



# West Bengal & Darjeeling

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## Why Go?

Stretching from the jagged northern hills down to the sultry mangroves of the Bay of Bengal, few states offer such a rich range of destinations and experiences as West Bengal.

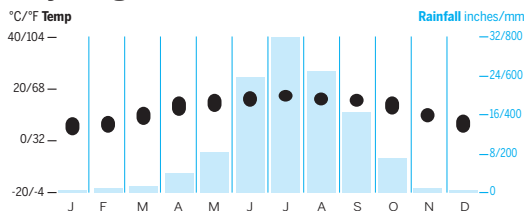
Down south in the plains, brilliant green rice fields surround bustling trading towns, mud-and-thatch villages, and vestiges of Bengal's glorious history: ornate, terracotta-tiled Hindu temples and monumental ruins of Muslim princes.

Up in the cool northern hills the 'toy train' of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway chugs its way up the British-era hill station of Darjeeling, a quintessential remnant of the Raj, whose views of massive Kkangchendzonga towering over the surrounding tea estates rank as one of the region's most inspiring sights.

Overshadowed perhaps by the reputation of its capital Kolkata (Calcutta), the rest of West Bengal sees surprisingly few foreign tourists. Perhaps visitors should learn from the Bengalis themselves, enthusiastic travellers who never tire of exploring their own fascinating and diverse region.

## When to Go

### Darjeeling



**Oct–Dec & Mar–May** Best for West Bengal hills views, trekking and spring bloom.

**Oct–Mar** Best for avoiding the heat on the lower plains.

**Jan** The best time to navigate the dense mangrove forests of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve.

## Food & Drink

Darjeeling is *the* place to taste a range of teas from local tea estates. Noted for its delicate taste, the teas range from black to green to white and are best taken alone or with a slice of lemon, but not with milk. For more on the best tea-related travel experiences see p492. Not to be outdone, Bengali food is considered iconic by locals and visitors alike – for more information on the delicacies of this region, see p443 and p1115.

### DON'T MISS

The views of 8598m Khangchendzonga, the world's third-highest mountain, are easily one of the West Bengal Hills' highlights. The classic viewpoints are from **Tiger Hill** or from the **Singalila Trek**, where the Himalayan skyline stretches from Nepal to Bhutan. **Darjeeling** town also has great views, as does Deolo Hill in **Kalimpong**. The major potential spoiler is the weather. The most reliable clear skies are at dawn during the post-monsoon months of October to December.

## Top State Festivals

- » Lepcha & Bhutia New Year (Jan, West Bengal Hills) Colourful fairs and traditional dances in and around Darjeeling.
- » Ganga Sagar Mela (mid-Jan, Sagar Island, p478) Hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims converge where the Ganges meets the sea, to bathe en masse in a fervent festival.
- » Magh Mela (6-8 Feb, Shantiniketan, p479) Crafts and rural arts take centre stage at this festival.
- » Bengali New Year (mid-Apr, Naba Barsha) A statewide holiday celebrating the first day of the Bengali calendar.
- » Rath Yatra (Jun & Jul, Chariot Festival, statewide) Celebrated by pulling the juggernaut of Lord Jagannath's chariot.
- » Jhapan (mid-Aug, Bishnupur, p479) Draws snake charmers to honour the goddess Manasa, the central figure of snake worship.
- » Fulpati (Sep & Oct, West Bengal Hills) Linked to Durga Puja and marking the seventh day of Dashain, this predominantly Nepali festival is also celebrated by Lepchas and others with processions and dancing from Ghum to Darjeeling.
- » Durga Puja (Oct, statewide) Across the state, especially in Kolkata, temporary *pandals* (pavilions) are raised and intense celebrations take place to worship the goddess Durga. After four colourful days, beautiful clay idols of the 10-armed deity are immersed in the rivers.
- » Jagaddhatri Puja (Nov, Chandarnagar, p478) Honours the goddess Jagaddhatri, an incarnation of Durga.
- » Poush Mela (23-26 Dec, Shantiniketan, p479) Folk music, dance, theatre and Baul songs radiate across the university town.

## MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

- Kolkata Airport (p470)
- Kolkata (Chitpore) Train Station (p470)
- Bagdogra Airport (p483)
- New Jalpaiguri Train Station (p484)

## Fast Facts

- » Population: 91.3 million
- » Area: 87,853 sq km
- » Capital: Kolkata
- » Main language: Bengali
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹600, \$\$ ₹600 to ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

## Top Tip

During the month-long 'puja season', around the Durga Puja, Dasain/Dushera and later Diwali festivals, hotels, jeeps and trekking huts are often booked out by travelling Bengali tourists. Pack a jumper and visit in November to avoid the crowds.

## Resources

- » West Bengal Tourist Department ([www.westbengaltourism.gov.in](http://www.westbengaltourism.gov.in)) Information and online booking for WBTD lodges like Jaldaphara.
- » Kalimpong ([www.kalimpong.org](http://www.kalimpong.org)) Travel information with an emphasis on accommodation.

## West Bengal Highlights

- 1 Enjoy 360-degree mountain views over breakfast at hilltop lodges on the **Singalila Ridge Trek** (p499)
- 2 Ride the steam-driven **toy train** (p484) as it puffs and pants its way between the tea towns of Kurseong and Darjeeling
- 3 Meander up the wide **Hooghly River** (p478) to uncover colonial and Mughal relics in Serampore, Chandernagar and Hooghly
- 4 Visit a tea estate, sip a delicate local brew and enjoy the fantastic views from the historic hill station of **Darjeeling** (p487)
- 5 Watch dawn break over the world's third-highest peak from **Tiger Hill** (p490)
- 6 Admire intricate scenes from the Hindu epics carved on the medieval terracotta temples of **Bishnupur** (p479)
- 7 Cruise the river channels of the **Sunderbans** (p476) through the world's most extensive mangrove forest, to spot darting kingfishers, spotted deer and the elusive Royal Bengal tiger



## History

Referred to as Vanga in the Mahabharata, this region has a long history predating the Aryan invasions of India. It was part of the Mauryan empire in the 3rd century BC before being overrun by the Guptas. For three centuries from around the 9th century AD, the Buddhist Pala dynasty controlled a large area based in Bengal and including parts of Odisha (Orissa), Bihar and modern Bangladesh.

Bengal was brought under Muslim control by Qutb-ud-din, first of the sultans of Delhi, at the end of the 12th century. Following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, Bengal became an independent Islamic state.

The British East India Company established a trading post in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 1698, which quickly prospered. Sensing rich pickings, Siraj-ud-daula, the nawab of Bengal, came down from his capital at Murshidabad and easily took Kolkata in 1756. Robert Clive defeated him the following year at the Battle of Plassey, helped by the treachery of Siraj-ud-daula's uncle, Mir Jafar, who commanded the greater part of the nawab's army. Jafar succeeded his nephew as nawab but his reward was short-lived; after the Battle of Buxar in 1764 the British took full control of Bengal.

West Bengal was the cradle of the Indian Renaissance and national freedom movement, and has long been considered the country's cultural heartland. In 1947 Indian independence from Britain, and the subsequent partition of the country, saw the state of Bengal divided on religious grounds, causing the upheaval of millions of Bengalis.



## Activities

### TREKKING

While pleasant walks along pine-scented trails are possible in all of West Bengal's hill stations, the most popular place for a multiday trek is Singalila Ridge (p498), near Darjeeling, where teahouse-style trekking is possible. Camping treks are possible elsewhere, including around Kalimpong.

### RAFTING

White-water rafting trips should resume soon on the mighty Teesta and Rangeet Rivers, easily arranged and accessed from Darjeeling (see p492).



## Getting There & Around

The vast majority who enter West Bengal arrive in Kolkata. Siliguri's Bagdogra airport has services to Bangkok, Kolkata, Delhi and Guwahati, as well as daily helicopter flights to Gangtok.

Most land arrivals are by train: main lines run south to Bhubaneswar and Chennai (Madras), and west to Gaya, Varanasi and Delhi. Other lines connect the state to Assam in the northeast and Jharkhand in the southwest. Numerous long-distance buses also connect surrounding states.

Overcrowded 'share jeeps' ply the winding roads of the West Bengal hills. Try to avoid the cramped back seats.

## SOUTH OF KOLKATA

### Sunderbans Tiger Reserve

Home to one of the largest concentrations of tigers on the planet, this 2585 sq km **reserve** (Indian/foreigner ₹15/150) is a network of channels and semi-submerged mangroves that forms the world's largest river delta. Royal Bengal tigers (officially estimated to number close to 300) lurk in the impenetrable depths of the mangrove forests, and also swim the delta's innumerable channels. Although they do sometimes kill villagers working in the Sunderbans, tigers are typically shy and sightings are rare. Nevertheless, cruising the broad waterways through the world's biggest mangrove sanctuary (now a Unesco World Heritage Site) and watching wildlife, whether it be a spotted deer, 2m-long water monitor or luminescent kingfisher, is a world away from Kolkata's chaos.

The best time to visit the reserve is between October and March. Organised tours (see p477) are the best way to navigate this tricky and harsh landscape, not least because all your permits, paperwork, guiding duties and logistical problems are taken care of. In fact, travelling alone is not recommended.

At Sajnekhali, the official gateway into the reserve, you'll find the **Mangrove Interpretation Centre** (☉8.30am-5pm) with a small turtle and crocodile hatchery, a collection of pickled wildlife and a blackboard with the date of the last tiger-spotting chalked up.



## Tours

Tour prices vary widely. They typically include return transport from Kolkata, as well as all the fees, but do check what is and isn't included. **West Bengal Tourism** (p469) organises weekly boat cruises from September to April, costing from ₹2300 per person for one night and two half-days, including food and on-board accommodation. Trips that include a worthwhile extra day start from ₹3100.

**Backpackers**

WILDLIFE WATCHING

(☎9836177140; www.tourdesundarbans.com; 11 Tottee Lane, Kolkata) An extremely professional and knowledgeable outfit that conducts highly recommended tours of the jungles, including birdwatching and local music sessions. All-inclusive prices are ₹4000/4500 per person for one-/two-night trips, give or take a few hundred depending on the number of people in your group.

**Sunderban Tiger Camp**

WILDLIFE WATCHING

(☎9331092632; www.sunderbantigerencamp.com; 71 Ganesh Chandra Avenue, Kolkata; 1/2 nights per person from ₹3250/4930; 📍) Provides expert guides and quality accommodation (on dry land).

**Help Tourism**

WILDLIFE WATCHING

(☎033-24550917; www.helptourism.com; 67A Kali Temple Rd, Kalighat, Kolkata; 1/2 nights for 2 people all-inclusive ₹22100/27600) Prices come down sharply as the number of people increases.

**Diamond Harbour**

(☎03174 / POP 37,238)

Diamond Harbour, once among the main ports of the East India Company, rests 51km south of Kolkata, where the Hooghly turns south and flows into open sea. It's a good staging area for points in the south.

There isn't much to see around, except the smoking chimneys of industrial Haldia township across the river.

**Ffort Raichak** (☎275444; www.ffffort.com; Sarisa; d from ₹7500; 📍@📍) is a surprisingly pleasant (though a tad oversized) resort nearby, a relaxed stay in which could be your only reason to halt an extra night here. Cutting a handsome profile and located right next to the waters, it's a plush getaway set amid 26 hectares of lush greens, and is equipped with the very best of luxe features. If you're staying, consider spending a few extra bucks on a delightful river cruise, if the hotel can arrange it for you.

Buses from Kolkata's Esplanade (₹40, 1½ hours) come and go every 30 minutes.

**Sagar Island**

According to legend, after the sage Kapil reduced King Sagar's 60,000 sons to ashes, it was at Sagar Island that the Ganges revived their souls by flowing over their dusty remains. Each year the **Ganga Sagar Mela** is

held here, near the Kapil Muni Temple, honouring the legend. The best way to see the festival is the two-day, one-night boat tour operated from Kolkata by West Bengal Tourism (p469), with accommodation on board (per person deck/berth ₹3950/6500). The island hibernates for the rest of the year.

**Mandarmani**

(☎03220)

About 180km south of Kolkata, Mandarmani is a sleepy fishing village that sports a heavenly beach stretching nearly 15km. It remains one of the more unpolluted beaches in the country, and supports countless colonies of sand bubbler crabs. The beaches see some additional action at dawn, when fishing boats drop anchor and disgorge their catches of marine goodies.

**Sana Beach** (☎9007725066; www.thesana.beach.com; d incl breakfast from ₹4050; 📍), at the far end of the beach, has a mix of comfy rooms, cottages and tents, and a good bar-restaurant.

To go, take the 6.40am *Tamralipta Express* (2nd class/chair ₹77/298, 3½ hours) from Kolkata's Howrah Station to Digha. A taxi drop from there costs about ₹400.

**NORTH OF KOLKATA****Up the Hooghly**

On the Hooghly River, about 25km north of Kolkata, Serampore was a Danish trading centre until Denmark's holdings in India were transferred to the British East India Company in 1845. **Serampore College** was founded in 1818 by the first Baptist missionary to India, William Carey, and houses a library that was once one of the largest in the country.

Further upstream is the former French outpost of **Chandernagar**, where you can visit the **Eglise du Sacre Coeur** (Sacred Heart Church) and the nearby 18th-century mansion now housing the **Cultural Institut de Chandernagar** (admission free; ☀11am-5.30pm, closed Thu & Sat), with collections documenting this colonial outpost.

In 1571 the Portuguese set up a factory in **Bandel**, 41km north of Kolkata and close to Saptagram, which was an important trading port long before Kolkata rose to prominence.

Here, you can climb the lofty clock tower of the romantically crumbling **Imambara** (admission ₹5; ☀8am-6pm Apr-Jul, to 5.30pm Aug-Nov, to 5pm Dec-Mar), where the view over the river (not to mention the climb) will take your breath away. The building was constructed in 1861 as a centre for learning and worship. Only 1km south of Bandel, **Chinsurah** was exchanged by the Dutch for the British possessions on the (Indonesian) island of Sumatra in 1825. There are dilapidated ruins of a fort and a cemetery, about 1km to the west.

About 6km north of Hooghly, **Bansberia** has two interesting temples. The 13 *sikhars* (spires) of the **Hanseswari Temple** look like something you'd expect to see in St Petersburg, while the ornate terracotta tiles covering the **Vasudev Temple** resemble those seen in Bishnupur.

## Bishnupur

📍03244 / POP 61,943

Known for its beautiful terracotta temples, Bishnupur flourished as the capital of the Malla kings from the 16th to the early 19th centuries. The architecture of these intriguing **temples** (Indian/foreigner ₹10/250; ☀dawn-dusk) is a bold mix of Bengali, Islamic and Orissan styles. Intricately detailed facades of numerous temples play out scenes of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The most striking structures include the Jor Bangla, Madan Mohan Temple, the multi-arched Ras Mancha and the elaborate Shyam Rai Temple. You need to pay for your ticket at Ras Mancha and show it at the other temples. Cycle-rickshaw-wallahs offer tours (the best way to negotiate the labyrinth of lanes) for ₹200.

