

# DRIVING HOLIDAYS



IN THE HIMALAYAS

Koko Singh

Sikkim

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56

# DRIVING HOLIDAYS

IN THE HIMALAYAS

# Sikkim

*"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference".*

– ROBERT FROST

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Terraced fields with a  
golden harvest of rice





**D**RIVING Holidays in the Himalayas is a series of books that endeavour to give the reader a glimpse of many exciting, exotic locales that can be easily accessed by road and hopes to provide enough insight to make your trip a comfortable and memorable one.

Whereas this book explores Sikkim, and briefly the adjoining towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, others in the series take you through Uttaranchal, Himachal, Ladakh & Zaskar.

These books especially focus on travellers who are fond of driving, have their own wheels (two, four – or even hired will do!), and love the mountains. Given the time constraints of our lives today, each book is designed to cover a fair degree of terrain in a week to ten days. Although it does not aim to visit every place possible in a region, it certainly traverses a reasonable cross-section. It reflects the author's own preferences of picturesque places to visit and also makes dining recommendations ■

# THE HIMALAYAS

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**T**HROUGH the ages, the Himalayas have been revered by millions of Indians as the abode of the Gods. The early 'rishis' (sages), referred to them as "the expanse of the two arms of the Supreme Being", suggestive of the whole world being locked in the Himalaya's divine embrace.

Writing in the fifth century AD, Kalidas, the renowned poet, has an evocative but apt description—

*In the northern quarter is divine  
Himalayas,  
the lord of the Mountains,  
reaching from Eastern to Western  
Ocean,  
firm as a rod to measure the  
earth.....*

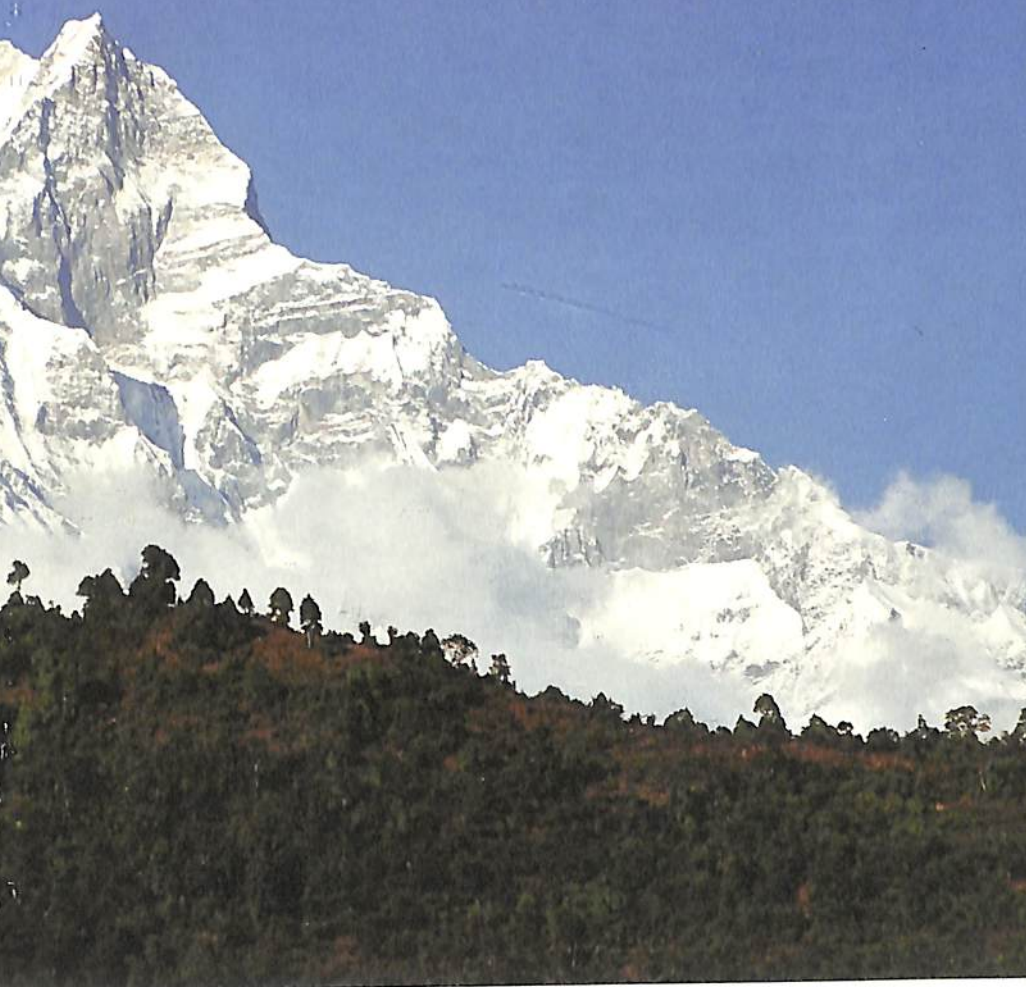
*There demigods rest in the shade of  
clouds,  
which spread like a girdle below  
the peaks but when the rains disturb  
them,  
they fly to sunlit summits.....*

