



husband wore a Gurkha *kukri*, or knife, in his waistband; his wife sported a nose-stud the size of a large gold coin. Pujan, our guide, said of the couple, “They have a large house but their four sons have all left the village, so they like opening up their home to guests. It’s nice for them to have people coming and going.”

Later that night, they invited a group of students from a nearby dance school to perform for us. Sitting round a fire, stars twinkling overhead, we watched as these shy, excitable teenagers sang and danced barefoot on the earthen floor and our hosts clapped along in time. Perhaps it was the bottle of Australian Merlot we’d had with dinner, or the thought of the Egyptian cotton-clad bed in our little wooden bedroom upstairs, but that evening we were convinced Sikkim did indeed possess a sort of magic.

With just under one lakh inhabitants, Gangtok is diminutive, but its prosperity is evident everywhere—from the sharply-dressed teenagers shopping at Levi’s and Tommy Hilfiger to the buzzing new casino (the first to be licensed on Indian soil) at the Mayfair Spa Resort. Partly the legacy of centuries of cross-border trade, this affluence also reflects Chief Minister Pawan Chamling’s ambition to make Sikkim the ‘Switzerland of the East’. The income of pre-1976 residents is tax-exempt, there are strict rules on recycling

and tree conservation, and Chamling hopes to make the entire state carbon neutral by 2013.

Left, from top:
Rumtek Monastery,
near Gangtok;
the
Dragon Bar at the
Elgin Nor Khill hotel;
Kanchenjunga views
at Tashi Viewpoint.
Opposite: The main
 prayer hall at Rumtek
 Monastery

Here, we expected comfort—after all, we were staying at the Elgin Nor Khill, or house of jewels, which was built in the 1930s as a treasury for the Sikkimese royal family. The building is now an old-fashioned hotel decorated in grand Bhutia style, with walls displaying photos of Sikkim’s last chogyal, Palden Thondup Namgyal, his American wife, Hope Cooke, and their glamorous offspring.

Gangtok has plenty of ways to keep a visitor amused for a day or two. Seeing delft-blue skies outside our hotel window, we headed to Tashi Viewpoint, where we were promised spectacular views of the Kanchenjunga massif. A Bhutia couple had made this scenic spot their workspace: the husband manned an ancient brass telescope, helping visitors pick out each peak in turn, while his wife helped tourists pose for photos in traditional costume. The mountain-scape behind them could have been printed on a photographer’s paper backdrop, so vivid were its whites and blues.

The Gangtok Ropeway provided dizzying views of the city and its bucolic surroundings, while the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology’s collection of Buddhist artefacts was a treasure-box of mystical, intricate objects. At the state-run handicrafts centre we watched Sikkim’s state symbol, the red panda, being immortalised on hand-woven carpets. (As the poor red panda is endangered to the point of near-extinction, the rugs were probably the best chance of a sighting we had.) And at the charming Enchey Monastery, where the spirits of Kanchenjunga are said to reside, we made offerings to the mountain gods, imploring them to stay visible for just a few more days.

An hour’s drive from Gangtok we visited another monastery: Rumtek, the home of Tibetan Buddhism’s mysterious Karma Kagyu, or Black Hat sect. As we ascended the steep, winding path that led to the monastery, our guide explained how the sect got its name. Back in the 13th century, he said, the sect’s founder meditated on the spot where Rumtek now stands. So successful was his meditation that he was visited by 10,000 angels—each of whom gave him one →