There's a small **museum** (admission ₹10; ☀11am-7pm Tue-Sun) that's worth a look for its painted manuscript covers, stone friezes, musical instruments and folk art gallery.

Bishnupur is in Bankura district, famous for its Baluchari silk saris and its pottery, particularly the stylised Bankura horse. Reproductions of detailed terracotta tiles from the temples are sold everywhere.

**Bishnupur Tourist Lodge** (📍252013; College Rd; d without/with AC from ₹500/1100; 🌳) is a freshly renovated and upgraded government-run hotel, with clean rooms and a good bar-cum-restaurant. It's close to the museum and a ₹50 rickshaw ride from the train station. It's often full, so book ahead.

Regular buses run from Bishnupur to Kolkata (₹90, five hours). For Shantiniketan (₹70, four hours) you may have to change in

Durgapur (see p480). Two trains run daily to Howrah (2nd class/chair ₹85/317, four hours): the 5.31pm *Rupashi Bangla Express* and the 7.33am *Howrah Purulia Express*.

## Shantiniketan

📍03463

Shantiniketan is the epitome of its Bengali name, which means peaceful (*shanti*) abode (*niketan*). The mystic, poet and artist Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) founded a school here in 1901, which later developed into the Visva Bharati University, with an emphasis on humanity's relationship with nature. It's a relaxed place with students from all over India and overseas.

The **post office** (Santiniketan Rd; ☀9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is on the main road, opposite the turn-off to the university entrance. The **State Bank of India** (Santiniketan Rd; ☀10am-3pm Mon-Fri), on the same road, has an ATM and changes foreign currency.

Spread throughout the leafy university grounds are eclectic **statues**, the celebrated **Shantiniketan Murals** and the **Tagore Prayer Hall**. The **museum and art gallery** (adult/student ₹5/3; ☀10.30am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Thu-Mon, 10.30am-1pm Tue) within the Uttaran complex (Tagore's former home) are worth a peek if you are a Tagore aficionado. Reproductions of his sketches and paintings are sold here. The **Subarnarekha** bookshop near the post office has plenty of Tagore's titles (₹80 to ₹250) in English.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Shantiniketan Tourist Lodge** HOTEL \$\$  
(📍252699; Bhubandanga; d without/with AC from ₹750/1800; 🌳) This large-scale government-run operation offers good-value rooms opening out to airy corridors, with good housekeeping and friendly service. There's a pleasant garden and the **restaurant** (mains ₹70 to ₹90) works up a limited range of Indian standards.

**Hotel Rangamati** HOTEL \$\$  
(📍252305; Bhubandanga; s/d ₹700/990, with AC ₹1090/1400; 🌳) A fun 'jungle hut' theme with faux branches, wooden fittings and lots of fish tanks at the entrance. Rooms are clean with big bathrooms and dark wood furniture. There's a basic restaurant.

**Camellia Hotel & Resort** HOTEL \$\$  
(📍9007030195; www.camelliagroup.org; Prantik; d without/with AC from ₹1750/4500; 🌳🌳) The

## UP ON THE FARM, DOWN ON THE FARM

If you want to get off the tourist track and enjoy views and solitude, we recommend three (very different) farm homestays in West Bengal. All need to be booked in advance.

Perched on an idyllic mountainside three hours' bumpy jeep ride from Darjeeling or two hours' drive from Rimbik, at the end of the Singalila Ridge Trek (p498), **Karmi Farm** ([www.karmifarm.com](http://www.karmifarm.com); per person incl full board ₹1500) overlooks Sikkim in one direction and Nepal in another. It's managed by Andrew Pulger-Frame, whose Sikkimese grandparents once ran an estate from the main house here, where delicious home-cooked meals are now served up to visitors on the old kitchen table. The simple but very comfortable double and family rooms are attractively decorated with colourful local fabrics, and bathrooms have 24-hour hot water. A small clinic for villagers is run from the farm, providing a volunteer opportunity for medical students and doctors. Treks and other activities can be organised, but it's equally easy to just sit for days on the rooftop deck with a book and a pot of tea, overlooking the bird- and flower-filled gardens and towering distant peaks. Wonderful.

Back down on the plains, bordered by brilliant-green paddy fields, is the rustic **Basudha Farm** (☎9432674377; [www.cintdis.org](http://www.cintdis.org); per person ₹300), an hour's drive from Bishnupur. Basudha is a rural self-help organisation and documentation centre that operates a seed bank of indigenous rice strains. Rices are grown using organic methods, and farmers are sensitised to use them as an alternative to using genetically modified strains. Visitors to the farm are assumed to be interested in the work and the local culture. Accommodation is basic, with limited (solar) power, and all water needs to be pumped from the well. The all-veg food is mostly grown on the farm.

A similar approach to nature and life is taken at **Babli** (☎03463-271285; [www.babli-farm.tripod.com](http://www.babli-farm.tripod.com); per person from ₹650), a farm near Shantiniketan that busies itself with conservation of forests, flora and fauna, while promoting rural empowerment. Those interested in learning more can spend a quiet day on their sylvan campus and be treated like family. Accommodation is in huts and cottages, and there's great veg food at the canteen.

Camellia has a pleasant country setting about 2km from the university, with leafy gardens and green lawns. Tasteful art and furniture make the rooms especially comfortable; the suites have a fridge and bathtub. Pick-up from the train station is available.



**Alcha**

CAFÉ \$

(Ratanpalli; mains ₹50-80; ☎7.30am-10am, noon-2pm & 4-8pm) This lovely cafe on one edge of the university campus is a melting pot for writers, artists, poets, musicians and free-thinking students nursing million-dollar ideas in their fertile minds. It's got a cool shack-style seating space that often doubles as an art gallery, and there's a boutique adjoining the eatery that sells a fantastic selection of jewellery, textiles and handicrafts made by local artisans. Oh, and the *parathas* are sinful.

### **i** Getting There & Away

Several trains ply between Bolpur station, 2km south of the university, and Kolkata daily. The best is *Shantiniketan Express* (2nd class/chair ₹70/232, 2½ hours) departing at 10.10am from Howrah and 1.10pm from Bolpur. For New Jal-

paiguri, take the 9.40am *Kanchenjunga Express* 5657 (sleeper/3AC ₹187/496, eight hours). There's a **train booking office** (Santiniketan Rd; ☎8am-noon, 12.30-2pm Thu-Tue) near the post office.

The Jambuni bus stand is in Bolpur. Buses go to Berhampore/Murshidabad (₹70, four hours) and Bishnupur (₹70, four hours) but direct buses can be hard to find: you may need to change in Durgapur for Bishnupur and Suri for Berhampore.

## Nabadwip & Mayapur

☎03472 / POP 115,036

Nabadwip, 114km north of Kolkata, is an important Krishna pilgrimage centre, attracting throngs of devotees, and is also an ancient centre of Sanskrit culture. The last Hindu king of Bengal, Lakshman Sen, moved his capital here from Gaur.

Across the river from Nabadwip, Mayapur is a centre for the Iskcon (Hare Krishna) movement. There's a large, colourful temple and the basic but clean **Iskcon Guest Houses** (☎245620; [mghb@pamho.net](mailto:mghb@pamho.net); d/tr/q from ₹300/350/450). Iskcon runs a private bus

to Kolkata (₹200, five hours) early on Friday, Saturday and Sunday mornings, returning in the evening; for details or to make a booking call **Iskcon Kolkata** (☎033-32488041).

## Murshidabad & Berhampore

☎03482 / POP 36,894

In Murshidabad, rural Bengali life and 18th-century architecture meld on the verdant shores of the Bhagirathi River. When Siraj-ud-daula was nawab of Bengal, Murshidabad was his capital, and he was assassinated here after the defeat at Plassey (now Palashi).

The main draw here is the **Hazarduari** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☀10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), a palace famous for its 1000 doors (real and false), built here for the nawabs in 1837. It houses an astonishing collection of antiquities from the 18th and 19th centuries. Other beautiful structures in the complex include the **Nizamata Imambara**, the clock tower; the **Wasef Manzil**, a former regal residence, and the elegant **Madina Mosque**.

Murshid Quli Khan, who moved the capital here in 1700, is buried beneath the stairs at the impressive ruins of the **Katra Mosque**. Siraj-ud-daula was assassinated at the **Nimak Haram Deori** (Traitor's Gate). Within the **Kathgola Gardens** (admission ₹7; ☀6.30am-5.30pm) is an interesting family mansion of a Jain trading family, dating back to 1873.

Berhampore is 15km south of Murshidabad and acts as its bus and railway hub.

## 🍴 Sleeping & Eating

### Hotel Samrat

HOTEL \$

(☎251147; fax 253091; NH34 Panchanantala; d without/with AC from ₹300/770; ☹) This is one of Berhampore's longest-running operations, and offers spacious and clean rooms opening along corridors painted in orange and cream. The Mahal restaurant (mains ₹100) downstairs is a good place for meals.

### Hotel Manjusha

HOTEL \$

(☎270321; Murshidabad; d from ₹500) A wonderful setting on the banks of the Bhagirathi, behind the Great Imambara. Downstairs rooms are cheapest, while rooms 201 to 203 have river and Hazarduari views for an extra ₹100. It's all about the location and period charm, though the rooms themselves are threadbare – some are slightly whiffy.

## 📍 Getting There & Around

The **Bhagirathi Express** (2nd class/chair ₹69/264, four hours) departs Kolkata's Sealdah station at 6.25pm, and departs from Berhampore at 6.34am. Regular buses leave for Kolkata (₹95, six hours) and Malda (₹70, four hours). To Shantiniketan/Bolpur (₹70, four hours) there are occasional direct buses but you may need to change in Suri.

Shared autorickshaws (₹20) whiz between Murshidabad and Berhampore. Cycle-rickshaws/taxis offer guided half-day tours to see the spread-out sites for ₹200/500.

## Malda

☎03512 / POP 161,448

Malda, 340km north of Kolkata, is a convenient base for visiting the ruins of Bengal's former capitals in nearby Gaur and Pandua. Malda is also famed for its mangoes ripening in spring; even if it's not mango season, you'll probably get mango pickle on the side with any food you order here.

State Bank of India and ICICI ATMs are on the highway, near the turn-off to the bus station. **i-Zone** (per hr ₹20; ☀10am-7pm), behind the bus station on the way to Malda Museum, has fast internet connections.

**Hotel Kalinga** (☎283567; www.hotelkalinga.malda.net; NH34, Ram Krishna Pally; d without/with AC ₹500/1000; ☹) is a big place on the highway, about halfway between the bus and train stations. The AC rooms are fine, but the cheaper ones are slightly grubby. The rooftop multicuisine restaurant (mains ₹100) has good food and great views.

**Malda Tourist Lodge** (☎220911; Rathbari More; d without/with AC ₹525/1050; ☹) is a state-run accommodation option that was undergoing renovation during research, and should have fresh, clean rooms on offer by now.

The best trains from Kolkata (Sealdah station) are the 3.15pm **Intercity Express** (2nd class/chair ₹105/374, six hours) and the New Jalpaiguri-bound 6.35am **Kanchanjanga Express** (sleeper/2AC ₹250/580, six hours). The former returns at 6.10am the next morning. Buses depart regularly for Siliguri (₹135, six hours), Berhampore/Murshidabad (₹70, four hours) and Kolkata (₹170, 10 hours).

## Gaur & Pandua

Rising from the flooded paddy fields of Gaur (15km south of Malda) are mosques and other vestiges of the 13th- to 16th-century capital of the Muslim nawabs. Little remains



from the 7th- to 12th-century pre-Muslim period, when Gaur was the capital of the successive Buddhist Pala and Hindu Sena dynasties.

Wander through the ruins of the impressive **Baradwari Mosque** and the intact arched aisle of its corridor, or beneath the fortress-like gateway of **Dakhil Darwaza** (1425). The **Qadam Rasul Mosque** enshrines the flat footprint of the Prophet Mohammed. The adjacent **tomb of Fateh Khan** (1707) startlingly informs you that its occupant 'vomited blood and died on this spot'. Remnants of colourful enamel cling to the **Chamkan Mosque** and the **Gumti Gate** nearby.

In Pandua (30km north of Malda) are the vast ruins of the 14th-century **Adina Masjid**, once India's largest mosque. Within a section of arched and domed bays sits the tomb of Sikander Shah (r 1364–79), the builder of this mosque. About 2km away is the **Eklakhi Mausoleum**, so called because it cost ₹1 lakh (₹100,000) to build.

The monuments are spread throughout Gaur and Pandua along some of the worst roads in India; it's worth hiring a taxi from Malda for half a day (₹1200).

## WEST BENGAL HILLS

### Siliguri & New Jalpaiguri

📍0353 / POP 656,000 / ELEV 120M

The crowded and noisy transport hub encompassing the twin towns of Siliguri and New Jalpaiguri (NJP) is the jumping-off point for Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sikkim, the northeast states, eastern Nepal and Bhutan. There's little to see here: for most travellers, Siliguri is an overnight transit point to cooler climes.

Most of Siliguri's hotels, restaurants and services are spread along Tenzing Norgay Rd, better known as Hill Cart Rd. NJP Station Rd leads southward to NJP station, while branching northeastward off Hill Cart Rd are Siliguri's other main streets, Sevoke and Bidhan Rds, the latter hiding the city's most interesting bazaars.

### Sleeping

#### Hotel Conclave

HOTEL \$\$

(📍2516144; www.hotelconclave.com; Hill Cart Rd; s/d from ₹750/900; 🚽) Unhelpful staff can't

detract from this solid contemporary hotel, conveniently close to all the transport options. Quality mattresses, artwork on the walls and a glass elevator add a touch of class. The rooms are spotless and downstairs is the excellent **Eminent Restaurant** (mains ₹70-140). Road-facing luxury rooms can be noisy. Pricier rooms come with breakfast.

#### Conclave Lodge

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍2514102; Hill Cart Rd; s/d without bathroom ₹200/350, s/d/tr with bathroom ₹332/500/611) Tucked away behind the more visible Hotel Conclave, this central lodge is the best budget option, with clean, quiet and high-ceilinged rooms with TV and hot water bathrooms.

#### Hotel Sinclairs

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍2517674; www.sinclairshotels.com; off NH31; d from ₹3800; 🚽🚿📺) This comfortable three-star hotel escapes the noise of Hill Cart Rd, 1km north of the bus terminal. The rooms are spacious and there's an excellent restaurant-cum-bar and the chance to dive into a cool, clean pool.

#### Cindrella Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍2544130; 3rd Mile, Sevoke Rd; www.cindrella-hotels.com; s/d incl breakfast from ₹3600/4000; 🚽🚿📺) The top place in town offers comfortable rather than luxurious rooms, with a bar, small gym and pool (closed Nov-Feb), grassy lawns, and free wi-fi throughout. It's 3km northeast of the centre.

#### Hotel Himalayan Regency

HOTEL \$\$

(📍6502955; Hill Cart Rd; s/d from ₹500/600, with AC from ₹1200; 🚽) Comfortable rooms with big clean bathrooms. Thought has gone into the design and colour scheme, though apparently by someone suffering from an extreme form of colour blindness.

