

Funded by Xtreme G2 Trust

# WEST SIKKIM, 2018

Participants: Annam Irfan | Sanmadi. K. R.



We chose West Sikkim as it houses the most diverse set of communities and tribes together, having only one thing in common: The Mongolic taxonomy. The Valley of rice was originally inhabited by tribes: Naong, Chang and Mon. Eventually the Lepchas (clan of Nagas) entered, followed by Buddhists of Tibet called Bhutias and the Nepalese from Nepal.

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We aim to study the culture and lifestyle of the indigenous people of Sikkim by living with them in their houses and travelling into their villages. We wish to document their architectural styles by studying their elaborate monasteries.

### NOT ALL EXCITING THINGS HAVE A GOOD START.

Our train on 31st May to Jalpaiguri got cancelled, so we waited a day to board the next train on 2nd June. The train was supposed to be 23 hours' journey, but it took us 36 hours to reach there after all the delays from New Delhi. The extra 13 hours drained us, but reaching our destination was our only hope. Travelling in a sleeper class would be an awesome experience if it was in a group. But just two of us travelling bored us at times. The best part of the journey was the change in topography simultaneously. We reached Jalpaiguri in the early morning around 5AM. The city was waking up and we started our day with chai from a road side shop near the railway station before heading to Namchi. We took a shared jeep to Namchi and it was raining all our way. We slept all our way till we reached Namchi around 11:00 AM. All we could see was lush green and faint purple all along the way. Purple was the Jacaranda tree blossoming the roadways as it was the early summer.



Top- train journey, bottom (right)- Teesta river.

## DAY 1 - Namchi

The first glimpse of Namchi was the bus station and the organic market happening along it. As we did not know the way to our homestay, we hired a taxi to the place. The home stay was not far from the town, but it was downhill. One has to hike to reach the place. We freshened up and decided to chill the day as we deserved after 40 hours of journey.

Namchi was a quiet, early town and a major junction before we headed to West Sikkim. The best part was that it's not commercially touristic yet and the town ends before it starts. The town is radially planned; urbanization is happening around the town plaza - a thriving public square. It is the cleanest and most inclusive public realm we have ever experienced in India. People were welcoming us with a big smile on their faces. I needed a book for reading during the trip and Annam needed a rain coat, before we travelled further. So we

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started hunting for things. I bought George Orwell's 1984 and Annam made a jugaad with a big polythene bag as we couldn't find a raincoat for our size.

We walked into the local market to try local cuisine and buy some products. But we were surrounded with China products mostly. So we had a light dinner and dozed off around 7 PM, as our expedition was bigger the NEXT DAY.



Top(left) - our journey, Top(right)- Namchi central square, Bottom - Namchi town.



Namchi town

## **DAY 2 - PELLING via RAVANGLA**

Pelling was our final destination, but to reach Pelling one has to pass through Ravangla. We took the first shared jeep to Ravangla from Namchi. On the way we saw the first Tibetan Settlement of India, Kunphenling Tibetan Settlement. We roamed there till we took the next shared jeep to Pelling. It was a well-planned, maintained settlement. Most buildings were flat roofed and renovated. The structure which bears load is wood and the filling is brick and mortar. But we could not take photos due to the army camp nearby. We reached Pelling around Noon, rented the first home stay we saw on our way. Ruby di (owner of the homestay) helped us plan our next three days there. We had a quick lunch and hiked 6 KM to Pemyangste Monastery. It is one of the oldest Monastery of Sikkim and played an important part in history. From its hill, one can see Nepal as it is at the Indo- Bhutan border. It was the gateway through which Nepal invaded Sikkim, that's the reason for such an ethno history in the state. We hiked 3 km further downhill to the Rabdentse ruins.



Top - the settlement entry, Bottom - houses inside the settlement.

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Pelling town.



**Right:**  
Vernacular fenestration embellishment at the Pemyangste Monastery

**Right:**  
FROM TOP  
1) Room of 1000 butter lamps  
2) Monastery Hostel  
3) The prominent use of red-yellow and black





left - our trek to the ruins, right - the ruins.

So that night we were very tired after the trek. Ruby di gave us the names of the villages to be visited to understand the tribal culture and traditions. She herself was from Rai community which is a brotherly community to Bhutia tribe. We spent the night listening to her tribal stories. It was very interesting to know that most tribes were matriarch. And every tribe has a symbol for themselves. It just broke the stereotypes of tribal community, because most people in the town had tribal identity. But they were all educated, humble and urbanized. They took what they want from modernity without giving up their identity and language

### **DAY 3 - Settlements on the Hills**

We planned to visit Hee Gaon village as it is a Limbu tribe village. The Village is important as it has the Limbu ancestor statue which people pray to. The countryside travel was really

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good, because we were going to less discovered places. On the way we halted at the Cheese factory at Dentam to see how they make cheese. It is a small cottage industry which collects milk from all the neighboring villages, thus becoming a major income turner here. The Interesting fact is that cheese for the whole Indian subcontinent is prepared here.

