

Darjeeling is all the Raj

Journeys: The Spirit of Discovery: Michael Gebicki
has a frightfully spiffing time at the time-stalled Windamere Hotel | August 01, 2009

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BECAUSE of a mix-up with my bags at Bagdogra airport, because the Toy Train has derailed and blocked the road, because it takes us 30 minutes to drive through the bazaar, when we finally reach Darjeeling's Windamere Hotel, it is just in time to catch the tail end of afternoon tea.

I make my way along the corridor to Daisy's Music Room, stopping briefly to read testimonials from previous guests (including Diana Cooper, Jan Morris and Jawaharlal Nehru) and enter a room full of people quietly scoffing lemon sponge cake and crustless cucumber sandwiches, little fingers crooked as they silently sip tea from dainty cups. The loudest sound is a ticking clock. This is truly remarkable.

Darjeeling sits in the northern part of the Indian state of West Bengal. The people in this room are mostly Bengalis, for whom restraint usually is a foreign virtue. Yet Windamere, with its flowery chintz and parlour-room airs, has reduced them all to the sort of embarrassed quietude that usually applies among strangers in provincial England.

Surveying the town from its flowery slopes on the flanks of Observatory Hill, Windamere is an absolute hoot, a world of make-believe where the clock stopped ticking circa 1930. It began life as a chummery, a boarding house for single colonial chaps sent out as managers on local tea plantations. In the late 1930s it was acquired by Tenduf La, a Sikkimese of Tibetan extraction who turned it into a hotel and chose the name Windamere.

Presiding over the hotel these days is his son, Sherab Tenduf La, a man of impeccable manners, style and perfectly modulated vowels who could charm the hair off a yak. I first encounter Tenduf La in the hotel's restaurant, where he is dining with an elderly gent. "Are you still having a monkey problem?" asks his companion with a roar that rebounds off the walls. "It's the same down at the club, you know. You're smothered in greenery and you can't see the devils. Nearly got away with my kedgerree, one did, before the bearer spotted him."

At the end of my meal, Tenduf La comes over and we are introduced. His guest is Teddy Young, a "relic of the Raj", says Tenduf La. Young is the last of the British planters, a former plantation manager who stayed on after his employment ended and now finds himself more at home in India than he could possibly be in contemporary Britain. Tenduf La packs me off with a whisky and soda to watch *The Himalayas: Other Times, Other Places*, a 1998 documentary in which Young stars.

The hotel has 37 rooms in several separate lodges, and to fully appreciate the Windamere experience, nothing but a Heritage Room will do, complete with clawfoot bath and hot-water bottle tucked beneath the covers when you turn in for the night.

In mine, named Princess of Siam after a former guest, is a Bakelite dial phone of the cradle type in a lurid shade of green, and beside it a note that sums up the faltering steps with which Windamere staggers about in the modern world.

"Our telephone intercom service was Windamere's pride and joy when it was installed in 1950," the note begins. "It gave reliable service for 20 years and then went wrong. Several telecom experts in succession succeeded only in making patchwork repairs. The last expert, 12 years ago, did some serious repair work, and as a consequence, when certain numbers are dialled, three phones ring simultaneously in separate rooms, causing alarm to guests who value their repose. We have been keeping this deficiency in our intercom service under review, and meanwhile, crave your indulgence."

Needless to say, there are no television sets in the heritage rooms, although they have infiltrated Annandale House and Observatory House, which together make up the The Snuggery Wing. As for Wi-Fi internet, only a fevered imagination would lead you to request such a new-fangled service.

Happily, Windamere and Darjeeling are made for one another. Spilling down from a high ridge surrounded by tea plantations at 2100m, Darjeeling is the most scenic, the subtlest and most satisfying of Indian hill stations. In the morning I am woken by the sound of bells and chanting coming from the temple that is shared by Hindus and Buddhists on the hilltop above me.

For entertainment, all I need do is saunter up the narrow lane to the crown of Observatory Hill to find a convergence of peoples drawn from the snow-browed valleys of the Himalayas. There are Nepalese, Tibetans, Bhutias and Lepchas, the forest people who were the original inhabitants of these hills. It is also misty, which only heightens its mystique.

One moment I am adrift in a white sea that blurs the rooftops and the deodar trees just 10m away and then, without warning, the mists slyly creep and turn, a hole appears and shining in the distance is the summit of Kanchenjunga, the Five Treasures of Snows, a cresting wave of ice and the third highest peak on the planet. It is thunderous, too. Darjeeling means Place of the Thunderbolt, and earth-shaking rumblings accompany me as I march back down the hill to my princely breakfast at Windamere.

Nostalgia is Windamere's trump card. Raj aficionados will find endless delight in the Snuggery, or library, which is filled with works from the period, and a substantial collection devoted to India's railways. Tenduf La embraces railway culture with enthusiasm, and there is no truer Brit than a steam buff.

Previous guests have included Edmund Hillary, Heinrich Harrer, prince Peter of Greece and the Queen. In the 1960s, Hope Cooke, a 21-year-old socialite from New York, met the

crown prince of Sikkim in Windamere's bar, and ended up becoming the queen of Sikkim. "Vivien Leigh was a student at the Loreto Convent Girls School in Darjeeling," Tenduf La says, "and when it closed down the nuns gave us a lamp from the dormitory and pointed out that Vivien Leigh would have walked under its beam. It is a very ugly affair.

"We get a constant stream of people who were either directly associated with Darjeeling or with family connections...(Playwright) Tom Stoppard came, retracing the footsteps of his mother. She was the manager of the Bata shoe store here during the war.

"Don't be impressed," Tenduf La urges when I confess to an admiration for Windamere's time-warped ways. "It happens automatically. People here don't like change. I once instituted some very big changes at Windamere, went away for a few months and when I came back I found that everyone was doing things exactly as before."

Michael Gebicki was a guest of Abercrombie & Kent.

Checklist

For information on private journeys and insider-access experiences in India, contact Abercrombie & Kent, 1300 851 800; www.abercrombiekent.com.au; www.windamerehotel.com.

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