#### Hotel Mount View

HOTEL \$

(📍2512919; Hill Cart Rd; d from ₹500) Under renovation after a change of owner at the time of research, but worth a look; located next to Khana Khazana restaurant.

### Eating

#### Khana Khazana

MULTICUISINE \$

(Hill Cart Rd; mains ₹60-120) The secluded outdoor area here offers merciful relief from the chaos outside. The extensive menu ranges from Chinese and South Indian specials to Mumbai street snacks, and includes plenty of vegetarian options. Our mildly-spiced chicken *mumtaz* was so good we ordered it three times.

**Sartaj**

(Hill Cart Rd; mains ₹70-140; ☎) A sophisticated and cool (literally – the AC is heaven) bar-restaurant with a huge range: first-rate North Indian tandooris and curries, good Continental options and top-notch service.

**i Information****Internet Access**

**iWay** (Hill Cart Rd; per hr ₹40; ☎9am-9pm) A tangerine dream, with bright-orange interior. It's half-hidden behind a shop, 1km southeast of the bus terminal.

**Medical Services**

**Sadar Hospital** (☎2436526; Hospital Rd)

**Money**

Bagdogra Airport has a money changer with decent rates but a fairly high commission.

**Delhi Hotel** (Hill Cart Rd; ☎9am-7pm) Currency and travellers cheques exchanged, opposite the bus station; ₹25 tax per transaction.

**Multi Money** (1st fl, 143 Hill Cart Rd; ☎10am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Exchanges cash only; next to Standard Chartered Bank.

**Standard Chartered Bank** (144 Hill Cart Rd) One of several ATMs on Hill Cart Rd.

**Tourist Information**

**Sikkim Tourist Office** (SNT Terminal, Hill Cart Rd; ☎10am-5pm) Issues permits for Sikkim on the spot. Bring copies of your passport, visa and one passport-sized photo.

**West Bengal Tourist Office** (☎2511974; www.westbengaltourism.gov.in; Hill Cart Rd; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Fri) Can book accommodation for Jaldhaphara Wildlife Sanctuary, including forestry lodges. Less helpful information desks are at Bagdogra Airport and NJP train station.

**Travel Agencies**

Private transport booking agencies line Hill Cart Rd.

**Help Tourism** (☎2433683; www.helptourism.com, www.helptourism.net; 143 Hill Cart Rd; ☎) A recommended agency with a strong environmental and community-development focus, including voluntourism. It has links to homestays and lodges around the hills, and its tour and trekking packages get rave reviews.

**Tourist Service Agency** (☎2531959; tsaslg@sanchar.net.in; Pradhan Nagar Rd) Can book Jaldhaphara accommodation, including forest lodges. It's close to the Delhi Hotel.

**i Getting There & Away****Air**

Bagdogra Airport is 12km west of Siliguri. Check websites for fares, which vary widely. Some

INDIAN \$

flights to Delhi are direct, while others go via Guwahati.

**Air India** (☎2511495; www.airindia.in; Hill Cart Rd; ☎10am-1pm & 1.45-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Five weekly to Kolkata and Delhi, three to Guwahati.

**Go Air** (☎1800 222111; www.goair.in) Daily to Delhi, three weekly to Guwahati.

**Jet Airways** (☎2538001; www.jetairways.com; Hill Cart Rd; ☎9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Daily to Kolkata and Delhi, four weekly to Guwahati.

**Kingfisher Airlines** (☎1800 2093030; www.flyingfisher.com) Daily to Kolkata and Delhi, three weekly to Guwahati.

**Spice Jet** (☎1800 1803333; www.spicejet.com) Daily to Kolkata (direct) and Delhi (some direct, some via Guwahati/Kolkata).

Five-seater helicopters (₹2200, 30 minutes, 10kg luggage limit) travel daily from Bagdogra to Gangtok at 2.30pm in good weather. You need to book by phone through **Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation** (☎03592-203960; see p535) in Gangtok.

**Bus**

Most North Bengal State Transport Corporation (NBSTC) buses leave from **Tenzing Norgay Central Bus Terminal** (Hill Cart Rd), as do many private buses plying the same routes. Private bus companies line the entrance.

NBSTC buses include frequent buses to Malda (₹120, 6½ hours) and Madarihat (see p484), plus a daily service to Kolkata (₹266, 7pm). Assam State Transportation Corporation runs a daily 4pm bus to Guwahati (₹353, 12 hours).

For Patna (₹275, 12 hours, departs 6pm) try **Gupta Travels**, just outside the bus station. Deluxe Volvo buses for Kolkata (₹900, 11 hours) leave around 7pm from this and many other agencies.

Sikkim Nationalised Transport (SNT) buses to Gangtok (₹115-210, 4½ hours) leave at 7.30am, 11.30am, 12.30pm and 1.30pm from the **SNT terminal** (Hill Cart Rd), 250m south of the bus terminal. The 11.30am departure is normally air-con (₹220). Arrange your permit in advance at the Sikkim Tourist Office next door (p483).

**Jeep**

A faster and more comfortable way of getting around the hills is by share jeep. There are a number of jeep stands lining Hill Cart Rd: for Darjeeling (₹90, three hours), Kurseong (₹50, 1½ hours) or Mirik (₹60, 2½ hours), look around opposite the bus terminal or outside the Conclave Hotel; for Kalimpong (₹80, 2½ hours) there's a stand on Sevoke Rd (take an autoricksaw); and for Gangtok (₹140, four hours) jeeps leave from next to the SNT terminal until around 2pm. Share and charter jeeps for all these destinations also leave straight from NJP train station.

Chartering a jeep privately costs roughly 10 times that of a shared ticket. An option for XL-sized Westerners is to pay for and occupy the front three seats next to the driver.

A prepaid taxi stand at Bagdogra Airport offers fixed fares to Darjeeling (₹1375-1475), Mirik (₹880), Kakarbhitta (₹400) and even Bhadrapur in Nepal (₹835), thus bypassing Siliguri completely. It's not difficult to find other people to share the cost.

### Train

There's a **train booking office** (☎2537333; cnr Hospital & Bidhan Rds; ☎8-11am, 11.30am-2pm & 2.15-8pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun) in Siliguri.

**Darjeeling Mail** 2344 The fastest of the four daily services to Kolkata (sleeper/3AC ₹264/695, 10 hours, departs 8pm), via Malda. **Haldibari Koaa SF Express** 2364 A better option for Malda (2nd class/chair ₹108/343, 3½ hours, departing 9.55am Wednesday, Friday and Saturday).

**North East Express** 2505 Fast to Delhi (sleeper/3AC ₹458/1214, 27 hours, departs 5.15pm), via Patna (₹229/587, 11 hours).

**Rajdhani Express** 2435 (2AC/3AC ₹2194/1735, 21 hours, departs 12.05pm) Fastest service to Delhi.

**North East Express** 2506 For Guwahati (sleeper/3AC ₹228/569, eight hours, departs 8.40am).

**TOY TRAIN** The diesel toy train climbs the 88km from New Jalpaiguri to Darjeeling in eight long hours (2nd/1st class ₹42/247, departs 9am). It's wise to make reservations two to three days in advance. It's also possible to board the train at Siliguri Jct station, which is just behind the Tenzing Norgay Bus Terminal on Hill Cart Rd. The line was under repair in 2011 after a series of landslides but should reopen soon.

If steam is your passion, catch the steam version to Darjeeling from Kurseong (p487).

### **i** Getting Around

From the bus terminal to NJP train station a taxi/autorickshaw costs ₹200/90, while cycle-rickshaws charge ₹50 for the 35-minute trip. Taxis/autorickshaws between Bagdogra Airport and Siliguri cost ₹350/200.

## Jaldhpara Wildlife Sanctuary

☎03563 / ELEV 60M

This little-visited **sanctuary** (☎262239; Indian/foreigner ₹50/200, camera/video ₹50/500;

## CROSSING INTO BANGLADESH, BHUTAN & NEPAL

### To/From Bangladesh

A number of private agencies in Siliguri, including **Shyamoli** (☎9932628243; Hotel Central Plaza complex, Hill Cart Rd) run a daily AC bus direct to Dhaka (₹800, 16 hours), departing at 1.30pm. You'll need to complete border formalities at Chengrabandha.

Regular buses go from the Tenzing Norgay Central Bus Terminal to Chengrabandha (₹42) starting from 7.30am. The border post is open from 8am to 6pm daily. From near the border post you can catch buses on to Rangpur, Bogra and Dhaka. Visas for Bangladesh can be obtained in Kolkata and New Delhi (see p1176).

### To/From Bhutan

Bhutan Transport Services run three daily buses from just outside the central bus terminal to Phuentsholing (₹75, departs 7.15am, noon and 2pm), and there are many more local buses to Jaigaon on the Indian side of the border, where you clear Indian immigration. Non-Indian nationals need visa clearance from a Bhutanese tour operator to enter Bhutan. See www.tourism.gov.bt and Lonely Planet's *Bhutan* for details.

### To/From Nepal

For Nepal, local buses pass the Tenzing Norgay Central Bus Terminal every 15 minutes for the border town of Panitanki (₹20, one hour). Share jeeps to Kakarbhitta (₹70) are readily available in Siliguri. The Indian border post in Panitanki is officially open 24 hours and the Nepali post in Kakarbhitta is open from 7am to 7pm. Onward from Kakarbhitta there are numerous buses to Kathmandu (17 hours) and other destinations. Bhadrapur Airport, 23km southwest of Kakarbhitta, has regular flights to Kathmandu (US\$147) on Yeti Airlines (www.yetiairlines.com), Buddha Air (www.buddhaair.com) or Agni Air (www.agniair.com). Visas for Nepal can be obtained at the border (bring two passport photos), in Kolkata or New Delhi (see p1177).

☉mid-Sep–mid-Jun) protects 114 sq km of lush forests and grasslands along the Torsa River and is a refuge for over 50 Indian one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*).

The best time to visit is mid-October to May, particularly March and April when wild elephants, deer and tigers (rarely seen) are attracted by new grass growth. Your best chance of spotting a rhino is on an **elephant ride** (Indian/foreigner ₹200/600 per hr; ☉5-8am), though these lumbering safaris are often booked out by the tourist lodges. Even if you are staying at Jaldaphara Tourist Lodge for a night you are not guaranteed a ride, as full occupancy is double that of their daily elephant quota.

**Jeep safaris** (4/8 passengers ₹1860/2260, 40% less for Indians) operate in the early morning and afternoon and stop at viewing platforms, but again these can be hard to arrange unless you are on a tour.

The West Bengal tourist offices in Kolkata (p469) and Siliguri (p483) organise overnight **tours** (per person Indian/foreigner ₹4200/4500; ☉departs 10am Sat, returns 5pm Sun) from Siliguri to Jaldhaphara, which include an elephant ride, transport, accommodation at the Hollong Tourist Lodge and all meals.

Mithun of **Wild Planet Travel Desk** (☎9735028733; easthimalayan3@yahoo.com) and Hotel Relax can often book accommodation and elephant rides when no-one else can and is probably your best option for a DIY trip. Budget travellers should bear in mind that an hour-long elephant ride is probably going to end up costing a minimum US\$40 per person, after all costs are added in.

Bring mosquito repellent.

## Sleeping & Eating

The two lodges should be booked well in advance through the West Bengal Tourist Office in Siliguri, Darjeeling or Kolkata, or online at [www.westbengaltourism.gov.in](http://www.westbengaltourism.gov.in). They don't take direct bookings.

**Hollong Tourist Lodge** JUNGLE LODGE \$\$  
(☎262228; d ₹2000, plus compulsory breakfast & dinner ₹300 per person) This wooden forestry lodge right in the heart of the park is easily the best place to stay, though booking one of the six rooms can be a real challenge. You can spot animals right from the verandah and you are guaranteed a morning elephant ride. Book up to three months in advance.

**Jaldhaphara Tourist Lodge** HOTEL \$\$  
(☎262230; Madarihat; d ₹1600, with AC ₹2200-3000; ☉) This functional WBTD hotel is just outside the park in Madarihat town and has

rooms in wooden and concrete blocks or in new cottages. All meals are included in the room rates, so singles get a 25% discount.

**Hotel Relax** HOTEL \$  
(☎262304; Madarihat; d ₹500) The Relax is the best private option, opposite the Jaldhaphara Tourist Lodge, but is still quite simple, with private bathrooms (hot water in buckets ₹10) and thundering road noise. Deluxe rooms were under construction at time of research. Simple set meals are available for ₹50.

## Getting There & Away

Jaldhaphara is 124km east of Siliguri. Local buses run every hour or so between Siliguri and Madarihat (₹66, four hours). There are also daily mail trains (unreserved seat ₹38, three to four hours), leaving Siliguri at 6am and 5.35pm, returning from Madarihat at 7am and 1.30pm.

From Madarihat to the park headquarters at Hollong is 7km. A return taxi costs ₹400, including waiting time, plus you'll also have to pay the ₹150 vehicle entry and parking fees.

## Mirik

☎0354 / POP 9180 / ELEV 1770M

Nestled near the Nepal border, halfway between Siliguri and Darjeeling, the low-profile hill station of Mirik is surrounded by an undulating carpet of tea estates, orange orchards, cardamom plantations and forests of tall, dark Japanese cedars. It has a quiet lakeside charm and relaxed vibe that make it quite different from Darjeeling or Kalimpong.

## Sights & Activities

Mirik is centred on the artificial murky-coloured Sumendu Lake and there's a pleasant walk around its 3.5km circumference.

**Pedal boats** (per 30min ₹42) can be hired near the central bridge, which is also the place for **pony rides** (half/full round-the-lake trips ₹80/160).

Perched high above Mirik, the large Kagyud-school **Bokar Gumpa** is very active. Look for the unusually modern Wheel of Life mural, depicting cars, soldiers and even joggers! It's a bracing walk up Monastery Rd from opposite Hotel Jagjeet.

A short walk from the monastery is the Rameetay Dara viewpoint, though you'll get better Himalayan views from the helipad beside Swiss Cottage, on a hilltop on the southwest corner of the lake.

For a great two-hour walk, take a Darjeeling-bound jeep 8km out of town and walk back past a charming Dr Seuss landscape of conical-hilled tea estates.

## Sleeping & Eating

Mirik has good value accommodation. All the places here are within 100m of each other in the lakeside settlement known as Krishnanagar.

**Buddha Lodge** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎9609982057; r ₹250-450) The five spotless, comfy and carpeted rooms with private hot water bathrooms are the best value in Mirik; the bright upstairs rooms are larger with appealing wood panelling and tiled bathrooms.

**Hotel Ratnagiri** HOTEL \$\$  
(☎9832010013; www.hotelratnagiri.com; d ₹400-1000, ste ₹2000) There are lots of different rooms here, the best being the warm, wood-panelled upstairs doubles with cute sloping ceilings. Some rooms have balconies and views of Sumendu Lake; all have TV and geyser. The pleasant garden **restaurant** (mains ₹30 to ₹180) out back offers such exotic fare as lasagne and sizzlers.

