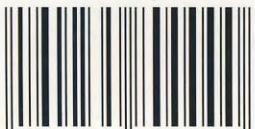


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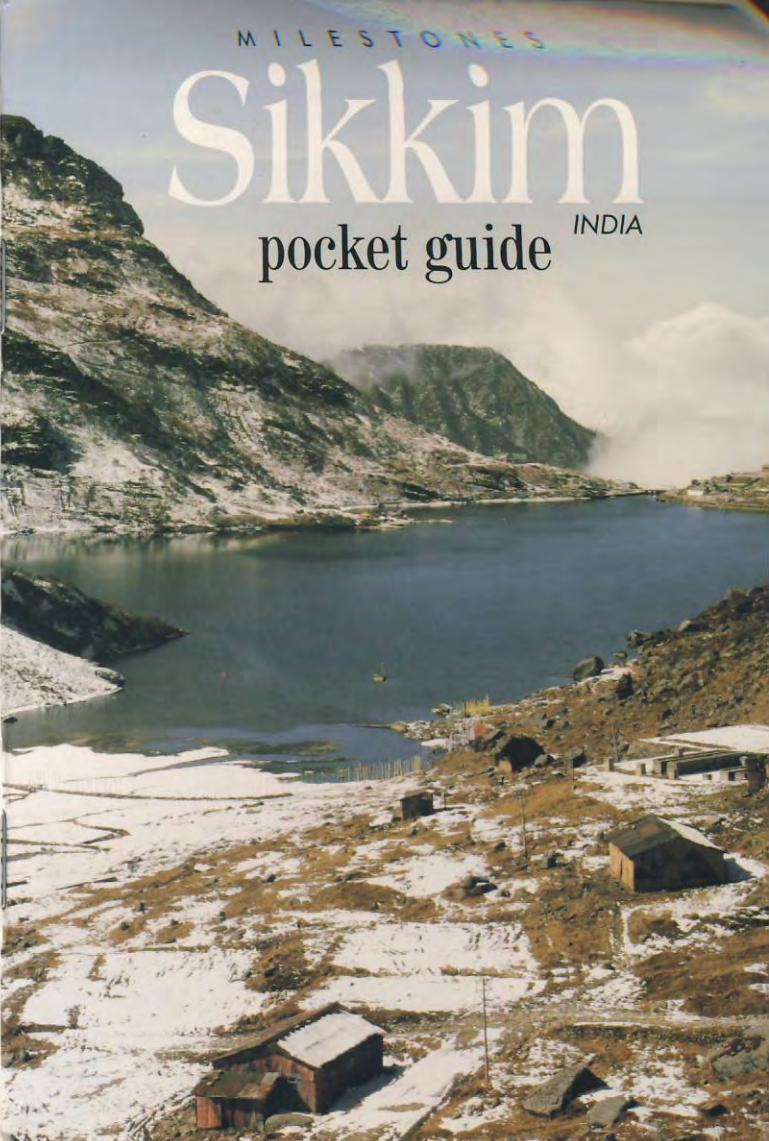
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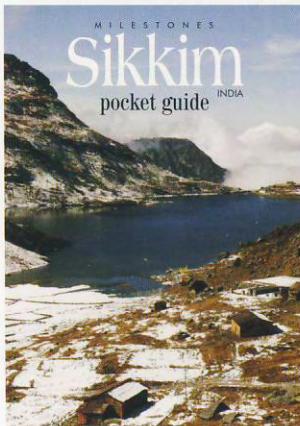
MILESTONES

# Sikkim

pocket guide

INDIA





M I L E S T O N E S

# Sikkim

pocket guide INDIA

Cover: Tsomgo Lake, East Sikkim

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Text: Sara Schneiderman and Mark Turin

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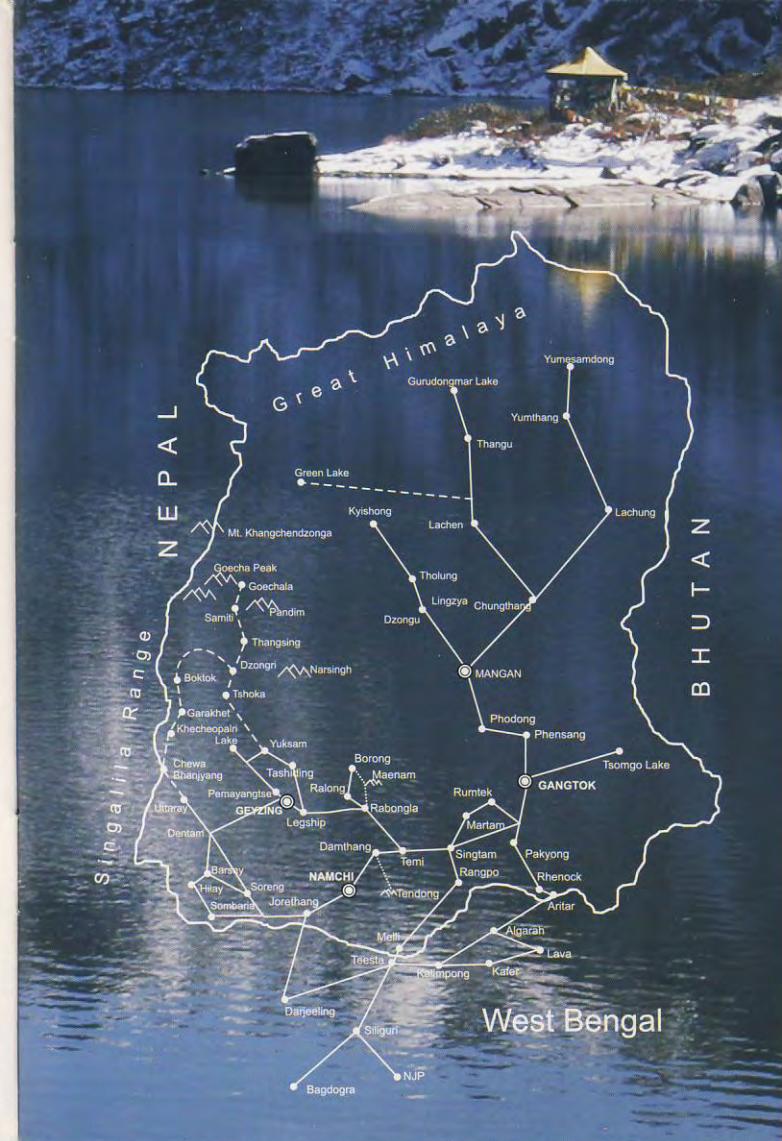
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# Sikkim

Sikkim is a land of superlatives, with its magnificent mountains, rich cultures and pristine environment. A tiny jewel of a state, its total population is only 540,000 and it covers just over 7,000 square kilometres. Yet within Sikkim's Himalayan boundaries, there are many worlds to discover, as you travel from Buddhist monastery to Hindu mandir, or trek from alpine meadow to cascading waterfall, visiting cities and villages along the way.

