

Head for the HILLS

Join us as we revisit northern India's all-time favourite hill stations.

The British had the right idea—hill stations, far from the searing heat of the plains, make for great summer retreats. But while it was the British who gilded these small towns with an inviting halo of difference, it was Bollywood that clinched the deal. Once sealed with a stamp of approval from the likes of Shammi Kapoor and Rajesh Khanna, there was no looking back—every lover must sing a song in Shimla, romance by the lake in Nainital, cosy up in a Kullu shawl in Manali, take the toy train to Darjeeling and get a picture taken with Ruskin Bond in Mussoorie. In the following pages we explore those familiar woods through different perspectives, each with its own tinge of nostalgia, its own dappled sunlight, its own crisp breeze, and its own childhood stories.



Picnic in the clouds

TEXT SUDARSHANA SENGUPTA

Call it a ritual or a rite of passage, but very few Bengalis can escape the quintessential Darjeeling holiday. Yet, somewhere between the tea estate and the tourist trap there is always room for realtime memories and borrowed *déjà vu*.

Everyone has a joke or two about the Bengali tourist—the ubiquitous tribe that makes its presence felt in any corner of the world which spells holiday. And you would have definitely seen them in Darjeeling, at ungodly hours perched on popular ‘viewing points’—monkey caps, walking sticks and cameras in place. From groups of

children in identical ‘new’ clothes to stoic uncles and sprightly grandmas in sneakers and saris, no one is spared the call of the alarm. All around are cries urging us to hurry bleary-eyed, for the sunrise is scheduled at 4 am, and God forbid that lesser deserving souls get to view the Kanchenjunga in all its resplendent glory before us.

Bijoy Chowdhury; Bhaswanan Bhattacharya



Clockwise from above: Villagers living in the outskirts of Darjeeling make their way to the town for their daily jobs; The Darjeeling Himalayan Railways’ ‘toy train’ chugs its way across the Himalayan slopes on its way to Darjeeling; An old couple standing outside their hut in one of the many villages that surround the hill town; The highest railway station in India, Ghum, stands at an altitude of 2,225m and is the penultimate stop on the DHR route. The station premise also houses the DHR Ghoom Museum.

A tea-leaf picker at the Happy Valley Tea Estate—one of Darjeeling's oldest tea plantations, and at 2,750m, one of the highest tea gardens in the world. Besides exporting some of the finest tea, the estate also offers tours and some unforgettable views of the Himalayas.

And so we were piled in two jeeps—nearly three generations, cousins, extended families, and even a distant ex-neighbour who joined us at the last minute when his plans for the Puja vacation were called off. He wasn't very pleased at being yanked off the bed at 3 am either. But the plan for the day was set—and it began with successfully viewing the mighty Himalayan range against the rising sun from Tiger Hill, each over-enthusiastic tourist on the line more hopeful than the next that today the mist would lift, today the Kanchenjunga shall make herself visible to us. It might have been my first trip to the Queen of the Hills, but for most others in the group it was a sort of homecoming—a ritualistic return to their vacation home in the mountains.

LAND OF THE RISING SUN

At 2,590m, Tiger Hill offers the early riser several viewing options. You could brave the cold outside in the viewing gallery that offers uninterrupted views of the gorgeous Himalayas stretching out on the horizon, or pay a little extra for an 'executive' or a 'special' viewing lounge and cram inside with your cameras and binoculars. Besides the Kanchenjunga, a clear day and a pair of binoculars will also reveal glimpses of Mt Everest, Lhotse, Makalu, Janu and Kabru peaks. To see the hesitant sunlight gently washing over the ranges is, they say, at the very least, mind-blowing. And it makes the dawn alarm and the rush worth it.

I wouldn't know because, well, we didn't see it that day. In fact, I have never managed to view the sunrise from Tiger Hill on any of my trips to Darjeeling. What I do remember is that all jeep rides involved a fight to get to the front seat, adjusting of various mufflers and a roulette of Avomine strips being passed down from one end to the other. As a result, most of my earliest memories are a little Avomine-addled. Better fall asleep than fall sick, went the family motto.

FAMILIES WELCOME

Sleepy car rides aside, Darjeeling proved to be a treasure trove where we restless kids were concerned. Perpetually worried about either losing us in the crowd or facing an endless tirade of 'are-we-there-yet?', the grownups couldn't have picked a better place for keeping brats entertained. I may not remember the spectacular sunrises, but picnics in the Botanical Garden and my first introduction to the culinary wonder known as the momo stand out in sharp contrast.

Darjeeling has a teasing sort of weather, toasty mornings are sometimes swallowed whole by slushy, grey afternoons, and consecutive rainy days are miraculously broken by weak sunshine. Sometimes, from our tourist lodge, I'd see local children making a beeline for school in the rains, their colourful umbrellas lighting up one side of the street. It was easy to make friends there. Most people speak broken or fluent Bengali thanks to the constant exposure, and as a kid, I would have lengthy conversations with one of the local kids who passed the lodge frequently, our mutual fascination with each other quite the source of amusement to the rest in the group. Needless to say, when I wanted to 'steal' her and bring her back to Kolkata, they weren't that encouraging.

The DHR (Darjeeling Himalayan Railways) was yet another source of entertainment. Ever since jeeps and buses started hawking their services outside New Jalpaiguri station, the 'toy train' has become the less-preferred mode of transport. The DHR, while beautifully quaint also took nearly eight hours to reach Darjeeling, a journey that could be covered in under four by road. Most of my toy train experiences, however, were from Darjeeling onwards. Sometimes we took it up the thrilling Batasia Loop and to Ghum, which has a beautiful

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Bijoy Chowdhury

Perspective

Tibetan monastery with a massive statue of the Buddha. Ghum incidentally also means 'sleep' in Bengali, leading to an onslaught of bad puns and wordplay, for example, the young 'uns being warned that if they didn't sleep at night they would be whisked off to Ghum, where people sleep for a 100 years. And so on.

