

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

culture &
spirituality

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Parashuram Kund Mela A PILGRIM'S HAVEN

Situated 48km approx north of the sleepy little town of Tezu, this holy shrine in the lower reaches of the Lohit River is said to wash away one's sins after a holy dip in the sacred kund.



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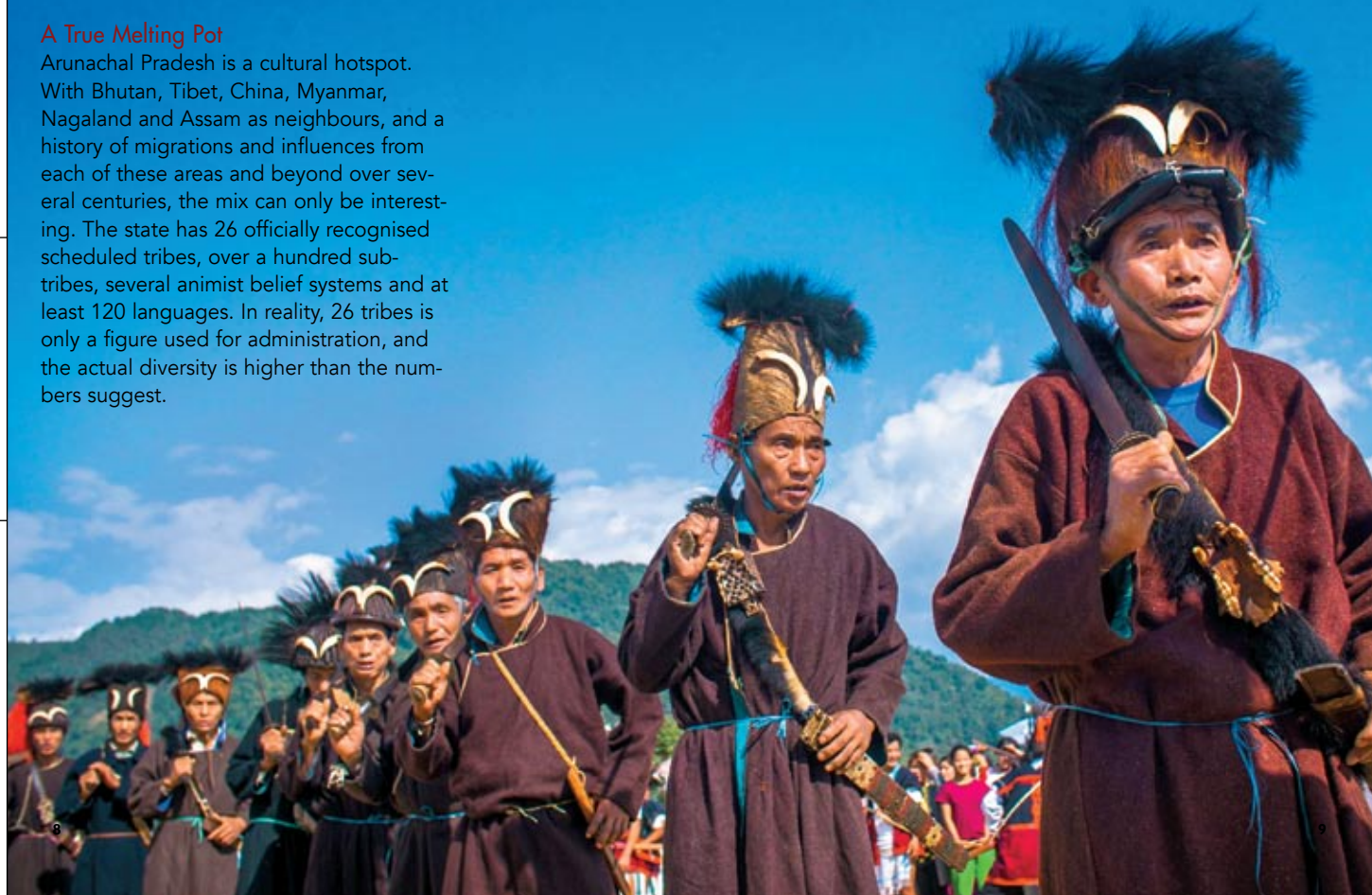
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Introduction

A True Melting Pot

Arunachal Pradesh is a cultural hotspot. With Bhutan, Tibet, China, Myanmar, Nagaland and Assam as neighbours, and a history of migrations and influences from each of these areas and beyond over several centuries, the mix can only be interesting. The state has 26 officially recognised scheduled tribes, over a hundred sub-tribes, several animist belief systems and at least 120 languages. In reality, 26 tribes is only a figure used for administration, and the actual diversity is higher than the numbers suggest.





Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN

This is probably the only place where Tibetan-style Tantric Buddhism and old-school Thai-Burmese style Theravada Buddhism can both be found thriving in the same state, along with a diverse set of shamanic animists.

Cultural zones

Generally speaking, the Mahayana Buddhist tribes practice Tibetan-style Tantric Buddhism, which

makes use of the Tibetan script and are mostly concentrated around the high mountain areas bordering Tibet, such as Tawang, West Kameng, Mechuka, Tuting and Anjaw. Their religion is a mix of Mahayana Buddhism and the older polytheistic Bon religion, and they have a lot in common with Tibetan tribes across the border.

The Theravada Buddhists on the other hand, who are

The people of Arunachal Pradesh

more Thai-Burmese influenced, tend to practice a more old-school Buddhism, mainly in the eastern districts of Namsai and Changlang. The plethora of animist tribes, however, can be found in almost every part of the huge state. They follow shamanic practices and believe in spirits and nature worship. Each of the various tribes have now

developed distinct indigenous cultures and practices here. The communities near the Myanmar border in Eastern Arunachal, such as the Noctes, Wanchos, Tutsas and Tangsas, have a somewhat different culture that's considerably close to what's found in parts of western Myanmar and the communities of Nagaland and Manipur. ■

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

From stories of the Dalai Lama in the West, the Animism in the Central and Theravada Buddhism in the East, a journey through Arunachal is a truly spiritual and enriching experience.



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ANIMISM

Apart from the Buddhist communities of Arunachal Pradesh, most tribes here are traditionally animists, and do not belong to conventional organised religions. Animists typically have no concept of temples, holy books, idol worship or worship of humanoid images or forms. Animism can include many nature-centric rituals dedicated to natural cycles and forest spirits.

Ancestors are also spiritually significant in nearly every tribe. The Tani tribes (Adis, Galos, Nyishis, Apatanis, Tagins) believe that they have descended from Abo Tani, the father of all mankind. Many of their myths, legends, deities and rituals relate to the colourful stories of their revered ancestor and his fascinating

exploits. These tribes all speak different languages, but have more similarities than differences overall.

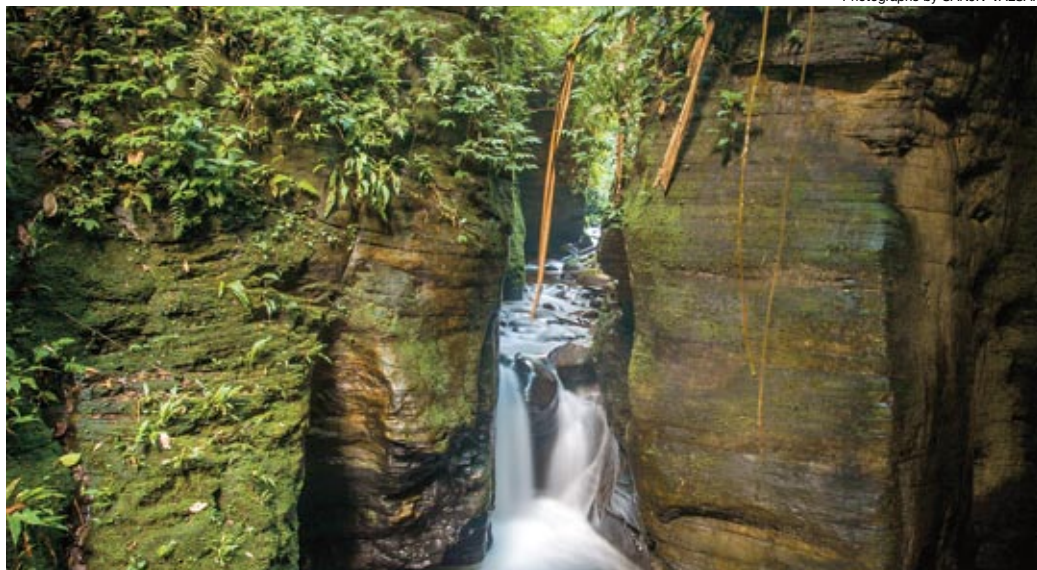
Sacred Yapom forests

Animists believe in an assortment of spirits related to observable phenomena such as wind, water, trees and wildlife, as well as multiple formless deities governing the cycles of nature, agricultural productivity, success in hunting and fishing. These spirits, known by different words in different languages, Yapom in Galo, Epoms in Adi, Khinus in Idu Mishmi, can either be neutral, benevolent or malevolent, depending on the situation. They are generally believed to dwell in dense forests, especially old trees such as *hollocks*, and rivers, waterfalls and lakes. When

humans interact with nature, as is the case with tribal communities everywhere, the belief is that people can come into contact with these forces.

The general policy with these spirits is respect and non-interference. Some old trees and forests believed to be their dwelling places are either avoided or entered only for a respectful ritual to acknowledge their territory and ask for their help and blessings. Entering these habitats casually, or cutting their old trees, was also considered to be risky, and there are plenty of stories going around about people who lost their way in the forest or never returned after they broke this code.

These 'Yapom places', avoided by humans, have thus effectively become protected areas, with beautiful forests. They are an excellent way to experience both culture and wilderness



Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN

simultaneously. Basar in Lepa Rada district has opened up a few such places to cultural and adventure travellers, including treks such as Nguda Pokcho peak and Hido Hidi waterfalls near Piri village, and the Joli forest, near Basar town.

The Hido Hidi falls trek in Lepa Rada district is a beau-

The sacred Hido Hidi falls

tiful three- or four-day hike beginning at Piri village, involving day-long rigorous wading across two rivers, camping in the forest and staying in a remote, yet content, tribal village with only four houses. It is customary for even trekkers to

respect the local tradition and sacrifice a chicken at a specially prepared totem in the forest while approaching the waterfalls. You also need to introduce yourself and the names of your forefathers, and ask the deities of the waterfall for their

blessings and safe passage through their forest.

For treks in the Lepa Rada Yapom forests contact Henka Basar (08730805486). A good time to go is either during the Basar Confluence, a cultural showcase tourism festival in November, or during Mopin, an enjoyable Galo tribal festival held in the first week of April, if a bit of rain doesn't bother you.

Shamans

Animists believe that if the spirits of the forest should decide to harm humans for whatever reason, the result can be disease, death, misfortune or other problems, but in typical tribal style, they also deem that every problem must have a solution. *Yapoms/epoms/ui's* and other supernatural beings can often be reasoned or bargained with, to

An animist forest ritual; an Idu Mishmi igu (facing page)



spare a person, clan or community from suffering. Hence, the shaman, who is an intermediary between the human and supernatural world, is the central figure.

You will hear many accounts by animists in Arunachal about how shamanic rituals cured them of illnesses after modern medicine failed. The shaman isn't

a conventional 'priest' or a holy man. He could be a farmer with a family or even hold a government job, and love smoking or drinking. But unlike regular folks, he has another side, an inborn gift of being able to access the supernatural realm when he goes into trances, chanting spontaneously for hours or even days in an archaic

Idu Mishmi igus perform rituals at Dibang Valley



An Adi tribal sits with his mithun

classical language that these beings understand.

A shaman can never be trained, unlike a priest or a monk; someone is either born a shaman or not. Other than ritual shamans, many tribal hamlets also have a diversity of other mystics, ranging from astrol-ogers, fortune tellers, leaf-readers, clairvoyants and touch healers to folk singers

who receive and chant 'from the other side.'

The mithun

A *mithun* is a semi-domesticated *gaur*-like bovine that you'll frequently see in many parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Although they are privately owned, like regular cattle, *mithuns* are allowed to roam and breed freely in the forest, and are never

fully domesticated, leading to a 'gamey' tasting meat.

The mithun plays an important role in many animist festivals, weddings and rituals. Unlike commercial ranching or agriculture, *mithun* rearing is a sustainable practice, and doesn't require forests to be cut, and provides enough to eat but not to sell, which is possibly why *mithun* meat can never be sold as per tradi-

Idu Mishmi igus chanting



tion; it is only distributed at ceremonies for free. Tribal society traditionally measures a man's social status by the amount of *mithun* meat he distributes for free to the entire village.

Literature through music and craft

For most of the region's history, the animists have had no written languages. They have always recorded their literature and history orally, through an elaborately intermeshed

set of customs, myths, taboos, folk songs, dances, textile motifs, shamanic chants, storytelling sessions, agricultural and fishing practices, festivals, and even their antique jewellery and artefacts.

Among the Tani tribes, *ponung* is an ancient animist vocal music form chanted in groups in an archaic classical language that can only be sung and



Adis rehearse for ritual dances at Rungong village

not spoken. *Ponungs* are very inclusive, in that though the song is led by an experienced 'Miri,' anybody can join in the chorus, since there's a lot of repetition; often, the Miri's lyrics can also be totally spontaneous. Folk songs like the *Nenem*, *Bari*, *Rellong* of the Adi tribes deal with complex philosophies and dis-

cuss and debate the origin of things. Likewise, the *Khappa-Sei*, the deeply poetic and philosophical interactive folk music of the Nocte tribe is also sung in a poetic, classical dialect called Khappa. The culture, philosophy, myths and migration routes of the Idu Mishmis of Dibang Valley are all contained in the

chants of their shamans (*Igus*), who go into trances and narrate this in nonstop song and dance for hours and days at a stretch.

Many animists can routinely trace their lineage up to 20 generations without the need of a script. Most animist music is understandably vocal and rich in culture, philosophy and history, with very few musical instruments, and many dances

involve colourful costumes and jewellery, agricultural and even war themes, beautifully made swords, spears, shields and even handmade guns.

Many antique swords, machetes, brass plates and bead necklaces have a history attached; when these valuables move from generation to generation, or from one clan to another as marriage gifts, along with them

Bamboo sliver counting



A Galo nyibo (shaman) and his assistants chant at a healing ritual

the stories of the previous owners are also passed on, which increases their value in more ways than one.

Christianity in Arunachal

Many animists in Arunachal Pradesh have converted to Christianity in recent years, as is the case all over the Northeast. Christianity is now a growing part of the local culture. Unlike the other northeastern states,

however, indigenous faiths like animism and Buddhism still form the majority.

Animists, Christians and Buddhists from various tribes live together harmoniously, and often inter-marry these days. It is an interesting period of cultural flux, but in the interior villages, original animist traditions are still very much alive to this day. ■



ANIMIST FESTIVALS

The best time to plan a trip to the animist areas would be during a festival. Most festivals in Arunachal revolve around getting good agricultural harvests, appeasing forest spirits and chasing away negative energies through various gatherings, ritual sacrifices and shamanic ceremonies. There's a good deal of fun as well, with lots of singing, dancing and *apong*, the ritual starch wine brewed with rice, millets, corn or tubers.

Arunachali tribals are generally a friendly, uncomplicated and hospitable lot, and you are likely to leave any trip here feeling a great deal of emotional attachment for the place and its people.