Cultural diversity is one of Sikkim's hallmarks, from the Dzongu indigenous Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim, to traditional Bhutia villages in the west and Nepalese agricultural settlements in the south. Each of these cultural groups celebrate their own rituals and festivals throughout the year, so that there is never a dull week in Sikkim. For those interested in nature as well as culture, the state's biodiversity is unsurpassed. Ranging from subtropical to alpine eco-zones, Sikkim's flora and fauna include a number of rare species such as the red panda, the snow leopard and the Himalayan black bear, not to mention a huge variety of brightly coloured rhododendrons and exotic orchids.

Bounded to the north and northeast by the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, to the west by Nepal, to the southeast by Bhutan and to the south by Darjeeling district of the state of West Bengal, Sikkim occupies an important strategic niche along one of the oldest Himalayan trade routes. Much of the state's north and west is perpetually snow-covered and dominated by the Kangchenjunga massif, India's highest and the world's third highest mountain. Each of Sikkim's four districts holds its own treasures, and this guidebook is structured in four parts to introduce you to every district in turn: East, North, West and South.

Welcome to Sikkim...it's waiting to be discovered by you.

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Mt. Kangchenjunga seen from Pangthang area, East Sikkim



Tsomgo Lake, East Sikkim

## EAST SIKKIM

### Gangtok

The capital city of Sikkim is fittingly called Gangtok, which means 'the town on the hilltop' in the local Bhutia language. From the former Royal Palace at the top to the Queen's Bridge at the bottom, the city sprawls across approximately 15 kilometres on the west side of a long ridge flanking the Ranipool (Ranipul) River. At an average altitude of 5500 feet (1676 metres), and with a population of approximately 50,000, this historically important transit point on the trade route with Tibet became the capital of Sikkim in 1894. Gangtok combines an attractive mix of Old World charm, traditional hospitality and a modern cosmopolitan outlook, making it an exciting place to spend a few days at the beginning or end of your Sikkimese journey. The town can be the ideal staging point for your travels across Sikkim's other districts, as you take advantage of top-notch tourism agencies, first class hotels and urban shopping amenities, or a comfortable haven with good food and hot showers at the end of your Sikkim adventure.

Although warmer than neighbouring Darjeeling, Gangtok is still a hill town with widely varying **weather** patterns, so take extra care when packing. Summer temperatures can be as high as 28° Celsius on sunny afternoons but may drop to 13° Celsius on rainy evenings. In the winter, you can expect highs of 18° Celsius and lows of 5° Celsius. Gangtok sees over 150 inches of rainfall per year, primarily during the summer monsoon season. Come prepared with light woollens and a rain jacket for the summer, and heavier clothes for the winter.

### Places to Visit around Gangtok

All royal ceremonies and pujas were held in the **Tsuklakhakhang** (Tsuglhakhang) chapel situated in the palace complex on the Ridge. This royal chapel is only open to the public on religious festival days such as Pang Lhabsol and Kagye Thutor (Kagey Thuetor). The associated monastery houses a vast collection of Buddhist scriptures and priceless religious paintings known as thankas.

Set in a shady grove of oak, birch and ash trees in Gangtok's Deorali area, the **Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT)** was established by Chogyal Tashi Namgyal in 1958. The foundation stone of this traditional Sikkimese building was laid by the 14th Dalai Lama, and this famed research and teaching institute was formally opened a year later by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. NIT (locally



Baba Harbhajan Mandir, East Sikkim

2 3



Nathula Pass, East Sikkim

known simply as 'Tibetology') sponsors and promotes research on the religion, history, language, and art of the Tibetan cultural area, with a special focus on Sikkim. The ground floor of the institute houses a well-appointed museum open to the public, which displays Buddhist artefacts, paintings and texts. On the second floor, you will find one of the world's largest collections of rare books and manuscripts on Mahayana Buddhism, many of them originally from Tibet. Special rotating photo exhibitions about the history and culture of region are displayed on the top floor. It is easy to spend half a day perusing all that Tibetology has to offer. A nominal entry charge is levied at the gate.

A short walk uphill from Tibetology are two exquisite stupas, the **Do Drul Chorten**, built to commemorate the victory of good over evil, and the Jhang Chub Chorten, built in the memory of Trulshig Rinpoche, a deeply spiritual individual and famed Buddhist teacher. Near the chortens stand two giant statues of the Buddha and Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, who is the patron saint of Sikkim.

Within the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology complex lies the **Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal Memorial Park**, dedicated to the 12th monarch of Sikkim's Namgyal dynasty. A life-size bronze statue of the late Chogyal, or Dharmaraja (religious king), is one of the park's main attractions, along with a quiet gazebo perfect for meditation and reflection.

The cable car or **Ropeway**, originally constructed to help Members of the elected Legislative Assembly reach their workplace, ferries tourists and locals alike from Deorali via Hur Huray Dara near the Sikkim Legislative Assembly (SLA) all the way to Tashiling Secretariat. Besides the thrill of the ride, you will enjoy excellent aerial views of Gangtok town and the surrounding green hills.

Established in 1957, the **Directorate of Handloom and Handicrafts** promotes and preserves the fine traditional arts and crafts of Sikkim. Exquisitely carved wooden friezes and intricate bamboo work, along with beautiful hand-woven carpets and handloomed textiles are produced, exhibited and sold here. Visitors can watch the artisans at work to better understand their skills. A favourite purchase here are choktse, portable wooden tables with ornately-carved panels that can be folded for easy transport.

At the **Flower Show Complex** you will find Sikkim's world-famous orchids on show, along with seasonal flowers and bonsai. During the tourist seasons,



Do Drul Chorten, East Sikkim



Hanuman Tok, East Sikkim

competitions are held to choose the best orchids, which are then displayed to the delight of the public.

Gangtok was a small hamlet until the construction of **Enchey Monastery** in the mid-1800s made it a pilgrimage centre. Perched on a ridge above the city, this monastery is nestled in a dense forest and offers a spectacular view of Gangtok town. Built on the site of the meditation hermitage of the great tantric master Lama Drutob Karpo, this monastery houses monks from the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

Recently set up at Bulbulay, the **Himalayan Zoological Park** is spread over 205 hectares. As the first zoo to use the 'immersion exhibit technique' in India, endangered animals of the eastern Himalayas live in open enclosures in their natural habitats. Wildlife enthusiasts can observe different species of deer, red panda, Himalayan black bear, snow leopard, blue sheep and other animals in this unique environment. The park also provides excellent views of the surrounding hills and the Kangchenjunga massif. This magnificent mountain range, whose name means 'the Five Treasures of the Snows' in Tibetan on account of its five peaks, is also written as Khangchendzonga and Kanchenjunga.

The **Ridge** is a stretch of road between White Hall and the beautiful palace of the erstwhile Chogyals (Dharmarajas) of Sikkim which erupts in a riot of colour during the cherry blossom season and remains a favourite place for walks. The zen-styled **Ridge Park** has a unique Sikkimese gazebo, which complements the palace gate at the other end of the stretch.

**Tashi View Point** is an acclaimed spot for photography located about 8 kilometres north of Gangtok on the main road to North Sikkim. On a clear day, you can see the monasteries of Phodong and Labrang. An observatory tower has recently been established, along with a small but well-stocked cafeteria. Along the way, stop to marvel at the clear waters of Bakthong Kyong Chhu, a small waterfall between Gangtok and Tashi View Point.

