

Darjeeling - Clouds Clearing

The Himalaya first penetrated my consciousness in the months preceding my long awaited departure from New Zealand in January 1988. Having diligently completed our university degrees and successfully put three years of career building efforts under our belts, Julie (my wife at that time) and I were finally ready to undertake what many young New Zealanders do, our 'O.E.' (Overseas Experience). We hoped to pursue adventure and to learn more about life outside the isolated comforts of our native New Zealand. Expecting to be away for two years, we ended up being away five, but even two years seemed a huge adventure for us at the time, hence our feverish planning as the departure date loomed.

During many discussions with knowledgeable old hands like my grandfather, names like Darjeeling and Kanchenjunga kept cropping up. Huge mountains, mystical cultures, good trekking; it sounded interesting, so we loosely resolved to go there.

We gave little further thought to that far away alpine region until finding ourselves sweltering in Calcutta. It was May, 1988, the pre-monsoon 'crazy season', with temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius coupled with 95% humidity and above. These conditions aren't easy to contend with at the best of times and, when the mayhem of Calcutta is the back drop, it was positively daunting. But the City of Joy served as the complete contrast to what we were about to experience further north in Darjeeling. Our visit to Calcutta wasn't really very joyous at all, but it did highlight the special qualities of my first Himalayan experience.



A street merchant in Calcutta

Given the oppressive climate, over-crowded conditions and our limited budget in Calcutta, we were unable to flush out some unwelcome, microscopic hitch hikers that had taken up residence in our stomachs. So, just as the soldiers of the Raj used to retreat to the hills during the crazy season, so did we.

Unfortunately, our particular retreat was probably not as efficient. We had two berths in a second class, three tier sleeper on the Darjeeling Mail which, to our surprise, did depart on schedule from Sealdah Station. However, three factors conspired to aggravate our flagging condition.

First, it was Friday the 13th.

Second was a young Indian boy, incapacitated by a terrible cough. As the hours dragged by in the close proximity of our sleeper, he covered us with an incessant, full frontal, point blank barrage of virus ridden breath.

The third factor was a derailment further up the line, which resulted in a stop dead, no explanations delay of 10 hours, only a third of the way into our fateful journey. Needless to say, 22 hours after leaving the seething, excrement dotted chaos of Sealdah Station, we were ecstatic to finally reach New Jalpaiguri Station near Siliguri.

The upside consequently, was that we were well prepared to appreciate to the fullest, any positive changes to our immediate environment, bodily condition or fortunes. And as we switch-backed our way up the 85 km ribbon-like road between Siliguri (approximately 200 metres above sea level) and Darjeeling (2,123 metres) things did improve steadily. The views became increasingly panoramic and the temperature fell, helping us to savour them in greater comfort. We were getting our first taste of the heightened well being obtained when at higher altitudes in cooler, clearer, cleaner air. It is a pleasure I still crave whenever I'm conscious of the stresses of life in the big city.



A view of Kanchenjunga and Darjeeling

To be honest however, our final approach to Darjeeling wasn't totally idyllic. When obtaining our visitor permits for Darjeeling in Calcutta, we were made aware of some unrest in the area between West Bengali Police and local terrorists from an organization known as the Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNFL). At times the situation was reputedly quite volatile, but tourists were not a target. So it really wasn't that surprising when our taxi driver pulled over at Ghoom, about 9 kms below Darjeeling, to inform us that he wasn't going any further due to a gun fight in progress a little further up the road.

The principal dispute revolved around a communist approach, being enforced by the West Bengali government and the conflicting capitalist aspirations of the GNFL. Darjeeling had prospered as a result of its tea plantations and tourism since the British East India Company pushed their road up in the 1830s. Consequently, Darjeeling was wealthier than much of the rest of West Bengal. In true communist fashion, the local government was exacting higher taxes on the Darjeeling area, supposedly for redistribution to less well-off areas within the state. The GNFL didn't like it and were opposing it vigorously.