In general, there are two types of tribal festivals here, the original, village-level version for which dates are decided just a few days or weeks before the festival, and the 'centralised' modernised high-budget versions with VIP guests, stage shows and fixed dates. Hardcore cultural travellers will generally want to seek out the village-level version. Planning is tricky though, because animist festival dates are announced only after certain rituals decide the auspicious dates for the festival. The centralised versions can also be interesting, and the big advantage while making plans is that festival dates are known well in advance. Often, it so happens that the people

you meet in the centralised festivals lead you to better and more experiences afterwards, so they're definitely worth a visit.

Apatani festivals

The best time to experience the hospitable Apatani culture of Ziro Valley is during their **Myoko** festival, a long series of rituals between

Nyokum preparations underway



mid- and late-**March**. **Myoko** is an 'open door' festival that goes on for some three weeks, and anybody is welcome into anybody's house to eat and drink with them during this time. The Apatanis also celebrate **Dree** in early July, and **Murung** in January.

Nyishi festivals

Nyokum, which used to be the **Nyishi** tribe's ritual practiced at a clan-level, is now celebrated at a community or tribe-level as an expression of tribal animist identity and unity, along with a ritual for a prosperous year ahead for everyone. It's held around **February 26** each year. Shamans appease the **Nyokum** spirits with extended rounds of chanting, and the whole gathering eats, drinks, sings and dances together. **Nyishi** millet wine is known to be of a high standard. The biggest



Mopin rituals at Darka village, West Siang

Nyokum celebrations open to the public are at **Yazali** and **Seppa**. **Nyishis** celebrate their **Boori Boot** festival in early **February**, while **Longte Yullo** is celebrated in mid-**April**.

Mopin

Mopin, the **Galo** tribe's big festival, is celebrated 'cen-

trally' on **April 5**. At the village/local level, the dates can vary up to a couple of weeks before or after that. The real deal is in the villages. There's lots of feasting and notorious quantities of a special **Galo**-style charcoal-filtered rice wine, that's locally called **poka**. This is certainly one of the more

Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN

playful festivals, and everyone smears rice paste and throws water on each other. Enjoyment aside, there are also rituals, singing, chanting and prayers for good harvest. Remember to come wearing only white.

Adi festivals

Uying and Aran are variations of an Adi festival that are simultaneously celebrated in late **February** by different Adi communities in

different ways in the geographically diverse Adi tribal belt, marking the onset of spring, and the beginning of the new agricultural cycle. The five-day 'Solung' festival is celebrated in the middle of the year, during the months of August/September. The Adi Solung and Uying festivals with their rare folk music and old traditions, are pretty ancient. Adi shamans, known as *miris*, sing stories

Adis prepare for dances during the Uying Giidi spring festival



A visitor receives a ponung song in his honour at Boleng

about the origin of man, animals and plants, the ancestry of the Adis, and the lives and deeds of the Adi heroes. Lots of feasting, *apong*, and *ponung* singing and dances are involved. Boleng, Pasighat and Adi tribal villages are good places to catch these festivals. Some vanishing forms of folk music can be witnessed during the festivities, but you will need a local

person who can translate them for you.

The Bokar Adis celebrate Podi Barbi festival in **December** in the exceptionally beautiful remote mountain area near **Monigong**, in Arunachal Pradesh's Shi Yomi district.

Tagin festivals

Si Donyi (Earth-Sun) is the Tagin tribe's big ceremony celebrated during the first



Sharing apong; Nyishis carry a Dapo totem (facing page)

week of **February**. It is dedicated to the Earth and the Sun, and seeks blessings of various spirits for a good harvest.

Eastern Arunachal festivals

The general **Reh** festival (different from the **Reh** clan-level ritual) is a visitor-friendly community-level celebration, along with a live display of shamanic chanting and

dancing by the **Idu Mishmis**, a very interesting tribe from the **Dibang Valley** and **Lower Dibang Valley** districts. This relatively modern celebration take on a traditional shamanic ritual happens between late **January** and early **February** in these two districts. The animist **Tangsas** of **Changlang** district celebrate their animist **Mol** festival in **April**. The **Digaru** and



Miju Mishmis celebrate Tamladu in mid-February, but the real village-level celebrations are hard to find these days, and the main centralised spots are at Wakro and Tezu towns.

Western Arunachal's animist festivals

The animists of Western Arunachal are less known. The Miji tribe have their colourful Chindang festival in mid-October, while Akas have the four-day Nechi Dau (Nyethrii Dow) festival in mid-November and



Pachi-Dugo-Doh and Sarok in mid-January, where you can sample *sai*, their rice-millet combination brew. The Puroiks have their Gomkum Gompa festival in mid-April.

Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi

The Singpho tribe of Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, also known across the international borders as the Kachins or Jingpaws in Myanmar and the Jingpo in China, are technically Theravada Buddhists by reli-



Scenes from the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi festival

gion. However, they still retain old animistic and ancestor worship traditions in their annual community dance festival Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi, on February 14 and 15.

For several hours over two days, the entire tribe shows up at a central venue, gets together in a circle in their liveliest traditional attire, and dances together. Men dance with swords in hand, while the women wave Chinese-style fans,

scarves and handkerchiefs to a groovy Singpho tune, which a band of singers keeps crooning live. The rule is that once you're in the circle, you need to last it out, till the very end!

The performance begins as concentric dancing circles, and then splits into multiple spirals that keep joining each other in different permutations and combinations, making various formations, inspired by flocks of birds in flight. By



The intergenerational dance at Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi

the end of it, you've made eye contact and danced with nearly every one of the thousands of people there.

The *poi* (festival) is also a great place to shop for exotic and colourful Burmese-made clothes, handicrafts and eatables from the many Burmese Singpho traders who make it to the festival. Eat and drink at the local Singpho food stalls (Singpho cuisine is ranked pretty high up in the northeastern end of things), check out the cul-

tural stage shows and socialise with the Singphos and Arunachali tribals and Kachins from Myanmar who make it to the festival.

It was the Singphos who introduced tea to the British, who then went on to introduce it to India. Singphos still make their traditional tea in bamboo hollows, and if you're lucky you can get to sample some Singpho tea here. ■

The venue of the festival varies every year, between Namsai and Changlang.



NYOKUM YULLO

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Tribal dances and mithun sacrifices; head to Pakke Tiger Reserve to experience the unique Nyokum Yullo festival of the Nyishis



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TIRAP AND LONGDING

AROUND TIRAP

Arunachal's unexplored exotic East is as rich in culture and spirituality as it is in landscapes. Culturally and spiritually distinct from both the Buddhist and animist tribes of central and Western Arunachal, the Noctes of Tirap are more like a diverse collection of similar communities rather than a single, homogenous entity.

The Nocte chiefs

Every village in the Tirap and Longding districts has a chief, who is still an important figure here. Unlike royalty in mainstream societies, the chief is typically a very accessible person, and lives in a bamboo hut, though his house is bigger and designed differently.

Though the Indian government and administrative systems now rule the state, the chief is still respected by his people. Along with the local chief council members, he forms the heart of the local judicial system used to settle disputes, and all important public meetings are held at his house. It is customary to first go meet the chief whenever you enter any Nocte or Wancho village, and you will invariably be received with hospitality. The chief will generally also be able to arrange homestays for travellers.

Spirit animals

The tiger is said to be the 'animal spirit' (*mong*) of kings, shamans and healers, and the Noctes believe that

killing a tiger could result in the death of a king or shaman to whom the animal's soul is linked, which is why killing tigers isn't allowed. Similarly, local taboos protect river dolphins, elephants, eagles, some large fish and other animals from the cat family. In the days gone by, it was common for people here to 'know' their spirit animal and connect

A Nocte farmer winnows rice



with it every night during their dreams. There are still a few old people and shamans who maintain this fascinating connection, and say they experience whatever their *mong* experiences, travelling with it wherever it goes, seeing what it sees.

The last headhunters of Tirap

At Luthong village, near Khonsa town, you can meet the two last tattooed headhunters of Tirap, who had earned their prestigious headhunting tattoos after bringing back the heads of invaders from Myanmar who had crossed into their village and killed someone from their clan. They are super friendly and welcoming, and are happy to chat about their experiences. Contrary to popular myth, the tradition of headhunting was done neither for sport nor cannibalism. The glory

Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN



Old headhunting trophies displayed in the pang at Lapnan

attached to headhunting trophies and tattoos was more about lionising the men who defended their land and territory from encroachers, just as modern-day defence personnel are glorified with medals and admiration after standing up to their enemies.

Pangs and log drums

In most villages these headhunting skull

collections have either been discarded, or have withered away through neglect (because since head hunting stopped, new skulls aren't added to the set anymore) but at Lapnan (3km) village, where old animist traditions are still followed, headhunting skull trophies are displayed in the community centre called the *pang*, which is still guarded in the traditional style.

The most important asset in the *pang* and Nocte percussion music tradition is the log drum (*thaam*), made with a huge log of an old tree that's hollow on the inside. The log drum is designed for double-duty, it can be either a huge musical instrument (played by many people at one time), or a public address system, developed in the days

A tattooed headhunter



before mobile phones existed. Every distinct beat or rhythm played on the *thaam* has a different meaning. There could, for example, be one beat to call a meeting at the *pang*, another to call everyone to assemble for jungle path clearing work, one beat for a special fire alarm, another one to signal an attack by invaders, or any emergency warranting community action, and so on. Nearly every Nocte village has a *pang*, but some are more active than others.

Indigenous animism

Though many Noctes have converted to Christianity, many still practice earlier traditions. The Noctes in traditional animist villages like **Lapnan** still live in tribal longhouses, practice weaving and bamboo craft, believe in the *jobans* (formless spirits of nature, time and space) and have their



Olo women sorting tapioca for traditional wine at Laju

own Hadang Kaalika (village god), to whom they make offerings. There are also traditional healers, clairvoyants and leaf-reading fortunetellers here who twist broom grass blades in their fingers to read the future. **Keti, Khunsa Basti, Borduria and Namsang** (near Deomali) are other villages where you can experience indigenous Nocte culture.

The Khappa villages

Nocte folksongs are sung in 'Khappa', an ancient, poetic language that most regular folks here don't understand anymore. This is the Nocte equivalent of Latin or Sanskrit; the difference here is that Khappa is actually still spoken as a colloquial language in three villages in Tirap, namely **Noksa** (15km from Khonsa), **Tupi** (near

Noksa) and Pulung (17km); where the old tradition of 'Khappa Sei', an interactive form of poetic, zen-like tribal folk music, still thrives. *Khappa Sei* is so hard to categorise that it probably warrants a genre of its own.

During it, the whole village divides into four groups with one lead singer, a group of dancers in tradi-

A tattooed Olo woman



tional costume, another group of percussionists, again, flamboyantly attired; and finally, the audience, basically the entire village, who are expected to respond in song to support the singer, every time he provokes them by singing a haiku-esque riddle. *Khappa Sei* lyrics are known to get poetic enough to move the audience to tears.

The bigger and more sensitised the audience is, the more impressive the performance will turn out, especially if there are many female voices in the audience. Without an audience that understands the now-threatened *Khappa* language, which now survives in only three villages in the world, there can be no *Khappa Sei*.

The ideal time to experience *Khappa Sei* and see the local costumes and dances would be at the **Konyu Spring Festival** and



Spectacular sunrise at Laju

Melo Paku, the Khappa harvest festival. At Noksa village the dates are generally **April 25–27 for Konyu** (26th being the main cultural performance day) and **October 18–20 for Melo.**

Contact Doyang Bayang on behalf of the Noksa king for accommodation, information about festivals and visiting (06383612580). At Tupi village, these two festivals

are held around the same time period.

The village welcomes cultural travellers, but in typical tribal style, festival dates are finalised only two weeks before the festival after certain moon readings. You can either directly go and meet the king or Gambura, or ask your operator to contact them on your behalf.

The Olos

Though the old practice of coming-of-age facial tattooing (*Manvi*) has now stopped among Nocte women, there are still many older Nocte women who have these tattoos. **Laju** (44km from Khonsa), close to the Indo-Myanmar border, is the heartland of the

An Olo man



Olo tribe, who trace their migration routes to Myanmar, where one part of their tribe still lives. You can still see lots of women with facial tattoos in Laju, the youngest of whom are probably in their forties, and also in **Sanliem** village (18km), on the road between **Khonsa** and **Laju** (44km). From **Laju**, the **Myanmar border** is a little over seven kilometres away, at **Nonglo**, the last village in India before Burmese territory begins. This lovely highland village built on a steep hill, is worth a visit for its lovely mountain landscapes, Olo culture, friendly locals and that indescribably exciting border-village feel; before you get there you have to stop at an army checkpoint and identify yourself to security guards. The Olos celebrate their **Worang festival** between **April 15 and 20** in **Laju** and around **May 10** at **Noglo**.



A hollowed out trunk of a tree, used as a drum

Pongtu Kun

This is an elaborate 10-day festival of the Tutsas of Tirap and Changlang, celebrated around April (dates are variable), with each day having a specific set of rituals dedicated to good agricultural harvest, millets in particular, and clan and village bonding. Like other festivals of the region, the original version involves feasting, *apong*, dances,

folksongs, colourful costumes and firing guns! (All distances in km measured from Khonsa town, district HQ of Tirap district)

Getting there

Khonsa town is the district headquarters of Tirap. The closest airport to Khonsa is **Dibrugarh** (120km/4–5 hrs), and regular buses and share taxis ply between Dibrugarh/Tinsukia and



Khonsa. Taxis can also be hired in either direction.

Tour operators
Village Holiday Tours & Travels organises cultural and food tours in the area.

THE ORIA FESTIVAL OF THE WANCHO TRIBE

March 15-17 at Mintong, Niusa and Longphong villages, Longding district
The Wanchos are the main tribe in Longding district, on the Indo-Myanmar border, culturally similar to the Noctes of Tirap, Konyaks of Nagaland and also other Burmese-Naga tribes across the border. Their spring festival, Oriah, is organised 'centrally' in Longding town on February 14 every year, which might be nice to attend if you're travelling in Arunachal at the time. The more local celebrations happen later in the villages, from the second week of March onwards. Each village



celebrates on a different date, which is announced only a few days before the festival.

Three festivals in one

While most villages celebrate Oriah on different dates, three Wancho villages, Mintong, Niusa and Longphong, now organise and celebrate the festival

Wancho dancers prepare for their set

jointly from March 15–17 at all three villages simultaneously, with 15th being the main day of tribal music and dances in traditional costume. All three villages schedule and synchronise their celebrations one after the other on this day, shift by shift, so that they them-

selves get to go to each other's villages during the festival. In these parts, language and traditional dress can vary from village to village, and each village has its own king, so getting to experience the same festival at three different villages on the same day is

a rare treat, even for the Wanchos themselves.

On the first night, village elders and women sing and dance; the menfolk take a break, because this is the night when all able-bodied men return exhausted after having spent the day clear-

ing jungle paths. On the second day, all the young men and women get together and celebrate, singing and dancing late into the night, and the Wancho brew, locally known as 'zu', certainly does help to liven the occasion.

A Wancho man during Oriah



Dances by headhunters

Unlike other areas, headhunting practices continued in the Wancho belt for much longer, with the last incident reported in 1984, so you can still meet the last surviving headhunters here. On the main day of the Oriah festival, the last surviving tattooed old Wancho headhunters lead the dances at Mintong village.