**Hur Huray Dara** (Hurhuray Danda) is located opposite the imposing Sikkim Legislative Assembly. You can take the footpath edging along the cliffs of Nam Nang (Nannang) Road to this special spot that overlooks the Bhushuk Chu river in the valley below.

The small temple at **Ganesh Tok** is dedicated to the Hindu elephant deity and



Gangtok Ropeway

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Enchey Monastery, East Sikkim

situated at an altitude of 6500 feet (1981 metres). Adjoining the temple is the **Pinetum** pine forest. A little further down the road is **Smriti Ban**, a forest where visitors are encouraged to plant saplings in the memory of loved ones. This area offers a panoramic view of Gangtok town, which is particularly spectacular at night. The lights of Gangtok are best viewed after dark from the **VIP Colony** entry gates.

Scrupulously maintained by resident units of the Indian Army, the **Hanuman Tok** temple is dedicated to the Hindu monkey god Hanuman and is situated about 9 kilometres above Gangtok at an altitude of 7200 feet (2194 metres). Popular belief has it that wishes made here will be fulfilled.

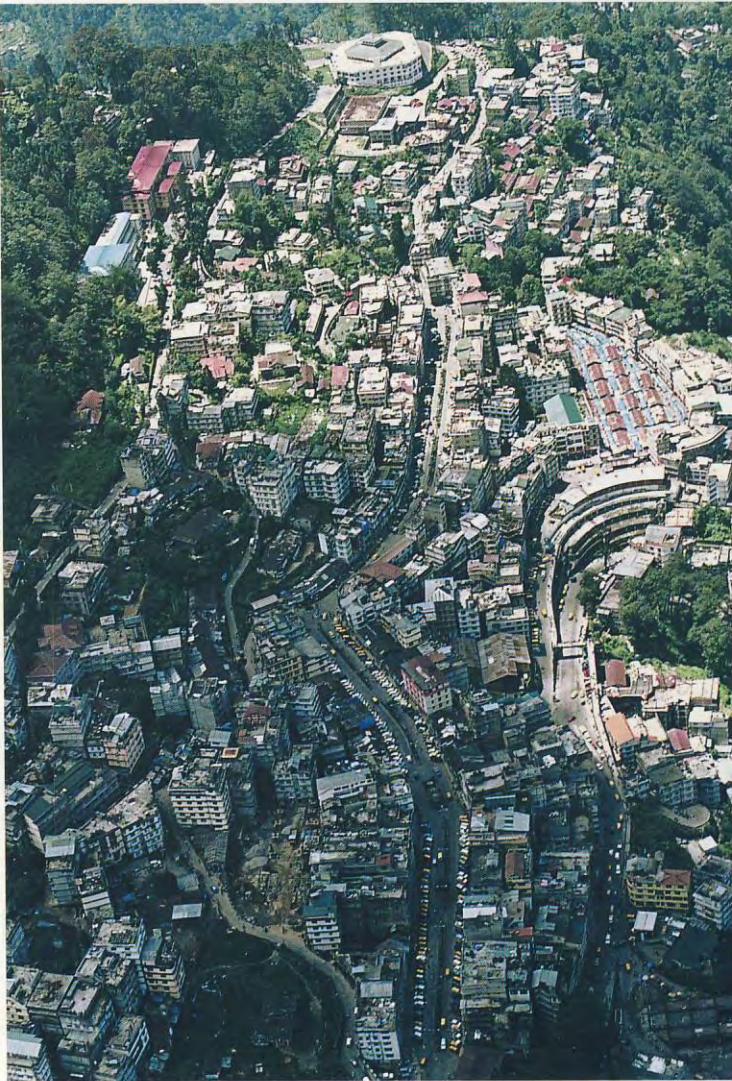
Although central Gangtok's main commercial thoroughfare is slightly less than a kilometre in length, **M.G. (Mahatma Gandhi) Marg** is lined with shops, hotels, restaurants, bars, bakeries, studios, cyber cafes, pool rooms and curio shops. At the western end of the road, near the Thakurbari Temple and overlooking the Tourism Information Centre, stands the Statue of Unity, depicting the meeting of the Bhutia Chieftain Khye Bumsa with the Lepcha leader Thekong Tek.

The **Lal Bazaar** is an eclectic mix of sights, sounds, smells and tastes. Although open every day, Sunday is the traditional 'haat', or market day, when farmers from around the region come to sell their products here. From fresh cheese and bamboo shoots to edible orchids, the wares on sale are as varied and colourful as the sellers themselves, and a few hours spent here will introduce you to all that is Sikkimese.

## East Sikkim beyond Gangtok

For the adventurous, a trip to Sikkim would be incomplete without experiencing the mighty Teesta's turbulent waters up close and personal in a **rubber raft**. Put-in point is at Bardang, which is about 1.5 hours drive away from Gangtok. Feel the adrenalin rush as you tumble and roll through the white waters down to Rangpo along the border of Sikkim and West Bengal.

The awe-inspiring **Rumtek Monastery** complex is situated 24 kilometres away from Gangtok. It includes the World Dharma Chakra Centre, which is the seat of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa, who is the head of the Kagyu (Kargyud) order of Tibetan Buddhism. Behind the main monastery is the lavishly decorated



Aerial view of M.G. Marg, Gangtok

Karmae Nalanda Institute of Buddhist Studies, which attracts students from all over the world. Opposite the entrance to the Institute is a small hall featuring the jewel-studded Golden Stupa, which contains the ashes and remains of His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa. According to legend, upon finishing a lengthy meditation retreat, the first Karmapa was visited by 10,000 fairies, each one of whom congratulated him by offering a strand of her hair as a gift. These divine hairs were woven into a black hat, which was passed down through the lineage and is still housed at Rumtek Monastery today. It is said that unless held on to by the wearer (who cannot be anyone else but the Karmapa himself) or kept in a box, the hat will fly away.

Half a kilometre before reaching Rumtek Monastery, the **Nehru Botanical Garden** lies just off the main highway. Here you will find a mixture of well-tended tropical and temperate plants and trees, and a huge greenhouse containing many orchid species.

About 14 kilometres outside Gangtok on the way to Siliguri lies the **Ipecac Garden**, popularly known as '**Saramsa Gardens**'. Named after the medicinal Ipecac plant which grows there, the gardens also exhibit a wide range of other flora including various species of native orchid. You can picnic amidst the famous tree ferns of Sikkim that grow throughout the gardens, and marvel at the lovely butterflies including the 'Golden Birdwing', which is regrettably as endangered as the Royal Bengal Tiger.

35 kilometres away from Gangtok at an altitude of 12,400 feet (3780 metres) you reach the beautiful **Tsomgo Lake**, which freezes over in winter and is fed by melting snows from the surrounding mountains. Local legend holds that lamas could forecast the future by studying the colour of the lake's waters. Fishing is totally prohibited and visitors are requested not to pollute the environs of the lake with rubbish in order to maintain its sanctity.

On the way to Tsomgo Lake, above the 15th Mile Sikkim Police check post, you will come across the high altitude **Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary**, home of the red panda and the blood pheasant, which are the state animal and bird respectively.