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Top (left) & bottom(right) - fusion style -contemporary + traditional, Bottom - the limboo statue, Rest- cheese making.

We traveled to the hill top to reach our next destination – Chaital. Agriculture and dairy farming is the major source of income for Chaital village. Around 50 families live in the village and most people are involved in cultivation and cattle rearing. Sheena was our first

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friend and she is an 8th grader who became our village guide. She took us around the village through the day. We really enjoyed the company of her and her family. She is the 6<sup>th</sup> child in her family, the rest are either into agriculture or into hospitality in towns nearby. The village had the fragrance of elaichi in the air as it was ready for harvest.



Chaital village.





Top- Chaital village, Bottom(left) - Sheena, Bottom(right)- Elaichi

fields.

## Houses

This Settlement has fusion houses where modern style and material fused with traditional style. The traditional style had the ground floor with solid, thick mud wall for insulation; while the upper floor has Tudor like construction with wood - structural frame and filler being mud/ wooden panel. The newer houses had wooden structural frame and concrete blocks as fillers. They have used concrete as flooring too. This has happened after the Flooding of 2009, where this village has gone through a lot of damage.

Sheena's family was very friendly and welcoming to us. We went into their home for taking photos as all the women in the family were together talking. We got involved in the conversation, 3 hours flew in their home. We can distinctly remember Sheena's grandmother who was witty and humorous. They told us about their culture and how they different from other tribes except for the place of nativity. Their major difference is their

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traditional attire and the symbol. They showed us their albums of wedding ceremonies. We really felt bad when we had to leave the village for the next stop. We were wondering if urban people would be this nice to two stranger women who question on each and everything?



Typical traditional house.





Sheena's family and our host.



houses made from modern material.

On our way back to Pelling it was raining and we saw an interesting building on the way. We got trenched in rain to explore the house under construction. It is the ancestral home of the Dentam MLA which is been renovatd in the traditional way. So we explored the construction technique and the spaces in the house. It was a very small house with minimal interior and design.



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Top(left)- conversation of a 100 years house , top (right) - Sheena's grandma, Bottom- Mt. Kanchenjunga

#### **DAY 4 - Singcholla village and Nae.**

The next day we rose early to witness Mt. Kanchenjunga. We can only see it in the early mornings before mist and clouds block it. We hiked to the helipad in the town to witness the majestic mountain. It was a euphoria moment and trekkers are banned to scale it from Sikkim trail as it is a gesture of respect for the religious sensitivities of the Sikkimese who regard the mountain as a deity. One can trek to the base camp from the Indian soil, but not more than that. Then we had a Sikkimese breakfast- Gundruk (a vegetable soupy noodles) before heading to Singcholla - a Bhutia tribal village. Unlike other tribes, Bhutias and Lepcha have urbanized a lot. Most of their homes have been renovated to become resorts and homestays. So we did not get much to see in this village as their lifestyle is modernized. So we decided to trek to a Buddhist Nae (a prayer site where a monk died) which is inside a forest. The place was very serene and pure and the best part was that they had well maintained bio- toilet inside the forest. The one thing we really learned from Sikkim was their approach to public hygiene and sanitation.

At night we learned to cook their traditional meal from two amazing chefs - Ruby di's niece. We had an amazing party with these ladies as it was our sendoff party.



Trek to the Nae and inside the Nae.



A Bhutia house converted into a home stay, the lintel is their symbol.



Left- homestay kitchen, Right- traditional meal.

### **DAY 5 - Darap.**

We visited Darap village the next day, it has a mix population of tribal habitats. We went around talking to school kids at government school to know more about their life. When we went there, kids were cleaning the school premises. When we asked their teacher, he replied that it is part of their curriculum that everyone learns to clean and keep their surroundings neat from a young age. We understood now why Sikkim is the cleanest state because people take initiatives and put effort to keep it neat and clean. The last day we bid our good bye to Ruby di and her family and left to Siliguri to board our flight back home.



Darap school



Hong Kong market at Siliguri corridor.



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Even though the trip got delayed by two days, it was an amazing experience. The only thought we had while we were there was that **WE ARE SURELY COMING BACK TO SIKKIM.**

Thank you Xtreme G2 Trust for this opportunity.