Gun-making competitions

Once a hunter-warrior tribe, the Wanchos have a long and cherished tradition of making local guns (and gunpowder), and firing them is



The Wanchos are known for their colourful costumes and jewellery

a big part of their dances and rituals. A local gun-making competition during the festival honours this heritage, with prizes and cheers for the best-made country guns and gunpowder. The village king is the judge, and he picks the best-made gun and gunpowder, based on the sound of the gunshot and accuracy of the weapon they have.

Wancho cuisine

Wancho zu can be brewed using different starchy ingredients, from local red rice, tapioca and all sorts of millets, and it's quite different from the apong found in the Tani tribal areas, for example. Wancho food, similar to Naga cuisine, is another delight in these parts, especially the wild veggies, local lentils, Naga-style pork



A dance being performed by the Wancho tribespeople

curry, sausages and 'stone pork', where the meat is slow-cooked without a fire, by tossing it in red-hot, pre-heated river stones that impart a subtle flavour.

Getting there

Longding town is the central transport hub for villages in the Longding district. Most villages in the district are easily accessible from the town.

Nearest Airport:

Dibrugarh, (178km)

Nearest railway station:

Sapeghati, Assam (60km) from Longding district headquarters.

Tour operators

Village Holiday Tours & Travels organises cultural and food tours in Tirap and Longding and can also organise homestays. ■



ARUNACHAL PRADESH

A celebration of friendship and harmony between various Apatani villages, Myoko is a festival during which the new paddy crop is sown; it is the best way to experience the tribe's rich culture



Department of Tourism

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THERAVADA BUDDHISM

Theravada Buddhism, or 'the way of the elders', is the world's oldest surviving form of Buddhism, using the original Pali scripts from the Buddha's time. Unlike the Tibetan-style tantric Buddhism of the Mahayana Buddhist tribes of Tawang, West Kameng and Mechuka, who have a pantheon of colourful Bodhisattvas, deities and figures from their older Bon Tibetan animist traditions in addition to the Buddha, the Theravada Buddhist tribes of Eastern Arunachal concentrate only on Sakyamuni (Gautama the Buddha).

Arunachal's Theravada Buddhists are ethnically, culturally and linguistically closer to the Buddhists of

Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia (with whom they share history, language and ethnicity). And, unlike animists, at their festivals, killing/slaughter and alcohol are forbidden.

The Tai Khamtis, Singphos and the Tikhak Tangsas of Changlang district have a thriving old-school Theravada Buddhist culture, which can be seen both in daily life and in their Buddhist monasteries and temples, locally called *chongs* or *kyongs*.

Buddhist Chongs

Nearly every Tai Khamti or Singpho village has a *chong* generally located near a stream on its eastern end. Most *chongs* in Eastern Arunachal have

been renovated or rebuilt in the more ornate Thai-Burmese style, a popular aesthetic in these parts. Many of the Buddha idols and figurines are also of Thai or Burmese origin. Most of the important *chongs* are in the Tai Khamti areas of Namsai.

A Tai Khamti man



Tai Khamti Dances and Poong theatre

Buddhist, classical literature and mythology are the basis of many of the expressive Tai Khamti costume dances called *Ka Poong* (dance drama), which are effectively theatre performances inspired by Buddhist ideologies and mythology.

The *Ka Kinnara-Kinnari* (Peacock and Peahen Dance), with its spectacular prop-like costumes, is associated with luck and happiness. It is believed that, during a previous life, Lord Buddha was a peacock, and this dance enacts how he lived that life. Similarly, the Buddha had taken over 500 forms, many of which were as birds and animals, and some of these stories have been incorporated into elaborate costume dances; accompanied by singing, drums, gongs, flutes and cymbals. The cockfight

Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN



Singpho women in their traditional attire

dance (*Ka-kong Tu Kai*) and Demon Dance (*Ka Fi Fai*) can impress with the costumes alone, even before the actual performance begins. *Poong* or *Pya-poong* is a highly evolved, yet unknown Tai Khamti form of ritual theatre, involving a combination of poetry, lyrical dialogue, music and flamboyant costumes,

based on literature found in the Tai Khamti classical texts called the *liks* (*Poong-Keincha*), and historical roots dating back to the 12th century.

The season for these performing arts begins after November or December, once paddy has been harvested and farmers have more leisure time. Theatre and dance groups are invit-

ed to different villages, and every family contributes towards the costs involved. Dance and theatre performances also happen during *Poi Lu Fra*, a ceremony where an individual donates an idol to a temple, and sponsors the big ritual and celebration that accompanies it. Typically, Tai Khamti

A Singpho girl



dances and drama are night-long affairs that begin after dinner.

Wish balloons

An interesting sight at many festivals and rituals are traditional Buddhist Wish Balloons, which are like miniature handmade mini hot air balloons made of paper that Buddhists light up and release to float like flying lanterns into the night sky, along with their wish at the end of rituals.

Where to stay in the Namsai-Chongkham area

Adjacent to the Golden Pagoda complex at Tengapani (9km from Chongkham, 20km from Namsai town) is the peaceful, clean and neatly landscaped **Golden Pagoda Eco Resort** (www.goldenpagodaecoresort.com), which is the only comfortable accommodation around for miles in the Namsai-Chongkham



The Golden Pagoda Eco Resort, Tengapani

area, and generally good value for money, with cottages costing between ₹2,000 and ₹3,000 (including breakfast) and clean dorms costing ₹600 per bed, a great deal as long as they're empty (which is most of the time, like the rest of the resort).

The staff doesn't have much information about the local places, culture, car

rentals, etc. so depend on them only for rooms, lunch (non-local cuisine) and dinner. The only other conventional tourist accommodation between here and Chongkham, other than government accommodation like circuit houses or forest department accommodation at Namsai, is the guesthouse at the Pali Vidyapeeth in Chongkham

(062694757/07005473293), which needs to be booked in advance.

Local guides and getting around

If you haven't got your own car, the Network counter at Namsai bazaar (094020-47340) is the place to rent one or find transport to

Local wild greens



nearby places. While visiting Buddhist temples (*chongs*), it's always better to either have a local guide to understand what's going on, and/or go speak to the *bhante* (monk) at the *chong*, if he isn't busy attending to his duties or meditating. **Camp Namdapha Holidays** is run by a person from Namsai, and they organise cultural tours and homestays in these parts.

Where to eat

All the Theravada Buddhist tribes—Tai Khamtis, Singphos and Tangsas—are known for their delicious and wholesome food. **Tai Hut** at second mile, **Namsai**, serves some nice local Tai Khamti dishes. Either choose the dishes of the day, or inform them in advance in case you would like them to prepare something specific. **Dhaba River View in Nalung** (8837392429, 9383004502)



Traditional Tai-style lunch at Tai Hut

on the highway between **Chongkham** and **Tengapani**, has a tree-house, where you can try some great local tribal food at reasonable prices. **Centre Point** at Chongkham has far less variety, but the food is still good. **Subhash Dhaba** near Pankha bridge, around 5km from Namsai, is locally famous for its North Indian

mutton curry, attracting locals and customers from as far away as Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in Assam. All these places have friendly owners who will be happy to talk food with you. **Noi Cheynam**, conveniently located on the highway near the Golden Pagoda at Tengapani, serves Tai Khamti food, and the ambience is pleasant. ■



THERAVADA BUDDHIST FESTIVALS

Mai-ka-Sung-Phai (Mai ko som phai)

January end–early February

Literally meaning 'to light up a stack of firewood', this festival is celebrated at a common ground in most Buddhist villages, to remember the day on which Gautama the Buddha announced his impending death and departure from his body, and honour all that he taught during his last days as a physical being. A special feast on this day features *Khao Ya-Ku*, a mixture of glutinous rice, sesame seeds, yam, nuts and leafy vegetables. As the name suggests, a tall tower of wood is burnt on the occasion, a spectacular visual by itself.

Sangken: The water festival

April 14–16

The water festival is celebrated on April 14, in different forms, all the way from Arunachal Pradesh to Myanmar and Thailand (where it is called 'Songkran'). Buddha statues are taken out of their temples and given an auspicious ceremonial bath and then re-installed, in three separate ceremonies. Sangken involves three days of celebrations that include these religious rituals, ending in merrymaking sessions, in which people splash and spray water at each other. This also symbolises spiritual cleansing. The tradition is that on Sangken, people move

from village to village, and *chong* to *chong* (every village has a *chong*) along with their village monks, to as many villages as possible. Every village and every *chong* takes on a festive vibe. This cheerful festival is a good way for people here to stay connected with their relatives, meet people from other villages in a happy context, and maintain peaceful relations among various hamlets.

Sangken marks the Buddhist New Year. The water festival is a good time to go *chong*-hopping in the Theravada belt, because this is when every temple is at its liveliest.

Monasteries such as **Empong, Phaneng, Momong, Chongkham** and the **Golden Pagoda** are particularly festive during this time and are a must visit if you're in the area.



Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN

Poi Potwa

Late October–First week of November

It is said that the Buddha had advised his disciples not to leave their monasteries during the monsoons to preach in the villages, possibly due to the risks associated with the season, and conduct sermons within

Disciples at Chong Long Chongkham

their monasteries itself. Monks here follow this tradition even today, and during the period between mid-July and October (Varsa Vas), the monks go into the 'monsoon retreat' period, at the conclusion of which the *poi* (festival) of the *Potwa*

(release from *Varsha Vas*) is celebrated.

Earlier, monks and laypeople from each village would visit as many villages as possible to pay respects to Buddha idols in every *chong*, meet monks and elders, catch up with rela-



tives, trying to reach as many villages as possible during this time. The belief is that this practice helps cleanse off whatever sins and mistakes that one might have committed during the past year. In recent times, to make things more convenient, it was decided that instead of going from village to village, a bigger festival could be organised at a central place, where people from every village could meet and celebrate together. This plan is followed to this day.

Every year, the *poi* moves to a new village, where all Buddhists arrive to pay their respects to the monks, gurus and elders, meet friends and relatives, cleanse themselves of sins and mistakes committed during the year.

Thousands of Buddhists arrive at a central location, with all sorts of offerings such as food, money and



A Theravada religious performance; the cock fight dance (facing page)

daily-use articles as ritual gifts to the monks and *chong*, hoping, in return, to be well taken care of and receive prosperity in their future births.

The host village builds a *Toan Patesa* (money tree), which people decorate with not just currency notes, but also small gifts and utility objects from fountain pens to matchboxes, books and handkerchiefs, anything. This festival of giving is a

big cultural event in the Theravada Buddhism.

Poi Pee Mau *Late November—early December*

This is a relatively recent centralised festival meant to unite Tai people, celebrated as a cultural extravaganza of performing arts, costume dances, songs and feasting. *Pee Mau* is not exactly part of pure Buddhist tradition, but certainly worth a visit. ■



THE THERAVADA BUDDHIST MONASTERIES

BUDDHIST CHONGS

The Buddhist temples, *chongs*, and their *bhantes* (monks) are at the core of everyday culture and daily life in the Tai Khamti villages. Every morning the *bhantes* go to seek alms in the village, and every householder is happy to give something to these seekers on the path of enlightenment, with the belief that they too receive some karmic points in the whole process.

While the village supports the *chong* and its ascetic *bhantes* for their material needs, the *bhantes* support lay people in spiritual matters. When Buddhists are in need of

spiritual counsel or intervention to solve their problems through rituals, they gift ritual offerings to the *bhantes*, who then conduct ceremonies for them at the *chong*.

CHONGKHAM

**Chong Long Chongkham /
Chongkham Buddha
Vihara**

Chongkham was once said to be one of the richest villages around, and the name itself translates into 'temple of gold'. The monastery here is literally just that: the whole compound is full of golden structures, roofs, pagodas and sculptures, a look that's further dramatised around sunset. The *chong* at Chongkham is

locally known as the 'Chong Long Chongkham' (main Chongkham temple). There are four holy *Setang* days every month, when prayers are offered, which fall on full moon, new moon, and two other days in between.

More modern and Burmese in style than the

The Buddha at Chongkham



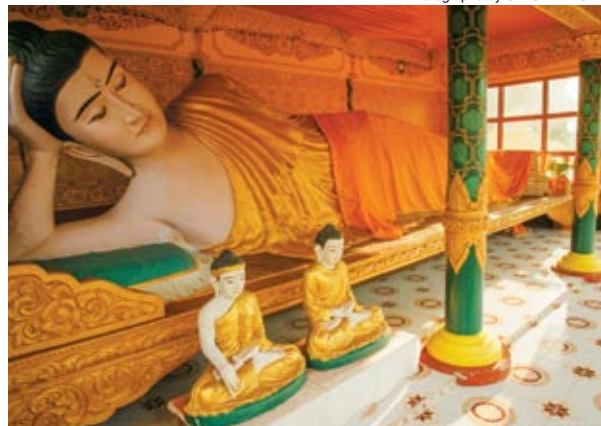
older stilted *chongs* at Phaneng, Empong and Momung, the current structure at Chongkham is quite ornate. Inside the compound are several golden pagodas (locally known as *kongmus*), with little carvings of the Buddha in their niches, and idols illustrating situations from the Buddha's lifetime. Particularly impressive is a giant reclining Buddha dressed in gold.

Between prayer sessions, playful little novice monks play hide and seek behind all these pagodas, breaking the seriousness of it all.

Local markets

Monday, Tuesday and Friday are **local market days** at Chongkham Bazaar (Friday is the big day), when tribal sellers arrive from their villages with farm fresh and wild produce and sometimes even local handicrafts. Wednesdays are market days at the Medo village

Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN



Reclining Buddha statue at Chongkham kongmu

(Lohit district, 15km) and Sundays are the big market days at Namsai town, when there is probably the maximum variety available.

River Island Meditation Centre, Chongkham

The meditation centre in the river island at Chongkham is affiliated to the main Buddha Vihara across the river (the Chong Long Chongkham). The World

Peace Pagoda is closed shut in the regular course, and opened during the **Sangken festival** or when groups of monks come to meditate, often from places as far away as Thailand.

However, if you're willing to play things by ear and manage regarding the language barrier, there are 10-day Buddhist Vipassana meditation courses offered at the River Island's little-



known traditional meditation centre. Contributions are voluntary, like most courses of this kind.

Stay can be managed, especially if you're willing to cook your own food, or find a homestay in the village. Just as other Vipassana courses, a basic rule is no speaking, reading, writing, cell phones, etc., for the duration of the course. Older people get concessions, and can sit for shorter

World Peace Pagoda



periods, or meditate with more relaxed rules.

A warning: The courses here are attended by local villagers from nearby, so the facilities are naturally not 'outsider-oriented', unlike the internationally standardised Vipassana meditation centre in Mudoi. The monks here say that everyone is welcome to meditate here, irrespective of where they might come from. One big difference between a meditation course in a place like this and a Vipassana centre is the cultural appeal. This is living, breathing Buddhist Vipassana culture, unlike the more religiously neutral and secular centre at Mudoi (which is more convenient to plan). The biggest challenge with planning a course at the River Island is that the course dates are only announced after mid-July. What compounds it even more is that very often



A bhante (Buddhist monk) at the River Island Meditation Centre

monks here might not be able to speak to you about course details while they have taken oaths of silence!

The meditation courses are held during *Varsha Vas*, the auspicious Buddhist retreat months, generally falling between the full moon of mid-July and September.

For basic information on course schedules, call monk Sasana Bhiku after mid-July on 09383347308.

TENGAPANI Kongmu Kham (Golden Pagoda)

Built on a plateau overlooking the plains and the Eastern Himalayas, the Kongmu Kham (Golden Pagoda) is one of the most noticeable landmarks as you enter Namsai town through Tengapani on the highway itself. Though the Kongmu Kham has become an iconic symbol of Theravada Buddhism in Eastern

Arunachal and probably the most photographed structure in these parts, the pagoda complex and its sprawling lawns were built as recently as 2010.