**Hotel Jagjeet** HOTEL \$\$  
(☎2243231; www.jagjeethotel.com; d ₹1300-2400) The best hotel in town has a wide variety of rooms. The super-deluxe options (₹1800) come with balconies, while the luxury rooms (₹2400) are surprisingly sleek and stylish. The cheapest rooms are in the basement. The restaurant-bar (mains ₹100 to ₹175) is easily the best in town, serving really excellent thalis. Toothsome sweets, including *barfi* (fudge-like sweet), are sold at a separate counter.

**Lodge Ashirvad** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎2243272; s ₹200, d ₹350-450) A friendly, family-run budget hotel down a lane just off the main road. The rooms are simple with very thin, but clean, mattresses. Only the priciest rooms have geysers; a bucket of hot water costs ₹15.

**Lohit Sagar Restaurant** INDIAN \$  
(mains ₹30-80; ☺breakfast & lunch) Beside the taxi stand, and near the lake, is this pure-veg cafeteria-type place catering to lakeside day trippers, with good snacks and South Indian favourites.

## Information

Ashirvad Lodge has an attached **internet cafe** (per hr ₹30). There are no money-changing

facilities but both Axis Bank and the State Bank of India have ATMs next to Hotel Jagjeet.

## Getting There & Away

Share jeeps depart every 30 minutes between 6am and 3.40pm to Siliguri (₹60, 2½ hours) and hourly to Darjeeling (₹60, 2½ hours). Jeeps to Kurseong (₹60, three hours) run in the early morning and at 3pm.

## Kurseong

☎0354 / POP 40,100 / ELEV 1460M

Kurseong, 32km south of Darjeeling, is the little sister of (and quiet alternative to) the Queen of the Hills further up the track. Its name derives from the Lepcha word *kurson-rip*, a reference to the small white orchid prolific in this area. Surrounded by manicured tea estates, it is the southern terminus for the charming steam-powered toy trains of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.

Hill Cart Rd (Tenzing Norgay Rd) – the noisy, shop-lined main thoroughfare from Siliguri to Darjeeling – and its remarkably close shadow, the railway line, wind through town.

There are numerous good walks in the area, including one to Eagle's Crag (2km return) that affords splendid views down the Teesta Valley and the steamy plains to the south.

**Makaibari** TEA ESTATE

(☎2330181; Pankhabari Rd; www.makaibari.com; ☺Tue-Sat) Anyone interested in tea should visit this organic and biodynamic tea estate. The factory is open to visitors and in between the huge sorting and drying machines and the fields of green bushes you may just run into the owner, local tea guru Rajah Bannerjee. Mornings are the best time to see the production process.

The estate is 4km below Kurseong along Pankhabari Rd, and 1km below Cochrane Place. A taxi here costs ₹100 to ₹150, or it's a pleasant downhill walk (it's much steeper coming back so take a shared taxi from Cochrane Place). En route, the lushly overgrown old graveyard at St Andrews has poignant reminders of the tea-planter era.

Makaibari also runs a homestay and volunteer program (www.volmakaibari.org; see p41) and offers courses for tea professionals.

## Sleeping & Eating

**TOP CHOICE Cochrane Place** BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$  
(☎2330703; www.imperialchai.com; 132 Pankhabari Rd; s/d from ₹2250/2650; @) With 360-degree

views over tea plantations, distant Himalayan peaks and the twinkling lights of Siliguri, this quirky, charming boutique hotel is a destination in its own right. The 31 rooms are individually decorated with divans and antiques and have either a view or a balcony. Delicious meals and tea tastings are available, making it a good lunch stop if you have your own transport. The hotel is wheelchair-friendly, can provide Bagdogra Airport and NJP train station pick-up and offers guided village and tea estate walks, as well as massage and beauty treatments.

### Kurseong Tourist Lodge

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2345608; Hill Cart Rd; d ₹1200-1500) This old-fashioned, government-run lodge has inviting wood-lined rooms that feature valley views. The toy train whistles past the popular cafe, where you can snack on *mosoms* (Tibetan dumplings), or you can enjoy a meal at its scenic **restaurant** (mains ₹50 to ₹115). Look for the much-photographed 'Hurry burry spoils the curry' traffic sign across the road.

## **i** Getting There & Away

Numerous share jeeps run to Darjeeling (₹50, 1½ hours), Siliguri (₹50, 1½ hours), Kalimpong (₹110, 3½ to four hours) and Mirik (₹80, 2½ hours).

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's steam toy train to Darjeeling (9D; 2nd/1st class ₹22/144, three hours) leaves at 3pm, while the diesel version (1D; originating at New Jalpaiguri) departs around 1.35pm. A diesel train (originating in Darjeeling) to Siliguri (2D; 2nd/1st class ₹44/247, four hours) departs at 12.05pm.

## Darjeeling

☎0354 / POP 109,160 / ELEV 2135M

Spread in ribbons over a steep mountain ridge, surrounded by emerald-green tea plantations and with a backdrop of jagged white Himalayan peaks floating over distant clouds, the archetypal hill station of Darjeeling is rightly West Bengal's premier attraction. When you aren't gazing at Khangchendzonga (8598m), you can explore colonial-era buildings, visit Buddhist monasteries and spot snow leopards and red pandas at the nearby zoo. The steep narrow streets bustle with an array of Himalayan faces from Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet and when energies start to flag a good, steaming Darjeeling brew is never far away.

Most tourists visit after the monsoon (October and November) and during spring (mid-March to the end of May) when skies

are dry, panoramas are clear and temperatures are pleasant. Tourist attractions and other establishments often extend their hours during these periods (specified as 'high season' in the following reviews), although they are not set in stone so check ahead.

Darjeeling sprawls over a west-facing slope in a confusing web of interconnecting roads and steep flights of steps. The two main squares are Chowrasta, near the top of town, and Clubside junction, which are linked by pedestrianised Nehru Rd (aka the Mall), the main shopping street. Hill Cart Rd (aka Tenzing Norgay Rd) runs the length of the bustling lower bazaar and is Darjeeling's major vehicle thoroughfare.

### History

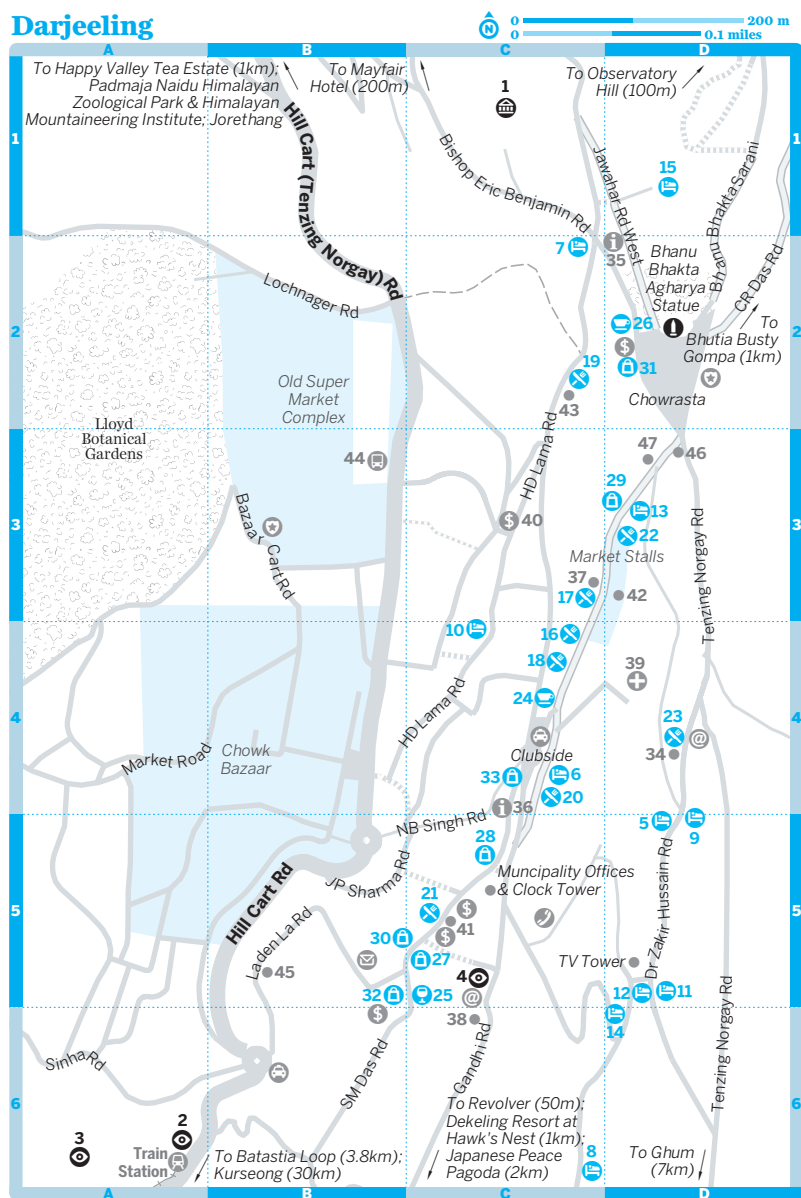
This area belonged to the Buddhist chogyals (kings) of Sikkim until 1780, when it was annexed by the invading Gurkhas from Nepal. The East India Company gained control of the region in 1816 then returned most of the lands back to Sikkim in exchange for British control over any future border disputes.

During one such dispute in 1828, two British officers stumbled across the Dorje Ling monastery, on a tranquil forested ridge, and passed word to Kolkata (Calcutta) that it would be a perfect site for a sanatorium; they were sure to have also mentioned its strategic military importance in the region. The chogyal of Sikkim (still grateful for the return of his kingdom) happily agreed to lease the uninhabited land to the East India Company for the annual fee of £3000. In 1835 the hill station of Darjeeling (Dorje Ling) was born and the first tea bushes were planted that same year.

Forest gradually made way for colonial houses and tea plantations, and by 1857 the population of Darjeeling reached 10,000, mainly because of a massive influx of Gurkha labourers from Nepal.

After Independence, the Gurkhas became the main political force in Darjeeling and friction with the state government led to calls for a separate state of Gorkhland in the 1980s. In 1986, violence and riots orchestrated by the Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) brought Darjeeling to a standstill, leading to the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) being given a large measure of autonomy from the state government.

Calls for full secession have continued, and in 2007 the political party Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), headed by Bimal Gurung, was formed out of the GNLF. It has



encouraged people to agitate for a separate state of Gorkhland by using tactics ranging from strikes (see p497) and nonpayment of telephone bills and taxes to active support for the Gurkha contestant on *Indian Idol* (who eventually won season three).

## Sights

### Tiger Hill

VIEWPOINT

To watch the dawn light break over a spectacular 250km stretch of Himalayan horizon, including Everest (8848m), Lhotse (8501m), Makalu (8475m) to the far west,

## Darjeeling

### Sights

- 1 Bengal Natural History Museum ..... C1
- 2 Darjeeling Himalayan Railway  
(Toy Train) ..... A6
- 3 Dhirdham Mandir ..... A6
- 4 Manjushree Centre of Tibetan  
Culture ..... C5
- Trek Mate ..... (see 24)

### Sleeping

- 5 Andy's Guesthouse ..... D5
- 6 Dekeling Hotel ..... C4
- 7 Elgin ..... C2
- 8 Hotel Aliment ..... C6
- 9 Hotel New Galaxy ..... D5
- 10 Hotel Seven Seventeen ..... C4
- 11 Hotel Tower View ..... D5
- 12 Hotel Tranquility ..... D5
- 13 Main Olde Bellevue Hotel ..... D3
- 14 Travellers Inn ..... D6
- 15 Windamere Hotel ..... D1

### Eating

- Dekevas ..... (see 20)
- 16 Frank Ross Café ..... C4
- 17 Glenary's ..... C3
- 18 Hasty Tasty ..... C4
- 19 Hot Pizza Place ..... C2
- 20 Kunga's ..... C4
- Lunar Restaurant ..... (see 6)
- 21 Park Restaurant ..... C5
- 22 Shangri-La ..... D3
- 23 Sonam's Kitchen ..... D4

### Drinking

- Buzz ..... (see 17)
- Café Coffee Day ..... (see 32)
- Elgin ..... (see 7)
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rise early and get to Tiger Hill (2590m), 11km south of Darjeeling, above Ghum.

The sunrise over the Himalaya from here has become a major tourist attraction, with convoys of jeeps leaving Darjeeling for Tiger Hill every morning around 4.30am. At the summit, you can either pay ₹10 to stand in the pavilion grounds, or buy a ticket for one of the heated lounges in the pavilion (₹20 to ₹40). It can be a real bunfight, even outside of the high season, with crowds of hundreds jostling for the best viewing spots.

Organised sunrise trips (usually with a detour to Batastia Loop on the way back) can be booked through a travel agency or directly with jeep drivers at the Clubside taxi stand. It's also possible to jump on a jeep going to Tiger Hill from along Gandhi or Laden La Rds between 4am and 4.30am, allowing you to check whether skies are clear before you go. Return trips cost around ₹80 per person or ₹600-800 for a vehicle.

One excellent idea is to take the jeep one way to Tiger Hill (or back to Ghum) and then spend the morning/day visiting the



## KHANGCHENDZONGA VIEWS

The Himalayan skyline is a major attraction in Darjeeling. The skyline is dominated by Khangchendzonga, India's highest peak and the world's third-highest mountain (until 1852 it was thought to be the world's highest). The name 'Khangchendzonga' is derived from the Tibetan words for 'great five-peaked snow fortress'. On either side of the main massif are Kabru (7338m), Jannu (7710m) and Pandim (6691m), all serious peaks in their own right.

Apart from popular dawn views from Tiger Hill, an early morning stroll around Bhanu Bhakta Sarani, which runs from Chowrasta around the north side of Observatory Hill, offers several stunning viewpoints.

monasteries of Ghum before wandering back to Darjeeling. You can take either the busy main road or the much quieter Tenzing Norgay Rd, via Alu Bari, (1½ hrs), which despite the lack of mountain views also makes a nice cycling route.

### Happy Valley Tea Estate

TEA ESTATE

(Pamphawati Gurungni Rd; ☺8am-4pm Mon-Sat) This tea estate below Hill Cart Rd, is worth visiting when the plucking and processing are in progress. An employee will whisk you through the aromatic factory and its various processes before politely demanding a tip – ₹20 from each visitor is appropriate. Take the marked turn-off about 1km northwest of town on Hill Cart Rd.

### Observatory Hill

SACRED SITE

Sacred to both Buddhists and Hindus, this hill was the site of the original Dorje Ling monastery that gave the town its name. Today, devotees come to a temple in a small cave, below the crest of the hill, to honour Mahakala, a Buddhist deity and an angry form of the Hindu god Shiva. The summit is marked by several shrines, a flurry of colourful prayer flags and the ringing notes from numerous devotional bells. A path leading up to the hill through giant Japanese cedars starts about 300m along Bhanu Bhakta Sarani from Chowrasta; watch out for marauding monkeys. Disappointingly, there are no mountain views.