Built in memory of Harbhajan Singh, a lost sepoy from the 23rd Punjab Regiment, the **Baba Harbhajan Singh Memorial Mandir** lies between the Nathu La and Jelep La passes. Legend has it that he appeared to his colleagues in a



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Gangtok - the capital, East Sikkim



Flower Exhibition Centre, East Sikkim

dream a few days after he went missing, and requested that a monument be built in his memory. His fellow soldiers then erected this monument, which over the years acquired the status of a pilgrimage site. Devotees leave a bottle of water, which they collect a few days later to take back home, blessed by the spirit of this hardy soldier.

At an altitude of over 14,000 feet, the **Nathu La** is now open for domestic tourists. This is the highest point in Sikkim reachable by car, without the extra exertion of a trek. However, visitors with heart conditions or concerned about high-altitude sickness are advised to avoid this destination. The historically important Nathu La pass was the gateway to Tibet, and was used extensively by traders and porters travelling from Kalimpong and the plains on their way to Shigatse and Lhasa in the Land of the Snows. Now open once again after several decades, visiting the pass is a once in a lifetime experience. You can walk up to the army viewpoint and look beyond into China, where green-uniformed Chinese army personnel with red stars on their caps stand to attention. All around them, the stark alpine landscape is interspersed with delicate primula blossoms and the unique Himalayan rhubarb shrub. Visitors are advised to start for Nathu La as early in the day as possible to avoid inclement weather which typically arises in the afternoon.

**Kathog Monastery** is the 6th oldest monastery in Sikkim, with a new structure that retains the original architectural design built on the location of the old monastery's ruins. Located about 2 kilometres from Pakyong, this is the only monastery in Sikkim that follows the Kathog tradition of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism.

At just half an hour's drive from central Gangtok, the **Sa Ngor Chotshog Centre** is the only monastery of the Sakya order of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. Established in 1961 by the Venerable Khen Loding Rinpoche, it caters largely to Tibetan refugees.

The **Pal Zurmang Kagyu Monastery** is located at Lingdum, about 45 minutes drive from Gangtok on the Rumtek-Ranika-Gangtok road. The complex is a fine example of Tibetan monastic architecture, with several levels of sacred rooms stacked against the steep green hillside. The head lama here is Gharwang Rinpoche, the 12th incarnation of Zurmang Gharwang.

Located about 20 kilometres from Gangtok, the **Fambhong Lho Wild Life**



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Chaam at Dharma Chakra Centre, Rumtek, East Sikkim



Dharma Chakra Centre, Rumtek, East Sikkim

**Sanctuary** spreads over an area of over 5200 hectares between Singtam and Dikchu. The sanctuary is home to the Himalayan black bear, the red panda and the civet cat, rewarding patient visitors with sightings of these rare animals. On the way back to town, a spectacular view awaits those who can make it to the observatory tower at Tinjurey.

The small village of **Aritar** about 4 hours drive from Gangtok is a perfect place to experience the rhythms of village life. The Aritar Lake, also called Ghati Tso, welcomes you with its cool blue waters. You can easily spend a night or two enjoying Aritar's peaceful environment. A trekker's hut, a few lodges and a private resort provide accommodation.

## NORTH SIKKIM

Snuggled right up against the sheer face of Kangchenjunga, North Sikkim has the largest land area but the smallest population of Sikkim's four districts. Home to the indigenous Bhutia and Lepcha populations, the rugged terrain offers snow-capped peaks laced with plunging waterfalls, fir forests dimpled with alpine pastures and medicinal hot springs bubbling out of rhododendron groves.

The north is famous for its stunning mountain views and many lakes of considerable size. Cho Lhamu at 17,000 feet (5181 metres) and Yum Tsho at 16,000 feet (4876 metres) lie in the extreme north at the source of the Teesta river; while the southeast corner of the district boasts the lakes of Chola, Chokam, Yakla, Bhysma or Jusa, Ninyetso and Beduntso, at heights varying from 10,000 to 15,000 feet.

Opened to foreigners in 1993, North Sikkim with its capital at **Mangan** has retained its typical Sikkimese culture and religious traditions. The local Bhutia communities here are proud of their distinctive heritage, and typically derive their last names from the villages in which they live, with Lachenpas and Lachungpas hailing from mountain settlements with these names. These communities continue to rely on Dzumsa, traditional village councils, to manage local issues. Unique to Sikkim, these councils are responsible for maintaining law and order and overseeing grazing, cultivation and the population's seasonal movements. Little can be done without the permission of the Pipon, the chairman of the Dzumsa village council.



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Discotheque in Gangtok



Nepali Dance

## Lachung and Lachen

Driving north, you will first reach **Chunthang**, a small town that straddles the confluence of the Lachen and Lachung rivers. Purchase supplies here for your onwards journey, since little is available further north.

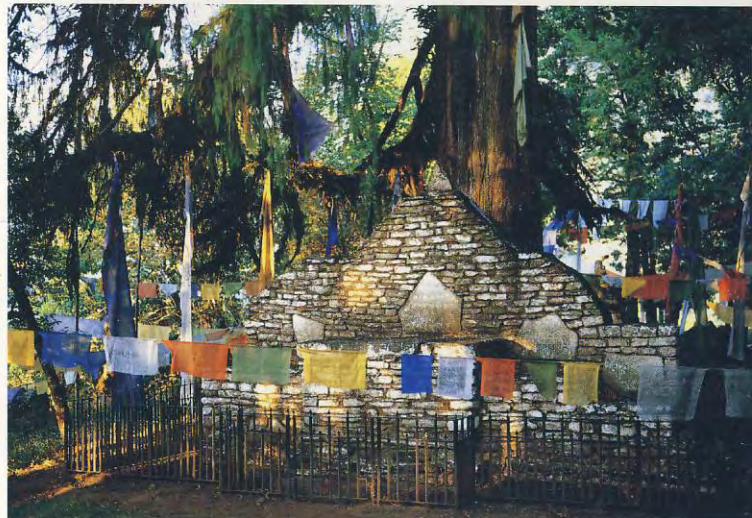
Continuing to the northeast from Chunthang, you will soon arrive at **Lachung**, an exquisite valley town at a height of 8610 feet (2624 metres). Resplendent with a crown of snow-capped mountains, breathtaking waterfalls and sparkling streams, it is no wonder that as early as 1855, Joseph Dalton described it as the 'most picturesque village of Sikkim' in his famed Himalayan Journal.

Less than an hour's drive further north from Lachung, you will reach **Yumthang** at 11,800 feet (3597 metres), where the treeline ends and the high plateau begins. Also known as the 'Valley of Flowers' on account of the rhododendron groves that burst into bloom and the wild alpine blossoms which dot the landscape during the spring season, Yumthang is also home to hot springs renowned for their medicinal properties. Take a dip and revel in the healing serenity of Sikkim's mountain waters.

An hour further north, your jeep will take you to **Yumesamdong**. At 15,300 feet (4663 metres), it is merely an army outpost just shy of the Chinese border where the road comes to an abrupt end. Look up into the Himalayas and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China beyond while inhaling the sweet fragrance of azalea flowers that permeates the air.