Inside the pagoda is a Bronze Buddha statue that was gifted by the chief monk from a wat (temple) in Thailand. The whole com-

Kongmu Kham (Golden Pagoda)



plex sprawls over around 20 hectares, with neatly manicured lawns, a pond, walking paths, an orchid centre with exotic species brought from Thailand, Meditation Centre, meant for Vipassana meditation courses, a Buddhist library, hall, living quarters, and an old-age home.

The meditation centre is well-equipped in terms of built infrastructure along with accommodation. Experienced meditators can speak to the management and take permission if they wish to use the premises for longer unguided meditations for 10-day periods. With a resort conveniently attached next door, this is the most visitor-friendly Theravada Buddhist temple around.

The head monk, who speaks several languages, including English, Thai and Burmese, is quite friendly, and often takes the time out



The lush environs of the Golden Pagoda

to talk to travellers who might be curious about the traditions followed here. He is also the one you'd need to speak with to access the library and other facilities.

During the first weeks of November, the Kathina Robe Ceremony (*Kathina Civara Dhana*), a ritual offering of red robes to monks by lay people is a big event at Kongmu Kham, and has in the past attracted monks and visitors from Thailand,

Malaysia and Myanmar, and a lot of cultural displays by artists from all these countries, along with those of the Tai Khamti artists. This is a good time to visit.

Being a high-profile monastery, celebrations of every festival at the Golden Pagoda happen on a relatively grand scale. *The Golden Pagoda is located at a distance of 20km from Namsai town on NH15.*

Momong

This is one of the oldest Theravada monasteries constructed in 1918 with some old bronze Buddha statues that were brought from Myanmar sometime in the late-19th century. In addition, there are many smaller figurines here.

Momong is also one of the older villages in the area, and it's just a couple of kilo-

Momong monastery



metres from the Golden Pagoda, making it a nice walking trip if you're staying at the Golden Pagoda Eco-Resort. For people who love beautiful old Bodhi trees at monasteries, the one at Momong will certainly impress you.

Momong is a good way to experience the late phase of the older style of Tai Khamti architecture, the one between the stages of bamboo and thatch temples and the extravagant new Thai-Burmese style.

Phaneng

The Phaneng monastery, 14km from Namsai, might not be the most visually impressive of the *chongs* in the area, but it's an old and revered monastery, attracting Buddhist devotees from everywhere. It is said that a religious text (*likh*) stored here, called the 'Dhammasangkhani Sutongpe', bleeds when it



A house constructed in the Khampti architectural style, Momong

is opened and the pages are turned. The story goes that it was written by a religious devotee who put all his heart and soul into writing it, animating it with his own devotion in the process. The book is now no longer opened to avoid hurting it, but people still come and offer prayers and offerings to the *likh*, hoping for their wishes to be fulfilled; this is the main attrac-

tion here. Once a year, during the Sangken festival, the *likh* is opened, but the pages are still never turned. On every full moon day, prayers are held for the book.

Phaneng is 20km from Namsai town.

Piyong

The Dhammarakkhita Vihar at Piyong (en route to Phaneng from Namsai) has

one Singpho and one Tai Khamti village nearby, with both Buddhist tribes sharing the same temple. What makes Piyong stand out is an inspiring little pagoda that has been fashioned out of the roots of a large Bodhi tree, which has obviously been grown with a lot of care, with cement pillars erected in some spots to support its heavy branches.

A structure in Phaneng



According to the head monk, this tree is a descendant of the pipal tree at Bodhgaya, where the Buddha meditated and attained enlightenment. *Piyong is 20km from Namsai town, on the road to Phaneng.*

Dhamma Aruna Vipassana Meditation Centre, Mudoï, Changlang

Affiliated to the international chain of Vipassana meditation centres started by SN Goenka, Dhamma Aruna teaches Vipassana, a Buddhist but secular, old-school meditation technique that was preserved for centuries in the region between Eastern Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar.

As far as Vipassana centres go, this is a small one, with a limit of 40 people per batch. For experienced Vipassana meditators, there is also a 'Sati Pattan', an eight-day serious course



The bhante at Dhammarakkhita Vihar, Piyong

held once a year, generally in the month of May. *Near the Mudoï checkpost, Changlang district.*

Singphos and Tikak Tangsa monasteries

Tangsa tribes, like the Tikaks of Changlang, practice Theravada Buddhism. Every Singpho tribal village generally has a monastery, which they call 'thang' or 'kyang'. The older temples are built of timber and thatch.

Venuban, one of the oldest

Singpho monasteries, is near **Bordumsa village**, and is said to have been originally constructed around 1870. Around 400 religious texts in Tai script are preserved here. **Guju village**, 3km from **Bordumsa**, has two Buddhist monasteries from the 1800s.

The **Buddha monastery** in **Kherem Bisa village**, Changlang district, dates back to 1890, and all the festivals of the Singphos are celebrated here.



Empong

One of the most important Buddhist *chongs* in Arunachal Pradesh, Empong is famed for its wish-fulfilling Buddha idol, known as the Phra Sutong Pe (Wish-fulfillment deity), which attracts devotees from as far away as Assam. It is said that if you come with a pure heart, you can ask the Phra Sutong Pe for anything you need, and it will be granted.

According to local legend, this wooden idol had miraculously survived a huge fire in another monastery, and was found by a Singpho farmer far away from the original site of the fire. The farmer innocently asked the idol to keep the birds away from his field, which it did. The news spread and some people came and recognised the statue as the one that had been burnt in the fire. Deeming its reappearance miraculous, the village

elders built a shrine for the idol at Empong, and since then, it has acquired a reputation of having granted wishes to a lot of people. There have also been reports of people seeing the whole shrine glowing at dawn, and so on. Over the years, the wooden idol has been painted and embellished with special Burmese gold leaves.

Empong village itself is at least three or four hundred years old, so the *chong* should be about the same age. The current *chong* is something of a hybrid structure that was built some 70 years ago and later modified; cement plaster overlap has been superimposed on the old bamboo and timber construction more recently but it still has an old feel. The *chong* is built in a sort of Burmese crossover style that came after the (now-extinct) fully bamboo *chongs* of the past,

and before the more ornate Thai-Burmese Buddhist temple architecture seen in most *chongs* today.

Khamtis seem to see this 'new style' as a revival of their own culture, rather than the adoption of a new one, because the Tai people have anyway gone through a history of migrations through China, Thailand and

A kongmu (*pagoda*) at Empong



Myanmar, before arriving in Northeast India in the 1600s and 1700s.

Architecture and mythology aside, Empong is also one of the more interesting *chongs* from a 'slow travel' perspective. The quiet riverside location of the *chong* is charming and serene, as is the nearby Empong village, a friendly Tai Khamti hamlet with a population of only 55 people, most of whom live in traditional huts, with spread-out habitations, separated by paddy fields that produce the famous Tai Khamti sticky rice.

Gastronomes might want to spend a few days in a local home at Empong to try the local food and experience rural Tai Khamti culture. People here still forage in the forest and prepare rare Tai delicacies such as *onklok* (a flavourful algae found on riverside rocks) during December to March;



A view from the banks of the Teang River

pasa, a special soup made with raw fish and green leaves, and all sorts of exotic dishes made with the legendary sticky rice.

A good time to visit Empong is during the Sangken Water Festival (April 14–16), when thousands of Buddhists from far away villages come to Empong to witness the Phra Sutong Pe being given an

auspicious bath. Post rice-harvest (November–December) would be a good time for catching ritual dance drama and theatre performances.

Empong is 7km from Chongkham, the nearest major town. For homestays in Empong, contact the Gambura (village headman) Chow Jigdra Lungkeing (08974872285). ■

THERAVADA BUDDHIST RESOURCES IN CHANGLANG AND NAMSAI DISTRICTS

Ashoka Vihara, Rima, Changlang

Address: Rima village, Nampong,
Changlang District Arunachal
Pradesh-792123
Affiliation: Tikhak Buddhist Society
Phone: 09436049474
E-mail: aggadhamma2010@gmail.com

Phone: 09436049474

E-mail: aggadhamma2010@gmail.com

Solungtoo Buddhist Temple

Address: Village Solungtoo, Arunachal
Pradesh-792103
Phone: 09436052072

Bordumsa Buddha Vihar, Bordumsa

Address: Bordumsa, Changlang Dist.
Arunachal Pradesh-792056
Phone: 09863414798/09854266436
E-mail: nongbukhalen@gmail.com

Tikhak Taipy Dhamma Jyoti Vihara

Address: Village Tikhak Taipy,
Jairampur, Changlang District,
Arunachal Pradesh-792122
Affiliation: Tikhak Buddhist Society
Phone: 09436049474
E-mail: aggadhamma2010@gmail.com

Dhammarajika Buddhist Vihara, Jairampur

Address: Kovin Village, Jairampur,
Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh
-792121
Affiliation: Tikhak Buddhist Society
Phone: 09436049474
E-mail: aggadhamma2010@gmail.com
and chimoyimai66@gmail.com

Arunachal Pali Vidyapith and Tai- Khamti Singpho Museum

Courses in Pali language. The campus
also has a museum-cum-research cen-
tre, which has some old Pali Buddhist
scripts; and a guesthouse that pro-
vides accommodation to travellers if
booked well in advance.
Address: Chongkham, Namsai District,
Arunachal Pradesh-792104
Phone: 09862694757/07005473293
09862694757/07005473293
www.apvschongkham.com/

Jyotsnapur Rapovan Buddha Vihara

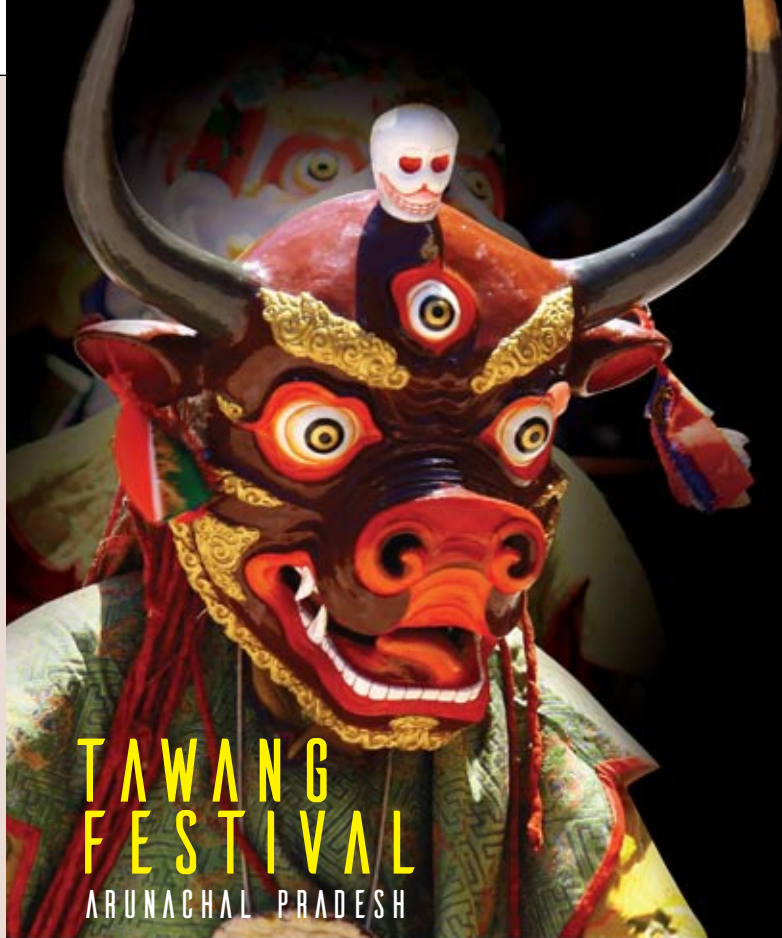
Address: Jyotsnapur Village, Diyun
Changlang District, Arunachal
Pradesh-792103
E-mail: bsanghapala@gmail.com

Old Champu Shanti Sukha Maha Vihara

Address: Village Old Champu, Miao,
Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh
-792122
Affiliation: Tikhak Buddhist Society

Namsai Buddha Vihara

A big Buddhist monastery in Namsai
town; Address: PO Namsai, Arunachal
Pradesh
Phone: 03806262331 ■



Department of Tourism

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MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

The Mahayana Buddhist tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are mostly concentrated around the western parts of the state (Monpas, Sherdukpen and Bugun tribes of West Kameng and Tawang), but smaller tribes are also found around the northern and eastern pockets near the Tibetan borders, like Mechuka (Memba tribe) and Tuting (Khamba tribe) towards the north, and Kibithu and Walong in the east (the Meyors).

Unlike the Theravada Buddhists of Eastern Arunachal, their culture is a mix of Buddhism, animism and Bon, the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion, rich in spirits and benevolent demons and heavenly characters who join the

pantheon of Bodhisattvas, mountain gods and a mythology around tantric, reincarnation, magic and enlightenment themes. All this shows in their highly expressive art, literature, theatre, opera, dances and music. These tribes use the Tibetan script and have a lot in common with Tibetan and Bhutanese cultures across the international border. The Monpa Buddhists are known for their evolved sense of 'eco-spirituality', and nature conservation is central to the religion.

Buddhist gompas

The *gompa*, or the Buddhist monastery, is typically the epicentre of religion, art and culture. Their designs

are generally striking, embellished with sensory aids like vibrant interiors, music, fragrant incense, prayer wheels, flags, vivid paintings and inspiring hill-top locations, with decoration styles that paradoxically combine exuberance with religiosity. The *gompas* are where monks grow up as apprentices and train to be gurus, and Buddhists are exposed to not just direct

A budding monk in Tawang



SANJOY GHOSH

religion and philosophy, but also a tradition of debates and discussion, vocal and instrumental music, theatre, *thangka* art, sculpture, mantras and mandalas, tantric practices and meditation. *Gompas* become the most natural and convenient starting point for planning a cultural tour in these parts.

Gaden Namgyal Lhatse (The Tawang Monastery)

Popularly known as the Tawang Monastery, this is easily Arunachal's most visited spot, which isn't surprising, considering that it's the largest monastery in India, and the second-largest in the world, next to the Potala Palace in Lhasa. With its expansive sprawl, strikingly yellow roofs and imposingly towering location, watching over Tawang town almost protectively, Tawang Monastery certainly makes a lasting first impression, and then goes on to



SHUTTERSTOCK

Interiors of the main prayer hall, Tawang Monastery

live up to the hype once you enter. The Tawang Monastery has two entrances, one from the side of the library and the other near the museum, which houses several artefacts including 18th-century wooden dance masks, musical instruments and statues of the Buddha. There is also a traditional manual printing press in the monastery, where religious

books are printed on handmade paper using wooden print-blocks. The library has a collection of books on tantric Buddhism, Tibetan festivals, several dictionaries, glossaries, the Dalai Lama's teachings among others. As can be expected for a monastery of this size and stature, there are several impressive Buddhist paintings, mandalas, idols



and decorative details all on the premises, and monks of all ages can be seen going about their daily routines and classes.

The monastic costume dances at Tawang (*cham*) are important to Monpa culture; as many as 22 different kinds of *cham* are performed here during **Torgya**, an annual Monpa Buddhist

A dancer in Tawang



festival during the second week of January, with dancers performing in flamboyant costumes and wearing oversized masks. Torgya is also when the monastery's collection of old *thangkas*, Buddhist stories lavishly painted on handmade cloth with stone-based pigments, are displayed to the public. Some of these are between 400 and 1,000 years old, and impressively, their colours haven't faded at all.