It is here that Shiva, the great god of destruction, found solace after the death of his consort, Sati, and atoned for almost destroying the world with his dance, the 'Tandava Nritya'. After wooing the bereaved Shiva for over a thousand years, Parvati, the daughter of the mountains succeeded in winning his love. The Himalayas are studded with temples dedicated to Shiva and



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Machapuchre or 'Fish Tail'  
viewed from Pokhra, Nepal





Parvati, and every year devotees in untold numbers travel hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometers, to visit their 'abode'.

In the words of the *Skanda Pūrana*: "As the sun dries the morning dew, so are the sins of man dissipated at the sight of the Himalaya".

Centuries of pilgrimage led to the building of numerous temples and hermitages, but not a single 'hill station', as we know it.

In earlier times, the local inhabitants were unaffected as the transient pilgrims were extremely limited in number due to the difficulties and time required for the arduous journey.

The first planned hill retreats were set up by the great Mughal emperors Akbar, Shah Jehan, and Jehangir who established summer palaces around Srinagar in the state of Jammu & Kashmir. The beautiful Nishat and Shalimar gardens are testament to those early endeavours and are a star attraction even today. The Mughals faded into oblivion and were followed by the British, a unique creature, unlike any other who ruled the subcontinent. They made little effort to absorb or integrate with the ancient cultures and traditions they found in this land. They were masters at the game of intrigue and treachery, playing one powerful local ruler against the other to extend and consolidate their

grip over the country. However, one enemy continued to challenge – the climate.

One of the main problems faced by the British was keeping the army of almost 100,000 troops healthy. Soldiers garrisoned in the hill forts were found to be much better off than their comrades in the plains and this started the search for resorts to be used as sanatoriums.

In 1819, the first 'hill station' was established at Shimla (now the capital of Himachal Pradesh) and over the next seventy years, around eighty hill stations were developed all over the country. Situated on hill tops and often even in places without a local populace, the Raj used the ample resources at its command to construct roads and railways under the most challenging conditions – who else could build railway lines to remote Darjeeling and Shimla! To give them due kudos, it is thanks to their eccentricities and desire to create conditions akin to those 'back home', far from the enervating heat, that such an extensive network of roads developed, allowing us our much-coveted driving holidays in the Himalayas.

Geologically speaking, the Himalayas are the youngest mountain range in the world and are actually still growing – up to 0.8cm annually. Samples extracted from the

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slopes of Mt. Everest confirm that in the past millennia, what is today the world's highest and longest (East to West) mountain range was once part of a vast ocean bed!

Eighty million years ago, in the period when dinosaurs roamed the earth – the Jurassic Age – the earth's land mass split into two great continents, Laurasia in the northern hemisphere and Gondwanaland in the southern hemisphere. Later the land mass, that is the Indian subcontinent, broke away from Gondwanaland and floated across the Earth's

surface till it ran into Asia! The collision between the hard volcanic rock of India and Asia's soft sedimentary crust resulted in the creation of all the Asian mountain ranges such as the Karakoram, Hindu Kush, Pamir, as also the Tien Shan and Kun Lun. This process took between five and seven million years and the fact that the Himalayas are at the front of the continental collision accounts for their dwarfing the other ranges and for their

**Bar headed geese over the Tso Moriri Lake in Ladakh**



## THE HIMALAYAS

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The Himalayas stretch 2500km from Nanga Parbat in the West (in Pakistan), to Namche Barwa (Arunachal Pradesh), in the East. The range boasts of fourteen peaks in excess of 26,200ft/8000m, including Mt. Everest which at 29,028ft/8848m is the highest mountain in the world. The highest peak in our country is the third highest in the world – mighty Kanchendzonga, 28,160ft/8585m, located in the second smallest state, Sikkim.

