



TRAVELLERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EXPERIENCES

▲ Clockwise from top: Sela Pass, at 13,700 feet, offers a breathtaking view; yaks stand as silent sentinels in the vast, unspoiled landscapes; from misty peaks to serene valleys, Arunachal Pradesh offers a journey into India's wilderness.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK (2); BAMBA KUMAR JHA/GETTYIMAGES

Sacred Peaks, Ancient Traditions

From mist-laden hills and riverside picnics to paddy fields and tranquil monasteries, **Punita Malhotra** discovers a place for hearts to connect and memories to bloom in Arunachal Pradesh

MY COUSIN FLOODS ME with photos of the most epic sunrise from Dong Valley and I'm hooked instantly. Dong Valley isn't just the first place the sun touches India; it's where the mighty Himalayas begin their majestic rise. It feels like the Valley is calling to me, and just like that, our journey to Arunachal Pradesh rolls into motion.

Touchdown Tawang

We stand at Sela Pass, 13,700 feet above sea level, watching fluttering prayer flags send whispers to the heavens. Driving from Bomdila, winding through jagged peaks and mist-shrouded valleys, has brought us to this tranquil threshold where West Kameng meets Tawang Valley. It's a short walk to Sela Lake, one of over 100 sacred glacial lakes in the area. I remove my glasses to fully absorb the ethereal brilliance of the glassy surface under the cobalt blue sky. An idyllic opening sequence, though not orchestrated for us. The wild yaks who graze here have the first dibs on this Eden.

"What does Tawang mean?" I quiz my guide. He readily explains that apparently, a Tibetan monk named Mera Lama came here in the 17th century, searching for a horse, fell in love with the land and ended up building a monastery, which he named Tawang (literally, 'chosen by horse'). The legend lingers in the air as we continue deeper into Monpa territory.

It is almost obligatory to visit Tawang Monastery, where Mera Lama's vision took root. India's largest and one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries outside Tibet perches loftily above the valley in a majestic display of red-and-gold grandeur. The soft hum of monks' chants guides us through the monastery's open courtyards, leading us to the *dukhang* (assembly hall). Inside, we gaze curiously at a silver casket veiled in silk. It holds the *thangkas* (painted scrolls), which are said to have been created with blood drawn from the nose of the 5th Dalai Lama. Our guide tells us that the Monpas are also renowned for their ancient craft of creating fine-textured handmade paper, called *Mon Shugu*, made from the bark of a local tree. This paper, integral to Buddhist rituals, serves as the medium on which sacred scrolls are painted. As we stand in the stillness, cloaked in mysticism and incense, I understand why Tawang is often described as "the last Buddhist kingdom in India."

The next day, we sidestep spirituality to embrace nature's living canvas at Nuranang Waterfall, a thunderous



▲ From left: Tawang Monastery is India's largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery outside Tibet; at Damu's Heritage Dine, the flavours of Tawang come alive in every slow-cooked dish.

cascade tumbling over 100 metres with a roar reverberating through the valley like a mighty drumbeat. Nearby, Sungster Tso, or Madhuri Lake as it's fondly called, springs into sight with the tale of an ancient earthquake that birthed it. How could anything be less than remarkable in a place as extraordinary as this? A surprise awaits at Damu's Heritage Dine ([instagram.com/damusheritagedine](https://www.instagram.com/damusheritagedine)), a humble yet exceptional eatery in Chug Valley. Supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) India, it is the labour of love of eight Monpa women determined to preserve their culinary heritage. Seated on colourful floor cushions, we savour slow-cooked delicacies: cold buckwheat noodles, millet tacos, and *churra gombu*—a maise tart served sizzling on hot coals. A plate of red rice paired with *shya marku* and yak meat braised with ginger and local butter completes the feast, leaving us with satiated tastebuds and a newfound respect for the indomitable spirit of Tawang's people.

Whisper of a River

"If you liked Chug Valley, you'll love Sangti," our guide promises to distract us from the bumps of the dirt track. Brokpa shepherds rally fluffy armies, women gossip, and wisps of smoke curling from rooftops of double-storied wooden huts. The gentle rhythm is familiar now.

From left: Sangti Valley's turquoise river and scenic picnic spot provide a peaceful retreat into nature's rhythm; Nuranang Waterfall roars through the valley, falling over 100 metres.



We find the perfect spot by the turquoise river, a bed of smooth stones softened by flowing water. The picnic basket is a Pandora's box of local treats. Pillowry rice cakes sit alongside jars of tangy pickles, their sharpness a refreshing contrast. There are fresh, plump fruits bursting with flavour, including the valley's famous kiwis; their sweet-tart taste like a burst of sunshine.