The Snow Lion dance is performed here during Losar (Tibetan New Year) and other festive occasions. The legend goes that once a saint named Tenteling was meditating on Mount Gangri-Karpo. Impressed by his religiosity, the two snow-lions living there offered him their milk, and the three of them became good friends. The three-day '**Tawang Festival**', a tourism event, is another good time to catch lots of such cos-



Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN

The Snow Lion dance at Tawang

tume dances on the streets of Tawang town (held between October 26–29).

The Tawang Monastery is more than just a monastery; it's an institution that manages some 17 other monasteries, where it sends trained and competent monks to work as caretakers. It is also a guardian of the forests here, and monks from here have led movements to save the sacred

groves of the Monpas from projects that destroy forests. It also manages huge tracts of land, including environmentally important high-altitude wetlands that it maintains as sacred groves.

The Ani Gompas (Buddhist nunneries)

What makes the nuns of Tawang special is that there's no social compulsion, tradition or pressure to

become a nun, nor is it compulsory to send a child to a nunnery. These girls do it of their own accord, shave their heads, refrain from jewellery and beautiful clothes, and live a hard life out of a personal commitment to the Path.

One of the oldest nunneries in the area, the **Gyanggong Ani Gompa**, 5km from the Tawang

Old market, Tawang



Monastery, with some 50 nuns, is affiliated to the Tawang Monastery, from where it receives support. At the Ani Gompa, every visitor is greeted with a cup of local 'butter tea'. When the nuns aren't busy with their routine duties or chanting in the main prayer hall, they're happy to share their stories. You can get to the foot of the gompa by a scenic 20-minute cable car ride from the Tawang Monastery when weather conditions and power availability permit. A road also leads to a point from where it's a half-hour hike to the top. Both routes provide great views.

Located at a spectacular location in the hills 9km from Tawang and accessible by road, the small but charming **Brahma Dung Chung Ani Gompa** was established in 1595 CE by the Karchen Yeshe Gelek Lama from the Tsang province of Tibet. The nuns here



Chanting is a day-long activity for many Monpa Buddhists

can be simultaneously shy and friendly. If you request respectfully, you could be allowed a walkthrough of the living quarters and witness their daily lives as they pray, study, chop firewood, cook, churn yak butter and scrub the courtyard. The smell of pine and cedar incense wafting through the place adds to the ambience. Around 28km towards the west from Tawang,

Singsur Ani Gompa houses about 40 nuns. This gompa was built by Rev. Gonpatse Rimpoche in 1960.

Urgelling Gompa, Tawang

Located at a distance of 3km from Tawang town, this place is believed to be the birthplace of His Holiness the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Tashi, who was born in 1683. The main hall of the gompa has nine

chortens within it, at which special prayers are performed on important occasions. Considering its historical importance, this *gompa* keeps a low profile and sees very few visitors and monks.

Zemithang

Buddhists believe that by rotating prayer wheels and circumambulating *chortens* (*stupas/domes*) whenever they find time, they can

Urgelling Gompa



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accumulate good karma. Around 85km from Tawang, the Zemithang Valley has the largest *stupa* in the region, the Gorsam Chorten, built during the 12th century CE. This is a replica of the *stupa* of Boudhanath in Nepal. Every year, in the month of March, the Gorsam Kora festival (also known as the Zemithang Mela) happens here, when you'll get to see everyone in the village come out in their traditional finery. The actual chorten is opened for public viewing once every 12 years during the Khathing festival.

Lumla

International borders have divided the Monpas between three countries: India, Tibet and Bhutan. Lumla is 45km from Tawang town, close to the Bhutan border. Bhutanese villagers have been coming to Lumla and Tawang to sell their



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A Monpa woman rolling the prayer wheels of Tawang Gompa

produce through Bleteng, the last Monpa village bordering Bhutan, for centuries. At Dolma Lhakang is a huge statue of Zetsun Dolma, the White Tara, goddess of compassion, who rose from the first tear of compassion shed by Bodhisattva Avalokiteswara.

Lhagyala gompa, Morshing

Having been established by the Kachen Lama in the

seventh century, Lhagyala gompa is older than even the Tawang monastery and is culturally important. The monastery is situated on the mountainside overlooking the Domkho-Morshing valley. The term 'lhagyala' means 'repository of over a hundred large icons'.

The gompa hit the headlines recently when it set a model example of Buddhist values, by converting 85 sq km of its forest land, which

extends up to the Sakteng wildlife sanctuary in Bhutan, into a community-conserved area, resulting in an important trans-national high-altitude protected corridor for wildlife. The Mon-Lhagyaala Buddhist Cultural Society (MLBCS) and the Kalaktang Tsopa, a collective of more than 20 villages, together declared the forested land as the Mon-Lhagyaala

Monpa women



Community Conserved Area (MLCCA).

Dirang

Dirang village, or **Dirang basti**, as it is locally known, is the old and more interesting part of Dirang. At **Dirang Dzong**, the medieval fortified section where people still live in 500-year-old cold-proof stone houses, you can sometimes see Monpa women weaving their own textiles by hand, and even spinning their own woollen yarn. The *dzong* isn't in great shape, compared to the *dzongs* of Bhutan or even the nearby Thembang village, but Dirang basti has an endearing old-world charm about it, especially if you stay for a few days without 'sightseeing' goals. The **Kalachakra Gumpa**, above Kalachakra village, near Dirang, is special, since it's over 500 years old. Not too many tourists visit it though.

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The New Gumpa in Dirang stands atop a hill overlooking the town

Also known as the Thupsung Dhargye Ling Monastery, construction on the **New Gumpa** began in the year 2008 and was completed in 2016. It was consecrated by the Dalai Lama on April 5, 2017. Built upon a hill with an excellent view of the entire town, this monastery is a haven of peace and serenity. Take the slope from the parking lot which leads to the main

prayer hall. The prayer hall is surrounded by well-manicured gardens and pathways that are flanked by multiple rows of prayer wheels. The walking path that begins near the prayer hall runs all the way to the edge of the cliff on which the monastery sits.

Bomdila

The town has three monasteries: the Upper, Middle



and Lower Gompa. The Lower Gompa stands at the beginning of the Bazaar Lane. Beyond the Bazaar, the road goes uphill, leading to the Middle Gompa, located on the face of a hill and visible from miles away. The Upper Gompa, a replica of the 15th-century Tsona Gontse Monastery in southern Tibet, with its intensely painted prayer wheel, is about 5km from the town centre. The Upper Gompa, oldest among the three, involves the most climbing, and has the best views. Practitioners of Tibetan medicine come here to pray to the 'Blue Medicine Buddha', who is believed to help both the healers and the sick here.

Chilipam Gompa, Rupa

A worthwhile 12km detour from Rupa town in **West Kameng** district, this is a two-storied monastery with ornate architecture and

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Upper Gompa, Bomdila

interiors, great mountain views and a school for young Buddhist monks. The monastery has a profusion of animal motifs and sculptures adorning the walls.

The 'Old Gompa' of Samten Yongcha, Mechuka

The 16th-century 'Old Gompa' of Samten Yongcha, near Mechuka, in Arunachal Pradesh's Shi

Yomi District, is one of the oldest Buddhist *gompas* in the state. It is even older than the more visited 17th-century Gaden Namgyal Lhatse monastery at Tawang (popularly known as the Tawang Monastery), but not so known outside the region. Though most of the small wooden structure has been either rebuilt or renovated over the years, it does have that local feel. The set-

A stupa at the 'Old Gompa'



ting is beautiful, too—it's perched on a hill overlooking the Yarbak Tsu river valley and snow-covered peaks like Tanzen La. The isolated hilltop location of the place adds to the serenity.

At the *gompa*, a multitude of fluttering multicoloured Buddhist prayer flags, demonoid tantric idols, paintings and masks really set the mood. The newer idols were made by Rinpoche Kunsang Dechen Rangdol, father of the present head lama of Mechuka, and some of the older relics, idols and scriptures here are twice as old as the *gompa* itself.

Most regular cars can't manage to make it up the dirt road leading to the *gompa*, so if you need to reach all the way up by road, you'd need an SUV. A nicer way would be to just do the one-hour easy trek to the *gompa* and enjoy the



Buddhist deity at the gompa in Mechuka

views of snow-covered mountains and pine forests, which is more in keeping with the spirit of the place.

Getting there

The monastery is on a hill near Segong village, about 14km from Mechuka town. Mechuka, a beautiful high-altitude valley close to the Indo-Tibetan border and home to the Buddhist Memba tribe, can be

reached from Aalo or though private taxis and shared cabs, through a twice-a-week chopper service from Naharlagun. Aalo is further connected to the plains by road to Murkongselek (142km/4hrs), the closest rail head, and Dibrugarh (256km/6.5hours) airport/railway station. Regular shared 'Line Sumos' ply to Aalo from both places.



The stone-edifice of Thembang Dzong

Thembang

With its medieval-era indigenous stone architecture, dramatic landscapes and ancient culture, the ancient fortified village kingdom of Thembang in Arunachal Pradesh's West Kameng district is one of the state's better-kept secrets, and this village is currently contending for UNESCO World

Heritage status.

Since Thembang Dzong (fort) is believed to be constructed before 1100 CE, UNESCO believes that this may very well be the precursor to the more majestic Dzong architecture of Bhutan and Tibet, a crossover cultural hub between these areas and Northeast India. Thembang was once the capital of a

large territory ruled by a descendant of the king of Tibet, and has witnessed many wars in the past, leading to a high level of fortification. The story is that in its heyday, large slabs kept on top of the fort walls would fall on any intruder who would try to scale them.

A living museum

The Monpa tribals here still live more or less self-sufficiently in old-style traditional stone and timber houses built using locally sourced materials, and practice a mix of Tibetan-style tantric Buddhism. Retaining many of their ancient animist traditions, they also worship nearby mountains like *Lachung* and *Dumri* as deities, and dedicate a ritual to them every seven years.

Operatic Monpa tribal costume dance dramas like the Yak dance and the *long* and elaborate Aji Lamu cos-

tume dramas, whose ending can be decided by the audience's reaction, are still performed here, for the locals, and by the local artists.

Every Monpa house has a prayer room. Every morning, they offer water in bowls at the altar, light incense and butter lamps, repeating the mantra of Avalokiteswara, 'Om mane Padme hum' several times.

The main *gampa* on the

Entry to Thembang Dzong



hill might be a new structure, but it's a very important one, and traditional in terms of practices and ceremonies, especially the Tibetan-style polyphonic chanting that accompanies some of the ceremonies. The only signs of modernity here are the satellite dishes on some of the primitive stone houses, and the occa-

A Buddhist stupa



sional offerings of Mirinda bottles and biscuit packets to the deities.

Eco-cultural Buddhism

The Monpas of Thembang are also highly advanced in organic farming, which has always given them all the food they ever needed. In their forests you'll see mounds of fallen oak leaves gathered in every corner, which they use as compost to grow their crops as well as a natural weedicide and pest-repellent. These are ideas that modern 'permaculture' has only just begun to grasp.

The village has preserved its wild areas as a sacred forest, knowing that they provide food and medicines, and maintains the 312 sq km of wilderness at an altitude ranging from 1,500m to 7,000m, as a Community Conserved Area. Foraging in the forest for wild vegetables, fruits

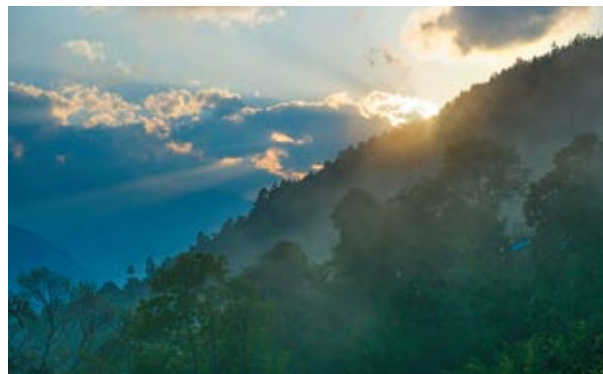


Churning yak butter the traditional way

and mushrooms and even strawberries can be a meditative and immersive way of engaging with the land, and nearly any local guide should be able to take you through a wild foods foraging walk, since most people in Thembang have good knowledge of wild plants.

Further up from Thembang, around villages

like Chander, Lagam and Mago, is where the Brokpa country begins. The Brokpa, a yak-herding community of nomads, maintain regular relations with the people of Thembang, bartering yak milk, butter, *churpi* (yak cheese) and yak meat with the corn, barley, buckwheat and dry red chilli grown here. Plan a long stay, and



A spectacular sunset from Thembang

trek to these high-altitude meadows, all the way up to the snow-covered Sela Pass and beyond, to spend time with this community.

How to reach

The nearest railway station is at Tezpur, roughly 151km from Bomdila, the closest transport hub. The nearest international airport from Bomdila is Guwahati, 309km. Local taxis and buses ply from both the railheads and the airport.

Where to stay

This is where it gets interesting: Thembang has an active community-based tourism project, which promotes very reasonably priced homestays in charming traditional-style stone and timber homes, with spacious old rooms and excellent hosts. Contact Sang Dorjee (09402986769) for bookings. Tsetan Jurme (094362 36001) also runs a great homestay here and can cook Monpa food. ■

HINDUISM IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Arunachal Pradesh is primarily a tribal and Buddhist state, and doesn't have a dominant influence of Hinduism in its contemporary or indigenous cultures. Further, Hindu references don't figure in any of the elaborate tribal oral history records. However, a series of archaeological excavations around southern parts of the state, close to Assam, have attracted the attention of both Hindu pilgrims and archaeology enthusiasts; hence a Hindu pilgrim circuit was born.

Ita Fort: These are the remnants of the brick walls of a fort after which Itanagar town was named when it was built as a capital city for

the newly-created state of Arunachal Pradesh. There is some controversy regarding the date and the builder of the fort. Scholars earlier ascribed the fort to Ramchandra of the Jitari dynasty, dated 1350–1450 CE. More recently, Lila Gogoi, an authority on the Buranjis of Assam, attributed it to Ahom King Chakradhvaj Simha in 1688 CE.

Excavated artefacts found at Ita Fort are on display at the Jawaharlal Nehru Museum in Itanagar. The fort is in ruins now, and is of mainly academic interest.

Malinithan: Near the Assam-Arunachal border in the West Siang district, the site has temple ruins dating



back to the 10th and 14th centuries CE of sculptural and architectural value. Some theorise that this was where Lord Krishna once stopped to rest, and was offered flowers by Goddess Parvati on his journey to Dwarka. Interesting artefacts from Malinithan, such as sculptures recovered from the site, are displayed at the Jawaharlal Nehru Museum in Itanagar.



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The Shivalinga on Kardo Hill

Bhismaknagar: Falling under the jurisdiction of the Guwahati circle of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), this brick fortress is believed to have been built by the Bhismaka dynasty of the Chutiya kingdom that had a stronghold in the Sadiya region of present-day Assam and the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh between the 12th and 16th centuries CE.

Parasuram Kund: This is a Hindu pilgrimage centre dedicated to sage Parshuram (one of Lord Vishnu's avatars) located on the Brahmaputra plateau in the southern reaches of the Lohit River, the kund is about 48km away from Tezu in Lohit district. Since it is believed that taking a dip in the holy water here cleanses one of sins, hundreds of devotees from Nepal and India come here to take a dip on the day of Makar Sankranti in January.

