



Paradise Now

If you are craving for a vacation in the lap of nature, surrounded by serene landscapes, Arunachal Pradesh is the ideal destination.



Lakes freeze as winter descends on the Tawang district in Arunachal.



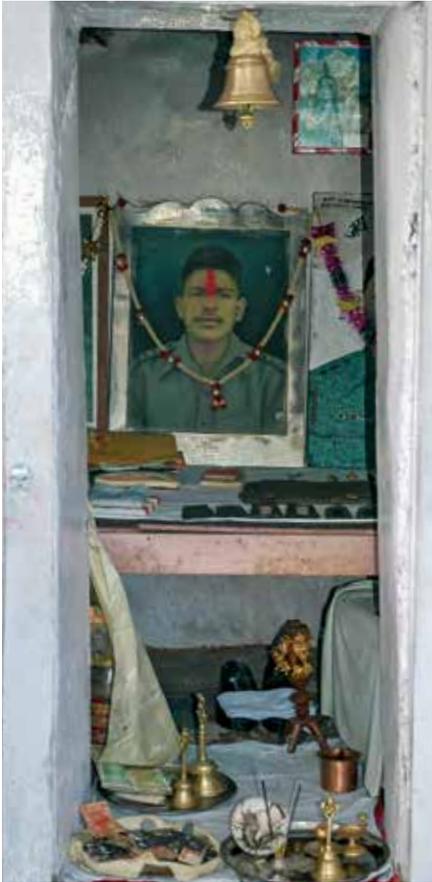
Text and Photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

A **SUSPENSION** bridge swaying in the wind over a silvery-blue river; a frozen waterfall trapped in the icy grip of winter; a ribbon of asphalt fluttering down a mountain slope; a monastery perched like a crown on the crest of a hillock; a village of five stone houses, lost in time; a local farmer, sporting headgear made of yak hair, tills the land; a herd of grazing yak...

Stop! Stop!

Our itinerary on the road to Tawang in the far reaches of Arunachal Pradesh became irrelevant as we found ourselves pulling up way too often to capture an Instagram moment or to just linger and pay homage to the savage and untamed beauty of the rugged mountainous terrain around us. Soon we realised that keeping to a schedule did not really matter in the backyard of nowhere and the tired adage ‘the journey is the destination’ did not sound so hackneyed after all.

Our easy-going, embrace-the-moment adventure started when we crossed the Assam/Arunachal Pradesh border where we were waved on after our Inner Line Permits were checked. Almost immediately, the arrow-straight road of the plains started to snake up the foot-



WE DROVE PAST LITTLE HAMLETS WITH STONE houses perched on the edge of cliffs that overlooked valleys carved out by swift running rivers.



Top left: Jawan Jaswant Singh's last-stand bunker has been converted into a shrine. Top right: At the top of Sela Pass, the main road connecting Tawang to the rest of India.

hills of the Himalayas like a giant anaconda. Any reservations we might have had about the condition of the mountain roads were soon assuaged by our driver-guide who informed us that the Border Security Forces that built and maintained them made sure they were in good shape and wide enough to move heavy equipment, if necessary, to the Tibetan/Chinese border.

Soon after the border crossing, we pulled into the orchidarium at Tipi. Though our visit was out of

season, there were enough exotic blooms to ensure we received a flowery welcome to the largest and northern-most of the north-eastern states of India. The greeting at the hotel was even more effusive as our host organised a cultural programme for his guests. Local residents dressed up in their ceremonial best—the women adorned themselves with silver heirlooms, sang and danced with shy grace, and then invited us to join the revelry at the end of the performance.

Our tryst with the hills started in earnest the next morning. The road traced the contours of the land as it coiled up the mountains painted with velvet-green vegetation. We drove past little hamlets with stone houses perched on the edge of cliffs that overlooked valleys carved out by swift running rivers. Prayer flags fluttered over suspension foot bridges that straddled icy streams. Terraced farmlands carpeted slopes, like patchwork quilts. Meadows of rust-coloured shrubs; apple and kiwi orchards glowing with white and pink blooms...

