

India – Spring Flowers of Sikkim, Darjeeling & Kalimpong

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 May - 6 June 2016

Report compiled by Alister Adhikari



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Tour participants: Alister Adhikari (leader) with two Naturetrek clients

Day 1/2

Saturday 21st/Sunday 22nd May

In Flight and journey to Bagdogra Airport

Day 3

Monday 23rd May

Arrive Bagdogra Airport and transfer to Darjeeling via Kurseong.

We met the guests at the Airport. Their flight had arrived a bit early but they were still collecting their luggage when I went inside the Airport to meet them. We got into the vehicle and started our journey to Darjeeling. Along the roadside we saw trees like the *Delonix regia*, *Cassia fistula*, *Peltoporum pterocarpum* and *Lagerstroemia indica* in full bloom and *Mangifera indica* fruiting. We started our ascent along winding road with lovely views of the plains below, amidst the tea plantations, to reach Kurseong. Here we made a quick stop at the West Bengal Tourism Restaurant for a cup of Darjeeling tea and Dumplings.

We continued our journey to reach Darjeeling at around 4pm. We checked into the Elgin Hotel and were happy to get bright rooms in the attic with a view.

Day 4

Tuesday 24th May

Darjeeling

It had rained heavily the previous night and was still drizzling a bit in the morning, so we did not have much hope for a fine day.

We started our day by walking down to the Bhotey Busty Monastery along a path going downhill from the town square. On the way down we passed the Deshbandhu Museum where Mahatma Gandhi had stayed when he had visited his friend Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan Das. We reached the Bhotey Busty Monastery which is the oldest monastery in Darjeeling. Passing through local houses, people and school children starting their day, we reached the Tibetan Refugee Centre. The Photo Gallery, carpet weaving and their craft workshops gave us the opportunity to better understand their history, culture and the hardships they faced after the invasion of Tibet by China. The second flush tea process was happening at the Takvar Tea Factory. At the end of it we bought some fresh tea, after a tea-tasting session at the factory.

Post-lunch, we visited the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Lloyds Botanical Garden and walked through the local market to witness the diverse and colourful varieties of goods being sold and it was a good way to end the day.

Day 5

Wednesday 25th May

Darjeeling to Tumling. Train ride.

We started our day with a visit to the St. Andrew's Church nearby, which is the oldest church in Darjeeling. Our train ride was at 10.40 am, so we got to the station a bit early giving us enough time to take pictures of the old steam engines in the shade, being prepared for the ride. After a 7km journey which ended at Ghoom station, and after a visit to the Railway Museum, we headed to Manebhanjang, a small settlement east of Darjeeling. On the way, amidst the temperate forest slope by the side of the road, we spotted a colony of *Calanthe plantaginea* in bloom.

On reaching Manebhanjang, we changed cars to take a 4x4 landrover to get to Tumling, situated on a ridge at 3,000m. We passed through temperate to almost subalpine forest with mixed vegetation of plants such as *Acer*, *Engelhardtia spicata*, *Machilus edulis*, *Magnolia (Michelia) doltsopa*, *Quercus*, *Abies densa* and *spectabilis*, *Betula utilis*, *Rhododendron spp.*, *Viburnum spp.*, *Magnolia campbellii* and slopes covered with *Iris clarkei*.

The Shikhar Lodge at Tumling has a homely atmosphere, serving good simple food and offering clean accommodation.

In the evening, we sat with our checklist next to the fireplace in the dining hall and had dinner with other guests in the Lodge. Hot water bags were provided for the night, though it was not very cold.

Day 6

Thursday 26th May

Day hike from Tumling to Gairibas and Tonglu.

Early, at around 5.30 am, there was a lot of activity outside and we realised that the morning was clear, offering the view of the Kanchandzonga Range.

After breakfast, we headed towards Gairibas to explore the surroundings. We walked past *Smilacina oleracea*, *Pleione bookerana*, *Androsace bookeriana*, *Rhododendron arboreum*, *R. cinnabarinum*, *Rosa sericea* and *Asarum himalaicum* in bloom. We walked through *Rhododendron* forests with big trees that must be hundreds of years old. After a cup of tea in one of the village houses, we walked back to the Lodge for lunch.