Courtesy ARUNACHAL PRADESH TOURISM



Parasuram Kund

Kardo Hill Temple

Earlier, one had to trek for two hours to reach Kardo Hill, which has a large rock that resembles a *Shivalinga*. Locals used to hike to the area and circumambulate the hill. Now, a road has been constructed that gets you to the hill in 15 minutes. The *Shivalinga* here is about 7.5m in height and has a circumference of about 6.5m. There is a

smaller rock adjacent to it, which is considered to be a form of Goddess Parvati.

Menga Cave

A natural cave high up on a hill, the Menga Cave is accessed by steps and is dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is a place deeply revered by Hindus and draws the devout especially during Makar Sankranti and Shivratri. It's near Daporijo.

Dangaria Baba Temple

According to the priest of Dangaria Baba Temple, the reason for establishing the Dangaria Baba temple dates back to 1962 when a PWD engineer constructing the Pasighat-Pangin road had a dream. In the dream, he was told to make Puja offerings at the temple's location where a small Shiva Linga was found.

It was also said that the engineers and travellers often came across a big cobra, testifying to construct the Mandir. Moreover, when the construction along Pasighat-Pangin road was in progress, several men and machines met with accidents, reasons for which were beyond the wisdom of earthly beings. However, the rate of accidents went down to almost nil after the temple was constructed.

So, with that belief, every believer of Dangaria (locally called 'Epom' or unseen

natural forces) travelling along this road doesn't forget to offer prayer to Dangaria Baba Mandir for a safe journey.

Due to its popularity, the numbers of pilgrims visiting Dangaria Baba Temple multiply every year.

Akashiganga Temple

One of the best-known Hindu pilgrimage sites in Arunachal, this temple is located 12km from Malinithan towards Aalo. According to Hindu mythology, one of the parts of Sati, Lord Shiva's consort, fell in this location. It's believed to be the head, making it sacred to Shakti worshippers. There's a holy water tank here, about 100m from the temple. A sparkling object is said to appear in the tank from a distance, but disappears once one gets closer. Devotees from all over turn up to witness this phenomenon. ■



MOPIN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Witness the enchanting celebration of the agricultural festival of Mopin, primarily observed by the Galo tribe in East and West Siang districts

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WEDDING BELLS!

Tribal weddings are very different from the big fat weddings of mainland India, and far less formal. In many tribes, the couple getting married may have already been formally engaged or living together for years before the actual 'wedding', an event where the clans of both the bride and groom bond and exchange gifts, livestock and valuables to formalise their bond.

The main purpose of the formal wedding in most tribes is the payment of a 'bride price,' which is the opposite of the dowry system of mainland India. In most tribal societies, which until recently followed a cashless economy, the family of the groom needs to give something in kind to the bride's family to formalise the wedding. In

many tribes, part of this can be *mithuns* and livestock, with some *mithuns* being sacrificed at the wedding itself to feed the gathering.

Both sides generally gift each other valuables at a wedding, including valuable artefacts and antiques, swords, old machetes (*daos*), antique beaded jewellery and necklaces (*tadok*), livestock, handmade loin loom textiles, dry fish or meat and lots of *apong*.

In tribes such as the Nyishis and Tagins, the value of gifts exchanged on both sides is expected to be approximately equal for the formal wedding (*nyidha*) to be finalised. When these exchanges are in kind, assessment of value itself can naturally involve a lengthy round of negotiations, with heated



Adi women sing traditional Ponung folk songs during a nyidha; and

debates and money calculations between representatives of both clans in front of an audience during the day of the wedding itself. Finally, after inspecting and assessing the exchange value of these gifts as fair, an agreement is reached, and this seals the marriage. Dancing and celebrations then follow. This bargaining in front of

an audience is an unusual but effective way for both clans to get to know each other quickly and cement a stronger relationship once they come to an agreement. There is also sometimes a storytelling and chanting session by the fire devoted to the gift articles like old swords and antique bead necklaces, which have moved from one clan to the



the Nyishi tribe's animist wedding customs

other, in which these articles themselves are animated into characters to whom the former owners are allowed to say goodbye.

Adi weddings are less about ceremony, or even the bride or the groom, and more about getting together as a community for some wonderful food, drink and bonding.

In Tai Khamti weddings,



gunshots announce the groom's arrivals and departures, and everything moves by the clock; auspicious times are fixed for every part of the process. The bride price isn't claimed by the bride's parents. Instead, various groups related to the bride, like her friends, aunts, cousins and even servants, all make *kittangs* (road

Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN



Snapshots from Tai Khamti weddings

blocks), where they playfully block the groom's path and demand money in jest, to allow the groom to take the girl home. The groom's side needs to bargain and settle each of these demands through a mediator before they are allowed to pass to the next gang, and finally get to take the bride home. Tai Khamti weddings are

believed to have some of the best wedding food in the state.

Wedding season for most tribes in Arunachal Pradesh is from rice harvest season (November) and ends before the rains begin in March. This also coincides with many tribal festivals and bamboo house-building season. ■



ARTS & CRAFTS

Weaving

One aspect that is common to all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh is their superb craft skills. This is one of the few parts of the world where loin looms or back strap looms, known to be world's most primitive loom requiring extreme weaving skills, are still used in textile making. In back strap looms, there is no real frame because the weaver is the 'loom'. With a few pieces of bamboo and sticks, rope and a belt tied around their backs, the weavers simultaneously maintain fabric tension and insert the yarn weave by weave for weeks, to create a textile with extraordinary tribal motifs and patterns. One speciality of the loin loom is that it allows the weaver to brocade designs into the

fabric by hand as and when it is being woven.

Every tribe has a different set of traditional patterns and colours. While traditional motifs are still around, tribal weavers have also been organically experimenting with a whole assortment of new materials, colours, designs and motifs, reinventing their aesthetic, resulting in some truly spectacular and colourful designs ranging from elegant subtlety to tastefully done neons and metallic bling! Since making sarongs, waistcoats, cloaks and jackets involve weeks of painstaking labour, they are understandably expensive, but worth buying. A handmade sarong woven by the Idu Mishmi women of Dibang Valley, who are among the



Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN



A loin loom in use

best weavers in Asia, could cost anywhere upwards of ₹5,000, but even this is a bargain for the skill and time involved in making each unique piece.

Loin loom textiles, hand-made tribal jewellery and bamboo handicraft articles are available in the government-run 'craft centres' at nearly every town in

Arunachal Pradesh, but a far better way of acquiring them would be to go to the villages, meet the weavers, make friends and buy directly from them. Ask your tour operator or local friends to connect you to local artisans in the villages who will be happy to show you their creations over a cup of chai.

House-building and bamboo craft

Just as textile weaving is a female skill common to every tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, all men are traditionally expected to have basket, cane and reed weaving skills, using which they make an astonishing variety of utility objects, from baskets and machete

covers to elaborate backpacks and fishing equipment. Every man is also traditionally expected to know how to build a house using locally sourced materials such as bamboo, wood, stone and thatch roofs using elephant grass and locally sourced leaves such as 'toko'. Some tribes such as the Galos are known

Constructing a house



Every man in the village contributes during house-building

to conduct rituals while replacing thatch roofs, since this is considered to be an important custom.

During house-building season, most tribal people can build a stilted bamboo longhouse in under four days flat, including the invariably jolly house-building party. What makes this possible is a strong sense of community. When anybody needs to build a house, the whole village helps out. The

host, meanwhile, keeps the kitchen going and *apong* (traditional grain wine) brewing for everyone constantly, which is quite a task by itself. From a very young age, every young man learns bamboo craft by helping his neighbours and sharpening his expertise in the process, while women become expert vintners, especially since *apong* is used as sacred ritual wine in nearly every animist cere-



Arunachal is known for some great crafts

mony, which again will involve bamboo craft to build *apong* filters, totems and baskets. Each of these weaving skills is always applied in other contexts, such as building makeshift shelters in the forest, complicated traps and paraphernalia for river fishing and hunting. Bamboo is central to the tribes here. They use it for building homes, baskets and holsters of various kinds; they also eat it in several forms. It is the fastest combusting firewood availa-

ble in most parts, useful for the hearth, hence is at the centre of traditional homes.

To experience the bamboo craft and house-building culture of Arunachal Pradesh, ask your tour operator or local friends to take you to a tribal village during the months between November and February. Most animist festivals have bamboo weaving as part of the pre-ritual preparations, so this is also a good time to see people working. ■

CALENDAR OF FESTIVALS (2019)

Festival	Tribe	Date
Si-Donyi	Tagin	January 6
Sarok	Aka	January 11
Reh	Idu Mishmi	February 1
Donggin	Adi	February 2
Boori-Boot Yullo	Nyishi	February 6
Shapwang Young Manau Poi	Singhpo	February 14
Tam Ladu	Digaru/Tarun-Mishmi	February 15
Oriah	Wancho	February 16
Nyokum	Nyishi	February 26
Unying-Aran	Adi	March 7
Mopin	Galo	April 5
Pongtu	Tutsa	April 11
Sangken	Khamti/Singhpo	April 14
Longte	Nyishi	April 15
Moh-Mol	Tangsa	April 25
Gumkum-Gumpa	Puroik	April 25
Dree	Apatani	July 5
Solung	Adi	September 1
Pham-Kho-Sowai	Howa (Bugun)	September 10
Ke-Meh-ha	Idu Mishmi	September 24
Chindang	Miji	October 15
Nyethrii-Dow	Aka (Hrusso)	November 15
Chalo-Loku	Nocte	November 25
Podi-Barbi	Adi	December 5



3.417 MM

TRADITIONAL FISHING TECHNIQUES

Long before nets, bait, lines, shiny spoons and lures were used to fish, the Tani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the Galos, used indigenous and sustainable river fishing techniques.

Some of these practices involve rituals and taboos, especially since some large fish, such as the *mahseer*, are believed to be the property of the *yapoms*, or the forest spirits, which humans borrow.

Using an understanding of the rivers and materials from the forest, the animist Galos have developed dozens of interesting practices.

Lipum—Zen of fishing
Observing basic river fish behaviour led to the understanding that more stones

and more warmth meant more fish. This led to an ingeniously simple solution: lay a formation of flat stones in a neat, one metre-deep circular formation in a quiet, shallow part of the river to create a warm, dark and stony micro-habitat shelter that attracts algae, insects and, with them, fish, prawns and crabs, which then make this their home. This technique, called *Lipum* (in the Galo language) or *Engo Lingkum* (in some Adi dialects) is the mainstay of many riverside hamlets. After two or three months, the fish are ready to harvest.

Removal of the fish also requires a bit of handcraft: the Galos use a long rectangular mat, hand-woven with bamboo, cane and wild

vines called the *ichir*. They join this on two ends to make a cylinder-shaped circular 'fence' to surround the circular *lipum*, so that the fish cannot escape once they're inside. It doesn't end there; there's a hole in the *ichir* in which they insert an interesting handmade conical bamboo device called the *idir*, which allows more fish from outside the enclosure to enter, but once they're in, bamboo gill-like

Pole fishing at Boleng



strips on the inner part of the device don't let them leave. Once the *lipum* is abundant with fish, crabs and prawns, it is ready to harvest, anything between four and 10kg of fish. The cost of *lipum* is literally zero, since all that's required is a bunch of stones and bamboo-weaving skills.

A cross between trap-hunting, fish farming and chess, *lipum* involves zen-like patience, strategy, observation skills and the thrill of mystery.

The fish can be harvested and smoke-dried on the hearth when ready; but sometimes, they are just left in the *lipum*, and pulled out whenever there are guests to entertain, just like meat in a refrigerator; only this way is much fresher, cheaper and eco-friendly.

Consider it a display of love when a Galo host unfolds a *lipum* feast in your honour!

Photographs by SANJIV VALSAN



Tahum kunam, fishing for prawns, small fish and crustaceans

Liite—Trap-fishing with currents

Liite is another technique that uses the trapping principle of the conical *idirs* described above, without luring the fish in any way. In *liite*, the fisherman traps the fish as they move downstream with the current.

The first step is to place stones and boulders on the river's course to obstruct its

flow, allowing the water to move only through a few spots, which form narrow channels. Along the mouths of each of these channels, a wicker '*takom*,' is strategically placed overnight. This is a cleverly thought-out conical trap woven from bamboo mesh with openings on both ends. While the wide mouth-end of the cone faces the current, let-

ting the fish inside, bamboo spoke-gills facing inwards don't allow them to leave the way they entered. The narrow end of the cone allows only water to filter through the mesh, but not the fish, effectively making this device a funnel-shaped filter-trap. The *takom* cone-traps are placed in the evening, left overnight to collect fish, and checked the following morning.

Cooking the day's catch



Pakam

'*Pakam*' is *lipum* taken to the next level, covering a greater area and involving many more hands, forest plant extracts, diving and even spear-fishing. Leaves, stones and pebbles are first placed over a large part of the river, creating an attractive habitat for all sorts of fish like a giant *lipum*, and left for a few months till the fish that settle down there are ready to harvest.

Tasks are then divided; while some people are put in charge of weaving the *ichir* valves, *idir* bamboo mats and fencing the whole enclosure with it, others prepare the material for the '*Tam Diinam*', a technique of stunning fish momentarily using neurotoxic forest plants like the toxic *taniir* tree, or *rugdik* fern.

Men and boys of all ages get together to pound the *taniir* bark into a hairy pulp that they use to stun the



The bark of the wild taniir tree is used to stun fish momentarily

fish. After pounding the *taniir*, they place it in the current, letting its opaque green toxin ooze out and flow towards the fish inside the enclosure. Soon enough, the fish get slow, and easy to spot and catch, even with bare hands.

If you see a fish, you can either grab it, or harpoon it with a bamboo spear. More

hands make for a greater catch, so the whole clan gets together—men, women, kids, everyone, to grab as many fish as they can.

Spear Fishing

In contrast to the calm, calculated and strategic approach of *lipum*, *pakam* is far more active. Deeper sec-

tions of the enclosure away from grabbing distance are where the people get to show their diving and bamboo spear-fishing prowess in icy cold water.

While the neurotoxin (*taam*) in the pulp can stun fish of all sizes temporarily, it doesn't kill them, nor is the meat from *taam*-stunned fish poisonous for human consumption. If the *taam* used isn't excessive, fish that are not caught during the short

Preparations for cooking fish



window period of intoxication eventually sober up on their own and return to their daily lives. Fishing can be more selective this way. The Noctes of Tirap also have a similar system of fishing using neurotoxic plants, called '*long taak*'.

Pole fishing

As anglers, Galos make their own poles with bamboo, and this technique is called '*ekar*', which is probably faster than bait-less trap-fishing techniques, if all you need is a few fish, as quickly as possible. The interesting part of *ekar* is the expedition for the bait in the forest because grasshoppers, worms and larvae can only be found on specific trees. The jackpot in this hunt is sometimes a small local tree, whose stem is typically infested with worms. When split in the middle, it's a wriggling, pulsating warehouse of bait.



Catch using the tahum kunam fishing style



Foraging for prawns

While the men do the heavier stuff, Galo women are in charge of the *tahum kunam*. A group sets out knee-deep along the length of a shallow stream carrying a large, conical handmade cane or bamboo mesh each, called a *raju*, into which women scoop pebbles, sand and stones in a combined lot, and, along with them, a

small quantity of prawns, crabs, small fish and edible local arthropods. The water drains out through the mesh on the *raju*, and all that's now left to do is throw out all the rocks and keep the fish. Repeat, several times.