### Gompas

MONASTERIES

Darjeeling and Ghum are home to a number of fascinating Buddhist monasteries. The most scenic is **Bhutia Busty Gompa**, with Khangchendzonga providing a spectacular backdrop. Originally on Observatory Hill, it was rebuilt in its present lower location by the chogyals of Sikkim in the 19th century. It houses fine murals depicting the life of Buddha. To get here, follow CR Das Rd

steeply downhill for five minutes from Chowrasta Square, past a trinity of colourful Buddhist rock carvings. Climbing back up is a 20-minute slog.

**Yiga Choling Gompa** (Ghum; camera per photo ₹10), the region's most famous monastery, has wonderful old murals and is home to 30 monks of the Gelugpa (yellow-hat) school. Built in 1850, it enshrines a 5m-high statue of Jampa (Maitreya, or 'Future Buddha') and 300 beautifully bound Tibetan texts. It's just west of Ghum, about a 10-minute walk off Hill Cart Rd.

Other gompas of interest nearby include the fortress-like **Sakya Guru Gompa**, which has *pujas* (prayers) between 5.30am and 7.30am (useful if returning from a dawn visit to Tiger Hill). The very active **Samten Choling Gompa**, just downhill, has the largest Buddha statue in West Bengal, a memorial chorten dedicated to German mystic Lama Govinda and even a small cafe. All three gompas are within 10 minutes' walk of each other on Hill Cart Rd and can be reached by share jeep or train from Darjeeling (₹15); some people organise to visit on the way back from Tiger Hill.

About halfway between Ghum and Darjeeling is the huge **Druk Sangak Choling Gompa**, also known as Dali Gompa, inaugurated by the Dalai Lama in 1993. Known for its vibrant frescoes, it is home to 300 Himalayan monks who study philosophy, literature, astronomy, meditation, dance and music.

### Japanese Peace Pagoda

BUDDHIST SIGHT

Perched on a hillside at the end of AJC Bose Rd, this gleaming white **pagoda** (☺*pujas* 4.30-6am & 4.30-6.30pm) is one of more than 70 pagodas built by the Japanese Buddhist Nipponzan Myohoji organisation around the world. Drumming resonates through the forested grounds during their daily *pujas*.

It's a pleasant, gentle 30-minute uphill walk from Clubside along Gandhi and AJC Bose Rds, past the implausible-sounding Institute of Astroparticle Physics and Space Science.

### Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park

ZOO

(admission incl Himalayan Mountaineering Institute Indian/foreigner ₹40/100; ☀8.30am-5.30pm Fri-Wed, ticket counter closes 4pm) This zoo, one of India's best, was established in 1958 to study, conserve and preserve Himalayan fauna. Housed within the rocky and forested environment are Himalayan megafauna such as musk deer, red pandas and Tibetan wolves. The zoo, and its attached snow leopard-breeding centre, are home to the world's largest single captive population of snow leopards.

The zoo is a pleasant 20-minute downhill walk down from Chowrasta along Jawahar Rd West; alternatively, take a share jeep (₹10, about 10 minutes) or a private taxi (₹70) from the Chowk Bazaar bus/jeep station.

### Himalayan Mountaineering Institute

MUSEUM

(HMI; ☎2254087; www.hmi-darjeeling.com; admission incl zoo Indian/foreigner ₹40/100; ☀8.30am-4.30pm Fri-Wed) Tucked away within the grounds of the zoo, this prestigious mountaineering institute was founded in 1954 and has provided training for some of India's leading mountaineers. Within the complex is the fascinating **Everest Museum**, with

fascinating detail from the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions, which both set off from Darjeeling. Look for the Carl Zeiss telescope presented by Adolf Hitler to the head of the Nepali army.

Just beside the museum, near the spot where Tenzing Norgay was cremated, stands the **Tenzing statue**. The intrepid Everest summiteer lived in Darjeeling for most of his life and was the director of the institute for many years.

Various mountaineering courses are offered here; see p493 for more information.

### Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre

MUSEUM

(Lebong Cart Rd; ☀dawn-dusk Mon-Sat) Established in 1959, this refugee centre comprises a home for the aged, school, orphanage, clinic, gumpa and craft workshops that produce carpets, woodcarvings, leather work and woollen items. There's also an interesting, politically charged **photographic exhibition** portraying the establishment and workings of the centre.

The refugees are welcoming, so wander through the workshops. The handicrafts are for sale in the **showroom** (☎2252552; ☀9am-5.30pm), where proceeds go straight back into the Tibetan community. See p496 for details regarding Tibetan carpets.

The quickest way to reach the centre is to walk downhill from the north side of Bhanu Bhakta Sarani; take the alley down beside the Hotel Dolphin. The 20-minute walk requires a steep climb back. A chartered taxi via North Point costs around ₹300 return.

## DON'T MISS

### THE TOY TRAIN

The **Darjeeling Himalayan Railway**, known affectionately as the toy train, made its first journey along its precipice-topping, 2ft-wide tracks in September 1881 and is one of the few hill railways still operating in India. The panting train passes within feet of local storefronts as it weaves in and out of the main road, bringing traffic to a standstill and tooting its whistle incessantly for almost the entire trip. The train has been a Unesco World Heritage Site since 1999.

There is a daily steam service to Kurseong and a diesel train to NJP train station. It's an exhausting seven to eight-hour haul to/from NJP, so if you simply want to experience the train, consider the steam train to/from Kurseong.

During the high season there are also joy rides (₹240) that leave Darjeeling at 10.40am (14D), 1.20pm (16D) and 4pm (18D) for a two-hour steam-powered return trip. The service stops for half an hour in Ghum, India's highest railway station, to visit the small **railway museum** (admission ₹20; 10am-1pm, 2-4pm) and pauses on the way back at the scenic Batastia Loop (see p492). For a budget taste of the train take the 10.15am passenger service to Ghum.

Book at least a day ahead at the **train station** (Hill Cart Rd), or online at www.irctc.co.in. For more on the service and efforts to maintain it, see www.dhrs.org.

## TEA TOURISM

We spoke to Makaibari Tea Estate and Nathmull's, two of the Darjeeling region's most experienced tea companies, for some tips on the best places to indulge in the area's most famous export.

**Visit** The easiest places to learn about tea production are **Makaibari Estate** in Kurseong and **Happy Valley** outside Darjeeling. March to May is the busiest time, but occasional plucking also occurs from June to November. Outside of high season there's no plucking on Sunday, which means most of the machinery isn't working on Monday.

**Stay** Overnight with a tea pickers family at a **homestay** (☎9832447774; www.volmakaibari.org; per person incl food ₹600) at Makaibari Estate and you'll get to join your hosts for a morning's work in the tea bushes. Pick your own leaves, watch them being processed and then return home with a batch of your very own hand-plucked Darjeeling tea. How's that for a personalised gift!

**Drink** Where better to sip a cup of Darjeeling tea? You can sample different grades of black, white and green teas by the cup at **Sunset Lounge** (p495) and **House of Tea** (p495). The pukka afternoon tea at the **Windamere Hotel** (₹375; ☎4-6pm) is a joy for aficionados of all things colonial, with shortcake, scones, cheese and pickle sandwiches and brews from the Castleton Tea Estate.

**Splash Out** Accommodation doesn't get any more exclusive than top-end **Glenburn** (www.glenburnteaeate.com; s/d ₹11,000/14,000), between Darjeeling and Kurseong, a working tea estate/resort that boasts five staff for every guest. A stay at Glenburn is rumoured to have given director Wes Anderson inspiration for his film *The Darjeeling Limited*.

**Lloyd Botanical Gardens** BOTANICAL GARDENS  
(☎2252358; admission free; ☉8am-4.30pm)  
These pleasant gardens contain an impressive collection of Himalayan plants, most famously orchids and rhododendrons, as well as temperate trees from around the world. Follow the signs along Lochnager Rd from the Chowk Bazaar bus/jeep station, until the hum of cicadas replaces the honking of jeeps. A map is posted at the office at the top of the park.

**Batastia Loop** MEMORIAL  
If you're travelling on the toy train, or walking back from Tiger Hill, look out for this famous railway loop and the sobering **Gorkha war memorial** (admission ₹10; ☉dawn-dusk). Some tours stop here after the sunrise trip at Tiger Hill; the views are almost as good, and the atmosphere much more serene.

**Bengal Natural History Museum** MUSEUM  
(Bishop Eric Benjamin Rd; adult ₹10; ☉9am-5pm)  
Established in 1903, this minor sight houses a moth-eaten collection of Himalayan and Bengali species, hidden away in a compound just off Bishop Eric Benjamin Rd. The giant leeches and horrific baby animals pickled in jars are guaranteed to provoke a shudder.

**Dhirdham Mandir** HINDU TEMPLE  
The most conspicuous Hindu temple in Darjeeling is a replica of the famous Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu. It's easy to find – just below the Darjeeling train station. There's a great view over Darjeeling from its grounds.

## 🚶 Activities

See p498 for information on treks around Darjeeling.

**White-Water Rafting** RAFTING  
At the time of writing, white-water rafting trips on the Teesta River from Teesta Bazaar along the road to Kalimpong, had been suspended following a fatal accident. Check with the DGHC to see if trips have resumed.

Expect scenic/adventure trips to cost around ₹450/800 per person, with a minimum of four people. Transport will cost another ₹1500 per jeep, or take a shared jeep for Gangtok and get off at Teesta Bazaar. The friendly DGHC-run **Chitrey Wayside Inn** (☎9434862561; dm/d ₹150/500), 1.5km from the bazaar, overlooks the Teesta River.

Private companies, such as Samsara Tours, Travels & Treks (p497), offer similar routes for a minimum of four people; prices include lunch and transport.

The rapids are graded from Grade II to Grade IV, though dam construction has limited runs in recent years. The best times for rafting are September to November and March to June.

### Pony Rides

HORSE RIDING

From Chowrasta, children can take a ride around Observatory Hill for ₹100, or through tea estates to visit a monastery for ₹200 per hour.

## Courses

### Language

Beginner and advanced lessons in written and spoken Tibetan are offered at the **Manjushree Centre of Tibetan Culture** ([☎2252977](tel:2252977); [www.manjushreetibcentre.org](http://www.manjushreetibcentre.org); 12 Ghandi Rd; 3-/6-/9-month courses ₹11,970/17,010/22,050; ☺mid-Mar-mid-Dec). Accommodation for students and tourists is available at the attached **Tibet Home** (rooms ₹1500). Classes in Tibetan Buddhism are also possible.

### Mountaineering

The **Himalayan Mountaineering Institute** (p491) runs 15-day adventure courses (Indian/foreigner ₹2000/US\$325) in January and February, which include climbing, jungle survival and canoeing, for those aged between 18 and 30. There are also 28-day basic and advanced mountaineering courses (Indian/foreigner ₹4000/US\$650), from March to May and September to December. Some courses are women only. Foreigners should apply directly to the centre at least three months in advance.

## Tours

During the high season the DGHC and other travel agencies offer a variety of tours around Darjeeling, usually including the zoo, Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre and several viewpoints. See p488 for Tiger Hill sunrise tour information.

Taxis can be hired for custom tours for around ₹750 per half-day.

## Sleeping

Only a small selection of Darjeeling's many hotels is mentioned here. Prices given are for the high season (October to early December and mid-March to June), when it's wise to book ahead. In the low season prices can drop by 50%.

Top-end hotels offer rooms on the 'American Plan', with breakfast, lunch and dinner

included; taxes and service charges usually add 15% to 20% to the bill.



### Andy's Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

([☎2253125](tel:2253125); 102 Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; s/d from ₹300/400) This simple, spotless, stone-walled budget place has airy, carpeted rooms, a comfy common area and a rooftop terrace with a great view. Mrs Gurung provides a friendly boarding-house atmosphere (no restaurant) that makes it quieter than most other budget places. There's a good laundry service.



### Dekeling Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

([☎2254159](tel:2254159); [www.dekeling.com](http://www.dekeling.com); 51 Gandhi Rd; d without bathroom ₹700, d ₹1300-2200; @☎) Spotless Dekeling is full of charming touches like coloured diamond-pane windows, a traditional *bukhari* (wood-burning heater) in the cosy lounge/library, wood panelling and sloping-attic ceilings, plus some of the best views in town. Tibetan owners Sangay and Norbu are the perfect hosts. The whole place is a perfect combination of clean and homey, right down to the well-bathed and adorable dog, Drolma.

### Windamere Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

([☎2254041](tel:2254041); [www.windamerehotel.com](http://www.windamerehotel.com); Jawahar Rd West; s/d full board from ₹7300/9400; @) This quaint, rambling relic of the Raj on Observatory Hill offers Darjeeling's most atmospheric digs. The charming superior room block was once a boarding house for British tea planters, and the well-tended grounds are spacious with lots of pleasant seating areas. The comfortable rooms, fireplaces and hot water bottles offer just the right measures of comfort and fastidiousness; a bit like staying at a rich aunt's house. It's a particularly great place to spend Christmas. Keep your eyes peeled for the Jan Morris poem in the tearoom.

### Hotel Aliment

HOTEL \$

([☎2255068](tel:2255068); [alimentwe@sify.com](mailto:alimentwe@sify.com); 40 Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; s ₹150, d ₹300-600; @) A budget travellers' favourite, with a good top-floor restaurant (and cold beer), books, helpful owners and wood-lined rooms. The upstairs rooms (₹600) have a TV and valley views. All the double rooms have geysers, but they only operate for an hour or so in the evening. The singles are a big step down in quality.

### Hotel Tower View

HOTEL \$

([☎2254452](tel:2254452); [krimilan@yahoo.com](mailto:krimilan@yahoo.com); 12 Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; dm ₹80, r ₹100-350) Rooms are basic but clean (the rooms with a view are best, as others can be cold and damp), but the real draw to this sociable place is the

cosy restaurant area that doubles as the family kitchen and lounge.

### Hotel Tranquility

HOTEL \$

(☎2257678; hoteltranquility@yahoo.co.in; Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; d ₹400-500; ☎) This good-value place is sparkling clean, with 24-hour hot water, nice lobby seating and small but neat baby-blue rooms. The helpful owner is a local schoolteacher, and can provide all kinds of info about the area.

### Revolver

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$

(☎225370; www.revolver.in; 110 Gandhi Rd; r ₹800-900; ☎) This Beatles-themed hotel is a must for fans. The five small but stylish rooms are each named after one of the Fab Four (plus Brian Epstein), so you can choose your favourite Moptop (John fills up first; no-one likes Ringo). The hotel is chock-a-block with Beatles memorabilia, including 'Beatles Rock Band' on the resident Play-Station 3. The downstairs restaurant serves good coffee and interesting Naga set meals (₹55 to ₹70) and the owners will even give you a *momo* masterclass if arranged in advance. It's certainly well thought-out but it could perhaps do with a bit more old-fashioned family warmth. The entrance is easily missed behind the Union Church.