Post-lunch, we climbed to the hill top called Tonglu. It is the very place where Sir J.D. Hooker had stayed during his explorations in 1850's before he entered East Nepal. While climbing up the hill we encountered a lot of *Rhododendron barbatum* and *falconeri*. *Magnolia globosa* and *Viburnum erubescens* was in bloom at the top, the ground was full of *Anemone rivularis* in bloom. We also encountered *Polygonatum verticillatum* in bloom. *Schisandra grandiflora* and *Holboellia latifolia*, both woody creepers were common in the area. On our return to the Lodge, we experienced a heavy downpour but we were ready with our rain gear. The downpour did justice to the rain gear we had carried, as it was the only time we needed it on the entire tour.

Another session with the plant checklist in the dining hall near the fireplace is how we ended the day.

Day 7

Friday 27th May

Tumling to Sandakphu.

After another view of the Himalaya in the morning and with some more pictures of them, we headed to Sandakphu situated at 3,636m. We drove for a few kilometres and then thought it best to start the day with some morning walking. Walking through mixed temperate forest comprising of Rhododendrons initially and then *Quercus* and *Lithocarpus* and then Bamboo later, we were able to identify some ferns like the *Asplenium ensiforme*, *Adiantum edgeworthii* and *Dryopsis apiciflora*.

On reaching Gairi Bas, we had to register our details with the army and the forest department. After a cup of tea, we continued our journey towards Kala Pokhari. A flat stretch of road proved an ideal place to walk some more as the area was full of *Pleione bookeriana* in bloom sometimes covering the whole trunk of trees going up to the branches. The *Viburnums* and the *Arisaemas* were more fresh here than in Tumling below. In a small house serving food to the travellers, we prepared ham, eggs, soup and toast for the guests while the driver and I ate what they had to serve. The final approach to Sandakphu being very steep, we decided to walk. The area was full of *Meconopsis paniculata (napaulensis)* for which we were a bit early for the flowers. *Anemone obtusiloba*, in white and blue, covered the top of Sandakphu which was a welcoming sight as we reached there. We still had some time to go out for a short walk after getting some rest.

Before the sun went down, the Himalayan range suddenly opened up and the Kanchandzonga and the Everest Range was visible to us. It was a good way to end the day. Hot water bags were provided of the night.

Day 8

Saturday 28th May

Explore the Sandakphu area and drive to Tumling.

After breakfast, the first half of the day was spent exploring the areas around Sandakphu. We encountered *Primula rotundifolia*, *Fritillaria cirrhosa*, early foliage of *Podophyllum hexandrum* and the giant saxifrage *Megacodon stylophorus*. The ridge was in some areas dominated by *Berberis angulosa* in bloom. We spotted Fire-Tailed Sunbird, both male and female, feeding on the flowers. The Oriental Skylark and the Grey-bellied Cuckoo could also be spotted. Post-lunch, we headed back to Tumling by first walking down the initial slope.

On reaching the awaiting jeep, it started to drizzle so we decide to drive along. The evening in Tumling was spent with the plant checklist and we were surprised to see the list had become impressive with the many different species of plants we had already found including *Arisaema speciosum*, *A. intermedium*, *A. concinnum*, *A. griffithii*, *A. nepenthooides* and *A. tortuosum*.

We were happy to be back in Tumling where it was much warmer and offered a fireplace to sit by in the evening.

Day 9

Sunday 29th May

Tumling to Gangtok.

Today it rained in the morning but receded later. We had to wait for our driver a little bit and after he came, we drove down to Manebhanjang. We took a short walk in between and soon reached our awaiting vehicle. It was a

good feeling to be back driving on smooth road. The driving skill of the Landover driver was much appreciated by the guests. On way to Gangtok, we passed through temperate forest and to our surprise by the side of the road was an eight-foot-tall *Cardiocrinum giganteum* in bloom. The road side was full of *Arisaemas* in bloom along with the yellow-flowering *Cantleya spicata* (Ginger family). Now passing through tea plantation, we had lunch at Lopchu, the tea garden which surrounds the place. It was getting warmer as we drove further down to the river valley. Amidst the teak plantation, we stopped at a view point above the confluence of the river Teesta and Rangeet.