From a capitalist's point of view I could understand why the GNFL opposed the socialist stance taken by the bureaucrats sweltering far to the south in the heat of the Ganges River delta. Darjeeling's population of 50,000 people was but a fraction of West Bengal's 49 million. The GNFL also comprised largely of people whose origins lay in Nepal, thereby sharing little in common with the Indians of the northern plains. "Why should Darjeeling be penalised for its modest little alpine success story?" they argued. There was room for debate, but I could not condone the GNFL's means of opposition.

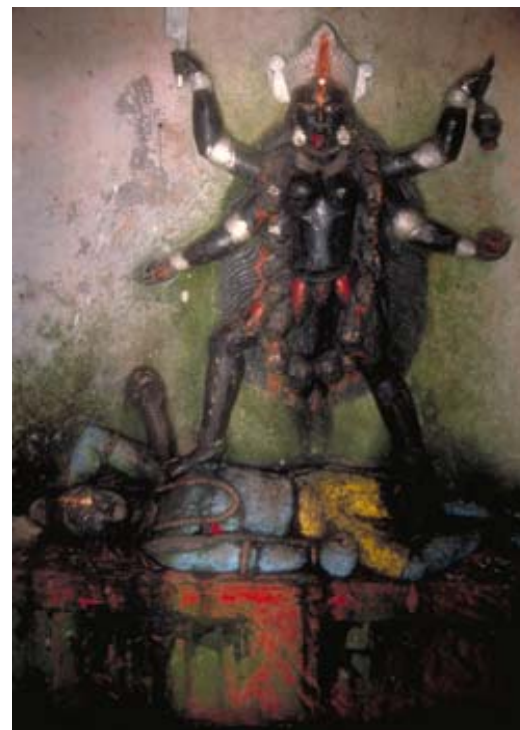
We were to hear several grisly stories, told in hushed tones during our stay in Darjeeling, of how the GNFL forcibly coerced public support in the southern part of town. Quite simply, if you didn't toe the line, if you didn't hang out your little green flag (GNFL colours), then your shop was razed to the ground in the middle of the night or worse. The irony, of course, was that the ideals of free enterprise were being bastardized in the name of their defence.

So there we were, scratching our heads on the verge of the road, when an army truck rolled up. We clambered into the back, tucked our heads down just in case some of those terrorists further up the road felt inclined to take pot-shots at our passing military escort, and so completed the remaining 9 kms into Darjeeling. The ride put a new spin on my previous hitch-hiking experiences; the adrenaline coursing through my veins saw to that.

It was immediately apparent that all was not as it should be in Darjeeling. The narrow, meandering, cobbled lanes were all but empty and several hotel construction sites had obviously been abandoned in various stages of non-completion. Little green flags dotted the scene. The southern end of Darjeeling, where we now stood, was populated (at least outwardly) mainly by GNFL sympathisers. The West Bengali government supporters held the northern end, hanging out little, red, hammer and sickle flags to signifying their loyalties.



Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity
all coexist in Darjeeling



There was a feeling of dislocation. It saddened me because, equally apparent, was an irrepressible charm, which any kind of conflict seemed totally at odds with.

First impressions can be surprisingly insightful and they proved to be for us in Darjeeling. But I was happy to discover that Darjeeling's special charm held much greater sway than the immediate political unrest. In a way, this was borne out later in the same year of our visit, when a compromise was reached between the factions, giving the Gurkha Hill Council greater control and autonomy over its affairs.

In such a charming setting no conflict could remain for long. Being so close to the mountains, I began to understand what made the Himalayan experience so entrancing, sensing for the first time a unique feeling. Whether this offers physical, intellectual or spiritual benefits depends on who the individual is and what their needs are. I benefit on all three fronts. Physically, I feel cleaner, stronger and more full of life. Intellectually, I find it easier to step back, to view the bigger picture and to bring things back into perspective. And, although not a religious person, I enjoy a state of spiritual revitalization, a resurgence of all the joys of being alive, when I'm amongst mountains and their inhabitants.

But why is this feeling so apparent? What is its basis? I began to find my answers as we explored Darjeeling over the next five days.