### Travellers Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2258497; Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; www.darjeelingtravellersinn.com; s/d/ste ₹1100/1500/2600) This well-decorated, faintly stylish hotel comes complete with polished-wood paneling, framed old photos of Darjeeling and a terrace restaurant with terrific views (mains ₹40 to ₹80). The mountain-lodge-style rooms are comfy but dimly lit and hot water is in the evening only. On Sundays forget about that lie-in and clap along to the loud gospel music from the church next door.

### Elgin

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2257226; www.elginhotels.com; HD Lama Rd; s/d/ste incl full board ₹6500/6800/7900; @☎) A grand yet friendly hotel full of classy ambience, the Elgin is more modern and formal than the Windamere but has less of a sense of history. The restaurant is elegant, as is the great bar and small library, and the small-but-lovely garden terrace is the perfect place to relax over a beer (₹185) or high tea (₹465; ☉4-6pm). The cosy 'attic room' underneath the dripping eaves is especially charming.

### Mayfair Darjeeling

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2256376; www.mayfairhotels.com; Jawahar Rd West; d with breakfast & dinner from ₹9000; ☎)

Originally a maharaja's summer palace but renovated within an inch of its life, this plush choice sits among manicured gardens and a bizarre collection of kitschy sculptures. Soft carpets and coal fires add to the warm welcome; there's a choice of DVDs and a comfortable bar. The outside and common areas don't have quite the cosy charm of the Elgin, but the plush rooms are well decorated in warm colours and art prints. The children's playroom makes it good for families.

### Dekeling Resort at Hawk's Nest

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2253092; www.dekeling.com; 2 AJC Bose Rd; d ₹3300; www.dekeling.com) Run by the good people at Dekeling, this is a quieter, more exclusive place, 1km outside of Darjeeling up a steep hill. The four 130-year-old, colonial-style suites come with antique touches and fireplaces in the room.

### Hotel Seven Seventeen

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2255099; www.hotel717.com; 26 HD Lama Rd; main block s/d/tr from ₹1500/1800/2000) A friendly Tibetan-themed place on the edge of the bazaar with a good restaurant and clean, fresh rooms. The older annexe (s/d ₹1300/1500) is cheaper but darker and less cheery.

### Hotel New Galaxy

HOTEL \$

(☎5520771; Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; s ₹150-250, d ₹300) A clean, simple budget option almost opposite Andy's, with wood-panelled walls, smallish rooms and hot-water buckets for ₹10. Try for room 104 – it has the best views across to the mountains.

### Main Olde Bellevue Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2254178; www.darjeelinghotel.co.uk; Chow-rasta; budget/deluxe d ₹1250/1950) Rooms at this 19th-century hotel are spacious and fairly well maintained and have a great location, though the service is sleepy at best. Opt for a room in the creaky chalet-style upper building, as these have a lot more colonial charm. Don't confuse this with the next-door Bellevue Hotel, run by a feuding brother.



### Eating

Most restaurants close by 8pm or 9pm.



### Sonam's Kitchen

CONTINENTAL \$

(142 Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; mains ₹80-120; ☉8am-2pm, 5-8pm) Providing an island of real brewed coffee in an ocean of tea, Sonam

serves up lovely breakfasts, French toast, pancakes, fresh soups (nettle in season) and pasta; the deliciously chunky wholemeal sandwiches can be packed to go for picnics. Home-style dinner mains need to be pre-ordered at least an hour in advance, so someone can dash up the street to stock up at the nearby veg stalls. It's a tiny place so try not to linger during mealtimes.

**Frank Ross Café** MULTICUISINE \$  
(14 Nehru Rd; mains ₹60-120, set breakfast ₹90-120) There's a diner-feel at this strictly vegetarian self-service place, with a wide-ranging menu, including pizzas, South Indian dosa and even enchiladas and nachos. The attached Frank Ross Pharmacy has groceries for self-caterers.

**Park Restaurant** INDIAN/THAI \$\$  
(☎2255270; 41 Laden La Rd; mains ₹70-140) The intimate Park is deservedly very popular for its tasty North Indian curries and surprisingly authentic Thai dishes, including small but tasty *tom kha gai* (coconut chicken soup) and spicy green papaya salad. Grab a seat early or make a reservation.

**Glenary's** INDIAN/CONTINENTAL \$\$  
(Nehru Rd; mains ₹120-210; ☺noon-9pm, later in high season) This elegant restaurant atop the famous bakery and cafe receives mainly rave reviews: of note are the Continental sizzlers, Chinese dishes, tandoori specials and veg gratin (good if you're off spicy food). We've heard a few grumbles that it's coasting on its reputation, but most people love it.

**Hot Pizza Place** ITALIAN \$  
(HD Lama Rd; pizza ₹90-150) A cramped but sociable one-table pizza joint with excellent pizza, pasta, paninis and salads. Come here also for breakfast, pancakes and good coffee, as well as that hard-to-find sausage fix. Service is friendly but slow.

**Shangri-La** INDIAN \$\$  
(Nehru Rd; mains ₹75-180) This classy modern bar-restaurant near the top of the Mall offers an upmarket version of the usual Indian/Chinese/Continental food mix in stylish surrounds, with sleek wooden floors, clean tablecloths and friendly service. There are also a couple of stylish hotel rooms upstairs (d ₹2750).

**Kunga's** TIBETAN \$  
(51 Gandhi Rd; mains ₹60-90) Kunga's is a cosy wood-panelled place run by a friendly Tibetan family, strong on noodles and *momos*, with excellent juice and fruit museli curd.

**Dekevas** TIBETAN \$  
(51 Gandhi Rd; mains ₹60-90) Next door to Kunga's, this is a similarly good place, offering Tibetan butter tea, *tsampa* (roast barley flour) and a range of noodles for connoisseurs who can tell their *thenthug* (Tibetan noodles) from their *sogthug* (different Tibetan noodles).

**Lunar Restaurant** INDIAN \$  
(51 Gandhi Rd; mains ₹50-120) This classy spot just below Dekeling Hotel is perhaps the best vegetarian Indian restaurant in town, with good service and great views from the large windows. The masala dosas (lentil-flour pancake filled with vegetables) come with yummy dried fruit and nuts.

**Hasty Tasty** INDIAN \$  
(Nehru Rd; mains ₹30-80, thali ₹80) There's nothing fancy at this vegetarian self-service canteen, but the open kitchen churns out good South Indian dosas and several types of veg thali (set meals). Don't be in a hurry.



## Drinking

**Glenary's** BAKERY  
(Nehru Rd; small pot ₹35, pastries ₹10-35; ☺8am-8pm; ☎☎) Below the restaurant, this cafe has massive windows and good views – order your tea, select a cake, grab your book and sink into some wicker. It's a great place to grab breakfast.

**Café Coffee Day** CAFE  
(☺8am-8pm; coffee from ₹40) It's almost heresy to drink espresso in Darjeeling but if the caffeine calls you, this reliable chain has two locations, one at the Rink Mall, the other at Chowrastra, both with good coffee.

**House of Tea** TEAHOUSE  
(Nehru Rd; tea ₹25-40; ☺9.15am-8pm) Sit and sip a range of brewed teas from several local Goodricke estates before purchasing a package of your favourite leaves.

**Sunset Lounge** TEAHOUSE  
(20 Chowrastra Square; cup of tea ₹20-75; ☺9am-8pm; ☎) This tearoom run by Nathmull's Tea offers aficionados a range of teas by the cup, with baked treats, fine valley views and wi-fi.

## Bars

The top-end hotels all have bars; the Windmere is the most atmospheric place to kick back with an early evening G&T (₹200).

**Joey's Pub** PUB  
(SM Das Rd; beer ₹120; ☺11am-10pm) If your preferred beverage comes in a pint not a pot,

this long-standing pub near the post office is a great place to strike up conversations with other travellers. It has sports on TV, cold beer and Hot Toddy's in the winter. It's generally very friendly, though lone women have experienced some not entirely good-natured teasing from staff.

### Buzz

PUB

(Nehru Rd; ☎4pm-9.30pm; beer ₹130) An American-style sports bar in the basement at Glenary's. If you get peckish you can order food from the upstairs restaurant.



## Shopping

### Nathmull's Tea Room

TEA

(www.nathmulltea.com; Laden La Rd; ☎9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, daily high season) Darjeeling tea is some of the finest tea in the world and Nathmull's is the best place to pick up some, with over 50 varieties. Expect to pay ₹80 to ₹150 per 100g for a decent tea and up to ₹1400 per 100g for the finest flushes. You can ask for a tasting, which will be expertly brewed, and you can also buy attractive teapots, strainers and cosies. The Sarda family has run the business for 80 years and are very knowledgeable.

### Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre

CARPETS

This centre makes gorgeous carpets to order, if you don't mind waiting around six months for one to be made. Choose from the catalogue and they will ship the finished carpet to your home address (US\$370 with shipping).

### Hayden Hall

CRAFTS

(www.haydenhall.org; Laden La Rd; ☎9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Sells yak wool carpets as part of its charitable work (₹5000 for a 1m by 1.8m carpet). There are Kashmiri-style carpets in most of the souvenir shops, but they're not likely to be locally made. There are also good knitwear and bags made by local women.

### Dorjee Himalayan Artefacts

HANDICRAFTS

(Laden La Rd) This tiny Aladdin's cave is crammed full of Himalayan knick-knacks, from Tibetan amulets to cast Buddhas and silver prayer wheels. Walking in through the door is like entering a scene from a Kipling novel.

### Life & Leaf Fair Trade Shop

HANDICRAFTS

(19 Nehru Rd) Supports local artisans and environmental projects through the sale of organic honey, tea, rhododendron juice, plus bamboo bags, scarves and toys.

## Oxford Book & Stationery Company

BOOKS

(Chowrasta; ☎9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, daily high season) The best bookshop in Darjeeling, selling a good selection of novels and Himalayan-related titles. They mail worldwide.

### Trek Mate

CLOTHING

(sleeping bag ₹40 per day, plus ₹1500 deposit) Clothing or gear can be hired from here, but the quality is pretty low.

### Rope

CLOTHING

(NB Singh Rd) This is located just below Clubside; stocks high quality imported clothing and trek boots.

## Information

### Emergency

**Police assistance booth** (Chowrasta)

**Sadar Police Station** (☎2254422; Market Rd)

### Internet Access

There are dozens of internet cafes around town; all generally charge ₹30 per hour.

**Compuset Centre** (Gandhi Rd; ☎8am-8pm;

☎) Does printing (₹2) and will burn photos to a CD/DVD for ₹50/70, but doesn't offer Skype.

**Cyber Planet** (Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; ☎8am-10pm) Opposite Sonam's Kitchen.

**Glenary's** (p496) Most convenient to the Mall; has wi-fi.

### Medical Services

**Planter's Hospital** (D&DMA Nursing Home;

☎2254327; Nehru Rd) The best private hospital.

### Money

A number of shops and hotels around Darjeeling can change cash and travellers cheques at fairly good rates; shop around.

**Axis Bank** (Rink Mall; ☎10.30am-3pm Mon-Fri) Changes cash and Amex travellers cheques, with an ATM.

**ICICI Bank ATM** (Laden La Rd) Accepts most international bank and credit cards.

**Poddar's** (Laden La Rd; ☎9am-8.30pm)

Better rates than the State Bank next door and changes most currencies and travellers cheques at no commission. It accepts credit cards and is a Western Union agent. It's inside a clothing store.

**Ridhi Siddhi** (Laden La Rd; ☎8.30am-8.30pm) Changes cash at good rates with no commission and sells trekking gear.

**State Bank of India** (Laden La Rd; ☎10am-2pm & 3-4pm Mon-Fri) Changes cash US dollars, euros and pounds sterling, plus US-dollar Amex

travellers cheques, with a commission of ₹100 per transaction. It has an adjacent ATM, another in Chowrasta; both accept Visa cards.

### Photography

**Das Studios** (Nehru Rd; ☎9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 2.30pm Sat, daily in high season) Film and printing, passport pics (six for ₹50) and burns digital photos to DVD (₹200). The reprinted 19th-century photographs make for a great souvenir (₹175); ask to look at the catalogue.

### Post

**Main post office** (Laden La Rd; ☎9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

### Tourist Information

**Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Tourist Reception Centre** (DGHC; ☎2255351; Silver Fir Bldg, Jawahar Rd West; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat, except 10am-1pm every 2nd Sat, 10am-1pm Sun high season) The staff are friendly, well organised and the best source of information in Darjeeling.

### Travel Agencies

Most travel agencies in town can arrange local tours, including the DGHC. Other reliable agencies and their specialities include the following:

**Adventures Unlimited** (☎9933070013; Dr Zakir Hussain Rd; www.adventuresunlimited.in) Offers Goecha La treks, kayaking, paragliding, motorbike trips and mountain bike rental (₹450 per day); ask about the cycle itinerary to Kurseong and back via Senchul Reservoir. They also offer internet access, a laundromat, cheap international calls and cash advances on a credit card. Contact Gautam.

**Samsara Tours, Travels & Treks** (☎2252874; samsara1@sancharnet.in; 7 Laden La Rd) Helpful and knowledgeable agency offering rafting and trekking trips, and domestic Nepali bus and air tickets to Kathmandu.

**Somewhere Over the Rainbow Treks & Tours** (☎9832025739; kanadhi@yahoo.com; HD Lama Rd; ☎8am-6pm, later in high season) Organises off-the-beaten track walks around Darjeeling, as well as rafting, rock climbing, cycling and trekking in Sikkim (including interesting routes from Uttarey). Treks start from US\$40 per day.

### Sikkim Travel Permit

**Sikkim Tourist Office** (☎9832438118; Nehru Rd; ☎10am-4pm Mon-Sat) For an on-the-spot Sikkim permit bring a photocopy of your passport and Indian visa, plus one photo. It's opposite Glenary's.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Strikes in support of the GJM's call for a separate Indian state of Gurkhaland have become

less regular in recent years but could easily return if discontent resurges. While there has been little violence and tourists have not been targeted, everything simply shuts down, including all banks, restaurants and transport.

## **i** Getting There & Away

### Air

The nearest airport is 90km away at Bagdogra, about 12km from Siliguri. See p483 for details about flights to/from Bagdogra.

**Indian Airlines** (☎2254230; Chowrasta; ☎10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat)

**Pineridge Travels** (☎2253912; pineridge@mail.com; Nehru Rd; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat) For domestic and international flight tickets.

### Bus

Samsara Tours, Travels & Treks can book 'luxury' air-con buses from Siliguri to Kolkata (₹750-1000, 12 hours) and ordinary night buses to Guwahati (₹360) and Patna (₹350). These tickets don't include transfers to Siliguri.

### Jeep & Taxi

Numerous share jeeps leave the crowded Chowk Bazaar bus/jeep stand for Siliguri (₹90-110, three hours) and Kurseong (₹50, 1½ hours). Jeeps for Mirik (₹60, 2½ hours) leave from the northern end about every 1½ hours. A ticket office inside the ground floor of the Old Super Market Complex sells advance tickets for the frequent jeeps to Kalimpong (₹80-90, 2½ hours), while two roadside stands sell advance tickets for Gangtok (₹130, four hours), departing between 7am and 3pm.