After meeting up with the main highway, we drove along the river Teesta to reach the border town called Rangpo. Here we stopped for a cup of tea while I arranged the permits for the guests and drove on till we reached the Hidden Forest in Gangtok in the evening.

Day 9

Monday 30th May

Gangtok

We got news that the bridge to Lachung had still not been replaced. According to the programme, we set out for a local sightseeing of Gangtok starting with the Plant Conservatory. Here we were given exclusive entry into the greenhouse. The greenhouse had a collection of terrestrial and epiphytic orchids in bloom along with *Cymbidiums* for which Sikkim is famous. We then drove down to the Tibetology Centre that houses artefacts related to the Tibetan culture and religion.

After lunch we visited the Handicraft Centre which promotes and imparts skills to the younger generation of the traditional arts and crafts. After visiting the different workshops and observing the boys and girls work, we then went to the local market and to the town square in the evening.

The plant checklist was discussed in the veranda of the Hidden Forest over a cup of tea and snacks. Mr. Sonam T. Lachungpa, the owner of the Hidden Forest, who recently retired as the Forest Secretary of Sikkim gave a small talk related to the Biodiversity and the forest of Sikkim to our guests.

Day 10

Tuesday 31st May

Excursion to Tsomgo Lake and the Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary.

Today we went on a day excursion to the high altitude Tsomgo Lake situated at 3,800m, en route to the Nathula Pass where only domestic tourists are allowed to go. As the Pass remains closed on Monday and Tuesday, there were not that many tourist vehicles. The day was nice and clear and we first stopped at the Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary. We took an easy walk along the tracks inside the sanctuary for about an hour and a half. *Rhododendron glaucophyllum* was a new addition to the list. *Mecanopsis (Cathcartia) villosa* could be found along with *Arisaema propinquum*. The day was still good when we reached the Tsomgo Lake. We could see from the sign board that Nathula Pass was only 14km from the lake. We took a walk around the lake and were happy to find *Mecanopsis simplicifolia* in bloom alongside *Bergenia purpurascens*. Other additions to the list of Rhododendrons were *R. fulgens*, *R. campylocarpum*, *R. lowndesii* and *R. anthopogon*. Just as we had finished exploring the surroundings of the lake, it started to rain. We took shelter in a small restaurant where we had lunch.

We drove back to Gangtok after a good day's botanising.

Day 11

Wednesday 1st June

Gangtok to Pelling via Rumtek Monastery

The hotel booking in Pelling was secured and we left Gangtok after breakfast for the famous Rumtek Monastery which is the seat of the Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. It is the largest monastery in Sikkim and there is a Golden Stupa which contains the relics of the 16th Karmapa. After visiting the monastery, we drove through the countryside through villages and terraced farm lands being readied for the paddy plantation. While we were driving, we spotted an orchid, *Pholidota imbricata*. *Curcuma aromatica* (Wild Turmeric) could also be found in bloom along the roadside. Being a clear and sunny day, we could enjoy the landscape and the view as we drove along. Ravangla is a small tourist town in South Sikkim.

We had lunch here and as we had time in hand, decided to visit The Buddha Park also known as Tathagata Tsal which features a 130-foot high statue of the Buddha as its centrepiece consecrated on 25th March 2013 by the 14th Dalai Lama.

We reached our hotel in Pelling just in time to be greeted by the spectacular view of the Kanchandzonga range in the evening.

Day 12

Thursday 2nd June

Day visit to Khecheopalri Lake , Yuksom, Norbugang throne & Rabdentse palace ruins.