The Himalayan range is actually three almost parallel mountain systems. At the top lies the Great Himalayan Range with perennial snow peaks rising to heights in excess of 16,500ft/5000m, preceded by the Middle Himalayan Range of peaks averaging between 13,000-16,500ft/4000-5000m. The foothills, or the Lower Himalayan Range, are the ranges bordering the plains with mountains upto 8000ft/2500m in height and, regrettably, it is only in this third, and lowest, layer of mountains that most of our driving journeys are confined!

The Himalayas are also the source of the three major river systems of the subcontinent – the Indus, the Ganga, and the Brahmaputra. All these originate from glaciers, one of which, Gaumukh – the source of the holy Ganga – is only a few kilometers from the road-head at Gangotri in Uttarakhand



Kumaoni slate roofed  
houses with 'Likhai'  
woodwork

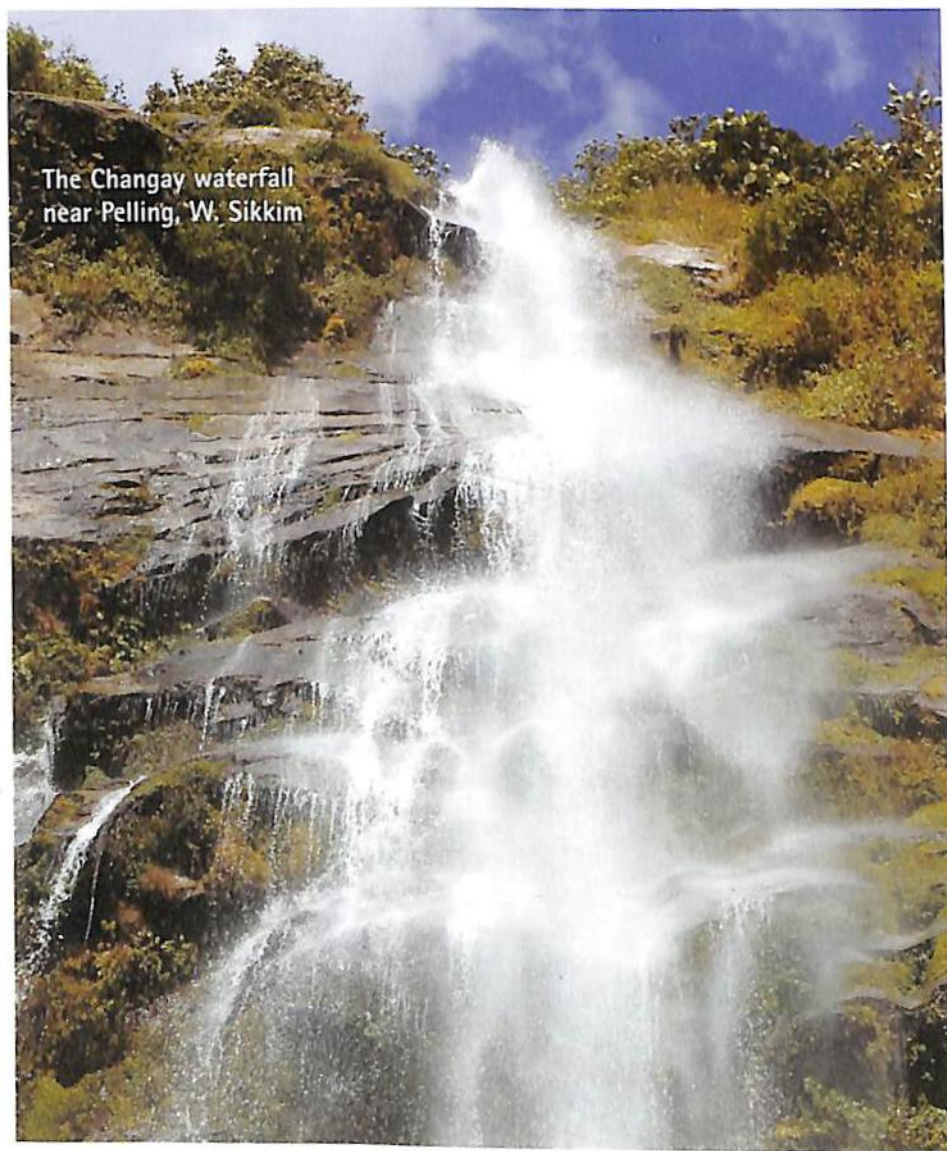


## WHERE IT IS

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**S**IKKIM is the second smallest state of our country measuring a mere 65km East to West and 110km North to South. This 7096 sq

km accounts for only 0.22% of the total area of our country but encompasses an astounding range of pristine natural beauty. From one of



The Changay waterfall near Pelling, W. Sikkim



the highest mountain peaks in the world, the towering Kanchendzonga, to virgin tropical forests; from alpine meadows and rhododendron forests to rushing streams, rivers and incredible waterfalls – Sikkim has it all and more!

This state is sandwiched between Nepal on the West, Bhutan on the East; it has the towering Tibetan plateau to the North and the southern region bordering West Bengal is the only way of accessing the area.

