

TOURISM UPDATE

SANDAKPHU



PHOTOS BY VAIBHAV MEHTA

▲ **Colour Burst:** In spring, Nature greets visitors with a variety of rhododendrons, orchids and giant magnolias in full bloom.

◀ **Room with a View:** The vantage point at Sandakphu which promises the best view of the Everest range.

▼ **Road to Heaven:** A narrow trekking route winding up the mountain path seems to vanish abruptly from the edge of the mountain into the vast sky beyond.

Paradise Point

For the best view of four of the five highest peaks in the world and the adventure of a lifetime head to Sandakphu. **BY RAVI SAGAR**

Sandakphu may not ring a bell for many travellers. But for the inveterate adventure seeker or the bona fide trekker, it is the ultimate destination. Tucked away in the eastern edge of India in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal is this tiny hamlet atop the eponymous peak, the highest peak in the state. So what makes Sandakphu so special?

The climb to the highest point of this hill station situated at an altitude of 3,636m promises you a sight that will leave you gasping. The arduous trek that takes three to four days to reach the point is well worth the never-before sight of Nature in all its glory.



Located to the northwest of Darjeeling town, the trek to Sandakphu packs one memorable adventure. This 32 km adventure trail along the Singalila Range is actually considered a beginner's trek, the best place for a first-time adventure tourist to begin. One of the most beautiful terrains for trekking, the best time for the Sandakphu experience is April-May (spring) and October-November (post monsoon). But the stark beauty of snow-covered Sandakphu in the harsh winter months is something (see pictures) that only the most experienced trekkers and die-hard adventurers dare to experience.

To reach Sandakphu, one actually has to begin the 12-hour trek from Maneybhanjang, known as the Gateway to Singalila and Sandakphu. It takes four days to reach Sandakphu on foot. The best way to reach the tiny hamlet is via the hill town of Darjeeling. Maneybhanjang is about 26 km from Darjeeling by road. Travellers can opt to take public transport (shared jeeps or buses) upto Sukhiyapokhri which is a one-hour drive from Darjeeling and from there change to another onward going transport up to Maneybhanjang. Trekkers can use this latter stretch as a warm-up leg, as Maneybhanjang is a 4-km trek from Sukhiyapokhri.

Maneybhanjang, a small village on the border of India and Nepal, is situated at the height of 2,150m. Tourists can take a jeep safari in one of the antique Land Rovers, a relic of the British Raj, to Sandakphu or Singalila National Park from here. If so inclined, break your journey and spend the night at one of the friendly lodges or home-stays. You can check out the Tibetan monastery and the quaint bazaar the next morning before proceeding to Sandakphu.

Starting a trek early in the morning is always advisable. If you can leave Maneybhanjang at the crack of dawn, the tea break at Chitrey at around 6 am will be rejuvenating. Breakfast can be had at Meghma, a small village; this will come as much-needed relief after the steep three-and-a-half-hour climb up the 7 km stretch. It takes another 2 km walk to reach Tonglu, one of the peaks of the Singalila Range at an altitude of 3,070m. Meghma Tea House, a small eatery, takes care of the hunger pangs and also offers accommodation. In Tonglu there is a Trekker's Hut. For those wanting to break journey for a view of the valleys of Nepal, plains of Bengal, the snow-fed Teesta River, Koshi and a number of smaller rivers dotting the bird's eye view from the peak, a night stay at Tonglu is recommended. You can catch the panoramic glory early next morning and continue your journey.

The downhill walk from Tonglu takes the trekker to Gairibas situated at 2,621m. After walking continuously for two hours covering a distance of 9 km, through scenic bamboo glades, one reaches Gairibas. From here the climb begins through the charming rhododendron forests to reach Kalipokhri, which is a further 6 km trek. It takes around three hours to reach the 'black pond', named so because of its black water which does not freeze even on the

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. TREKKERS PARADISE, PANORAMIC DELIGHT



Sunrise Lodge at Sandakphu offers one of the best early morning views of the mountains.

2. CLOUD CURTAIN



The snowy peak of elegant Mount Everest is etched out sharply on the canvas of clouds billowing around and upwards.

3. WHITE WASHED



A visit to the Army camp at the Indo-Nepal border ridge is a lesson in the rigours of life for visitors.

4. HALT HERE



Sandakphu is a tiny hamlet offering limited facilities. This is one of the few lodges available.

5. SWEET POISON

Sandakphu derives its name from the poisonous aconite plants that have beautiful purple and yellow flowers.



We are the World: The view of the snowed out valley meeting the skyline like a vast unending expanse is captivating.

coldest day of the year. The next stop is Bhikeybhanjan or the Valley of Poison. The valley has got its name from the poisonous aconite plants that grow in abundance here. The weary trekker can have lunch and take a nap before the last lap to the final destination.