At the northern end of the station, three to four jeeps a day leave before noon for Jorethang (₹90, two hours) in Sikkim. You must already have a permit to enter Sikkim (see p497) via this route.

To New Jalpaiguri or Bagdogra, get a connection in Siliguri, or charter a jeep or taxi from Darjeeling.

**Darjeeling Transport Corporation** (Laden La Rd) offers charter jeeps to Gangtok (₹1400), Kalimpong (₹1200) and Siliguri/Bagdogra Airport (₹1200).

### Train

The nearest major train station is at New Jalpaiguri (NJP), near Siliguri. Tickets can be bought for major services out of NJP at the **Darjeeling train station** (☎8am-2pm). Fares are to Ghum (2nd/1st class ₹21/96, 50 minutes), Kurseong (₹27/144, three hours), Siliguri Junction (₹38/217, 6½ hours) and NJP (2nd/1st class ₹42/247, seven hours). For sightseeing services see p484.



## DARJEELING HIMALAYAN RAILWAY

NO	DARJEELING	GHUM	KURSEONG	SILIGURI JCT	NJP
2D*	9.15am	9.45am	11.55am	4pm	4.50pm
10D (steam)	10.15am	10.45am	1.10pm	-	-

\*At the time of research the 2D service was suspended due to landslides, but should have resumed by time of publication.

### To/From Nepal

Foreigners can only cross the border into Nepal at Kakarbhitta/Panitanki (not at Pasupati).

Samsara Tours, Travels & Treks can book night buses from Kakarbhitta to Kathmandu (₹750; departure 4pm), leaving you to hire a jeep to Kakarbhitta (₹1600), or catch a shared jeep to Siliguri and then Karkabhitta. Samsara can also book Nepali domestic flights from Bhadrapur to Kathmandu (US\$147), which will save you the overnight bus trip.

Any tickets you see advertised from Darjeeling to Kathmandu are not direct buses and involve transfers in Siliguri and at the border – leaving plenty of room for problems – it's just as easy to do it yourself. See the boxed text, p484 for Siliguri-Panitanki transport details.

### **i** Getting Around

There are several taxi stands around town, but rates are absurdly high for short hops. Darjeeling's streets can be steep and hard to navigate. You can hire a porter to carry your bags up to Chowrasta from Chowk Bazaar for around ₹60.

Share jeeps to anywhere north of the town centre (eg to North Point) leave from the northern end of the Chowk Bazaar bus/jeep station. To Ghum, get a share jeep (₹15) from along Hill Cart Rd.

## Trekking Around Darjeeling

A number of rewarding and picturesque treks are accessible from Darjeeling. October and November's clear skies and warm daytime temperatures make it an ideal time to trek, as do the long days and incredible rhododendron blooms of May and early June. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC; p497) produces a useful *Himalayan Treks* leaflet (₹25), which includes a map and descriptions of major trekking routes.

Most popular is the **Singalila Ridge Trek** from Mane Bhanjhang to Phalut, which passes through the scenic **Singalila National Park** (Indian/foreigner ₹100/200, camera/video ₹100/400) and offers great views of the Hima-

layan chain stretching from Nepal to Sikkim and Bhutan. Sandakphu in particular offers a stunning panorama that includes Lhotse, Everest and Khangchengdzonga peaks.

Guides (₹700 per day) are mandatory within the park and can be arranged at the office of the **Highlander Trekking Guides Association** (☎9734056944) at Mane Bhanjhang, along with porters (₹350) if required.

Mane Bhanjhang is 26km from Darjeeling and is served by frequent shared jeeps (₹50, 1½ hours) as well as a 7am bus from Darjeeling's Chowk Bazaar bus/jeep station. From Rimbik, there are shared jeeps back to Darjeeling (₹110, five hours) at 7am and noon and a bus at 6.30am (₹72). Book seats in advance.

If you have to overnight in Rimbik the best lodges are **Hotel Sherpa** (☎9434212810; dm ₹100, d ₹300-800), with pleasant lawns and Alpine-style huts, and **Green Hill** (dm ₹80-100, r ₹350-600), with quieter wooden rooms out back. For a relaxing end to a trek, consider a stay at **Karmi Farm** (p480), an hour or two drive from Rimbik near Bijanbari.

The usual trekking itinerary is described in the boxed text, p498. A shorter four-day option is possible by descending from Sandakphu to Sri Khola on day three. A very rough jeep road now follows the trek from Mane Bhanjhang to Phalut but traffic is very light and the walking trail partly avoids the road.

Private lodges, some with attached bathrooms, are available along the route for around ₹100 for a dorm bed or ₹300-600 per room. All offer food, normally a filling combo of rice, dhal and vegetables (₹60-80). Rooms have clean bedding and blankets so sleeping bags are not strictly necessary, though they are nice to have. At a minimum bring a sheet, a sleeping bag/liner and warm clothes for dawn peak viewing. Bottled and boiling water is available along the route. Trekkers' huts can be booked at the DGHC (p497), but even they will tell you that you are better off at one of the private lodges. The main lodges are listed below in ascending order of price and quality:

**Tumling** Trekkers' Hut, Mountain Lodge, Siddharta Lodge, Shikhar Lodge

**Tonglu** Trekkers' Hut

**Kalipokhari** Chewang Lodge and five others

**Sandakhphu** Trekkers' Hut, Namobuddha, Sunrise, Sherpa Chalet Lodge

**Phalut** Trekkers' Hut

**Gurdum** Himalayan Sherpa Lodge

**Sri Khola** Trekkers' Hut, Goparma Lodge

**Gorkhey** Trekkers' Hut, Shanti Lodge, Eden Lodge

**Ramman** Trekkers' Hut, Namobuddha Lodge

**Molley** Trekkers' Hut

All-inclusive guided treks on this route are offered by Darjeeling travel agencies for ₹1600 to ₹1800 per day, though it's easy enough to arrange a DIY trek for much less. Lodges can get booked out in the busy month of October, so consider a November trek.

Remember to bring your passport, as you'll have to register at half a dozen army checkpoints. The ridge forms the India-Nepal border and the trail actually enters Nepal in several places.

Reliable trekking agencies include the following:

**Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Tourist Reception Centre** (p497) Charges about ₹2000 per day (all-inclusive) for Singalila Ridge, or can just organise guides/porters.

## SINGALILA RIDGE TREK

DAY	ROUTE	DISTANCE (KM)
1	Mane Bhanjhang (2130m) to Tonglu (3070m)/Tumling (2980m) via Meghma Gompa	14
2	Tonglu to Sandakhphu (3636m) via Kalipokhari & Garibas	17
3	Sandakhphu to Phalut (3600m) via Sabarkum	17
4	Phalut to Rammam (2530m) via Gorkhey	16
5	Rammam to Rimbik (2290m) via Sri Khola	19

**Samsara Tours, Travels & Treks** (p497)

Experienced agency offering reasonably priced rafting and trekking trips.

**Trek Mate** (☎2256611, 9832083241; trek matedarj@gmail.com; Nehru Rd) All-inclusive guided treks run from US\$45 per person per day, or US\$60 for Goecha La in Sikkim, depending on group size.

**Himalayan Travels** (☎2252254; kkgurung@cal.vsnl.net.in; 18 Gandhi Rd; ☎8.30am-7pm)

Experienced company arranging treks and mountaineering expeditions in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Can supply tents and other equipment.

## Kalimpong

☎03552 / POP 43,000 / ELEV 1250M

This bustling bazaar town sprawls along a ridge overlooking the roaring Teesta River and within sight of Khangchendzonga. It's not a must-see but it does boast Himalayan views, some fine hikes, temples and churches, and a fascinating nursery industry.

Kalimpong's early development as a trading centre focused on the wool trade with Tibet, across the Jelep La Pass. Like Darjeeling, Kalimpong once belonged to the chogyals of Sikkim, but it fell into the hands of the Bhutanese in the 18th century and later passed to the British, before becoming part of India at Independence. Scottish missionaries, particularly the Jesuits, made great efforts to win over the local Buddhists in the late 19th century and Dr Graham's famous orphanage and school is still running today.

The Gorkhaland movement is active in Kalimpong. The Gurkha leader CK Pradhan was assassinated here in October 2002, and is commemorated by a small shrine on the spot where he was gunned down.

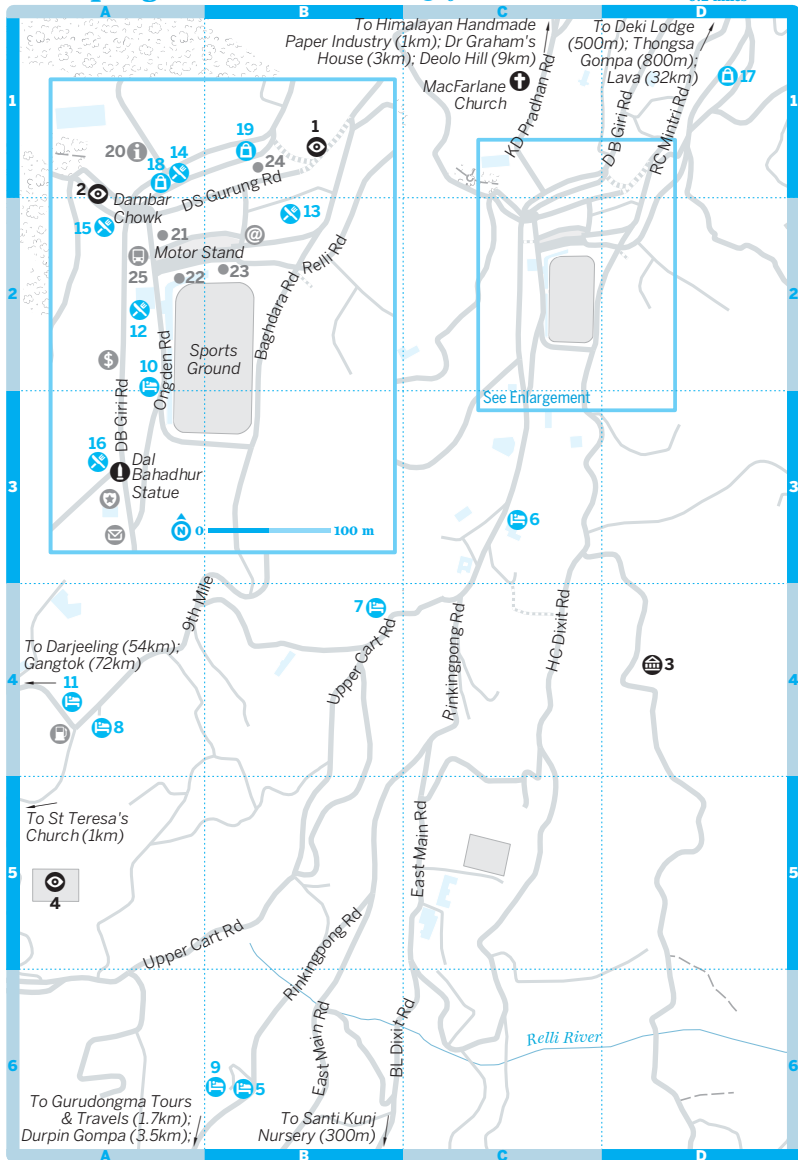
Kalimpong is centred on its chaotic Motor Stand. Nearby are restaurants, cheap hotels and shops; most sights and quality accommodation are a kilometre or two from town, accessed via DB Giri and Rinkingpong Rds.

## 👁 Sights

### Durpin Gompa

MONASTERY

Kalimpong's largest monastery, formally known as Zangtok Pelri Podrang (sometimes spelled Zong Dog Palri Fo-Brang), sits atop spectacular Durpin Hill (1372m) and was consecrated after its opening by the Dalai Lama in 1976. There are impressive wall and ceiling paintings in the main prayer room downstairs



(photography is permitted), and interesting 3-D mandalas (visual meditational aids) on the 2nd floor. The monastery is located about 5km south of the town centre, and is best reached by taxi (₹80 return). A viewpoint

about 300m below the gompa looks out south over the Reelli and Teesta Rivers.

### Tharpa Choling Gompa

MONASTERY

Built in 1922, this Gelugpa-school Tibetan monastery, off KD Pradhan Rd, contains stat-

## Kalimpong

### 📍 Sights

- 1 CK Pradhan Shrine..... B1
- 2 Himalayan Eagle..... A1
- 3 Lepcha Heritage Museum..... D4
- Nurseryman's Haven..... (see 8)
- 4 Pineview Nursery..... A5

### 🛏 Sleeping

- 5 Cloud 9..... B6
- 6 Elgin Silver Oaks..... C3
- 7 Himalayan Hotel..... B4
- 8 Holumba Haven..... A4
- 9 Kalimpong Park Hotel..... B6
- 10 Sherpa Lodge..... A2
- 11 Sood's Garden Retreat..... A4

### 🍴 Eating

- 12 3C's..... A2
- 13 China Garden Restaurant..... B2
- 14 Fresh Bite Restaurant..... A1
- 15 Gomp'u's Bar & Restaurant..... A2

- 16 King Thai..... A3

### 🛒 Shopping

- 17 Haat Bazaar..... D1
- 18 Kashi Nath & Sons..... A1
- 19 Lark's Provisions..... B1

### Information

- 20 Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council  
    Tourist Reception Centre..... A1
- Helpdesk..... (see 10)
- Studio Foto Max..... (see 16)

### Transport

- 21 Himalayan Travellers..... A2
- 22 Kalimpong Mainline Taxi  
    Driver's Welfare  
    Association..... A2
- 23 Kalimpong Motor Transport..... B2
- 24 Kalimpong Railway Out Agency..... B1
- 25 Sikkim Nationalised Transport..... A2

ues of the past, present and future Buddhas. A garuda protects each Buddha from above, his mouth devouring hatred and anger (in the form of a snake). It's a 30-minute walk (uphill) from town, past the top of Tripai Rd.

### Thongsa Gompa

MONASTERY

Near the top of RC Mintri Rd, past JP Lodge, is this Nyingmapa-school monastery, also known as the Bhutanese Monastery. The gompa was founded in 1692, but the present building, surrounded by 219 small prayer wheels, was built in the 19th century after the Gurkhas rampaged across Sikkim.

### Dr Graham's Home

HISTORIC BUILDING

This working orphanage and school was built in 1900 by Dr JA Graham, a Scottish missionary, to educate the children of tea estate workers, and now has more than 1300 students. There's a small **museum** (admission free ☺9am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) that commemorates the founder and his wife, Katherine. The 1925 chapel above the school seems lifted straight out of a Scotland parish, with its grey slate, spire and fine stained-glass windows. The gate is 4km up the steep KD Pradhan Rd. Many people charter a taxi to get here (₹100) and then walk back to town via Tharpa Choling Gompa.

