip-and-happening gear. Psychedelic disco lights flashed and the rhythm of throbbing rap music filled the air: it was break dancing time. The audience cheered wildly as young boys and girls, in branded sneakers and jeans, spun on their heads with legs flayed out towards the heavens. But it was the reaction of the elderly couple sitting to our right that stayed with us. Gentle eyes and ready smiles softened the hard lines of their weather-beaten faces. We were looking at a portrait of the Nagas: hardy as the hilly terrain yet tempered with the gentleness of earthy innocence.

The following day we decided to give the staged programme a miss and feel the pulse of Nagaland—raw, innocent, and sometimes savage. Our destination: the little village of Khonoma perched on a ridge across



Khonoma, also referred to as Khwunoria (the Angami term for a local plant), is said to be around 700 years old; spread over an area of 123 sq km, the terrain is hilly, and ranges from gentle slopes to steep and rugged hillsides.



FACT FILE

- The Hornbill Festival is held each year during the first week of December at the Naga Heritage Village, a model tribal complex situated 10 km outside Kohima.
- Dimapur, on the border with Assam, is the main airport and railhead in Nagaland. From there one must drive up to Kohima (about 60 km).
- Multiple airlines operate flights to the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati, Assam, which is the most convenient airport to reach Nagaland.
- By way of accommodation, there are a number of hotels in Kohima that cater to all budgets.
- Indians need to carry Inner Line Permits (relatively easy to obtain) to enter Nagaland. Foreigners must obtain Protected Area Permits to enter the state.

a valley from the capital city. An imposing modern church, underscoring the fact that 99% of Nagas are Christians, welcomed us at the entrance of the village.

In the middle of the two-street town stood a martyr's memorial dedicated to residents who lost their lives fighting the Japanese during WWII (there is another war memorial in Kohima dedicated to the British officers who fell in that battle). The price of stopping the Japanese army's march on the eastern borders of the country took its toll on the village as almost every adult enlisted and was either killed or wounded.

Shy, ruddy-cheeked kids smiled and waved as we trudged up a flight of steps that led to the top of a ridge where there was another memorial: this one marking the spot where a British officer was killed when trying to put down a tribal uprising at the turn of the 20th century.

Back in the centre of town, we met a couple who ran a four-room guest house and organised treks to the Dzakou region, which is transformed into a valley of wild flowers during the monsoon months. We talked for a while when our hosts' son asked us a question, "Why do people from big cities that are buzzing with activity come to Nagaland which is so quiet and peaceful?" He had answered his own question: we seek the tranquillity that he takes for granted. ■