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FOOTLOOSE

STORIES FROM THE WORLD AROUND YOU

A global, yet scenic, city nestled in the Western Ghats

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If you are keen to go on a short trip but haven't yet decided where to head to, Pune is a good option in summer.

Reaching Pune from Mumbai is the easiest with three highways. However, the best is the NH-4. The tunnels on the highway are an absolute delight. If it is not too sunny, you are in for a romantic drive. Although I had paid ₹500 more for an air-conditioned cab, I hardly kept my window shut. With towering cliffs and picturesque villages lining the highway, only a zombie would enjoy the comforts of the car. After two and a half hours, I reached Pune and headed to my guesthouse at MG Road. Soon, I tucked in a sumptuous lunch and went around in a cab that I had booked in advance.

I had heard a lot about the National Defence Academy from my brother who had undergone training there, but had never got a chance to be there. We drove through the city towards Khadakwasala. For the adjectives that I had heard about the place, I knew this one had to be great. A dam with a vast stretch of greenish blue water and a sandy bank made it look like a mini-beach. Enjoy the sun, the sand and the water and after you taken enough snaps, make sure you have the delectable baked sweet corns. Near the place is the NDA, and looking at it gave me the goosebumps. This place has trained so many bravehearts who fight for the country, I thought.

Soon, it was time to drive back to the city. Since it was too

■ The Kanchenjunga, which is one of the peaks forming the Sleeping Buddha, during sunrise

SLEEPING BUDDHA

HIKING ON THE HILLS With its snow-capped peaks, pristine streams, blooming rhododendrons and orchids, Sandakphu has much in store for trekkers and adventurers



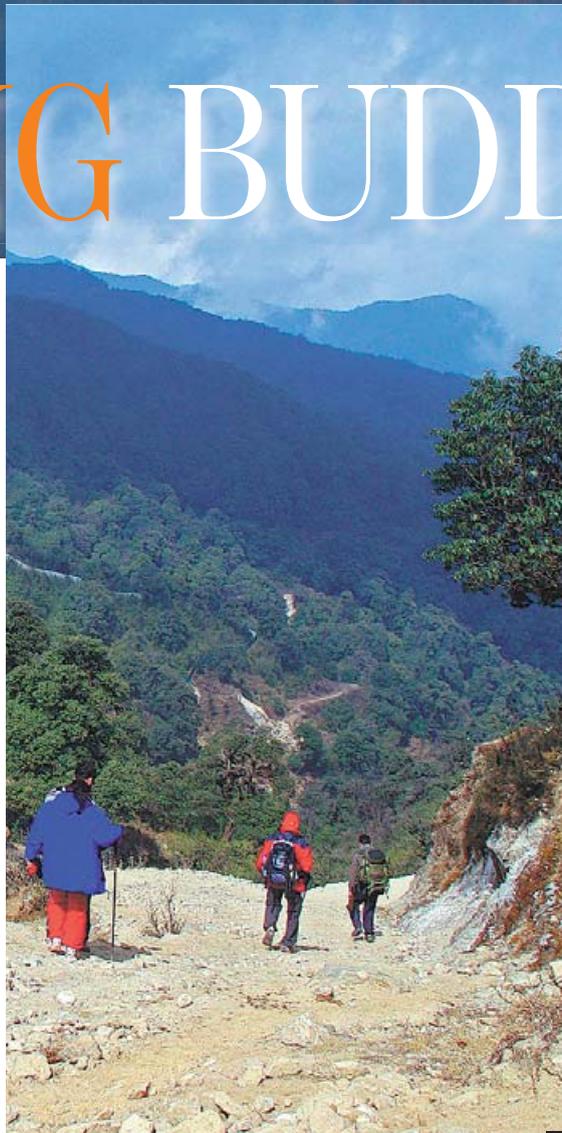
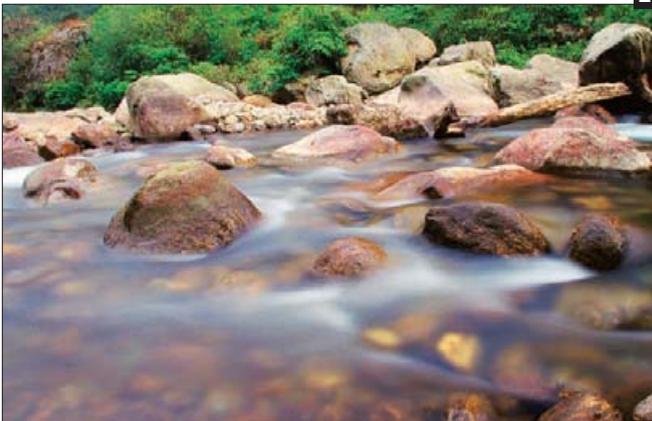
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readers' corner