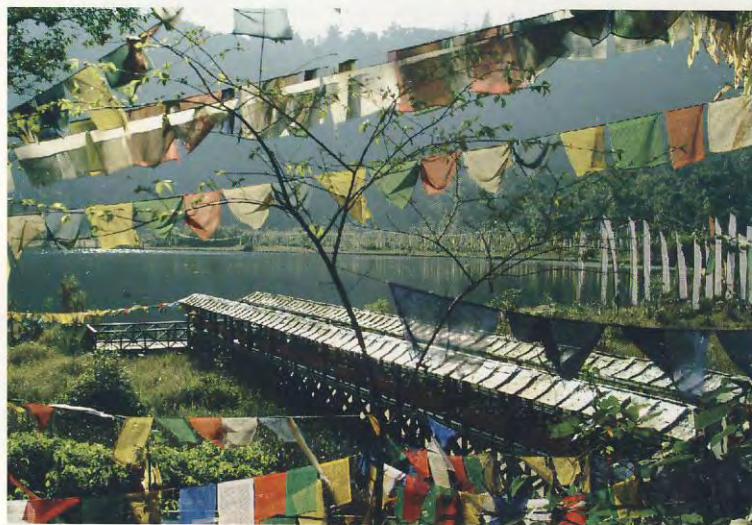
The road leading to the northwest from Chunthang winds its way to **Lachen**. Standing at 9500 feet (2895 metres) in an alpine meadow with pine-clad snowy peaks rising on all sides, the town of Lachen has barely 150 houses. The hamlet is inhabited only seasonally in the winter, as its residents spend their summers in temporary huts high up in the alpine pastures tending to their yak herds. Lachen is one of Sikkim's hidden jewels.

Continue north from Lachen through the **Chopta Valley** at 14,500 feet (4420 metres) with its bright spring flowers to **Guru Dongmar** lake, one of Sikkim's highest at 17,100 feet (5212 metres). This sacred lake is believed to possess the miraculous power of granting children to barren couples. Guru Dongmar freezes over during the winter, except at one spot believed to be specially blessed by Guru Rinpoche.



Norbughang - The Stone Throne, West Sikkim

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Khecheopalri Lake, West Sikkim

## Monasteries of the North

Phensong and Phodong are two of North Sikkim's most beautiful monasteries. They are particularly famous for their masked dances on religious festival days.

Situated on a gentle slope stretching from Kabi to Phodong, **Phensong Monastery** was built in 1840 and belongs to the Nyingma order. Its name translates as 'the excellent banner' or 'good bliss', and the monastery stands as testimony to the dedication of its monks, who reconstructed it within a year after it burnt down in 1947.

**Phodong Monastery**, about 38 kilometres from Gangtok, is recognised for its exquisite mural paintings and frescoes. Built by Chogyal Gyurme Namgyal at the beginning of the 18th century in honour of the Karmapa, Phodong was the first Kagyu monastery to be established in Sikkim.

**Labrang Monastery** sits slightly uphill from Phodong. Unlike the other monasteries, which were razed by fires and reconstructed relatively recently, this one is much older and still retains its original design. Its name literally means 'the lama's dwelling'.

Near Phodong you will find **Tumlong Monastery**, a holy spot said to contain relics of the 17th century lama Lhatsun Chempo. **Tumlong** became the third capital of Sikkim in the early 19th century. The palace ruins are now covered with a thick canopy of bushes.

The famous site of **Kabi Lungchok** is located just before Phodong, around 20 kilometres to the northwest of Gangtok. On this heavily-garlanded rock, a blood brotherhood was signed between the Lepcha chief Thekong Tek and the Bhutia chief, Khye Bumsa, signifying the beginning of Sikkim as a multi-ethnic nation. Recently, an impressive life-size sculpture of the Lepcha and Bhutia 'blood-brothers' has been added to the grounds.

The remotest and most inaccessible monastery in Sikkim is at **Tolung**, in the Lepcha heartland of Dzongu. On the western banks of the Teesta in the southwest reaches of North Sikkim, the Dzongu region is a bastion of indigenous culture and really worth a visit.



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Rabdentse ruins, West Sikkim



Pemayangtse Monastery, West Sikkim

## WEST SIKKIM

Go west for history. The first Chogyal, or religious king, of Sikkim was crowned in the original capital of Yuksom in the 1640s (scholars still dispute the exact date). A short distance from Yuksom are the ruins of Rabdentse, the second capital of the erstwhile kingdom. The West is also home many of Sikkim's oldest and most sacred monasteries.

Standing witness to history are the awe-inspiring peaks of Kangchenjunga, Pandim, Kabru and Narsing, which rise up from virgin forests of oak, walnut and pine. Punctuated by sacred azure lakes, West Sikkim's landscape is truly magnificent. Khechuperi Lake is the most sacred lake in Sikkim, and is believed to grant the wishes of those who look upon it. Other lakes in this region are Sungmoteng Tso, Lamchho and Kabur Lamchho. West Sikkim boasts at least 47 species of birds and a variety of trees and plants including rhododendrons.

Yuksom is fast developing into a base for tourists. Local families provide lodging, hire out pack animals and work as guides and porters. They also produce delicious potatoes which can be purchased for your trek. The Yuksom to Dzongri trail begins at Yuksom, and has rapidly grown into the most popular trek in Sikkim. The route takes you to Kangchenjunga National Park, Samiti Lake and Goechla pass. Thick, diverse forests envelop you in their pristine environment, while the cliffs, high alpine meadows and cascading streams provide ideal habitats for flora and fauna of all varieties, making the trek perfect for bird watching.

### Places to visit in West Sikkim

Literally meaning 'King's Fields', **Gayzing** (alternately spelled Gyesing, Gyalzing and Gyalshing) is now the district capital of West Sikkim. With a well-appointed hospital, a large bazaar and regional government offices, this is the place to take care of all of your administrative and provisioning needs before heading to the remoter parts of the district.

**Pelling** is a relatively new settlement that has only recently become a major stopping point for tourists visiting the region. Located centrally with easy access to most of West Sikkim's attractions, you can tour the rugged hills, sacred monasteries and historical ruins by day and sleep comfortably in one of Pelling's many hotels at night.



Mt. Kangchenjunga - a view from Pelling, West Sikkim



Rhododendron

Not even 2.5 kilometres away from Pelling lies **Pemayangtse Monastery**, at an altitude of 6840 feet (2085 metres). Perched on a wooded hilltop, this monastery whose name means 'Perfect Sublime Lotus', indeed offers a sublime view of Kangchenjunga and its foothills. Built during the late 17th century, Pemayangtse is one of the oldest and most important Nyingma monasteries in Sikkim. For generations, monks from this monastery had the exclusive right to anoint the reigning sovereign of the land with holy water, and Sikkim's Chogyals required Pemayangtse's support in order to rule successfully. Only the monks of this monastery, who come from special Bhutia lineages, are considered to be pure monks of the highest level.

Pemayangtse monastery follows the Mindroling tradition and belongs to the lineage of Lhatsun Chenpo. Tibet's Mindroling monastery was founded by Minling Terchen Gyurme Dorje, whose famous daughter Jetsun Migyur Paldon lived near Pemayangtse and taught there during her exile. You can still see her stone throne in this monastery, which is home to 108 monks (an auspicious number in Tibetan culture). With three floors open to the public, Pemayangtse displays a wealth of Buddhist statues, traditional paintings, ritual texts and wooden masks. On the top floor, you will find the monastery's main attraction, a wooden replica of Zangdog Palri, the celestial abode of Guru Padmasambhava, built by Serdup Lhundrup Dorje Rinpoche in 1971. With extraordinarily detailed woodwork and bright colours, it offers a feast for the eyes and spirit. Pemayangtse's annual cham, or religious dances, are held here on the 28th and 29th day of the 12th month of the Tibetan lunar calendar.