Almost two-thirds of the state is mountainous – with ten peaks in excess of 20,000ft/6000m on the western border, and six massifs of similar stature on the eastern border. The Tibetan plateau marks the northern border, the Chola &

Pangolia ranges lie to the East and the Singelila range on the western side. The mighty Teesta River originates in the far North from a glacier above Cholamu Lake. The nearby Gurudongmar Lake is an additional source for the Teesta. The river starts as a tiny trickle of almost frozen water from an altitude of over 17,000ft/5150m, but turns into a torrential, awesome river within a very short distance of under 100km. Along with the Rangit, which starts from the central mountain range, these two rivers form the southern frontier with West Bengal. Another spur of the Himalayas, that originates from the Tibetan plateau, separates the Lachen and Lachung valleys which are, in my perception, one of the most beautiful and spectacular regions of Sikkim. The area, ringed in by a horseshoe of mountains, descends steeply from lofty heights of 18,000ft/5500m in the northern plateau to 2000ft/600m in a span of only 80km.

As per the 2001 census the total population of the state is just under 550,000, which is a mere 0.05% of our country's population! Gangtok, the capital, accounts for around ten percent people and the state is represented by one member each in the Lok and Rajya Sabha. The local assembly has thirty two members and literacy is a highly respectable seventy percent ■

Views of mountain ranges  
on the drive up







## GETTING THERE

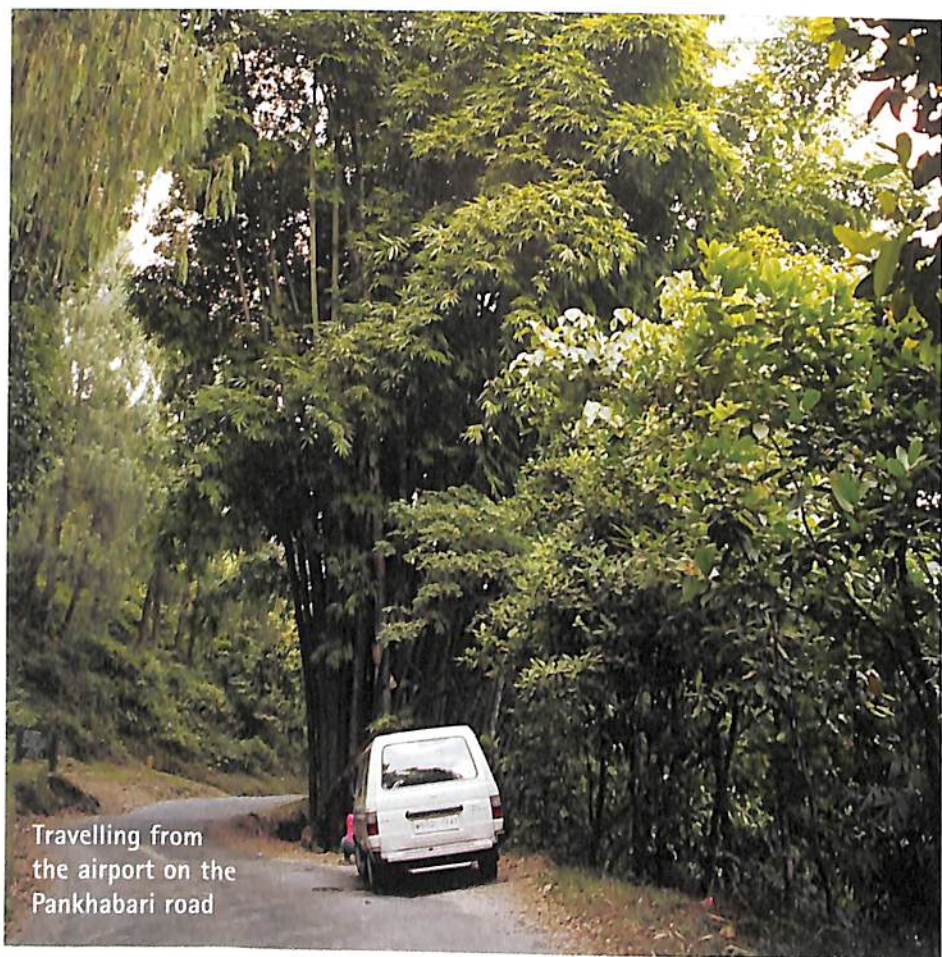
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ONE would imagine that this would be a difficult, time-consuming exercise but the exact opposite is true!