Darjeeling is a name that evolved, during the period of British domination, from the ancient name Dorje Ling, which means 'place of thunderbolts'. As we explored the lanes that twisted and turned, climbed and descended, hugging the narrow ridge they were built upon, Darjeeling's location was magnificent in its elevated isolation. I could imagine the thunderbolts that must cross the sky here during each rainy season.



But it wasn't only the isolation that made Darjeeling so spectacular. The ridge it ran along was steep on three sides. To function in Darjeeling required a sturdy pair of legs and an equally sturdy set of lungs, as the elevation between the highest dwelling and the lowest must be several hundred metres. Falling away below the houses were thousands of hectares of brilliant green tea plantations. This orderly sea of olive and emerald tea bushes served to accentuate the town. Even the tea bushes didn't reach the valley floors. The largest drop-off at the northern end of Darjeeling boasted a gondola of sorts which, when it was operating that is, descended 2,050 metres to Singla Bazaar beside the Little Ranjit River.

Most glorious of all though, were the gigantic snow clad mountain vistas that must be seen to be believed. Darjeeling is surrounded by mountain country - to the east is Bhutan, to the north is Sikkim, and to the west is Nepal - and the third highest mountain in the world - Kanchenjunga, which lies on the border between Nepal and Sikkim.

Kanchenjunga is actually the name for five gigantic peaks. The name is Sanskrit, meaning 'the five holy treasures (or strong boxes) of the great snows'. The 8,598 metre jewel in this crown towered over all before her and the whole range totally dominated the north western outlook. On a clear day it seemed you could almost reach out and touch her snowy flanks, so close and so large did she loom.

Having said this, Kanchenjunga played hide and seek with us for several days before she finally revealed her full glory. In retrospect, this served to heighten my new appreciation of alpine scenery. Each morning I'd awaken at 5 am in anticipation of sunrise. Each morning the clouds revealed seductive glimpses of something gigantic and beautiful. Sometimes the sun played upon sections of ice and snow, spotlighting them in brilliant white. Just as it seemed the clouds would lift to reveal their secret, new ones rose to take their place. Other mornings, subtle shades of warm sunlight washed the spectacle in hues of red and orange and yellow. But the beauty was lost on me as I yearned to see the entire Kanchenjunga with my own eyes.

When this finally happened, I was staggered by the grandeur of the sight before me and realised why the Himalaya was so named. 'Himalaya' stems from the Tibetan words Ima and Laya, meaning 'land of snows'.

Kanchenjunga on a clear morning



Outstanding qualities were the sheer size and extent of the mountains and the clarity and sharpness of the colours.

Before me lay an endless cobalt sky, brilliant white peaks stretching from east to west and emerald green foothills, all bathed in a golden, early morning light. Adding to the occasion was the knowledge that I was gazing upon the third highest point on earth.

This was when I first knew in my heart that I must walk amongst the peaks of the Himalaya. Since that Saturday morning in May, 1988, I've done so ten times. Each time my wish to return intensifies.

Scenery of such magnitude and grandeur transcended the visual world, moving on into the spiritual. This is partly why I think being on the Roof of the world is so special. But during our stay in Darjeeling I also began to discover another aspect, the character and cultures of the people who live in the Himalaya.

With its cooler climate and slower pace, Darjeeling was ideal for us to overcome our gastric afflictions and catch our breath. It wasn't long before I was feeling vastly better and well on my way to recovery. I'm sure the uplifting effect of Darjeeling had a lot more effect than the antibiotics I'd picked up in Calcutta.

One of my fondest memories of Darjeeling is our daily pilgrimage to the Himalayan Restaurant. I say "pilgrimage" because the freshly cooked Tibetan bread, smothered in a generous dollop of mixed fruit jam, then washed down with a glass of sweet lassi (liquid curd) was certainly a heavenly experience. We always sought a comfortable window seat looking out to a fabulous, expansive, alpine view and, without fail, the deep, soothing tones of a kindly old Tibetan man tending the cash register, as he chanted "om mani padme hum" (hail to the jewel in the heart of the lotus) endlessly, over and over, created a wonderfully tranquil atmosphere.

