



# FOOTHILLS OF THE HIMALAYAS

*Wildlife-rich tropical forests, innumerable hill streams, low hills rising up from the rivers – welcome to the gateway of Bhutan and Northeast India*

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Away from the tourist throngs and selfie sticks, the alluvial floodplain of North Bengal clustered around the Himalayan foothills teems with a vast treasure of treasures. Here majestic mountains soaring to the skies give birth to free-spirited, frothing, ice-cold rivers that gush over rock-bedded rivers. Wildlife-filled forests, tea-leaf speckled terraces, wide patches of green grassland, striking blue skies and sweetest possible birdsong converge into a rich tapestry that makes the city-weary soul sigh with satisfaction. Dooars Valley (from the

word 'dwaar', literally, true to its name) is a gorgeous gateway to North Bengal, Sikkim and Bhutan, waiting to be reveal its magic to the intrepid traveller. About 100-odd kilometres from Bagdogra Airport simply zip by in a flash.

## JUNGLE BOOK STORY

Forest bathing or wildlife encounters, each agenda gets ticked off the wish list in the natural habitat of the Dooars. From sightings of a armour-plated rhino, to tiger, leopard, elephant, black bear, sloth, deer, python, golden cats, red pandas, Himalayan flying squirrel and civet cats, a jeep safari experience

Seeing the  
Himalayan  
range from  
Dooars

— BREATHE —

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brings in every kind of reward. A visit to Buxa National Park, the 760 sq km wildlife zone in the eastern Dooars, bordering the Buxa hills of Bhutan, comes highly recommended, for its varying landscape. Savannah-like woodlands and tropical evergreen forests meet Himalayan deciduous trees at elevations as high as 5,000 ft, with Jayanti and Raidak rivers slicing through the verdant scene. A British post office and a small museum attached to the Buxa Fort, (a prison for freedom fighters during 1930s) makes an interesting historical diversion.

Western Dooars houses the 98 sq km Gorurana National Park, which, though smaller and denser, affords better chances of sightings. Day passes can be obtained at the nearby town of Lataguri. In this area, another alternative is Neora Valley National Park, located in the Kaimpong Hills, stretching from borders of Gorurana to the 10,340 ft high Rachela pass, leading to Silikim and Bhutan. The Neora river and its tributary trickling through the 88 sq km national park can be explored with day passes issued at the hill station of Lava.

From bamboo and sal thickets to rhododendron, oak woods and orange orchards, tree lovers can reach heights of indulgence, trudging the solitude-filled trails. Eyes glued hypnotically to Raidhak, Murti, Torsha, Jaldhaka and other streams crashing down to the plains, as one traces the contours of smooth rocks with fingers crinkly from



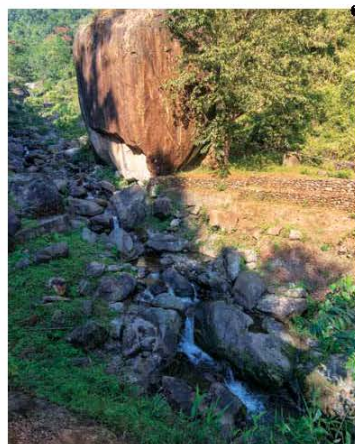
### HIGHLIGHTS



**HOW TO REACH**  
The nearest airport is Bagdogra Airport, located west of Siliguri



**TRAVEL TIP**  
Winters here are cold and foggy so keep your warm coats ready



the icy, transparent waters. Warm sunbeams dance and timelessness has a new definition.

### TEA-TIME TALES

In this prime tea country, one we reach the time-warped destination of Malbazar, one can almost smell the whiff of old-world charm from a distance. Colonial hints are everywhere, from the clock tower to tin-roofed factories, bungalow-like-draped bungalows and heritage buildings with enchanting views of gardens, hills and river beds. Cupping hot tea on sprawling lawns, (ideally with scones), one can try to imagine the bygone era when horse carriages would have transported *sahibs* to their Victorian quarters, right here to the upper, cool climes of North Bengal.

No hint of that British snobbery seems visible anymore, but there is still a forlorn leftover of magic in the crisp air. Evident in the rosy morning sunrises that shyly reveal the snow-capped peaks of Bhutan in the distance. Or the warm glow of the bonfire embers under a glittering star-speckled dark sky at night. The kind that only sincere seekers can find.

### FOLKLORE AND FABLES

Shifting from natural treasures to heritage of a different kind, culture aficionados can seek enrichment by participating in the colourful rituals and unique lifestyles of Dooars' various ethnic communities, like Toto, Rava, Mech, Turi and Drukpa. Attending a folk drama performance, especially *chor chunni* and *dhamsan* are experiences that have been gaining traction in the region lately.

Savouring an authentic meal of *momos*, dry fish pickle, and bamboo shoots, while attempting to decipher the meaning behind the Rajbanshi's popular devotional and love songs is merely a small introduction to the deeply-rooted past of the region's local tribes. Those keen on exploring further can visit during the East Himalayas Tourism Festival. An intriguing excursion can be planned to Rajabhatthiwa, named after a forest feast of rice between the King of Chooch Behar and the monarch of Bhutan) or to Totopara Fort the unique Toto tribe, considered Mongoloid, which speaks a Tibet-Burman script-less language. **O**

1 Rhododendron  
2 Jayanti and Raidak  
3 Natural stream in  
Dooars