Amitabha Gupta

If you are a first-time trekker, a trek to Sandakphu, with well-defined trails and lodges that provide good food, is ideal for you. Located in the Singalila Wildlife Sanctuary, Sandakphu (3,636m) is the highest point of West Bengal. The sanctuary is home to Himalayan red panda, barking deer, black bear and leopards. Apart from several varieties of trees, rare orchids embellish this sanctuary. From Sandakphu, you can see a panoramic view of the Himalayas including four of the five highest peaks in the world — Kanchenjunga, Everest, Lhotse and Makalu. The best time for this trek is from October to January in winters and from March to June in summer.

The most conventional route to Sandakphu usually starts from Maneybhanjan through Chitrey and Meghma. However, we chose the 6-km route from Dhotre to Tumling (2,790m), which is full of rhododendron forests.

We reached Dhotre after a six-hour drive from Siliguri via Mirik. With rhododendron flowers in full bloom, forests on the way are brightly coloured in April and May. On a clear day, you can see Kanchenjunga on your right on the way to Tumling. Although we trekked during January-end, we saw some blooming rhododendrons. When we reached Tumling at 4pm, dusk was just setting in. At the entrance of this settlement, there is a signpost of the West Bengal government. A little further on the right, another post says: "Welcome to Nepal". If you walk straight down, you are in Nepal. We turned left and reached Shikhar Lodge, our stopover for the night.



Next day before sunrise, we went to the junction of Nepal and Bengal once again. A spectacular sunrise was about to begin and to our left was the mighty Kanchenjunga. As the sun crept up steadily, its rays fell on the snow-clad Kanchenjunga, which shone like molten gold.

After breakfast, we started our second day's trek. We paid the entry fee for permits at the office of Singalila Wildlife Sanctuary and continued trekking on the stone-paved paths. The 1964-built Land Rover is the only vehicle that can negotiate this route. From the village of Joebari, we took a right turn and started descending down a zig-zag pathway. After walking downhill for more than an hour, we reached Gauribas, a military base. Next was the toughest part — trekking 1,500ft uphill to Kalapokhri via Kayakatta.

At Kayakatta, some members of

our group were panting. We decided to take a break and treat ourselves to gundruk soup, a soup of fermented vegetables. The sun had just set when we reached the lake of Kalapokhri (3,010m). We settled down at Chawang Lodge. There was a sudden drop in temperature. Despite having enough warm clothes, we felt relieved only after having some Sikkim rum.

Early next morning, we went for a stroll near the Kalapokhri Lake. It is believed that the water of this lake does not freeze because of certain medicinal qualities in it. However, these days the water does get frozen during December and January.

We watched a fascinating sunrise and began our uphill journey of 6km to Sandakphu. After crossing a huge ice patch on our path near Bikeybhanjan, we reached Sandakphu in the afternoon. A steep left turn brings you to a signboard, which says "Singalila



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WITH THE SLEEPING BUDDHA DRENCHED IN THE RAYS OF THE RISING SUN AND CLOUDS HOVERING IN FRONT, THE PLACE WAS A PARADISE

National Park. Leave nothing but footprints and take nothing but memories." We settled down in front of fireplace at Sherpa Challet Lodge.