**Sangachoeling Monastery** (also spelled Sangye Choeling) is located on a hilltop about 2 kilometres from Pelling bazaar, and is Sikkim's second oldest monastery. Constructed by Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo in the 17th century, the building maintains its traditional style with wooden floors and ornate wall paintings. A road is under construction to provide direct access to the monastery, but for now you must walk the last half kilometre steeply uphill. It's well worth the exertion, since when you reach the top you can relax on a sunny rock and soak up the beautiful view, or even enjoy a cup of tea at a newly built guest house.

The second capital of Sikkim was at **Rabdentse**, and the ruins of the fort have been extensively renovated by the Archaeological Survey of India to create a historical site. From the roadside gate, a winding track leads through a forest preserve for almost half a kilometre before you arrive at the ruins of the early



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Lachung during winter, North Sikkim



Gurudongmar Lake, North Sikkim

town and the royal palace. Looking out in all directions, with sacred chortens nearby, it is easy to understand why ancient kings would have chosen this beautiful sheltered hillside for their fortress.

At 680 feet (207 metres), Shingshore Suspension Bridge is the second highest bridge in Asia, and well worth a visit. Nearby you will find the Khandu Sangphu medicinal hot springs and a sacred cave.

The serene **Khechuperi Lake** (also written as Khecheopalri) lies in a small valley surrounded by prayer flags and forested hills, and is about 90 minutes drive from Pelling along a bumpy road. Its crystalline waters are said to be wish-fulfilling, so take your time and think carefully! The small Khechuperi Monastery lies 1.5 kilometres further on.

**Yuksom**, at an altitude of 5577 feet (1700 metres) was the first capital of Sikkim, and also the site of the first Chogyal's coronation. Traces of his enthronement ceremony still abound in the form of stone amphitheatre seats, the footprint of the head lama on a stone and a stone throne constructed for this great event, which still stands at Norbugang and has been declared a Heritage Site. Nearby lies the sacred lake of **Kathok Tsho**.

Located on a hilltop above Yuksom, at 5580 feet (1701 metres), stands **Dubdi Monastery**, the earliest religious institution established after the first Chogyal's enthronement. Dubdi means 'the hermit's cell', and this site surrounded by verdant forests is indeed an ideal place for meditation.

At 13,123 feet (4000 metres), the alpine pasture of **Dzongri** has breathtaking views of the mountains. The journey here from Yuksom is the most popular trek in Sikkim, with a winding route that passes through almost entirely uninhabited pristine forests, past seasonal yak herding settlements and even remote village monasteries. Orchids grow in abundance around **Bakhim** and **Tshoka**, the last village on this trekking route. The route from Tshoka to Dzongri is lined with rhododendron and silver fir. From Dzongri to **Thangshing**, you trek through the Onglathang Valley, which is of special interest to bird watchers since a quarter of all bird species found in the Indian subcontinent have been spotted here. The camp ground at Thangshing is located in a vast, open valley by the side of the glacial lake of Samiti. Finally, you reach the last camp at **Zemathang** at 15,000 feet (4572 metres), from which you can see Goecha Peak to the north and the splendid pinnacle of Mount Pandim with its glaciers and icefalls to the northeast.



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Yume Samdong, North Sikkim



Yumthang Valley, North Sikkim

This region is the natural habitat of the bharal (blue sheep) and snow leopard if you are lucky and patient you may get a glimpse of one of these rare creatures.

Sikkim's most sacred monastery of **Tashiding** is perched atop a conical hill. A mere glance at the Thongwa Rongdol Chorten here is believed to absolve you of all sins. Founded around 1716, Tashiding was believed to be the heart of Bayul Demoshong, the 'hidden fruitful valley'. During the famous 'Bumchu' festival, a bumpa, or vessel containing holy water, is opened and a small quantity distributed to the devout. The contents of the vessel date back to the 7th century, when Guru Rinpoche is said to have stored sacred soil, water and precious jewels in it from all of the holy places in India. Each year, the water level is checked as an indicator of the times ahead.

The **Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary** is one of five wildlife sanctuaries where you can view an enormous variety of rhododendrons, in addition to many medicinal herbs and plants. Rinchenpong is the base for treks to the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary and the Singalila Range. The panoramic views of Kangchenjunga from here are unparalleled.

## SOUTH SIKKIM

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**Namchi**, the district headquarters, is a well laid-out township about 78 kilometres from Gangtok.

On the hill of **Samdrupse**, 7 kilometres above Namchi, stands the popular 135 foot-high statue of Guru Padmasambhava the highest of its kind in the world. There are also several major monasteries near Namchi, such as **Ngadak Monastery** and the Tamang community's **Ahlay Monastery**.

Just above Ngadak Monastery, around 6 kilometres from the town of Namchi, you will find the artificially created **Rock Garden**, which is home to rare flowers, orchids and timbur, a sour citrus fruit with medicinal properties for the liver and chest congestion. The garden also has a children's playground, which is among the highest in the world.

The **State Biodiversity Park and Medicinal Plants and Herbal Garden** lies 14 kilometres north of Namchi, and is the first of its kind anywhere in India. Here you can visit both the conservation unit for sub-tropical and temperate flora and fauna of the state and the centre for nature education, awareness and recreation.



Statue of Guru Rinpoche at Samdrupse, South Sikkim



Temi Tea Garden, South Sikkim

**Ravangla** (also called Rabong) stands at 6800 feet (2072 metres) and straddles the ridge between **Meanam** and **Tendong**, and serves as the sub-divisional headquarters of South Sikkim district. This pleasant little town and its surrounding villages come alive during the Pang Lhabsol celebrations, when locals perform the spectacular Warrior Dance at Mani Chokarling Monastery in honour of the guardian deity of Sikkim. Just above the town is a **Tibetan Refugee Settlement Camp**, where you can buy fine Tibetan-style wool carpets at the Kunpheling Carpet Center.

8 kilometres out of Ravangla at **Damthang** is a perfect sunrise viewpoint, where you can see the first rays of the sun touch the snowy peaks of Narsing, Jopuno, Kabur, Rathong and Pandim.

Heading towards Namchi from Singtam, you pass through miles and miles of green tea bushes belonging to the organic **Temi Tea Estate**, Sikkim's only tea garden. Established in the 1960's by Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, the tea produced here has a rare combination of liquor and flavour and fetches some of the highest rates on the international market. You can observe the tea being processed and purchase some leaves for yourself at the factory, located 18 kilometres from Ravangla.

**Tinkitam** is a quaint Sikkimese village 6 kilometres from Ravangla, which is the natural habitat of paphiopedilum faireanum or 'lady's slipper', a rare species of orchid. Unlike most wild orchids which grow on trees, this orchid is terrestrial and flowers in October and November.

