CROWN JEWEL

What is in a name, you ask? Plenty! Manipur—which means ‘the jewelled land’—shows why its name is not just a label but a hearty sum of its parts.

Text and Photographs: Mukul and Shilpa Gupta

It takes no time for our ‘North-Indian’ hearts—used to vigorous, vehement, and aggressive bargaining—to melt at the congeniality of the shopkeeper. Here, far removed from the mainland, the haggling is good-natured with the aged seller incredibly smiling through it all, her disposition friendly and temper perfectly even. “Thoda kam (a little less), please,” we implore in a pantomime of expressions, gestures, and silent lip movement. The bemused shopkeeper responds similarly, almost. She articulates a mispronounced “toda” (the Hindi thoda, meaning little) while ‘more’ is expressed with a rise of her flat right palm, signifying that we jack up the negotiating rate. We chuckle at her attempt, she giggles into her innaphi (shawl), the deal is struck and the bamboo basket is ours.

Turns out, we came back from Imphal with a lot more than a piece of utility. We carried back an experience of a lifetime from an ancient land that was apparently even referenced in the epic Mahabharata.

Manipur, India’s outpost in
the north-east, means the land of jewels. If ever there was an apt moniker, it is this. From raggedy hills, pristine valleys, dense forests and clear blue lakes, to innumerable orchids and the Siroi lily found here exclusively, the state packs in quite a punch (just like its most famous denizen, the indubitable boxer Mary Kom). As if the abundant natural beauty was not enough, Manipur lures with a cornucopia of cultures and traditions. Its mosaic of attractions includes several dance forms—including the lyrical and devotional
Manipuri dance which depicts the *raas-leela* of Krishna and his *gopis*, and the Lai-Haraoba, meaning the merry-making of the gods, which has a dedicated annual festival—the martial arts of wrestling and sword fighting, exquisite handicrafts, and handlooms (a good place for your initiation into Manipuri culture and history is the State Museum with its collection of tribal artefacts and weapons). With weather that is pleasant all year through—summers are not too hot and winters are anything but harsh—what is not to like!

There is, of course, nothing in the world quite like the kaleidoscopic *Ima Keithel* or mothers' market where we had our genial tussle with the woman shopkeeper. It is among the largest markets run exclusively by women. Here, all manner of commodities—decorative, cosmetic, and utilitarian—are hawked by almost 4,000 women traders. While the genesis of the market is vague and obscure (some inconclusively estimate it has been around since the 16th century), there is no doubting the fact that it underlines the active role of women in Manipuri society.

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Another iconic feature of the state capital is the Shree Govindajee Temple. Dedicated to Lord Krishna, the temple is elegant in its simplicity. Originally built in 1846 using bricks and Burma teak, it has faced a series of upheavals, including loot, an earthquake, and reconstruction. As much as a thing of beauty and piety, it is a symbol of Vaishnavite influence on the state that was once a cluster of independent territories occupied by separate clans. It became a consolidated sovereign kingdom under the Meiteis in the 15th century. Known as Meitei-Leipak (Land of the Meiteis), its capital was Kangla, now renamed Imphal. Kangla Fort is representative of those days of glory. It is a heritage site that holds archaeological and historical relevance, not unlike Langthabal, right next to the campus of Manipur University in Canchipur. It is famous for the crumbling ruins of an early 19th century palace that was built by Maharaja Gambhir Singh after the liberation of Manipur from Burmese occupation. Apart from the brick-red vestiges of the palace, there are temples and other sites dating back almost two centuries. Set amid pine and jackfruit forests, it ranks high as an eminently worthy tourist destination.

Short excursions from Imphal yield sights, sounds and vistas unique to the state. Whether it is the holy land of Bishnupur with several heritage temples, or Ukhrul, bestowed with ample natural bounty including peaks and caves, the virginal Thoubal that is an ideal trekking destination, or Moreh, the gateway to exotic Myanmar, the tiny cup-shaped state holds a plethora of aces up its sleeve.

Manipur was thrust into global consciousness during World War II. Its transformation from a peaceful haven of the Raj into a site for a battle was precipitated by the Japanese who, with help from Subhash Chandra Bose’s Indian National Army, wanted to wrest Imphal from the British. Today all that remains to serve as reminders of the Battle of Imphal are two solemn WWII cemeteries immaculately maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, UK National Army Museum’s declaration of Imphal/Kohima as Britain’s Greatest Battle, and an assortment of sites, including many roads that were first tarred during the war. Even the runway at the capital’s airport is a relic of the war. However, the most epic reminder of both battle
and bravery is the INA Museum in Moirang (45 km from Imphal), once the unofficial headquarters of the INA. It exhibits a collection of photographs, correspondence and artefacts of Bose and his INA comrades—priceless for more than sentimental reasons because it was here that the Indian tricolour was hoisted for the first time on April 14, 1944.

If, however, your imagination is stirred more by geography than history, visit Loktak lake, near Moirang. Making it unique is not the fact that it is north-east’s largest freshwater lake but the incredible phumdis—floating mass of decomposing weed and vegetation, some doughnut-like, others forming islands. Larger phumdis are inhabited by local fisherfolk who have built huts, called khangpok. The Loktak is a lifeline for Manipur and it is a sight to behold as scores of fishermen set out fishing in their boats. For a bird’s-eye view of the panoramic beauty, Sendra Island is the place to be. Naturalists should also visit the Keibul Lamjao National Park, the only natural abode of the Sangai deer. It’s a large stretch of phumdi, bestowing upon it the unparalleled honour of being the world’s lone floating national park.

Since the robust weather and serene beauty alone cannot help a visitor survive, Manipur also dishes out singularly unique edibles. While the staple food of the state is rice, vegetables like different types of mushrooms, fermented fish dishes and fermented soybeans are everyday features (Hindu Vaishnavites consider fish to be vegetarian). Try iromba, a stew of veggies, bamboo shoots and dried fish, and ngri made with dried fish. Be careful of the heat though as Manipuris love peppers. Morokmetpa, a spicy sauce made of either red or green chillies and dried fish, is omnipresent.

For us, though, nothing captures Manipur’s ethos, simplicity and beauty quite like the wrinkled, betel-chewing lady who sold us the bamboo basket. She does not know it but she inadvertently taught us that the credit for shaping the destiny of a region and making it a thing of beauty goes to its residents. Of course, it helps if Mother Nature too plays along.