

TOURISM UPDATE



PHOTOS: SUPRIYA SEHGAL

▲ **Orange Top:** With pumpkin-covered rooftops, Khonoma has been declared a 'green village' for its effort in protecting its forests.

◀ **Welcome Home:** This guesthouse stands at the highest point of ToupHEMA village, furnishing a panoramic view of the countryside as it dips into the deep valley.

▼ **Old Warrior:** For the Hornbill Festival, Naga tribes wear elaborate ethnic costumes and colourful headgear decorated with hunting trophies like teeth and feathers.

A Date with History

Nagaland beckons with its pristine natural charm and age-old customs of its indigenous people. BY SANGITA THAKUR VARMA



Missed the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland in December 2012? Block your diary in advance for this date with history in 2013. The Hornbill Festival is held every year in the first week of December, in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. A state creation to showcase the enthralling culture of the indigenous people of Nagaland, the festival has become a magnet for tourists from all over the world. This is a platform for the 16 officially recognised tribes of state to showcase their fascinating customs and mesmerising dance forms through the eight-day-long extravaganza.

But why wait till the next festival to explore this mine of mysteries? A single trip to Nagaland is never enough—it calls you again and again to explore its mesmeric depths. The Hornbill Festival may well have become the brand identity of Nagaland, but this tiny state offers its visitors an experience of a lifetime on any occasion. Firstly, it's the climate—salubrious all through the year. What adds enormously to its charm is that it remains secluded; it is not a touristy, glitzy, overcrowded and banal destination. Making it just the right choice for a quiet,

relaxing staycation, a trek, an adventure, or a date with time. For a foreign traveller, it's the place where India's complex and rich diversity is played out in technicolour.

Stepping into Nagaland is akin to walking back in time. It's fascinating to see an almost medieval tribal island in a sea of 21st century modernity—an anachronism that has survived due to the ingrained Naga pride in their mores and roots. You come across men and women with their fierce headhunter tattoos, body piercings, totems, feathers, decorated spears, shields covered in bear skin—a scene straight out of some Hollywood classic.

Nagaland is home to several sub tribes too. For an outsider with little knowledge of Nagaland, it is easy to club all the tribes as one. However, each has a distinct identity, customs, traditions, dances and songs. Each tribe also has its own festival which they celebrate with a lot of revelry, singing, dancing and merry-making. The festivals revolve around agricultural cycles and are the means through which the Nagas have passed down their oral history.

The entire stretch of land comprising Nagaland is a traveller's delight. A weekend trip hence, is too short to unravel the treasures of this hill state. To really explore the various options—sightseeing, ecology, adventure, culture, etc., a 10–15 days' stay is recommended. For nature lovers, the best way to enjoy the scenic beauty of Nagaland is to travel by road. A flight from Guwahati or Kolkata to Dimapur is the quickest way to reach the state. Frequent shuttle trains also connect Guwahati and Dimapur.

But there is nothing to beat a road journey from Guwahati to Kohima. Fill up your lungs with the pure, clean air as the car winds its way through the verdant hills and forest en route. The short six-seven hour journey by road is unforgettable. It is best to start early and reach Kohima before dusk.

There are several hotels in Kohima and the commercial capital of Dimapur to suit every pocket. Make either of the cities the fulcrum of your stay and plan daily trips to cover the various attractions that Nagaland offers. Kohima is a two-hour drive from Dimapur.

For history buffs, a visit to Nagaland is incomplete without an expedition to the World War II memorial of the Battle of Kohima. It is unbelievable that this peaceful city once witnessed 64 days of bloodshed when the Japanese invaded

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. THE BATTLE OF KOHIMA



The sprawling World War II cemetery with 1,420 memorials at Kohima, a tribute to Naga bravery.

2. THE HORNBILL FESTIVAL



The eight-day, state sponsored cultural extravaganza to showcase Nagaland's unique history, people, ethos and mores.

3. MARKED IN STONE



Half of Longwa village in Mon district lies in Myanmar with this stone marking the Indian territorial boundary.

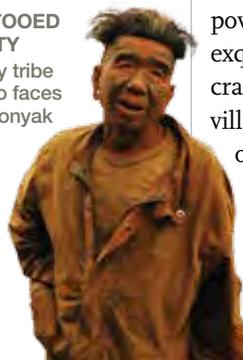
4. PROUD HERITAGE OF HEADHUNTING ERA



Trophies stored in the *Morung* (community learning space) in a village of Mon district.

5. TATTOOED IDENTITY

The only tribe to tattoo faces is the Konyak of Mon district.



Sunset Boulevard: The sun sets early at 4 pm, at this eastern end of India, as the village church bells toll calling the faithful to prayer.

it during World War II. Kohima's place in the annals of Indian history is engraved in golden letters for the bravery of its people. At an altitude of 1444.12m above sea level, today this hilly sanctuary beckons tourists with its peaceful ambience and pleasant climate throughout the year. For the adventurous, the tropical forest in and around Kohima offers a multitude of trekking and camping opportunities. Also, visit the state museum and discover the tribal artifacts, the Naga Heritage Complex at Kisama, the Heritage Museum and Crafts Centre at Khonoma, among other attractions. Nagaland's unique textile heritage can be seen at Belho Weavers. You can buy a few souvenirs for friends back home from the Sales Emporium.