In the higher reaches of the mountains, we came upon a herd of shaggy yak and got out of our vehicles to freeze them in images. Suddenly, one mean-looking bull with rapier-like horns took exception to our presence. He lowered his head and charged. We just

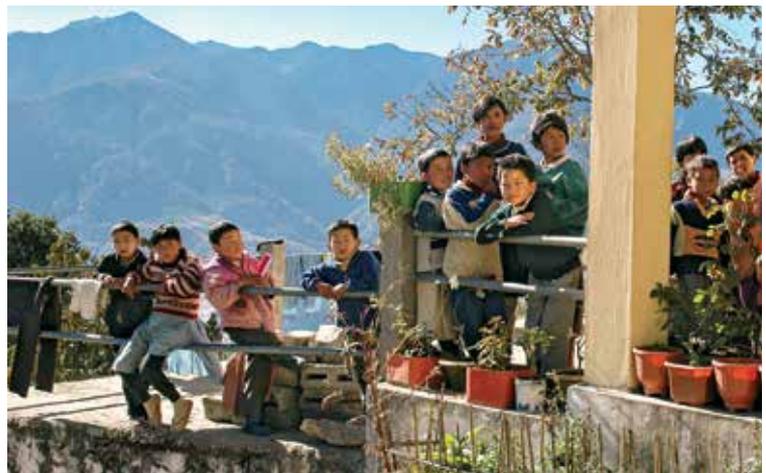


about managed to hang on to our cameras and dived into the vehicle and slammed the door shut. The beast stopped short of ramming into the bodywork of the car. Okay, we got the message—you are on the cusp of the wild and civilisation—and moved on.

The spirit of the yak was reflected in the terrain where nature grudgingly yielded ground to cultivation but retained large tracks to flourish the wild and the unrestrained. The 25-odd tribes and sub-tribes that people the north-eastern state seem to be grateful for nature's gift and live in harmony with it. Those in the central and eastern parts of Arunachal Pradesh follow the ancient religion of Donyi-Polo (worship of the sun and the moon). Buddhism is the religion of the Monpa and Sherdukpen tribes in Tawang and Kameng districts.

Ancient cultures held the onrush of an all-consuming urban civilisation at arm's length. And this was evident in the headgear of the Monpa men and women we saw—curious five-point wigs made of yak's hair to stave off snow and rain.

Finally, at the end of the day, punctuated with unscheduled stops, we pulled into our stay at a cosy little retreat overlooking the town of Dirang, nestling in the river valley below. Smoke curling out of cosy low-slung homes betrayed the fact that this was a living



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Top: The comparatively low altitude of the Dirang river valley ensures a pleasant climate. Across: Semi-wild yaks are an important part of the state's yak husbandry efforts.



Top: Wood and stone have long been the primary building materials in traditional villages. Right: Rivers freeze as the temperature drops on the road to Tawang.



village and not a Legoland created by some imaginative kid.

After a well-earned night's rest, we were off on the next leg of our journey at the crack of dawn which in this eastern-most region of the country was at 4.30 am. Yes, Arunachal Pradesh is the land of the rising sun in the Indian context. We drove down the Dirang river valley and then started to ascend the mountains towards Sela Pass (13,700 ft above sea level) in earnest. There was a dusting of snow by the side of the road and fluttering of flakes in the sky as we approached one of the highest motorable passes in the world. Icicles hung like daggers from the embankments of the road, while waterfalls froze as they tumbled down chasms.

Suddenly, our vehicle seemed to acquire a life of its own and started to skid off sheets of ice on the road. Roon, at the wheel, allowed the wayward car to flirt briefly with its sense of freedom before reining it in. We heaved a sigh of relief but it took a few moments for our heartbeats to settle down.