### Deolo Hill

VIEWPOINT

(admission ₹50; 9km from Kalimpong) On a clear day the sunrise views of Khangchendzonga from this hilltop park are superb. After savouring the views you can have breakfast at the attached **Tourist Lodge** (breakfast ₹70-140; ☺from 8am) and then walk back to Kalimpong via Dr Graham's. A taxi here costs around ₹250. If it's cloudy, stay in bed.

### Himalayan Handmade Paper Industry

HANDICRAFTS

(KD Pradhan Rd; ☎255418; www.rupeshpradhan.com; ☺9am-3.30pm Mon-Sat) Visitors are welcome to drop into this small workshop to see the traditional papermaking process, from pulping of the local *argayli* bush to pressing and drying. The resulting insect-resistant paper is used by monasteries to block print scriptures. Morning is the best time to visit.

### Nurseries

NURSERIES

Kalimpong is a major flower exporter and produces about 80% of India's gladioli as well as many orchid varieties. Visit **Nurseryman's Haven** (☎256936; 9th Mile) at Holumba Haven (see p502) to have a look at orchids; **Santi Kunj** (BL Dixit Rd; ☺8.30am-noon & 1.30-4pm Sun-Fri) to see anthuriums and the bird of paradise flower (bulbs are also sold here); and **Pineview Nursery** (☎255843; www.pineviewcactus.com; Atisha Rd; admission ₹10; 8am-

5pm, Sun closed winter) to gaze at its eminently photographable cactus collection.

### Lepcha Heritage Museum

MUSEUM

(☎9800033650; ☀9am-4pm Mon-Fri) There are plans to move this collection of Lepcha treasures to a more formal location, but until then the experience is best likened to rummaging through the attic of your grandfather's house, if he were a Lepcha tribal elder. A guide will explain Lepcha creation myths, while pointing out the religious texts, sacred porcupine quill hat and several old pangolin skins. It's a 10-minute walk below the sports ground, just past the Kamudini Homes School. Calling ahead is advised.

### St Teresa's Church

CHURCH

A fascinating missionary church built in 1929 by Swiss Jesuits, St Teresa was constructed to incorporate designs from a Bhutanese gumpa. The carved apostles look like Buddhist monks, and the carvings on the doors resemble the *tashi tagye*, eight auspicious symbols of Himalayan Buddhism. The church is found off 9th Mile, about 2km from town, but is often locked outside of the early morning services.



### Activities

The sleepy DGHC Tourist Reception Centre (p503) and private Helpdesk (p503) can arrange local transport and treks.

**Gurudongma Tours & Travels** (☎255204; www.gurudongma.com; Hilltop, Rinkingpong Rd) organises interesting tours, including trekking, rafting, mountain biking, birdwatching and fishing throughout the region, in a bus especially from its lodge on the Samthar Plateau (see p504).

Kalimpong-based Swede Roger Lenngren offers paragliding flights through **Himalayan Eagle** (☎9635156911; www.paraglidingkalimpong.com; Dambar Chowk). Tandem flights cost ₹2150/3500 for a 15-/30-minute flight, which includes transport. Weather conditions have to be perfect. Lenngren also runs motorbike and 4WD trips through www.himalayanbiketours.se.

**Kalimpong Walks** (☎9932828753; www.kalimpongwalks.blogspot.com, www.thesilkrouteexperience.com; walks ₹300-900) offers a series of guided walks around Kalimpong, ranging from hour-long dawn strolls to full-day hikes.

### Sleeping

The hotels closest to the Motor Stand are mainly grotty and overpriced; it's well worth walking a few extra steps for a significant increase in quality. High-season rates (October to early December and mid-March to early June) are given here.



#### Holumba Haven

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$

(☎256936; www.holumba.com; 9th Mile; ₹700-1800, cottage from ₹4500) Described by its welcoming owners as 'more of a homestay than a hotel', this family-run guesthouse is situated in a splendid orchid nursery just 1km below town. The spotless, comfy rooms are arranged in homey cottages spread around the lush garden, and spring water is piped directly into the rooms. Good home-style meals (₹300, preorder) are available in the sociable dining room. Owner Norden is a fantastic source of local information.



#### Himalayan Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$

(☎255248; www.himalayanhotel.com; Upper Cart Rd; s/d ₹1800/2800; @) This hotel was opened by the revered David MacDonald, an interpreter from Francis Younghusband's mission to Lhasa in 1904 and one of those who helped the 13th Dalai Lama escape Tibet in 1910. The original rooms have loads of Raj-era appeal beneath a sloping Himalayan-oak ceiling, while the new suites mesh old-world charm with modern comfort and private balconies. It's a triumph of sympathetic renovation; comfortable but full of lovely original fittings. You're in fine company here; the former guest list reads like a 'Who's Who' of the great 19th-century Himalayan travellers, from Alexandra David-Neel and Heinrich Harrer to Charles Bell. Head to the lawn to savour the Himalayan views over an al fresco breakfast or afternoon beer.

#### Kalimpong Park Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$

(☎255304; www.kalimponghotel.com; s/d/ste ₹1800/2300/3000) This former maharaja's summer residence has oodles of Raj-era charm. Wicker chairs and flowerpots line the verandah and there's a charming lounge bar, along with a restaurant offering such British boarding-school dishes as jelly custard. Rooms in the new wing lack some of the period charm of the old house but are fresh and still very appealing. Request a front-facing room, preferably on the upper floors.

**Deki Lodge**

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎255095; Tripai Rd; s ₹250-450, d ₹350-650, deluxe d ₹850-1050) This pleasant lodge is close to the Thongsa and Tharpa Choling Gompas and still handy to town. It's a friendly, family-run place set in a garden with a cafe (on request) and rooftop viewing area. Rooms are generally appealing, particularly the upper-floor rooms, and it's light years better than anything near the Motor Stand.

**Sherpa Lodge**

HOTEL \$  
(☎8972029913; s ₹200, d ₹300-400) This decent budget place is slap bang in the centre of town, offering bright, clean rooms and buckets of hot water for the attached bathrooms. The rooftop terrace has great potential. Ask for Raju.

**Sood's Garden Retreat**

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$  
(☎9733123113; www.soodsgardenretreat.com; 81/2nd Mile; ste ₹2550-3050 with breakfast; ☎) Renovations have reinvented Sood's as a modern, stylish boutique hotel. The suites in particular have great floor to ceiling mountain views and there's a good restaurant with a pleasant sitting area for tea or a beer. The eager-to-help owners can organise all kinds of tours and trips.

**Elgin Silver Oaks**

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$  
(☎255296; www.elginhotels.com; Rinkingpong Rd; s/d incl full board ₹5600/5900) This centrally located Raj-era homestead has been renovated into a modern and very comfortable Elgin hotel. The rooms are plushly furnished and offer grand views down the valley (ask for a garden-view room). The tariff includes all meals in the excellent restaurant and the sociable bar packs bags of atmosphere.

**Cloud 9**

HOTEL \$\$\$  
(☎259554; cloud9kpg@yahoo.com; Rinkingpong Rd; d ₹1100-1500) There's no chance of a tour-group invasion in this friendly place, since there are just three wood-panelled rooms, plus a cosy TV lounge and a good restaurant, serving interesting Bhutanese and Sikkimese dishes (try the *kewa tachi* - potato and cheese). Guitars in the lounge attest to the owner's love of late-night Beatles covers.

**Eating****King Thai**

CHINESE \$\$  
(3rd fl 'supermarket', DB Giri Rd; mains ₹50-110; ☎11am-9.30pm) A multicultural hang-out with a Thai name, Chinese food, Bob Marley posters and British soccer banners for

decoration, the regular crowd here mixes expats, monks, businessmen and Tibetan cool kids drawn to the noisy live music in the evenings. The excellent food is mainly Chinese with some Thai and Indian flavours and there's a bar with comfy chairs and even a disco ball.

**Gompu's Bar & Restaurant**

TIBETAN \$  
(☎257456; off DB Giri Rd; mains ₹40-120, beer ₹120) Gompu's is famous for its massive *momos* (pork, chicken and veg), which have been drawing locals and travellers alike for ages. It's a good place for a cold beer. It's found within the hotel of the same name.

**China Garden Restaurant**

CHINESE \$  
(☎257456; Lal Gulli, mains ₹70-100) In the China Garden Hotel near the Motor Stand, this is Kalimpong's best Chinese restaurant. The fairly authentic soups, noodles and spicy ginger chicken are tasty, if you can pry the staff's attention away from the hypnotising TV.

**Fresh Bite Restaurant**

MULTICUISINE \$  
(DB Giri Rd; mains ₹50-140) Upstairs, across the road from the DGHC, this place has a wide range of almost uniformly good food including some hard-to-find dishes that you might have been craving, like miso soup and bacon sandwiches and a good Gorkhali set meal, featuring Nepali-style *gundruk* (fermented greens).

**3C's**

BAKERY \$  
(DB Giri Rd; cakes & snacks ₹10-30; ☎8.30am-7.15pm) If you need a quick break, this popular bakery and fast food restaurant offers a variety of pastries and cakes, both sweet and savoury, with seating in the back.

**Shopping****Lark's Provisions**

FOOD & DRINK \$  
(DB Giri Rd) The best place to pick up Kalimpong cheese (₹240 per kg), produced in Kalimpong since the Jesuits established a dairy here in the 19th century, and locally made Kalimpong lollipops (₹25). Also sells groceries and yummy homemade pickles.

**Haat Bazaar**

MARKET  
(btwn Relli & RC Mintri Rds) On Wednesday and Saturday this normally quiet bazaar roars to life.

**Kashi Nath & Sons**

BOOKS  
(DB Giri Rd; ☎10am-6.30pm) This, and the shop next door, has a decent range of books on Buddhism, Nepal and Tibet, plus some novels.

## DIY EXPLORING AROUND KALIMPONG

There's plenty of scope for some exploring in the hills and villages around Kalimpong. The picturesque drive east from Kalimpong passes through mist and moss-laden, old-growth forests and makes for nice hiking. For more information on the region see the Helpdesk in Kalimpong (p503) or Norden at Holumba Haven (p502).

About 32km east of Kalimpong, **Lava** (2353m) is a small village popular with Bengali tourists, with a Kagyupa gumpa and a bustling Tuesday market. En route, a short detour 6km from Algarh, you can make the short hike to the faint 17th-century ruins of Damsang Dzong, a former fortress of the chogyals of Sikkim.

Adjoining Lava town is **Neora Valley National Park** (admission ₹150), featuring lush forests home to red panda and clouded leopard. There are some fine day hikes or you can make the four-day camping trek to Rochela (3155m), at the high junction of West Bengal, Sikkim and Bhutan.

There's plenty of accommodation in Lava. The cottages of the **Lava Forest Lodge** ([www.wbfdc.com](http://www.wbfdc.com); d ₹600-1200) just above town is the nicest option but can be hard to book; try through WBTD in Siliguri or Holumba Haven in Kalimpong. The government-run **Tourist Cottage** (☎9932270767; d ₹750) is another decent choice.

About 26km further east of Lava is **Kaffer** (1555m), also known as Lodaygaon, from where there are views of the summit of Khangchendzonga. **Daffey Munal Tourist Lodge** (☎03552-277218; dm ₹150, d/tr ₹750/1000) is a rambling old DGHC place with huge, clean rooms, hot water and fireplaces.

To get further afield, **Gurudongma Tours & Travels** (☎255204; [www.gurudongma.com](http://www.gurudongma.com), [www.awakeandshine.org](http://www.awakeandshine.org); Hilltop, Rinkingpong Rd, Kalimpong; s/d full board from ₹3800/4500) runs the cosy Farm House at Samthar. There are fine views of the Bhutanes Himalaya and some fascinating conversations when the owner, 'the General', is in residence. They will arrange transport from Kalimpong.

Other adventure companies in the region include **Silk Route Experience** ([www.the silkrouteexperience.com](http://www.the silkrouteexperience.com)) based around its Silk Route Retreat in Pedong, 22km from Kalimpong.

Several jeeps daily link Kalimpong with both Lava and Kaffer.

### **i** Information

**Axis Bank ATM** (81/2nd Mile) Next to Sood's Garden Retreat.

**Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Tourist Reception Centre** (DGHC; ☎257992; DB Giri Rd; ☉10am-5pm) Staff can organise local tours and rafting in Teesta Bazaar (see p492).

**Helpdesk** (☎9434886511; [helpdesk\\_kpg@hotmail.com](mailto:helpdesk_kpg@hotmail.com); ☉9am-5pm) This private information centre on the ground floor of the Sherpa Lodge offers guides, walks and information on trips around Kalimpong.

**ICICI Bank ATM** (DB Giri Rd)

**Net Hut** (per hr ₹30; ☉9.30am-7.30pm) Internet access near the Motor Stand.

**Post office** (Rinkingpong Rd; ☉9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Just behind the police station.

**Sikkim permit** There is nowhere in Kalimpong to obtain permits for Sikkim, but free 30-day permits are available at the border at Rangpo, en route to Gangtok. You need to present three passport photos.

**State Bank of India ATM** (DB Giri Rd)

**Studio Foto Max** (☉8am-7pm) Small shop in an arcade will burn digital pictures to a CD/DVD for ₹50/75.

### **i** Getting There & Away

All the bus and jeep options and their offices mentioned here are found next to each other at the chaotic Motor Stand.

#### Bus & Jeep

Bengal government buses run twice daily to Siliguri (₹50, 2½ hours), and there's also a single Sikkim Nationalised Transport (SNT) bus to Gangtok (₹80, 3 hours) at 1pm.

**Himalayan Travellers** (☎9434166498) Helpful transport company runs share jeeps to Gangtok (₹100, three hours, four daily), Lava (₹50, 1½ hours, five per day) and Kaffer (₹60, 2½ hrs, 8am).

**Kalimpong Mainline Taxi Driver's Welfare Association** (KMTDWA) Regular share jeeps to Siliguri (₹80, 2½ hours) and Gangtok (₹100, 2½ hours) and one daily to Kaffer (₹70, departs 7.15am) and Jorethang (₹60, two hours, departs 7.15am).

**KS & AH Taxi Driver's Welfare Association**

Four jeeps daily to Ravangla (₹110, 3½ hours) and Namchi (₹80) in Sikkim, though you need to have arranged a permit in advance for this route.

**Kalimpong Motor Transport** Regular share jeeps to Darjeeling (₹80-90, 2½ hours). Jeeps can also be chartered for Darjeeling (₹1400), Siliguri (₹1400) and Gangtok (₹1500).

**Train**

**Kalimpong Railway Out Agency** (Mani Rd;

🕒10am-4pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) sells train tickets from New Jalpaiguri station.

**To/From Bhutan & Nepal**

A West Bengal government bus travels to the Bhutan border, Jaigon (₹100, 5½ hours) at 8.15am, and there are also early morning jeeps (₹130, five hours). There is one early morning bus (₹90, 5.45am) and jeep (₹110, 6.30am) to the Nepal border at Kakarbhitta (₹110, three hours).

Border information can be found in the boxed text, p484.

**i Getting Around**

Taxis can be chartered for local trips from along DB Giri Rd. A half-day rental to see most of the sights should cost ₹700.

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