Next morning, we were treated to a spectacular view. The snow-laden peaks created the shape of a man sleeping on his back, popularly known as Sleeping Buddha. The peaks of Sleeping Buddha are Janno, Kaktang, Ratong, Kabru, Kanchenjunga, Simvo, Japuno and Pandim. The sun popped out of an enormous mass of clouds. With the Sleeping Buddha drenched in sun rays and clouds hovering in front, the place seemed to be a paradise. We could see the Everest Range on our extreme left with its peaks of Everest, Lhotse and Makalu.

Normally, people walk downhill from Sandakphu to Sirikhola via Gurdung for a night's stay. Others move to Rimbick and end the trek that day itself. We took it easy and stayed at Gurdung. In the last day of our trek, we reached Rimbick (2,286m) in two and a half hours from Sirikhola. Our hosts at Hotel Sherpa had made a bonfire in the lawn and we joined in. While listening to a local song, Bir Gorkhali, accompanied by the music of a guitar, we mused over our trek to the land of the Sleeping Buddha.

1 The sunrise at Kalapokhri

2 The Siri river at Sirikhola

3 Downhill trek from Joubari

4 A rhododendron flower in full bloom

5 An orchid at Rimbick



■ Khadakwasala Dam near Pune

late, I decided to steal a glance of two more places. We went to Pune University and I also saw Osho Ashram on my way back at Koregaon Park. However, it is not open to tourists any more.

The next day, I visited a number of tourist spots. Aga Khan Palace which has the *samadhi* of Kasturba Gandhi, Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, National War Memorial, Saras Baug, Fergusson College, Chatushrungi Mata temple and Parvati Hill temple are the places I enjoyed visiting. Although I had to climb 108 stairs to reach Parvati Hill temple, I loved the bird's eye view of the city from the hill. The 8th century rock-cut temple at Pataleshwar Caves, the forests of Bhimshankar and the scenic Bund Garden are other memories that I cherish about Pune.

Take a bite of the delectable dessert from Odisha

CULINARY ATTRACTION:
Chhenapoda
PLACE: Chilika Lake,
Odisha

Chhenapoda might sound like something burnt but it definitely doesn't taste so. The result of magical caramelisation of sugar, few ingredients and a simple recipe, this dessert from Odisha is a complete delight. Milk, *sooji*, sugar and a few dry fruits such as cashew as toppings, *chhenapoda* is sold at roadside eateries and in all major sweet

shops. If you are visiting Odisha, you must taste this delectable sweet dish.

WHERE TO EAT

Chhenapoda is made at all homes in Odisha and you would also get it in all the roadside tea stalls and shops. All major sweet shops and restaurants have *chhenapoda* on their dessert menu. If you are visiting Chilika Lake, one of Odisha's must-visit places, you can taste the *chhenapoda* at

Chilika Dhaba and Sagar Fast Food restaurant which keep a stock of nice and fresh *chhenapoda*. A plate of *chhenapoda* will cost between ₹25 and ₹40. In some major sweet shops, *chhenapoda* is sold by weight at ₹150 per kg.

HOW TO GET THERE

Bhubaneswar is the nearest airport to Chilika Lake and the nearest railway station is at Balugaon. From Balugaon, buses are available to the lake.

WHERE TO STAY

There are umpteen options for tourists to put up at various tariff ranges to suit your pocket.

OTDC (Odisha Tourism Development Corporation) Panthanivas is a good option that has rooms starting from ₹700.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

You must visit Nalabana, an island in the middle of the Chilika Lake, which is a treat to birdwatchers. You should also visit Bird Island, Kalijai Island, Breakfast Island, Beacon Island, Honeymoon Island and the village of Mangalajodi. Another must-visit is Satapada, located close to the Dolphin Point. Here you can get a glimpse of the endangered Irrawady dolphins and even bottle-nosed dolphins.

Chilika is one of the only two lagoons in the world where Irrawady dolphins can be seen.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The best time to visit Chilika is during the winters since this is the time when a number of migratory birds flock to the lagoon.

Compiled by Tasmayee Laha Roy

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