We drove past a lonely temple and ducked under an archway that welcomed us to the head of the pass. By the banks of the frozen Lake Paradise was a memorial to Jaswant Singh. A rifleman with the 4th Battalion of the Garhwal Rifles, Jaswant Singh sacrificed his life by holding back the advancing Chinese army in the 1962 war. He is said to have killed over 200 soldiers before he fell to an enemy bullet. In memory of the rifleman, who was awarded a Maha Vir Chakra posthumously, the bunker in which he made his last stand has

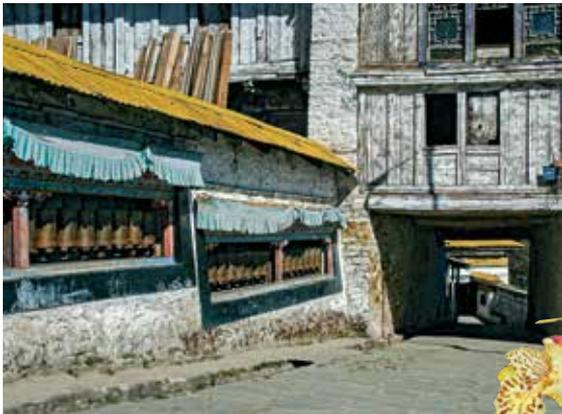
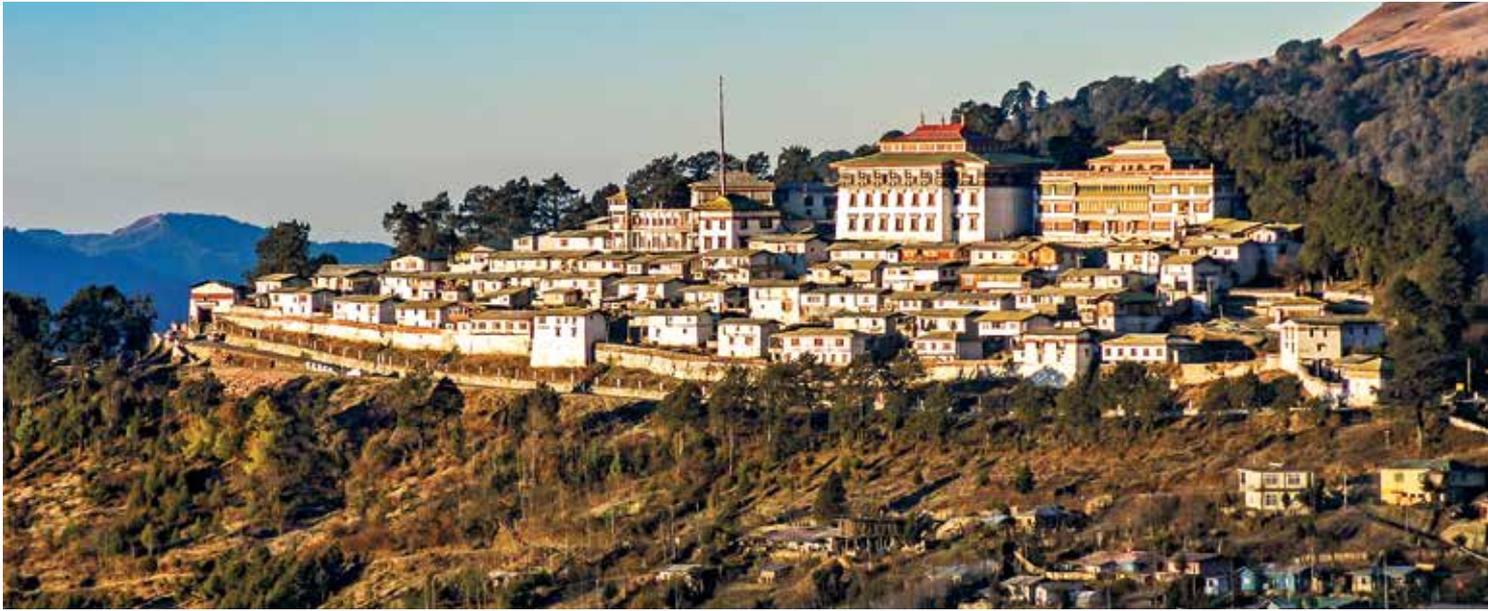
been converted into a shrine. They say that his spirit haunted the place—every morning there were signs that the bunker had been slept in, and any sentry who dozed off on duty would be awakened with a sharp slap across his face. The 'haunting' stopped on the day Captain Jaswant Singh (he was promoted posthumously) would have retired, had he survived.