There are daily morning flights to Bagdogra (near Siliguri) in West Bengal. From here to Gangtok, the capital and the starting point of your holiday, is just a very pleasant three to four hour drive by road. So you

could actually start from Mumbai, Delhi or Chennai in the morning and be in Gangtok by late afternoon! Return flights are also conveniently scheduled in the afternoon. So getting back home – wherever that is – in a matter of hours, is very possible.

For those who do not like flying, overnight train connections to New Jalpaiguri (30km from Siliguri), like



Travelling from the airport on the Pankhabari road

the Guwahati bound Rajdhani from New Delhi and several others from Kolkata, are a convenient option.

From Siliguri, or New Jalpaiguri, to Gangtok the principal connection is by road – a 125km journey from either the airport or the railway station. The road routes through dense forest just outside Siliguri and ascends as a surprisingly good mountain road, large sections of which run along the beautiful but frisky Teesta River. There are numerous picturesque spots along the way for a 'chai-break'. At a few places such as Kalijhora, (5km after the Coronation Bridge), or the confluence of the Relli and Teesta, (approximately another 15km ahead), you can climb down to the river and have a picnic lunch washed down with a beverage of your choice.

The journey takes between three to four hours and your travel operator can arrange a jeep, Maruti van, Qualis or the good old Ambassador, depending on your preference. (Luxury buses are available from Siliguri to Gangtok and take around five hours for the trip).

There is also a helicopter service from Bagdogra to Gangtok, which the company Pawan Hans operates on a regular basis, subject of course, to weather conditions.

Foreign nationals require an inner line permit to visit Sikkim (refer page 175) ■

## TRAVEL WITHIN THE REGION

Private vehicles are discouraged in N. Sikkim and some parts of E. Sikkim. Travel in these regions can be organised by your tour operator who takes care of accommodation, meals, transportation and a guide (optional), as also permits wherever required. Your own vehicle would be useful in Gangtok and in W. Sikkim.

### PETROL PUMPS

There are not very many petrol pumps other than on the main highway to Gangtok. Since you will probably not take your own vehicle to N. Sikkim, make sure your tour operator's vehicle is adequately stocked. There is a petrol pump at Gyalsing (Geysing) in W. Sikkim which takes care of your needs in that region. Remember, distances are short and a full tank will cover you from Gangtok to Pelling and around. Topping up at Gyalsing will see you back to Siliguri via Darjeeling though of course, both Darjeeling and Kalimpong also have petrol pumps. Repair shops are few and far between, but are available all along the main highway to Gangtok (at Singtam, Rangpo, Melli, Ranipul) and also at towns like Jorethang, Namche, Pelling, Gyalsing, Ravangla, Legship.