Fishing dam parties

Hibok Penam takes community fishing to a much larger scale. The entire vil-

lage gets involved. The first step is to divert the flow of the river itself using stones, sand, leaf sheets and bamboo poles, and create a dam of stranded fish. Then let the neurotoxic *tam diinam* plants flow inside. A diving and harpooning extravaganza follows, with the fish totally disoriented. In the 'female section' of this shallow area, some women patiently forage for prawns, crabs and smaller fish using *raju* bamboo baskets, *tahum kunam* style, while others prepare black Galo rice wine called *poka* and a third lot stuff the fish, prawns and other catch into bamboo hollows with king chillies and bamboo shoot, roasting them directly on wood fire, as kids splash carefree in the water and teenagers steal secret glances of their first crush in this picnic-like setting. *Hibok penam* isn't



just a lot of work for food security; it's also a massive riverside party and a celebration of community.

SEASON

Lipum, *tam diinam* and trap fishing are done during the **winter season**. Prawn foraging (*tahum kunam*) and pole fishing (*ekar*) are generally possible year round.

Using bamboo and other locally available products to catch fish

Where to experience Galo fishing

Traditional river fishing is practiced at many tribal villages in Arunachal Pradesh. With a little advance notice, your local tour guide or tour operator should be able to organise an experience for you.

Alternatively, once a year, in November, the **Basar Confluence** (www.basarconfluence.org), a three-day Galo annual cultural showcase festival, has an entire day dedicated to traditional community fishing, during which you can experience tribal Galo fishing at its traditional best. ■

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

THE PLACE

Arunachal Pradesh is **over 81% forest** – these include tropical, sub tropical, pine forests, temperate forests and alpine forests, along with several sub-types. It is one of the world's most unexplored biodiversity hotspots. Climate varies with elevation (wide range between 50-7,000 mts msl), ranging from humid subtropical, to temperate, and cold, alpine at highest elevations, where it can snow during winters. It experiences heavy rainfall of 2000-4100mm annually. **Rains begin around February**, but it's most intense between April and October. Most travellers plan their trip during the dry winter months for obvious reasons, but flora tourism is year-round, since different species of course have different flowering seasons. Butterfly tours will obviously follow a similar pattern since butterfly diversity follows flower diversity.

THE PEOPLE

To put the state's diversity in perspective, Arunachal Pradesh shares borders with Assam, Nagaland,

Bhutan, China/ Tibet and Myanmar, along with a long history of exchange and migrations from each of these places, and as far away as present-day Mongolia. Officially, there are 26 major tribes with over 100 'sub-tribes' and dozens of languages, but in reality the diversity is even more than these numbers suggest. Culturally and geographically the state's ethnics groups can be divided into some broad categories – the Indo-Tibetan **Mahayana Buddhist tribes** such as the Monpas, Sherdukpen, Brokpas and Membas; the animist **Mishmi tribes** like the Idu Mishmis, Digaru Mishmis and Miju Mishmis; the '**Tani Tribes**,' such as the Nyishis, Apatanis, Galos, Tagins and various Adi tribes; and the **Theravada Buddhists** such as the Khamtis, Singphos; and the **Indo-Burmese** tribes close to the Myanmar border like the Tangsa tribes, Nocte groups and Wanchos, who share cultural and ethnic similarities with tribes in Nagaland and Myanmar. The major religions are Buddhism, Christianity and various ethnic animistic faiths. Hindi is used as a

common language, since without a common tongue, none of these tribes would have been able to understand each other's languages. English is also spoken in towns, since it's the medium of education. In Eastern Arunachal, some Assamese is also spoken. Since there are so many tribes here, tribal festivals feature almost year-round, and make for good bookmarks to plan an itinerary. Animist **festivals, rituals and weddings** almost invariably involve a publicly visible animal sacrifice (it will be eaten subsequently); the faint-hearted might want to take note in advance. Elderly people are highly respected in tribal societies, and senior citizens have a good life compared to their urban counterparts.

Hospitality

The tribals of Arunachal are a warm, friendly, generous and cheerful lot, and in general homestays are far more interesting than hotels. Tourism is still raw, infrastructure is just about coming up and creature comforts might not always be possible in many places, but this is all part of the adventure. You might even encounter situations where you will be offered food and homestay

accommodation by a genuinely hospitable tribal person you just met, who refuses to accept money for it since it is against his culture and ethos to charge for food or stay. So it helps to have a bunch of nice gifts ready in your bag to give away in such situations; these will be happily accepted, and can sometimes go much better with the culture, unlike money. Alternatively, one could also buy handicrafts from them, since nearly every woman in the villages is a textile weaver here, and most older men are adept at bamboo craft. In any case in some tribes, when you visit any old villager's home, it is often customary to bring small gifts in kind such as tea leaves, coffee, dry fish, dry meat, etc; so it's best to prepare accordingly. At the end of your trip, if you have any extra gifts left, you could give them away to villagers anyway just to make people happy, which leads to new bonds, friendships and cultural exchange.

Safety

In general, this is a safer state for travellers (solo female travellers included) than many parts of India, and

robberies are extremely rare, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, and provided you exercise basic commonsense, it's generally safe to trust in the hospitality of locals you might meet. However, days typically begin and end early here, and streets and lanes in bazaar areas of small towns are deserted late at night, so it's probably best not to pursue an overactive nocturnal life in such areas. Villages are extremely safe, though. Dress code: moderately modest.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

AIRPORTS AND HELICOPTERS

The airports are Pasighat (weekly flights from Kolkata), Tezu (to be fully functional soon), Guwahati (International, Assam), Dibrugarh/ Mohanbari (Domestic, Assam - useful for southern and eastern Arunachal), Lilabari (Domestic, Assam - closest to Itanagar), Tezpur (Assam, domestic, better for Western Arunachal). Regular helicopter services (operated by SkyOne) connect Mohanbari/Dibrugarh and Itanagar (via its twin city Naharlagun) to a few headquarters in

Arunachal. These can be incredibly convenient, save lots of time and present great value for money; but safety and last-minute flight cancellations can be a concern during rough weather. Additionally, you could suddenly find that your booking stands cancelled due an emergency medical case requiring quick transport. All things considered, it's tricky to plan tight schedules relying on the chopper services during your return journey, when you have a flight already booked that you absolutely don't want to miss. In our experience, here's the smart way to use the choppers: Book your trip into Arunachal from Guwahati or Mohanbari airport and some part of the onward journey by chopper, along with a 'Plan B' road plan, in case the chopper is cancelled; but be sure to plan your return trip back to the airport entirely by road to be on the safe side. During rainy or stormy weather, avoid chopper rides involving higher altitude mountains altogether. Regular, comfortable, pay-per-seat share taxis ply between Guwahati Airport and Itanagar, and reasonably priced air conditioned buses leave every half hour or so between

Guwahati airport and Ulubari, which is near the railway station in downtown Guwahati. Smartphone app-based all taxi services such as Ola and Uber are otherwise the cheapest and most reliable means to move around Guwahati town till you make your onward journey.

TRAINS

The most useful railways stations are Naharlagun (near the capital Itanagar), Silapathar, Jonai, Harmuti Jn. and Murkingsalek (all on the same line in Assam) on one end; and Tinsukia and Dibrugarh (Assam). Guwahati in Assam is also a useful interchange station, since it has a major airport and connects Naharlagun, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh to most parts of India. Be warned that train travel to Arunachal Pradesh is for strictly long haulers; The fastest train from Delhi to Itanagar, for example takes close to 36 hours. Having said this, the trains on this route are cleaner and better maintained than the average Indian standard, especially the Rajdhani and intercity express trains from Naharlagun, and reservations aren't difficult to get, even last minute.

Getting in and out of Naharlagun railway station using public transport can be a confusing affair, especially for those catching early morning trains from Naharlagun. At the Itanagar end of things, the government-run APST bus service has a bus service running to and from Naharlagun railway station and Itanagar/Naharlagun town, coinciding with the departure and arrival of major trains, but these are easier to reach from Naharlagun railway station to Itanagar/Naharlagun town than the other way around. These 'feeder service' buses leave downtown very shortly after the arrival of each train, so get off the train quickly if you need to catch them. Taxis are generally available at the railway station as well.

LOCAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

There's a whole biodiversity in these category, ranging from the cheaper state-run APST buses, to private bus operators such as Network, and budget-friendly 'Line Sumos,' which are basically cramped share SUV taxis plying between different towns and villages, with a medley of Bollywood songs sometimes playing nonstop

along the route. Line taxis penetrate deeper into Arunachal than the other modes, and reach fast as well. Booking more than one seat per traveller (2 or 3 seats) could still work out cheaper than hiring your own car, let you control the music (!) and can often be a more acceptable compromise between cost and comfort when you don't have your own car. Or better yet, if travelling in a big group, hire the whole vehicle by booking all 10 seats, which can oddly still work out cheaper than 'hiring a car.' Safety-wise, this can be a particularly smart choice on tricky routes and difficult mountain roads, where the Line Sumo driver who does a certain route daily would know the terrain better than someone who's less familiar with the place. Most towns have a bazaar area, where you'll find the 'counter' where you can enquire about bus and Line taxi services, and even hire private cars. Bookings can subsequently happen even over the phone, and payment is strictly cash only.

Itanagar town has expensive three-wheeler 'auto-rickshaws' and cheap 'Trackers' and 'Tempos,' which are

basically share-taxis that ply along the long arterial road covering the length of both Itanagar and Naharlagun, and on to Doimukh and the Banderdewa Gate, forming the border with Assam. At night, even these services stop, and the rickshaws nearly triple their rates. Even later into the night (post 9pm) you will often find no transport at all, at any price! So it's best to have a car in Itanagar, especially if you plan to return to your room late at night. Towns like Roing in Lower Dibang Valley, however have more reasonably priced and reliable auto-rickshaws, so local public transport varies greatly from town to town. By and large, it's best to have your own vehicle, should you choose to travel without an operator who arranges everything for you. Whatever the case, rush hour traffic in Itanagar is real, and you want to avoid being in it.

ROAD TRAVEL

Driving into Arunachal always involves crossing Assam, where the roads are much better, but once you enter hilly terrain, the story changes. Mountain road conditions in Arunachal can vary from buttery smooth and comfortable

to adventurous, off-roader style rollercoaster experiences. Don't be fooled by linear distances between two points the map — negotiating rough, zigzaggy mountain roads can account for biggest component of travel time in Arunachal, especially if you're planning several regions of this large state on the same trip. It's always a good idea to enquire not just about distances, but also road conditions, while charting out your routes. It rains here for nearly nine months of the year, so this is worth keeping in mind, especially if you're cycling or motorbiking. Road conditions are best in the dry season (Oct-Feb), when road travel times are a lot faster. Regular Indian driving licenses are valid in Arunachal, but try and avoid negotiating rough mountain roads in foggy or stormy weather at night; in some instances travel on this routes may be officially closed during this time to ensure that mishaps are avoided; it's safest to either wait till the light or weather clears up, or get a person who's familiar with the area to drive. Arunachal Pradesh may be a mountain biking paradise, but spontaneously renting bicycles is

almost unheard of in these parts; so if you're planning on cycling, either get your own, rent a bike from Assam or get your tour operator to make the arrangements.

ATMs, cash, Communication, Internet: Be sure to stock up on cash, because in many interior places you'd want to visit, credit card payment isn't possible, and ATMs are also known to run out of cash intermittently. Most urban and semi-urban and village areas have cellphone coverage, but the operator may vary, so carrying dual SIM phones or multiple phones is advisable if connectivity is vital during your stay. You can be sure however, that many of the most beautiful forests in Arunachal will not have mobile coverage, so prepare accordingly. For internet, you'll have to depend on your cellphone and hotspots most of the time. A power bank can also be handy during power cuts, especially in remote areas. India Post's 'Speed Post' service interestingly works better in Arunachal Pradesh than most parts of India, and can be useful in smaller towns and villages, where private courier companies don't operate.

PERMITS AND BORDERS

Arunachal Pradesh lies on India's border with Bhutan, China/Tibet and Myanmar, but for the moment, tourists aren't allowed to cross over into these countries from Arunachal via these borders, either with or without the relevant visas. Indians and Myanmar citizens are occasionally allowed to cross the Pangsau Pass near Nampong, in Changlang District for a day, but lately, this passage has been opened to the general public somewhat less consistently.

Entering reserve forest areas and militarily or politically sensitive border areas might require special permission from the concerned authorities, such as the local Forest Range office, army authorities, DC, ADC, etc. In general, additional permissions from local authorities are required for sport angling or river rafting, which your tour operator will manage. Foreigners aren't allowed to enter certain border areas of Arunachal Pradesh. Unlike in other parts of India, most forests and water bodies in tribal areas are either

community-managed or private property, so avoid fishing, harvesting from orchards or farms excessive foraging without permission. In the Nocte and Wancho tribal villages of Tirap and Longding, it's generally a good idea as an outsider to meet the local king or chief as a courtesy visit, and in his absence, the village 'Gambura.' In other tribes, having any local contact from the village will do. These meetings can be useful icebreakers and set the tone for some good interactions.

Travel Permits for Foreign Travellers

Foreign tourists in groups of 2 or more (single for travel to Tawang and Ziro) need to apply for a **Protected Areas Permit (PAP)**, which costs US\$30 (valid for 30 days). You'd need to apply for these through local tour operators.

PAP is issued from the following offices to foreign travellers:

1. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi
2. Office of Resident Commissioner, Arunachal Bhawan, New Delhi

3. Office of Deputy Resident Commissioner, Arunachal Bhawan, Kolkata and Guwahati.
4. Department of Home, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.
5. Department of Tourism, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.

PAPs aren't issued to tourists in certain sensitive border areas such as some parts of Changlang, Tirap, Longding districts. Check if where you want to travel in Arunachal is a no-go zone for tourists. Researchers, scientists, etc might be able to travel to these parts, however in special cases, provided they have received a local invitation and have proper projects in these places.

Travel Permits for Indian Travellers

Though an Inner Line Permit (ILP) is mandatory for Indian citizens to enter Arunachal Pradesh, getting it is a simpler process than it is for foreigners, and with fewer restricted areas. Every district in Arunachal Pradesh has a similar administrative structure. Above the village and local authorities are Circle Officers, Additional Divisional Commissioners (ADC) in the bigger

villages and towns, and above that the Divisional Commissioner (DC). It helps to decide on the districts you are likely to visit while planning your trip itself, because the ILP is generally issued only a few districts at a time, and often not valid if you cross over to another district which isn't on your ILP, making spontaneous travel complicated for first-timers. To renew, extend your ILP or add a different district on your pass, if you don't choose the online route for whatever reason (such as temporarily not having internet or electricity), you'd need to submit a written application to the local DC or ADC. These offices are of course, closed on public holidays. Keep passport-sized photographs and photocopies of your ID handy

Apply for ILPs online here:
www.arunachalilp.com

Hardcopy ILP applications are also received and issued by the following offices

1. Delhi

The Resident Commissioner, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, Kautilya Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi.

Tel: 011-23013915

2. Kolkata

The Deputy Resident Commissioner,
Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, CE-109,
Sector-1, Salt Lake City, Kolkata.
Tel 033-23341243, 23589865

Cell 09830822512

3. Guwahati

The Deputy Resident Commissioner,
Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, GS Road
Rukminigaon opposite Manasa Mandir,
Dispur, Guwahati

Tel 0361-2412859, 2416720

Cell 7086026788

4. Shillong

The Deputy Resident Commissioner,
Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh,
Meghalaya, Shillong. Tel 0364-
2224247, 2224476

5. Tezpur

The Deputy Resident Commissioner,
Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh Parvati

nagar, Tezpur, Assam - 03712-260173
Tel 03712-260173, 260141

Cell 09435521735

6. Dibrugarh

The Deputy Resident Commissioner,
Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh,
Mohanbari, Dibrugarh, Assam
Tel 0373- 2382560/2382738.