The last leg to Sandakphu is a steep 4 km trek. But the path is so picturesque that it makes the whole effort to reach the peak well worth the pain. In the spring season, a walk through the forests promises a vista of trees heavy with blooming rhododendrons of various varieties, giant magnolias, spruce and orchids. Sandakphu is the only spot in the world to boast of silver fir forests, a riot of rhododendrons of different colours and types apart from 600 varieties of orchids. From this vantage point, a visitor can have a never-before view of four of the five highest mountain peaks of the world—Mt Everest, Makalu, Kanchenjunga and Lhotse. Along with these, many other peaks of Sikkim, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan are visible in a single unbroken stretch covered in snow. The view, in one word, is breathtaking.

Sandakphu literally means height of the poison plants, i.e. the aconites flowering on the highest peak in Darjeeling. The aconite flowers are in vibrant shades of purple and yellow, their beauty taking away some of the sting. There are a couple of private lodges and a Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council trekker's hut at the village atop the summit, offering comfortable accommodation and food.

The best time for this once in a lifetime panoramic date with Nature is early dawn. Step outdoors and stand on the hilltop. In the foreground you will see the deep basin with thick vegetation and pops of bright colours—the rhododendrons growing on the slopes. At the back rise the majestic mountains, unbroken and impenetrable. The towering



▼ **White Beauty:** Rhododendron trees clad in winter snow are a beautiful sight to behold.

▲ **Danger Ahead:** All paths are snowed out. Just a few metres ahead from here is the edge of the valley.

⊙ **Together We Trek:** In winter, summer or spring, trekkers are advised to stay with the group.



Kanchenjanga with her attendant peaks Kabru, Pandim and Kumbhkaran, and the graceful Everest dominate the whole range of mountain peaks. The ranges of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan form 320 km of an unbroken snow barrier but they are dwarfed by the mighty Kanchenjanga and the beautiful Everest. Smaller snowy ranges fill up the space between the two giants.

As the sunlight strikes Sandakphu, the white peaks of the Everest family in the West in Nepal, 160 km from where you stand, become awash in the red-gold hue of the sun. The Everest (29,029 ft) rises in all its glory above the valleys and ridges. You can also see the fifth-highest peak, Mt Makau (27,825 ft), rising like a huge snow pyramid, along with Mt Chamlang (24,006 ft) and Mt Lhotse, the fourth-highest peak at 27,940 ft, further west towards Nepal behind the ranges of the Everest family. Look to your east beyond the great Kanchenjanga and you will see Narsing, Donkya, Chola and Chumalhari ranges that form the Tibetan frontier. The red glow of the sun adds a halo to the mountains that look like a crown of snow reaching up in the sky. Their beauty is indescribable. Trekkers may opt to continue further to Phalut, another 23 km from Sandakphu, and camp at Singalila Pass or stay at the trekker's hut there. Phalut Summit, the tri-junction of Sikkim, Nepal and West Bengal, provides an awe-inspiring view of the snow-clad Kanchenjanga peak, which is just 48 km from this point. The scenery in the company of the silent yaks is a moment to treasure and is etched in the mind forever.

Coming back to Sandakphu, for those who opt for the four-wheeled ride to the hamlet, there is still much to savour on the way back. Drive through the Singalila National Park, which is one km from Tumling, a small hamlet two km from Tonglu. Tumling is more popular with the trekkers than Tonglu as it offers better lodging facilities. Situated at 9,600 ft, this village of Nepal is inhabited by just about 10-15 Nepali families. There is no border restriction and the village offers a beautiful view of both the Kanchenjanga and the Sandakphu peaks.

The Singalila National Park is spread across an altitude of 7,900 ft to 12,000 ft and covers 78.6 sq km. Part of the trekking route, this stretch of virgin forest adds to the charm of the Sandakphu trail. Jeeps are also allowed to drive through the park to Sandakphu. For visitors in spring, the park will have rhododendrons in full bloom. In October-November, it is time for the orchids to come out of hibernation. The variety of flora includes oaks, ferns, silver fir, bamboo, magnolias, primula, etc. If you are lucky, expect to find a red panda nestled among the branches of a tall tree. Himalayan black bear, clouded leopards, an occasional tiger, barking deer, yellow throated martens, Himalayan newt, and exotic birds (there are 120 species) are all among the residents of this park. The breathtaking view of the Eastern Himalayan peaks that the park offers is the added bonus.

Whichever route you take, the drive back is as memorable as the road to Sandakphu, through forests and hills and valleys. At the end of it you return home tired but refreshed. ■