



# Pure and Pristine

*Sikkim—the Northeast Indian state bordering three of India's neighbours is a land known for its biodiversity. It is also host to the highest peak in India, and the third highest in the world, Kanchenjunga.*



Image: Dinodia

Text and photos: Manju Vasudevan and Lucy Rist

**T**he lure of Sikkim for most travelers is the Eastern Himalayas with its high altitude lakes, alpine meadows, and exotic wildlife. For the more adventurous, of course, scaling the Kanchenjunga ought to top the wish list.

On a humid April morning, we embarked on the five-hour jeep ride from New Jalpaiguri station to Yuksom in western Sikkim. The road traversed along Teesta, but only for a while, as if to lend perspective and a sense of belonging to the unknown terrain we were in. The tumultuous river originates in the Pahunri or Teesta Kangse glacier (above 7,000 metres) and flows south, carving ravines and gorges in Sikkim.

Yuksom is where several trekking routes start—to places like Dzongri and Tashiding in Khangchendzonga National Park. The Park's span is immense—we opened our map, and reminded ourselves that no other state in the country can possibly boast of a protected zone covering about 25% of its land area!

The air was crisp, clouds had cleared up, and the few people around were shy and laid back. Kinsong Bhutia, our local contact who runs the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, walked us to the homestay run by a young Tibetan couple. We were served an aperitif of millet beer in a large wooden mug with a bamboo straw; an earthy flavour to it and not as mild as our hostess had assured us. Dinner is mountain



A serene lake in Yuksom.

fern with Yak's cheese, nettle soup, and rice. Kinsong joined us and we were carried away in a conversation from 'organic Sikkim' to issues in fragile mountain ecosystems. He has conviction that the best way to preserve the entire Kanchendzonga range—its forests, glaciers and alpine meadows—is by treating it as a 'sacred landscape'. The idea was powerful and befitting to the mountain community in Sikkim; and made more sense than any special habitat or charismatic animal-centred conservation project we had ever heard of.

We were offered a glimpse of the snow-capped K2, the third highest in the Kanchendzonga range. Kanchendzonga is home to the snow leopard, the clouded leopard, the musk deer, and the Himalayan Tahr. Looking at it from a distance and knowing that somewhere in the folds of those mountains these animals wander about safe, brought a content smile on our faces.

Dubdi monastery is a short hike towards the east: exit the village and follow the trail past a stream and a rhododendron grove. A short way up the hill, a sudden quietude surrounded us and we noticed what a small place Yuksom is—a handful of houses and a local market further down and more monasteries around the lake. Falling into a comfortable rhythmic pace, we walked through open vegetation under the seamless sky, before veering into the shadows of pine and birch trees. The entrance of Dubdi monastery is marked by a stone stupa. Fur-

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Kanchendzonga range—its forests, glaciers and alpine meadows—is by treating it as a 'sacred landscape'.



ther up the curve, emerged a splendid sight—tall white prayer flags along an ascent of stairs, and in the backdrop, a quaint structure with painted ochre and crimson windows and pillars. Something tells you to slow down on the stone steps and listen to the flapping of the prayer flags. Peace must find its way easy into any wanderer’s mind in these mountains; no wonder the Tibetans believe that mantras on the prayer flags will be blown by the wind to spread good will and compassion to all. Inside the monastery, the serene face of Padmasambhava is encircled by lamps and vibrant wall murals.

Dusk set in early, and on our way back, we saw silhouettes of pine trees against the distant Himalayas. This is the way, we agree, to visit a monastery—on foot and never driving up a motor vehicle.

Our third evening in Sikkim, and we were standing amidst the ruins of the Rabdentse palace near Pelling. Rabdentse was the second capital of the former kingdom of Sikkim (1670-1814). Standing by the three chortens where the royal family might have offered prayers, we waited for the setting sun to paint the sky.

Before leaving Pelling and its charmless, commercial streets, we had just enough time for an early morning walk to the Rabdentse monastery. Fog was thick and there was a chilly drizzle. The trail was long and signboards, if any, were not visible in the fog, adding mystery to the experience. ■



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Above: Rabdentse Ruins near Pelling