7. From the office of all the Deputy
Commissioners of 25 Districts of
the state.

PERMITS ON ARRIVAL

**Tourist ILP facilitation centres are
at the following places:**

1. Naharlagun railway station
2. Gumto railway station
3. Guwahati Asom Paryatan Bhawan near
Nepali Mandir and Guwahati
LGBI Airport.

International Airport

Airport Director Tel 0361-2841909

[W aai.aero](http://www.aai.aero)

AIRLINE OFFICES

AIR INDIA

Toll Free 18602331407 [W airindia.in](http://www.airindia.in)

ALLIANCE AIR

Toll Free 18602331407

[W airindia.in/alliance-air](http://www.airindia.in/alliance-air)

GO AIR

Customer Care: 022-62732111

Toll Free: 18602100999 [W goair.in](http://www.goair.in)

Origin Bagdogra, Delhi, Kolkata

INDIGO

Tel: 0124-6173838 Cell 09910383838

[W goindigo.in](http://www.goindigo.in)

Origin Agartala, Amritsar, Bagdogra,
Bengaluru, Bhubaneswar, Chennai,
Delhi, Hyderabad, Imphal, Kochi,
Kolkata, Mumbai, Varanasi

VISTARA

Cell 09289228888 [W airvistara.com](http://www.airvistara.com)

DIBRUGARH AIRPORT

Mohanbari, Assam

Airport Director Tel 0373-2382755

[W aai.aero](http://www.aai.aero)

AIRLINE OFFICES

AIR INDIA

Toll Free 18602331407 [W airindia.in](http://www.airindia.in)

INDIGO

Tel: 0124-6173838

Cell 09910383838

[W goindigo.in](http://www.goindigo.in)

SPICEJET

Cell 09871803333

[W spicejet.com](http://www.spicejet.com)

LILABARI AIRPORT

North Lakhimpur, Assam

[W aai.aero](http://www.aai.aero)

AIRLINE OFFICES

ALLIANCE AIR

Toll Free 18602331407

[W airindia.in/alliance-air](http://www.airindia.in/alliance-air)

SPICEJET

Cell 09871803333, 09654003333

[W spicejet.com](http://www.spicejet.com)

Origin Kolkata

TEZPUR AIRPORT

Haleswar Dist-Sonitpur,

Tezpur, Assam

Airport Director Tel 03712-258441

[W aai.aero](http://www.aai.aero)

TRANSPORT DIRECTORY

AIR

IN ARUNACHAL

AIRLINE OFFICES

ALLIANCE AIR

Toll Free 18602331407

[W airindia.in](http://www.airindia.in)

Origin Guwahati

TEZU AIRPORT has been inaugurated,
but at the time of going to press is not
up and running as yet.

IN ASSAM

LOKPRIYA GOPINATH

BORDOLOI/ Guwahati

AIRLINE OFFICES

ALLIANCE AIR

Toll Free 18602331407

[W airindia.in/alliance-air](http://airindia.in/alliance-air)

HELICOPTER SERVICE

[W arunachalpr.gov.in](http://www.arunachalpr.gov.in)

Guwahati Ticket Counter

Cell 09085738939

Naharlagun Ticket Counter

Cell 09436291907

SECTORS:

Guwahati -Naharlagun

Guwahati-Tawang

Naharlagun-Pasighat

Pasighat-Along

Naharlagun-Mechuka

RAIL

Enquiry 139

[W indianrail.gov.in](http://www.indianrail.gov.in)

irctc.co.in

IN ARUNACHAL

BHALUKPONG RAILWAY STATION

Bhalukpong Railway Station is connected to Assam by the Bhalukpong-Dekargoan Passenger.

NAHARLAGUN RAILWAY STATION

Naharlagun Railway Station connects

Assam and New Delhi. Trains serving this station include the Naharlagun-Guwahati Donyi Polo Express, Naharlagun-Guwahati Shatabdi Express, Tinsukia Intercity Express, and Arunachal AC SF Express (bi-weekly) which connects Delhi, UP, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam to Arunachal Pradesh.

IN ASSAM

DIBRUGARH RAILWAY STATION

Dibrugarh Railway Station is well connected to Delhi, Amritsar, Chandigarh, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Uttar Pradesh etc. Major trains serving this station are Avadh Assam Express, Dibrugarh-Amritsar Weekly Express, Dibrugarh-Chandigarh Weekly Express, Dibrugarh-Kolkata Weekly SF Express and Dibrugarh-New Delhi Rajdhani Express. It is connected to Arunachal Pradesh by the Naharlagun- Tinsukia Intercity Express.

GUWAHATI JUNCTION

Guwahati Junction is a major railway station connecting Assam to other parts of the country. Major trains serving this station are Anand Vihar -Agartala Rajdhani Express, Bikaner-Guwahati Express,

Kolkata-Silghat Town Kaziranga Express, Mumbai LLT-Guwahati Express, etc. It is connected to Arunachal Pradesh by the Naharlagun-Guwahati Shatabdi Express, Tinsukia Intercity Express and Arunachal AC SF Express.

HARMUTI JUNCTION

Harmuti Junction is connected to served major metros and cities by Arunachal Express.

Other trains connecting Arunachal Pradesh are Naharlagun-Guwahati Shatabdi Express, Naharlagun-Tinsukia Intercity Express and Naharlagun-Guwahati Donyi Polo Express.

NORTH LAKHIMPUR RAILWAY STATION

North Lakhimpur Railway Station is connected to Arunachal Pradesh by the Naharlagun – Tinsukia Intercity Express.

RANGIYA JUNCTION

Rangiya Junction is a major railway station connecting Assam to major cities in India and Arunachal Pradesh. Trains serving this station are Kanchenjunga Express, Avadh Assam Express, North East Express, Mumbai LLT Kamakhya AC Express, etc. It is

connected to Arunachal Pradesh by Naharlagun-Guwahati Donyi Polo Express, Arunachal AC SF Express.

TEZPUR RAILWAY STATION

Tezpur Railway Station falls under the Rangiya Division. Trains serving this station are Alipurduar Jn-Silghat Town Rajiya Rani Express, Kolkata-Silghat Town Kaziranga Express etc. It is connected to Arunachal Pradesh by Guwahati-Naharlagun Shatabdi Express, Guwahati-Naharlagun Donyi-Polo Express, Arunachal AC SF Express.

TINSUKIA JUNCTION

Tinsukia Junction is connected to Dibrugarh, Guwahati by Ledo-Guwahati Intercity Express, Tinsukia-Jorhat Town Passenger, etc. It is connected to Arunachal Pradesh by Naharlagun-Tinsukia Intercity Express.

ROAD BUS

Aalo (SS) Cell 09436058188
Bomdila (SS) Cell 09402476020
Pasighat (SS) Cell 09612453200
Itanagar (SS/AS) Cell 09774034571
Roing (SS) Cell 09436222387
Tawang (SS) Cell 09436836087

TOURIST OFFICES

INFORMATION ⓘ INFORMATION & BOOKING ⓘ ⓘ

ARUNACHAL TOURISM

W arunachaltourism.com

ITANAGAR

Department of Tourism ⓘ

Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar
Cell 08787619774 (Director of Tourism)

GUWAHATI

Department of Tourism ⓘ

Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh

GS Road, Rukmani Village,
Opp Mansa Mandir, Dispur, Assam
Tel 0361-2229506 Cell 7086026788

NEW DELHI

Department of Tourism ⓘ

Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh
Arunachal Bhawan, Kautilya Marg,
Chanakypuri, New Delhi
Tel 011-23013915,
23013956

TOUR OPERATORS

BOMDILA STD 03782

Himalayan Holidays

Location ABC Bldg. Main Market,
Bomdila Tel 3782-222017 Cell 094360
45063 W himalayan-holidays.net
Services Car rental, tour packages,
transportation, accommodations, wildlife
tours, customised tours, forex, ticketing,
passport n visa, all permits
Destinations All North-Eastern States

ITANAGAR STD 0360

Duyu Tours & Travels

Location Vivek Vihar, College Road,
Itanagar Tel 0360-216450, 218056

Cell 09436044905 W arunachaltours.
com Services Car rental, tour
packages, customised tours,
transportation, accommodations
Destinations All North East

Kaziranga Tours

Address Kadambari Complex (Gr Flr),
Thana Charall Tel 2325969
Cell 09435530345, 09401343501
W kazirangatours.com

Services Customised tours, wildlife
tours, trekking Destinations All of
Arunachal Pradesh
Guwahati Branch House No 149 (1st

Floor), Kolnadhara Cell 07002412384

NAHARLAGUN

Help Tourism

Location Arunachal Paradise Tours
D Sector, Naharlagun
Cell 07002031852, 09862885645
Services: Rural Tourism, Homestays,
Nature Lodges, 'Biodivinity journeys'
Contact: Raj Basu +91-9434046892
E-mail: info@helptourism.com
W www.helptourism.com

Ravi Travel & Tour Inc

Location A Sector, Naharlagun (Near
Old Cinema Hall), Dist Papumpare
Cell 08257894003-04 Services Hotel/
Air/Rail bookings

Xcell

Location Hafizan Complex, Ulubari,
Opp Volvo Point, GS Road, Guwahati
Cell 09854121140 W xcell.co.in
Services Car rental, tour packages,
accommodations Destinations
Arunachal Pradesh, Assam

PASIGHAT STD 0368

Donyi Hango Tours

– Rafting / Trekking

Location Tebo Village, East Siang, NH

52, Pasighat Tel 222324 Cell
09436043393 W arunachal
donyihango.com Services Tour
packages, trekking, rafting, hotel
accommodations, transportation,
arrange permit

ROIING STD 03803

The Mishmi Hills Trekking Co.

Location 2 kms from Roing Cell
09436875102, 09366709589,
08974299357 Services
Car rental, Packages for all NE state,
customised tours, accommodations,
transportation

Wildwildeast

Location Roing Lower
Dibang Valley Cell 7002031852,
9862885645 Services Tribal ethno-
cultural festival tours, E mail
tajomtayeng@gmail.com

M/s Menchukha Tours & Travels

Location Menchukha/ Itanagar
Cell 09402224350 09402224350, Gebu
Sona 9436074877, 940299666
E-Mail: chukla12wang@gmail.com,
menchukhatravels@gmail.com
W gthomestay.com Services Culture
tours between Menchukha and Tato

HOMESTAYS

BHALUKPONG**Bham Homestay**

Location Thembang Village, Dirang
Cell 08729930222, 09436635835
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹700** **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, room service, parking, geyser, heater, common bath

Dirkhipa Homestay

Location Thembang Village, Dirang
Cell 08729930222, 09436635835
Room 2 **Tariff ₹700** **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, geyser, attached bath

Khaje Homestay

Location Thembang Village, Dirang
Cell 08729930222, 09436635835
Rooms 3 **Tariff ₹1,000** **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, room service, parking, geyser, heater, attached bath

Yangdol Homestay

Location Jigaon Village, Rupa, West Kameng
Cell 09402071593, 09402928011
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹1,000** **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, room service, geyser, heater, attached bath

Yeshi Homestay

Location Tipi Village, Near Kameng River
Cell 08415850764, 08731978022
Rooms 3 **Tariff ₹1,300-1,600** **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, room service

Yul Pema Chhen Homestay

Location Thembang Village, Dirang
Cell 08729930222, 09436635835

Rooms 2 ₹1,000 **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, parking, geyser, heater

NAMSAI**Greenview Homestay**

Location behind Higher Secondary,
Namsai
Cell 09436637187
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹3,000** with all meals **Facilities** Kitchen, vehicle for sightseeing

Hewli Homestay

Location Behind Buddhist Monastery,
Namsai
Cell 09862708997, 09436049977
Rooms 3 **Tariff ₹2,500** with two meals **Facilities** Kitchen, traditional cuisine, vehicles for sightseeing

Sangtini Homestay

Location Behind Buddhist Monastery,
Namsai
Cell 08794089075, 09366604048
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹2,500-3,000** **Facilities** Kitchen, parking, pic n drop, common bath

PASIGHAT**Ane Gumin Homestay**

Location Tigra Mirbu, Pasighat, East Siang
Cell 07005059493, 08731991784
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹1,600** per person, with two meals **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, common bath

K Gumin Homestay

Location Village Mebo, Romdum
Cell 09436053509, 08729989123
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹1,600** per person, with two meals **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, common bath

Nana Homestay

Location Village Takilalung, Pasighat
Cell 07085858003
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹1,800** per person, with two meals **Facilities** Kitchen, common bath

Narmi Homestay

Location Runne Village, East Siang
Cell 09862911689
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹1,600** per person, with two meals **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, room service, common bath

Takar Homestay

Location Tebo Village, East Siang, NH 52
Tel 222324
Cell 09436043393, 07005586217
Rooms 4 **Tariff ₹2,800-3,000** **Facilities** Kitchen, dining room

Pineapple Homestay

Location Village Napit, Pasighat, East Siang
Cell 09862571827

Tuniyang Homestay

Location Village Takilalung, Pasighat

AALO STD 03783**Bebo Home Stay**

Location Ori Village
Cell 07638933767, 08424802002
Rooms 8 **Tariff ₹1,500** per person, with all meals **Facilities** Kitchen, local guide, dining hall, room service, attached bath

ROING STD 03803**Dibang Valley Jungle Camp**

Location 12 km to Miuliati, Lower Dibang Valley
Tel 0353-2433683
Cell

09733000442 [w](http://www.helptourism.net) helptourism.net

Rooms 4, tents 6 **Tariff ₹5,000**; TE with all meals, tents ₹3,500; TE with all meals **Facilities** Restaurant, laundry, room service, attached bath, TV

Zaktum Notko – Artist Camp

Location Lower Dibang Valley, Bomjir, 17km from Roing
Cell 08258829810, 09402054057
Rooms 6 cottages **Tariff ₹2,500-3,500** **Facilities** Kitchen, food on request, dining hall, attached bath

TIP Also called Dambuk Homestay

TAWANG STD 03794**Jambey Villa Home**

Location Urgelling (4 kms)
Cell 08414987117, 09436045988
Rooms 6 **Tariff ₹1,800-3,000** **Facilities** Kitchen, food on request, dining hall, geyser, heater, attached bath

Lemberdung Home Stay

Location 8 km from Tawang Market
Cell 09436051009
Rooms 3 **Tariff ₹1,500-2,000** **Facilities** Kitchen, food on request, dining hall, geyser, heaters, attached bath

ZIRO STD 03788**Ngunu Ziro**

Location Siro Village, Ziro (3 kms from main Ziro Town)
Cell 09436047891, 09856209494
Rooms 2 **Tariff ₹1,200-2,000** per person, with two meals **Facilities** Kitchen, dining hall, parking, geyser, heater, attached bath

Photo Credits

Front Cover

SANJIV VALSAN

The Golden Pagoda or Kongmu Kham,
Namsai

Inside the Book

SANJIV VALSAN

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to feed his *mithun*

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Page 4, Bottom right: Tai Sang Along, a
costume dance drama

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Tawang

Page 5, Middle left: Archaeological finds from
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SANJOY GHOSH

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SHUTTERSTOCK

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