**Karma Rabtenling Monastery** was built in 1768 at **Ralong**, 13 kilometres from Ravangla. Legend has it that the 12th Karmapa, head of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism, gave his blessings by throwing some grains of rice from Tibet, and the monastery was built on the site where they landed. Pang Lhabsol and Kagye masked dances are held here every year. Adjacent is a new monastery, Palchen Choeling Monastic Institute, which was built by the 12th Gyalsab Rinpoche in 1995. The sacred Mahakala Dance is performed here every November.

**Ralong**, **Legship** and **Borong** all have tsa chu, or hot sulphur springs, which are used as traditional spas by locals as well as by visitors from Nepal and Bhutan. These springs have medicinal properties believed to cure many ailments of the skin, joints, bones and muscles. For overnight stays, temporary huts are available at nominal rates.

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River Rangit between Jorethang & Reshi, South Sikkim



Palchen Choeling Monastic Institute, Ralang, South Sikkim

**The Bon Monastery at Kewzing**, 5 kilometres from Ravangla, is the only one of its kind in Sikkim. It is a symbol of the determination of this minority Tibetan community, which follows pre-Buddhist traditions, to preserve their own identity.

2 kilometres away from Kewzing bazaar is the **Mangbru Gompa**, which follows the Nyingma sect of Buddhism. The invading Bhutanese army used this as a strategic point in the 19th century, and the ruins of their bunkers and outposts can still be seen here.

The dam built across the Rangit River has created a unique body of water known as **Rangit Water World**. Situated 26 kilometres downhill from Ravangla, it is an ideal place to enjoy boating, rafting, fishing and swimming.

**Meanam Peak** (10,600 feet/3230 metres) is a 12 kilometre uphill trek from Ravangla. The route winds through a thick forest of oak, chestnut, magnolia and rhododendron. As the natural habitat of the red panda, Himalayan black bear, and barking and musk deer, this area is designated as a wildlife sanctuary. A short ways above Yangang village, you can visit the legendary 'Bhale Dunga', a rocky spur resembling a rooster's comb.

The name of **Tendong Hill** (8,500 feet/2590 metres) means 'upraised horn' in Lepcha. According to legend, the horn-shaped Tendong Hill rose out of the water during a great flood to save the Lepchas. Every year at the beginning of the monsoon, locals gather on this hilltop to pray that such a calamity does not recur. Spectacular panoramic views of Sikkim and the distant plains of Bengal reward those who brave the climb up the hill.

## LOCAL FOOD

The diversity of Sikkimese plant life and its inhabitants come together to make for a unique local cuisine. Tibetan influence has left an indelible mark on the culinary landscape, with dishes ranging from steaming-hot noodle soups known as thenthuk or thukpa, filled with vegetables or meat as desired, to world-famous steamed dumplings, or momos. Locally-made cheese known as churpi, sold soft in fresh leaf packets or dried in hard chunks, is worth tracking down in the markets. For the adventurous, make sure to ask your guide or hotel staff where you can eat gundruk (preserved spinach greens), sisnu (stinging nettle soup), and tama (bamboo shoots), three healthy local foodstuffs which traditionally



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Mt. Kangchenjunga - a view from Samdrupse, South Sikkim



Red Panda - State animal

kept hill farmers warm and fit during the long winters. You may want to finish your meal with a round of local homebrew, such as chang (local beer made of fermented rice), thungba (hot water poured over fermented millet) or raksi (distilled grain alcohol).

### Distances from Gangtok to Important Destinations

Darjeeling	94 kilometres
Kalimpong	75 kilometres
Pelling	117 kilometres
Yuksom	124 kilometres
Yumthang	145 kilometres
Tsomgo Lake	34 kilometres
Phodong	32 kilometres
Nathula	51 kilometres
Ravangla	65 kilometres
Namchi	79 kilometres
New Jalpaiguri (nearest railway station)	125 kilometres
Bagdogra (nearest airport)	124 kilometres
Siliguri (nearest major city)	114 kilometres

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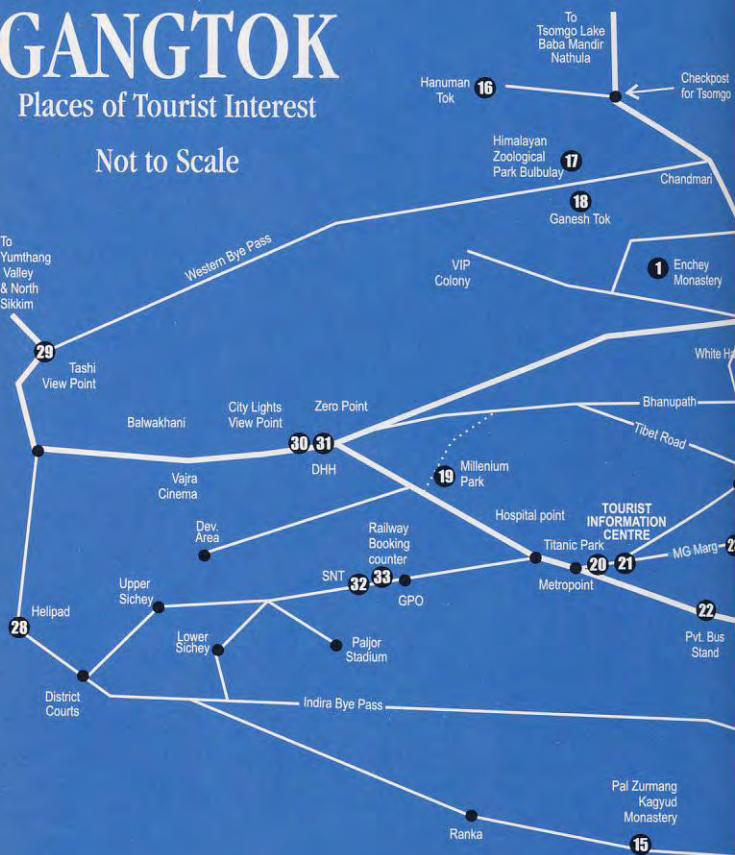
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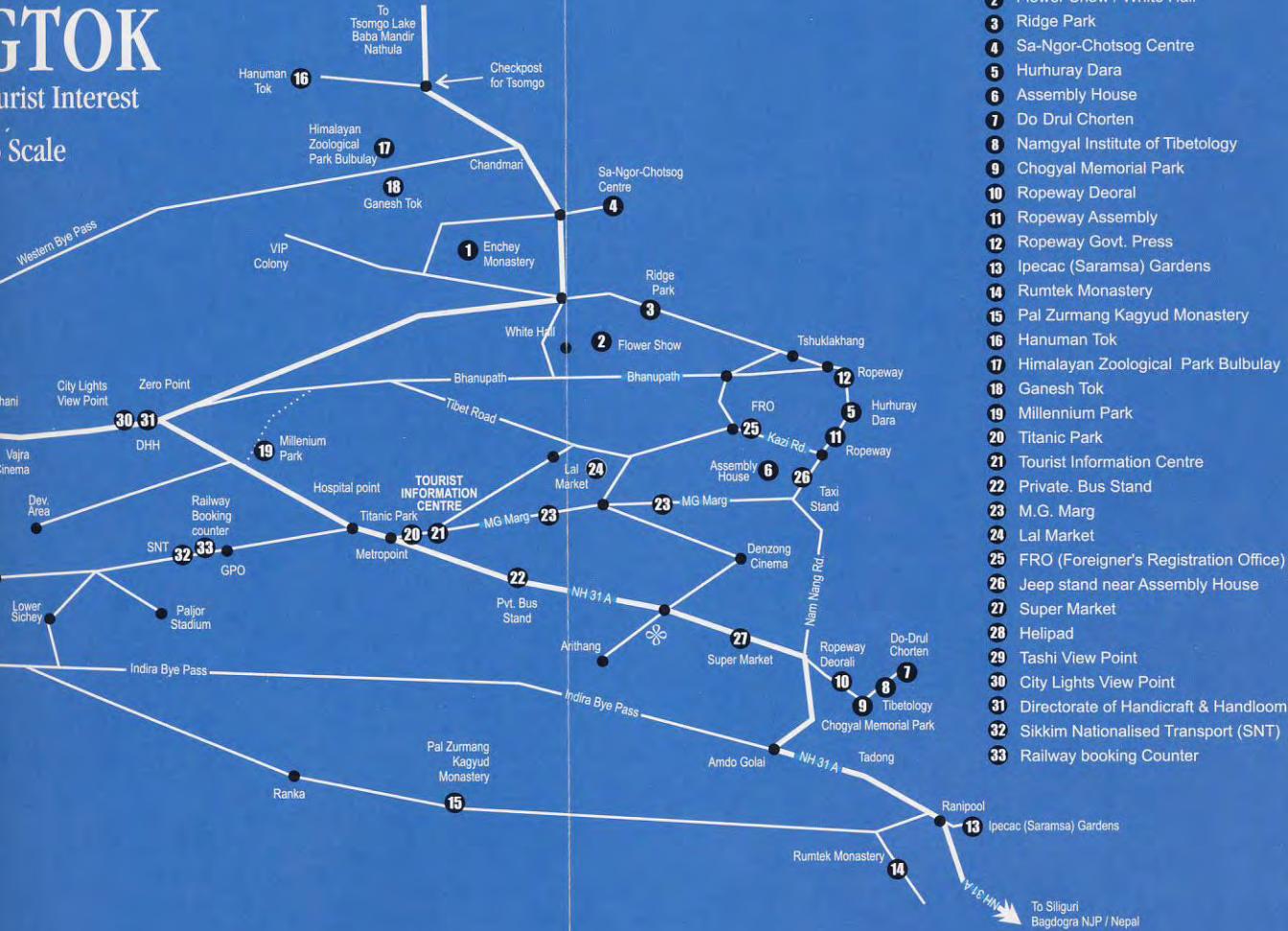
## Places of Tourist Interest