Dimapur is the only district located in the plains of Nagaland and has two seasons—wet (June–September) and dry (October–May). Since there is no meteorological office in here, waterproof yourself and head for the ruins of the medieval Kachari kingdom. For the wildlife enthusiast, Rangapahar Reserve Forest and Itangki Wildlife Sanctuary (37 km from Dimapur) offer rare sightings of exotic species of endangered birds.

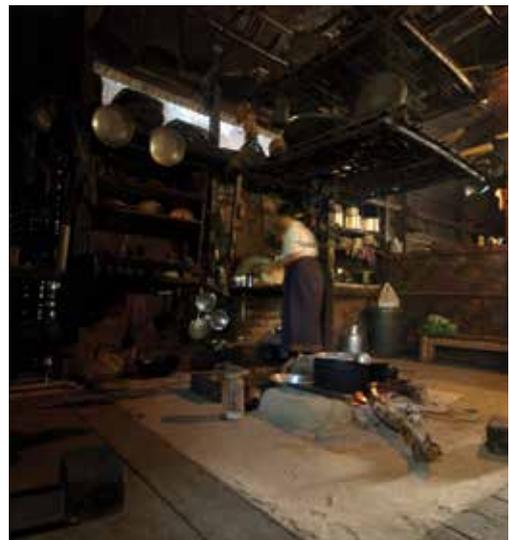
Take a trip to Mokokchung, the cultural centre of the Ao, and spend the day getting a taste of tribal life at various villages—Longkhum, Mopongchuket, Ungma, etc. Take a few sips of refreshing water from TangkumMarok or the 'spring of life' which is said to have healing powers. Mokokchung district offers the most exquisite handlooms and handicrafts by expert craftspeople of village Longkhum. A visit to this village, with the rhododendrons in full bloom on the hillocks and the precipices enraptures visitors with sheer natural beauty.



▲ **Centre Point:** The common learning space of a village, a Morung also houses hunting trophies.

◀ **Exquisite Craftsmanship:** Nagas love their ornaments and wear the full regalia at various festivals.

▼ **Welcome Warmth:** Life in Naga homes revolves round the kitchen, which literally radiates warmth.



The village markets of Mon are a visitor's delight as they give a glimpse of true Naga life. Don't miss the stone monoliths and the museum in the village of Shangnyu. And for a communion with nature, head over to the Veda Peak. On a clear day, the vista from its pinnacle is awesome—with the Brahmaputra River and the Chindwin of Burma in clear sight. There is an interesting bit of history attached to the peak. It was here that the British soldiers first built their camp and planted the first opium plants. There is also a waterfall gurgling down the slopes that adds to the peak's natural beauty—certainly one of the best locales in Nagaland.

Zunheboto is a bird lovers' destination. The Ghosho Bird Sanctuary, home to more than 20 species of endangered birds, is exclusively maintained by the villagers. From June to September a variety of migratory birds also flock to this sanctuary, guarded by villagers against poachers and hunters. Home to Blythe Tragopan, the bird on the verge of extinction, the Satoi Range is among the few virgin forests that are surviving today. April to May is the best time to visit the spot with rhododendrons adorning the stretch. A perfect spot to unwind from city stress, it offers trekking trails and camping under the stars.

Nagaland undoubtedly is a land of folklore and rituals. Phek district is another place where the tourist gets to learn about its strange mores and ethos. For a taste of the folklore, a visit to the district town of Tuensang is a must. Visit the villages there to learn about the intriguing Chang legend and check out the scene of the last headhunting, which was as late as August 1978. In Peren district, Benreu village is home to a unique endangered animist culture which has been preserved down the centuries. The village is in the midst of a thick wildlife sanctuary. Stay at the village and have a first-hand experience of true ethnic lifestyle while enjoying the wildlife treks.

Mount Pauna is the third highest peak in Nagaland. To get a view of the flora and fauna, book a cottage at Mt Pauna Tourist Village and trek up

the winding path for a breathtaking view. Glory Peak at a height of 2,600m above sea level is a popular destination for the unhindered view it offers of Mt Everest in the west and Mt Saramati in the east. The waterfalls and lakes in and around Pfutsero town add to its scenic beauty and are a big draw. Kiphire district has the highest peak in Nagaland situated at an altitude of 3,841m above sea level. Covered with the thickest virgin forest range, this mountain remains snow-capped and its beauty is spellbinding. The best time to scale its height is between October and April. While there, also visit Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary. Though small in size, it houses a wide variety of flora and fauna. Visitors can spot tigers, leopards, wild mithun, hoolock gibbons, tragopan, hornbills and a variety of pheasants. Visit the caves at Salomi and Mimi, the Wawade waterfalls and the mysterious geyser hole or LupongKhun (hole of winds). Each of the eleven districts of Nagaland has something unique to offer. There are places in the state that no tourist has yet discovered. Be the first. ■