We tune into the rustle of leaves, the occasional bird call, and the river's deep hum. The air is light, cooling us in the warmth of the afternoon, and the breeze seems like nature's lullaby, brushing gently against our skin. When did we last check the time? Does it even matter? I close my eyes, letting the moment wash over me. When I open them again, everything feels muted. Sangti continues its endless, unhurried flow through the stones, steady and constant. In its gentle cadence, the river has shared its peace with me.

Rice and resilience

Dramatic changes await as we continue towards Ziro Valley via Itanagar. En route, we



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK (2); COURTESY OF DAMU'S HERITAGE DINE; SHUTTERSTOCK (2)



▲ From left: Dong Valley is the first place in India to witness the sunrise, marking the beginning of the Himalayas; in Hong Village, Apatani women with distinctive tattoos and nose plugs tell the story of identity and community.

stop in Chullyu Village, where the Nishi men weave baskets for women and women weave jackets for the men. It's a timeless ritual of romance woven with shared purpose and mutual respect.

Finally, we arrive in Ziro Valley, where jade rice terraces stretch into the distance like a colossal painting. Rolling hills, thick bamboo grooves, swaying pine trees, and the earthy scent of damp soil: it's a sanctuary untouched by time. Yet, there's no grand spectacle in Ziro. It's a place that invites you to pause and appreciate life's simple pleasures: freshly harvested rice swaying in the breeze or the quiet joy of conversing together under the shade of a tree.

Seeing our eagerness to know more about the native Apatani tribe, our guide fills us in. The Apatani, whose roots in the valley stretch over 500 years, have cultivated this land with wisdom passed down through generations. Here, the land and its people are bound in a harmonious dance. Wet rice cultivation flourishes in these fields, where rice and fish grow together, weaving a sustainable balance with the environment. The paddy grown here has the highest density of rice, revered by neighbouring rice-eating countries who come seeking good fortune and longevity.

In Hong Village, one of the largest in the region, we meet Apatani women with distinctive facial tattoos and large nose plugs. Beauty spots, identity marks or community symbols, I wonder. We learn that when Apatani people are in love, they share smoked pork, a delicacy whose value increases with age. The longer it's smoked, the better it is considered, with some pork being smoked for up to 10 years. Forget cheese and wine, this love story is truly aged to perfection.

Dawn at Dong

It's the last leg of the passage. When we set out of our homestay in the stillness of Dong Valley, it is pitch dark. As we trek up the hill, the chill of the air bites at our skin. By the time we reach the sunrise viewpoint, the world is still

sleeping, save for the glittering blanket of stars above. The valley remains a mystery, hidden beneath a veil of mist, like a faint suggestion in the dim light.

The shadows stretch long across the valley as the mist starts to lift. We watch as the sky is painted with a gigantic brushstroke. There's no dramatic flair, no grand fanfare, just the graceful unfolding of a new day, a special gift just meant for us. It's our little secret, intimate and sacred in its simplicity. And when the valley opens before us, untouched and vast, the soft outlines of the hills rising in the distance, I realise it's not just the sunrise that makes this moment unique. It's how the world slows down, gently inviting us to be present, to simply exist and breathe with the land. The dawn at Dong may be the end of our Arunachal chapter, but it is also the beginning. Of the beauty of being. 🌍

GETTING THERE

Indigo ([indigo.in](https://www.indigo.in)) and **Air India** ([airindia.in](https://www.airindia.in)) have regular flight connections from major cities to Itanagar, or Guwahati. Taxis need to be booked in advance to reach key destinations like Ziro, Tawang, and Bomdila.

WHERE TO STAY

Tawang Vivanta Arunachal Pradesh is a luxury hotel set away from town. *Doubles from ₹7,500 per night; [vivantahotels.com](https://www.vivantahotels.com)*

Timilo Boutique is an elegant property close

to town. *Doubles from ₹10,000 per night; [timiloboutique.com](https://www.timiloboutique.com)*

Ziro Ziro Palace Inn offers a fuss-free stay in Biirli Valley. *Doubles from ₹3,500 per night; [ziropalaceinn.com](https://www.ziropalaceinn.com)*

Ziro Valley Resort is a budget-friendly retreat. *Doubles from ₹3,800 per night; [zirovalleyresort.com](https://www.zirovalleyresort.com)*

Namsai Hotel Kinnara offers comfortable rooms in Namsai, 240 km from Dong. *Doubles from ₹5,500 per night; [hotelkinnara.com](https://www.hotelkinnara.com)*