Not to Scale



# GTOK

Tourist Interest  
Scale



## FOREIGN NATIONALS

Besides a valid passport and an Indian visa, foreigners require a special permit to visit Sikkim. These are now easy to obtain, with all Indian embassies, consulates and high commissions abroad authorised to issue a 15-day inner line permit for Sikkim. Your Sikkim permit can be stamped into your passport on request when you obtain your Indian visa. You can also get your 15-day permit from any of the Sikkim Tourism Offices in Delhi, Kolkata or Siliguri, or at the Darjeeling District Magistrate's office. If you find yourself at Sikkim's border town of Rangpo without already having obtained a permit, don't worry, because the Tourism Officer stationed there will issue you a 15-day permit on the spot. Regardless of where you apply for your Sikkim permit, you must submit photocopies of your passport and Indian visa details, along with two passport-size photographs.

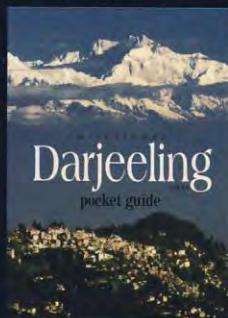
Your initial 15-day permit can be revalidated for 3 further instalments of 15 days each in case you wish to stay longer. The maximum stay for any foreigner at one time is 60 days, beyond which it is impossible to extend your permit further. The Foreigner's Registration Office at Gangtok, and the Superintendents of Police of the North, South and West Districts have the authority to extend permits.

With your regular 15-day permit you gain access to Gangtok, all district headquarters (Namchi, Geyzing and Mangan), and all sub-divisional headquarters (Soreng, Pakyong, Ravangla), except Chungthang in North Sikkim, which is only accessible to foreigners who form a group of two or more. The permit also covers Rumtek, Phodong, Pemayangtse, Khechuperi and Tashiding.

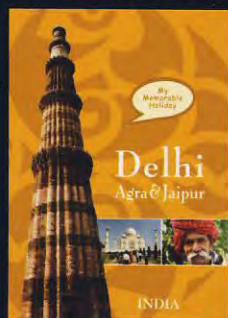
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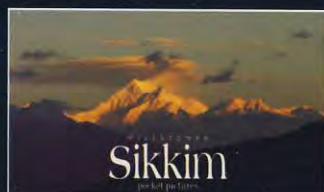
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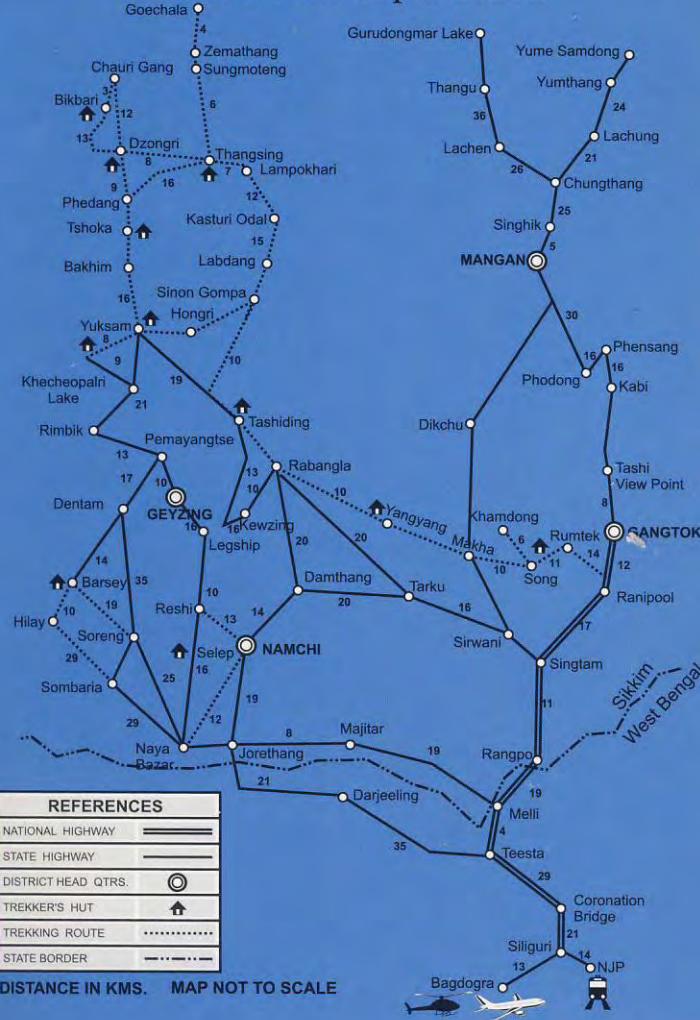


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