

Sikkim: A Foray into the Historic British Raj

By Andra Leo

This scintillating, multi-faceted tour began with the fizz of champagne (celebrating one participant's birthday), the sparkle of diamonds (an exhibit of antique jewellery) and continued with fascinating visits to schools, monasteries and holy sites, as well as tea with dignitaries such as the Governor of Sikkim and the Maharaja and Maharani of Burdwan. One continual marvel was waking up each wondrously clear and blue-skied morning to the awe-inspiring sight of the sun-reflecting, snow-capped peaks of the Kanchenjunga Range, gleaming majestically down on us from their lofty heights. Wherever we drove in this mountainous, forested part of the country, views of Kanchenjunga accompanied us, providing endless photo opportunities. The trip was also a foray back into the days of the British Raj when hill stations such as Kalimpong and Darjeeling were cool retreats from the heat of the plains. In these towns, in my imagination, champagne flowed and diamonds glittered as the privileged gathered for parties and soirees.

Our group of 16 ladies set off in cheerful spirits—a light heartedness that remained with us throughout the trip. We flew first to Calcutta, next Bagdogra and then travelled by car to Kalimpong, Gangtok and finally Darjeeling. Calcutta is a

city of intriguing contrasts. Imposing colonial buildings are still used and maintained while most of the elegant mansions of British India's capital are slowly disintegrating under the encroachment of myriad other buildings. All crowd each other for space. Fungus proliferates and byzantine tangles of wires droop alarmingly between buildings. Turbulently crowded roads are a cacophonous maelstrom of people and vehicles, all struggling for space. Despite its many shortcomings, Calcutta nevertheless inspires much affection among its residents.

With FOM member Aditi Krishnakumar providing expert knowledge about this interesting city, we had the pleasure of visiting various landmarks. These included an historic cemetery; the imperial-era Tollygunge Club, where we had a delightful lunch and hostess; and finally the monumental Victoria Memorial, complete with an imposing bronze statue of the portly queen gazing forbiddingly down on all who passed. Our lively group chose to have photos taken below that stern mien.

The bustling town of Kalimpong was our next destination. We drove along endlessly winding roads till we reached the ridge it clings precariously to, and settled into the first of the old-world-style hotels we would be staying in. Here



Tea plantations on hillside slopes with Kanchenjunga in the distance

we visited two impressive schools: Dr Graham's Homes and the Gandhi Ashram, each remarkable in its own way. The former celebrated its centenary in 2000 and is renowned for producing students with "a harmonious personality and independent thought and judgement." The second left an indelible impression on us all – desperately poor children come here to study and all learn to play the violin. Its founder, Father Edward McGuire, believed playing music empowered poor children intellectually and emotionally. We were entertained by an orchestral concert during our visit – a moving and thoroughly delightful experience. Another highlight of Kalimpong was the Lepcha Museum, where twinkling-eyed museum owner Sonam Tshering introduced us to his people's music, culture and history. Kalimpong is also home to several unusual churches as well as monasteries, which we visited.

Before setting off for Sikkim's capital, Gangtok, we traipsed through Kalimpong's bazaar, picking up 'necessities' such as cast-iron woks and other oddments. Two monasteries were visited en route: the old and the new Rumtek. The former is a charming, atmospheric little gompa, the latter a rambling complex also housing a school. Rumtek should be the 17th Karmapa Lama's home, but political sensitivities dictate that he live in Dharamsala. Sikkim's Governor was our genial host at a tea party one morning, which was followed by a visit to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology – a museum housing many artefacts and old photographs. The Museum's director, Tashi Densapa, was our gracious host and accompanied the group during the tour. Mr Densapa had kindly arranged a special treat that morning – a visit to Tsuklakhang, the former royal chapel, and a sneak peek at the royal palace.

The following day we visited a number of places outside Gangtok; a viewpoint, a holy site revered by both Bhutias and Lepchas, several gompas and a pretty waterfall whose cascade created glistening rainbows in the misty spray. The long drive was enlivened by the interesting road conditions – 'sinking' zones, 'shooting' stones, landslides and on one blind bend, an encounter with an enormous grader that loomed up and filled the entire narrow roadway – one side was a drop of thousands of feet. Expert manoeuvring by all drivers got us safely past.

Darjeeling, famous for its teas, was our final destination. This hilltop town is the summer home of the affable and courtly Maharaja and Maharani of Burdwan, in whose palace we had a sumptuous tea. Here we also met the owners of the Elgin hotels, a charming couple who later entertained us at their hotel. The previous night, an elegantly served dinner at the famous Windamere Hotel had taken us back in time. Another highlight of our stay in Darjeeling was a ride on what is known as the Toy Train. In the late 1800's, this railway was



FOM group at Tsuklakhang, Gangtok

Photo by Helen Cannon-Brookes

an engineering marvel – in many ways it still is, as a minuscule engine pulls three carriages along ageing narrow-gauge tracks. In Ghoom we visited the railway museum and Darjeeling's oldest gompa, where a benign Maitreya Buddha gazes imperturbably.

Finally, lightning evening 'raids' were made on the Darjeeling bazaar, where Tibetan objets d'art, jewellery and books on multiple subjects were the targets of eager shoppers. On the final night, tour participants thanked our intrepid leaders, Helen Cannon-Brookes and Sue Ellen Kelso, with small mementos as well as a 'folk tale' recounting the trials and tribulations of keeping an unruly 'tribe' together and on time – a remarkable feat.

Leo settled in Singapore 41 years ago after marrying her airline pilot fiancé. Nowadays, after a variety of careers - university lecturer, magazine publisher, writer, editor - she calls herself a happy wanderer who travels when she can tear herself away from her young grandson. Andra's interest in FOM was awakened by its Study Tours. She is also a member of a FOM book group

Photos by Andra Leo, unless noted



Three devotees at Tsuklakhang, Gangtok, Sikkim



Three pupils of the Gandhi Ashram School, Kalimpong