We drove on through this winter wonderland showered with snowflake confetti, and stopped to admire drops of water trickling down the thousand frozen fingers of an icy cascade. On the evening of the second day, we rolled into Tawang where the 17th century hilltop Buddhist monastery, the largest in India, looked down benevolently on the sleepy town.

Early next morning, even before the sun peered over a far horizon, the snow-tipped peaks of the surrounding mountains started to blush rosy-pink. We braced ourselves in the crisp mountain air and headed off to Tawang monastery where an eight-ft high gilded Buddha kept vigil over a family of 500-plus shaven head lamas as they spun prayer wheels, lit lamps, and chanted sonorous verses from ancient scriptures.

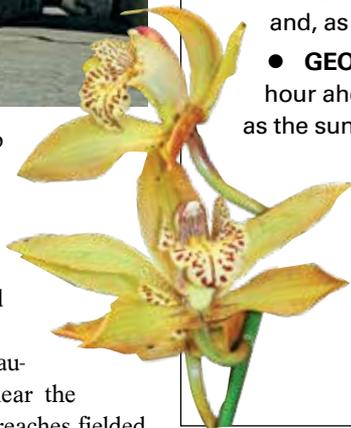
Later, we browsed through the town's colourful marketplace which was buzzing with activity—school kids skipping to school, a rosy-cheeked lama nun





collecting provisions for her hilltop monastery, farmers from neighbouring villages sitting behind mountains of vegetables, a gaggle of young girls crowded in the back of a truck, women backpacking their babies as they shopped for their daily needs.

After relishing momos at a local restaurant, we headed for the lake district near the Chinese border. The lakes in the lower reaches fielded the reflections of the surrounding snow-cuddled peaks in their mirror-like surface. The ones higher up in the mountains were covered with glassy sheets of ice. We pulled up on the banks of one and switched off the engine of our vehicle. The silence was deafening: the mountains seemed to be holding their breath as though amazed by their own beauty. After what seemed like an eternity, the deep stillness exploded as the car rolled forward and its tyres crunched into crystals of ice and snow on the surface of the road.



FACT FILE

- **JORHAT** in Assam is the closest airport to the border town of Bhalukpong on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border.
- **THE ROAD** from Bhalukpong to Tawang is well maintained by the Indian Army. A 4WD vehicle is preferable though not necessary to negotiate this mountainous terrain. Bulldozers are permanently located at the head of the Sela Pass to make sure that the road remains clear of snow for military and, as a result, civilian traffic.
- **GEOGRAPHICALLY**, Arunachal Pradesh is about one hour ahead of IST, hence it is advisable to get an early start as the sun rises and sets fairly early in these parts.
 - Indians need to obtain Inner Line Permits to enter Arunachal Pradesh. Foreigners have to apply for Protected Area Permits.
 - In a region as unexplored as this, it's best to enlist the services of a local tour operator who knows the lay of the land and can assist in obtaining the necessary entry permits and hiring the right vehicle.

At Y-Junction, a few kilometres from China, we had reached the farthest point of our incredible journey. But the adventure was not over as on the way back to Tawang, we stopped by a lake perched on a cliff overlooking the valley. Here we sat around a campfire and cupped our hands around hot mugs of tea made from melted snow and watched a sunset symphony of fiery colours play on the clouds overhead. By now, we had come to accept the fact that in paradise, the spectacular is the norm. ■

Top: Tawang Monastery is the largest monastery in India, and the second-largest in the world.