THE GOOD OLD TIMES

A trip to Darjeeling also almost always ended up as a history lesson. There's always someone in the group who'll lament the passing of the good old days. These good old days could range anywhere from their last trip to the town to the stories they heard as children on their first trips to Darjeeling. A colonial hangover is funnily enough quite a rage among Darjeeling's most regular patrons, who can adapt to tea gardens and English breakfasts with surprising ease.

"It was nothing short of heaven," is something I've heard more than once from the carefree visitors of the '60s, then a wide-eyed gang, escaping the heat and the crowds of Kolkata into a cloud-wrapped gift package that held the transient secret of happiness.

"Despite the sharp turns, Darjeeling is a very walkable city," recounts one gentleman, who made his first trip in 1966, and then subsequent ones in '78 and '90. "The shops around the Mall area were picture perfect, and Keventer's terrace café with its umbrellas and milkshakes served the best views of the marketplace and town centre. Often, when we were feeling rash, we'd allow ourselves to splurge on

an overpriced *phuchka* in one of the Mall shops." While Darjeeling prices have fairly caught up to world standards now, it's the sense of wonder that the place once evoked that's not on the shelves anymore.

CINE-STAR

Acutely integrated in the hearts and minds of Kolkata-dwellers as a favoured holiday destination, Darjeeling was also a standard setting for Bengali literature and cinema that a lot of us grew up on, generally creating the illusion of *déjà vu* when you actually visited the place. My first introduction to it was in a Satyajit Ray young adult mystery, thrillingly titled *Danger in Darjeeling*. Involving a film crew, stolen artefacts and the murder of an aristocratic gentleman with a secret past, the story also gave you an accurate description of the town's popular streets, sights and hangouts, so when you actually did go to Keventer's, you felt like you'd tasted the hot chocolate before. A lot of Darjeeling thrives on this misplaced sense of belonging—and thankfully doesn't know how to bottle and sell it yet.

Incidentally, Ray himself often came here and eventually, in 1962, he based his first original screenplay, *Kanchenjunga*, in Darjeeling. Set in real time around the lives of an upper middle class family spending their holidays in Darjeeling (well, what else), the film was far ahead of its time in terms of storytelling, and yet deceptively familiar thanks to its location. Besides dealing with several complex issues, it also referred to the characters'

A short walk from the Darjeeling Mall is the Observatory Hill, which promises some of the best views of the snow-capped peaks and is often full of hopeful tourists waiting for the mists to clear.



Bhaswan Bhattacharya



Bhaswaran Bhattacharya

A view of the twin peaks of the Kanchenjunga at sunrise in all its spectacular glory. At 8,586m, the range is the third highest in the world, whose name literally translates to 'the five treasures of the great snow' after its five peaks.

preoccupation with securing a clear view of the Kanchenjunga, which the fog had denied so far.

In fact, Darjeeling's yesteryear magic has enamoured filmmakers from outside the Bengali film industry as well, making it a preferred location for movies based in and around Kolkata. *Parineeta* (2005) and the recent *Barfi!* are examples of this—both elaborate features that have made Darjeeling look close to perfect on celluloid. What's interesting is that a large number of movies shot in the town largely echo the Darjeeling of a bygone era—times when the hill town was at its breathtaking best. It's the same nostalgic period that is evoked by reminiscing old-timers as well, an era when Darjeeling was an escape from the mundane, a place to write sonnets and love letters, to love and be inspired.

MAKING MEMORIES

To all those who have lived and loved Darjeeling, it has always managed to create a distinct identity in our memories that varies subjectively from its actual geographical boundaries. It's been years since the October of that first trip, and I've met friends since who actually grew up in Darjeeling and had their share of stories about the innumerable tourist troupes that flooded their hometown during holiday season. She laughed when I told her we would ride ponies on the Mall and sometimes be dressed up in local clothes for photo ops.

From the little cluster of villages 'borrowed' and nurtured by the British in 1849 to its various associations through the ages— peace and fluttering prayer flags, delicious weather and world-renowned teas, mountain views and bright-eyed people—it is evident that the Darjeeling captured in our photo albums has changed outside it. Yes, the problems faced

have been serious and damaging—the place that was once a sanatorium for suffering souls now requires immediate attention for its own failing health. Its busy, overexposed and wary present justifies a lament for its incredibly beautiful past and everything that has changed in between. But even as you read this, a whole bunch of houses, families, couples and friends in neighbouring cities are booking their tickets for their upcoming holiday in Darjeeling. And for many more summers to come, there's always going to be room for some world-famous Darjeeling tea in a cup of romance. Thankfully, I don't see that changing anytime soon. ■

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily flights to Bagdogra from Delhi and Kolkata. From Bagdogra, you can take buses or hire a taxi that will take you to Darjeeling in less than four hours under favourable weather conditions. You can also opt for the pretty ride on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railways part of the way, from Kurseong to Darjeeling.

ACCOMMODATION

Tourist lodges, hotels and the old-fashioned Dak bungalows have mushroomed all over Darjeeling, and you are sure to find something to suit your budget. For a truly colonial experience, stay at The Windamere, a 19th-century British boarding house turned heritage hotel, located on the historic Observatory Hill and offering sweeping views of the Himalayas with dollops of old-world charm. For bookings and enquiries, visit www.windamerehotel.com

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