There are many historical places around West Sikkim and most of these places are at a short distance from Pelling. Therefore, today we decided to visit Yuksom, the first capital of Sikkim. We drove through villages and Cardamom plantations, which is a major cash crop in Sikkim. We stopped to take a pictures of the *Dactylicapnos macrocapnos* (Bleeding Heart) and the *Arundina graminifolia* (Bamboo Orchid) which we found flowering by the side of the road. We first visited the holy Khecheopalri Lake considered as a wish-fulfilling lake. It is said that any leaf that falls on the water is immediately removed by the birds. It is a place of worship for both Hindus as well as the Buddhist and the lake is in a shape of a footprint.

On reaching Yuksom, we first had lunch and then visited the Norbugang throne, visited as a part of the Buddhist religious pilgrimage circuit involving the nearby Dubdi Monastery, the first monastery built in Sikkim. It is here where Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated as the first Denjong Gyalpo or the Chogyal (king) of Sikkim. The huge old *Cupressus* trees were impressive. We could see the very same tree under which the ceremony was conducted and the stone thrones. We drove back to Pelling taking occasional walks in areas that looked interesting. Just outside Pelling lies the well preserved Rabdentse palace ruins which was the second capital of the former kingdom of Sikkim from 1670 to 1814. A

fter visiting Rabdentse and before checking into the hotel, we stopped at a local bakery, set up to support a nearby school for deprived children. Fresh-baked cookies, tea and apple pie provided a much needed tea break for us.

Day 13

Friday 3rd June

Pelling to Kalimpong via Dentam

Today we drove out of Sikkim. A promising day ahead with the view of the Kanchandzonga Range and clear morning, we once again drove through villages and countryside. Along the way, we made a quick stop to see the Alpine Cheese factory in Dentam. As the day was clear with the view of the hills, we made occasional stops to take pictures and to botanise. At the river valley in Jorethang, we stopped to have lunch. We then drove along the river Rangeet to reach the border check post in Melli where we crossed over to West Bengal.

We checked into the Himalayan Hotel and had enough time to rest for a while and freshen up before we went to visit Mr. U. C. Pradhan and see his orchid nursery. A good conversation over tea and snacks ended the day for us.

Day 14

Saturday 4th June

Kalimpong

After breakfast we left Kalimpong for a small settlement called Lava. But before that, we visited the Dr. Graham's Homes School, founded in 1900 by Reverend Dr. John Anderson Graham, a missionary of the Church of Scotland. It was initially started as an Orphanage-cum-School for destitute Anglo-Indian children. We walked across the school compound and talked to some of the children who were there for extra classes. Being a Saturday, the school was closed so we could not visit the school museum. We passed through the art room and then to the school chapel. Some of the school children were cleaning the church and practising songs for the next day's Sunday service. We were welcomed by the school Reverend into the church and did spend some time there admiring the stained glass windows and its architecture.

We drove further to Lava making occasional stops and taking short walks along the wooded areas. The Himalayan Alder which is a common tree that sometimes dominates the forest could be seen as a good host for many epiphytes including loads of white orchids, *Coelogyne cristata*, in bloom. After lunch in Lava, we returned to Kalimpong where we took time to explore the local market selling things such as fermented mustard leaf, fermented soyabean, *Amorphophallus* shoots, wild yeast and different spices used by the local people in their daily cooking. Next stop was at the handmade paper factory which uses the bark of the *Edgeworthia gardneri* shrub to make paper. The complete process of making paper was shown to us and some finished products in the end. To end the day, we visited the Pine View Cactus nursery. It was just the right time to see the many different cacti of different shapes and sizes in bloom. It was very kind of the guests to invite me and my wife for dinner. It was a pleasure for us and we had a lovely evening.

Day 15

Sunday 5th June

Departure. 4hrs drive to Bagdogra Airport.

We left the Himalayan Hotel in the morning to be in time for the guests' onward flight to Delhi. We checked with the Airlines and came to know that the flight was in time. Being a Sunday, there was very less traffic on the highway. We reached the Airport without any hurry and the guests were happy to be there in time. We bid farewell, after a fascinating tour of this area of the Himalaya.

Day 16

Monday 6th June

Arrival back in the UK

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