The old Tibetan man really intrigued me. I wasn't sure of his age, but he must have been at least in his sixties. Whatever his age, his weather beaten face spoke of greater insights than a single lifespan. Chanting his strange mantras, almost without missing a beat, he methodically ran his fingers along his rosary of 108 beads. While doing this, he simultaneously received payments and gave change to his customers, and even snuck in the occasional smile of acknowledgement. In a sense, he seemed to be in a world all his own, yet it was easy to feel his warmth and friendliness. I liked him.

We also met several other Tibetans in Darjeeling. A 61 year old called Norbu befriended us when we tried in vain, due to the political unrest at that time, to get trekking permits for the area beneath Kanchenjunga. As a consolation for not being able to go trekking, we opted for a guided tour with Norbu on pony back around the points of interest near Darjeeling.



As my backside numbed from the pummelling it received on my rock hard saddle, we visited Tiger Hill, which at 2,590 metres, is the highest point in the area. If the clouds had cleared we would no doubt have enjoyed a magnificent view of Kanchenjunga. But the visit to the Tibetan Monastery at nearby Ghoom made all my buttock blisters worthwhile anyway. Here I had my first encounter with Tibetan tea. More like soup than tea, it had rancid yak butter in it, which made for a uniquely savoury taste sensation. Some say it grows on you, but I have yet to make that gastronomic leap!

On another day, we came upon the Tibetan Self Help Centre. Established in 1959 to help rehabilitate Tibetan refugees fleeing the brutal occupation of their homeland by the Chinese since 1949, the centre served to highlight both the desperate plight of Tibetans as they continue to weather the storm of Chinese occupation, but equally, their indomitable spirit and good humour.

The centre was a happy, thriving, optimistic place. People were engaged in spinning and dyeing wool, carpet weaving, wood carving and thanka painting which, collectively, earned them a viable income. While at the centre we were literally mobbed by a swarm of Tibetan orphans, who surely epitomized the notion of cuteness. Although we normally didn't condone the encouragement of unnecessary begging by indiscriminately dishing out pens, sweets and cash to the local children, in this case we couldn't resist their enthusiastic charms.

Since our first encounter in Darjeeling, I've met many more Tibetans and other people, like the Sherpas of the Solu Khumbu in Nepal, of Tibetan origin. Each new encounter has been consistent with the first. Their land is a magic place. They are people of their land. So, their's is a magic character. The old man tending the cash register at the Himalayan Restaurant no longer intrigues me in the same way that he first did. I now understand him a little better, where he's coming from, so to speak. But he was my first insight into a special people dimension that completes the magical formula constituting the 'Himalayan experience'.

Of course, Darjeeling is not part of Tibet, although the Tibetan Buddhist influence seems much stronger than the 14% of the population in Darjeeling who follow it. The most prominent group is actually Indian and Nepali Hindus. In fact, one of Nepal's most famous sons, Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, lived in Darjeeling for many years. A road is named after him in Darjeeling. There is even a small group of Christians, about 3% of the population. All three faiths have their own houses of worship, making for a vibrant, cultural cocktail.

As the people of Darjeeling revealed their Himalayan character and the clouds finally cleared to reveal Kanchenjunga, so clouds of confusion began clearing from my mind. I began to find a focus for my rather directionless but primary passions - creativity, personal growth, physical fitness, adventure, personal achievement. I think focus is very important for people, like myself, who have many options open to them. Choice is a luxury to those who don't have it, but choice can be a torment to those who do. To know what is really important to you and to know how to access it, these can be paths to fulfilment.

Our short stay in Darjeeling had been significant. I had learnt more than I realised at the time. The immediate impact of our new insights was a change of travel plans. Initially we had not intended to visit Nepal. But having glimpsed the Himalayan experience, we could hardly stop at just a taste. With regret we left the Place of Thunderbolts, but we took with us renewed anticipation of what we might discover in neighbouring Nepal.

We were not to be disappointed.

