Our story of Darjeeling begins thousands of miles away from its lush valleys and snow-capped hills—in an eight-foot by eight-foot store, sandwiched between a curio shop and a jeweller, in New Delhi. The unlikeliest of places, you would think. Not really. For, an evening here is no less invigorating than a visit to the Himalayan paradise, I can promise, as I sip cup after heartwarming cup of delicate Darjeeling tea, brewed to mathematical perfection and fawning attention. My host, Vikram Mittal, is the soft-spoken owner of this very well-known tea shop in the capital’s posh residential district. He personifies his prime leaves from Darjeeling. He is erudite and proud in one cultured mix of polish and humility. And, he watches his brew over a triple-tube hour-glass array, timing it to the last grain of sand. I am meeting Vikram because a friend has said I must, if I have anything to do with Darjeeling. And I do—I am, after all, writing a travel story on Darjeeling. It seems there isn’t a tea lover within 50 miles of his shop who doesn’t stop by. There are the Japanese, the Koreans, British, Germans and the French and locals of all hues. They smell the leaves, make the right noises, sample the brew and take away armloads of tea. Darjeeling brings them together, even though they are miles away from it. Such is the pull of Darjeeling. But Darjeeling is not just its tea. It is one of the most beautiful places on earth. At nearly 7,000 feet...
above the sea, it is perched on the Himalayan foothills, at the northern tip of the West Bengal state, but you can easily call it the soul of Bengal. Part of the Lesser Himalayas, a prominent range where mountains can be as high as 10,000 feet, Darjeeling developed as a hill station and sanitarium during the British Raj. A British surgeon, Dr Arthur Campbell, is said to have introduced the tea plant to Darjeeling, in the 1840s. It took to the hills like a fish takes to water.

Stand on a hill top on a clear October morning, and you can see Mount Everest and the world’s third tallest peak, Mt Kanchenjunga, together.

On a good day, the 8,500 foot Tiger Hill, nearby, turns into a royal grandstand, as you watch the rising sun turn Mt Everest into a solid block of gold. Mt Kanchenjunga is the bonus view.

It will leave you gaping. But somehow, the glacial draft doesn’t chill you to the bone—the place has a warmth all its own. It is the easy swagger of the local bright-eyed and ruddy-cheeked Gorkhas and Sherpas that puts you at ease, within minutes of setting foot.

The place is pristine, the weather fine, the mood right and the air, oh, the air is a story in itself. Depending on where it is coming from, the air is smelling of clove-spiked tea, freshly fallen snow or smoky mist rolling downhill.

But, tea has been infused so completely into the soul of Darjeeling that you can smell it even before you see it. Eighty-seven tea estates together produce nearly 10 million tonnes of the priceless leaf. Hill upon rolling green hill is covered in a mauve blanket nearly 10 million tonnes of the priceless leaf. Hill upon rolling green hill is covered in a mauve blanket that puts you at ease, within minutes of setting foot. It will leave you gaping. But somehow, the glacial draft doesn’t chill you to the bone—the place has a warmth all its own. It is the easy swagger of the local bright-eyed and ruddy-cheeked Gorkhas and Sherpas that puts you at ease, within minutes of setting foot.

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It takes a little more than two hours to fly from New Delhi to the nearest airport, Bagdogra. Darjeeling is a scenic 90 km drive from the airport that’s primarily an air force base, but doubles as a civilian facility.

Usually, the town remains rain-drenched. If you are lucky enough and the sky clears up, there are breathtaking views of the towering Himalayan peaks. A personal favourite, however, is watching the evening mist blanket out twinkling lights that dot the hillsides. It takes the mist seconds to put out the brightness, forcing everyone to bid an early goodnight.

But no story of Darjeeling is complete without the mention of its famed toy train. Well, not exactly toy train. Pulled by a real, full-sized, vintage steam engine, it’s a fully-functional narrow gauge train of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, running daily from Darjeeling to a place called Jalpaiguri, nearly 90 kilometres away.

If the magnificence of the Himalayas and its stunning valleys don’t take your breath away, then the treacherous hairpin bends and the sheer drops most certainly will.

And if you are up to exploring, don’t miss some of the most revered Buddhist monasteries you will ever find. The oldest such buddhist centre, called the Ghoom Monastery, was built in 1875.

A day starts and finishes early here. A note to the traveller who needs night-life—you won’t get one. Darjeeling offers a handful of eateries and watering holes that down shutters early. But, the food and chang (local brew) are served with a smile. Local cuisine is as tasty as it is cheap at the tiny Bhutanese and Tibetan restaurants—they’re unique pancakes and bread. If you fancy something more posh, head to Glenary’s or Keventers’. Joey’s Pub is an excellent choice for a night cap. Residents throng there in the evening. Its affable owner (yes, he is called Joey) is a retired musician. After his band dismantled, he headed home to start his landmark pub.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in Darjeeling, do have a cuppa. Local dumplings (called momos here), noodles, thupka (noodle soup), eggs and bacon for breakfast, or roti with curry lunches—you can gorge to your heart’s content. When you have eaten enough, sit back and enjoy the brew. Depending on the season, you can sip a sparkling light yellow spring flush to the brooding coppery autumn flush. Three summers ago, a few friends and I went visiting to Darjeeling. One afternoon, a sudden shower sent us scampering into Nathmulls, a boutique tea shop. There, a smiling assistant not only offered us fresh towels, but also free samples of the estate’s produce, in dainty china.

Sometimes, I wish Darjeeling was closer by, not so many thousands of miles away. But at least, there is Vikram Mittal, and his little world of tea, right here in the heart of bustling Delhi.

If I can’t have Darjeeling, I can drink Darjeeling.