

## A TOUR OF SOME NORTH EAST STATES

### BY VETERANS & VEER NARIS - OCT/NOV 2023

#### **The Beginnings**

- A tour of the North East was the brain child of Cdr. Vijai Vadhera, (President NFMC). His enthusiasm, reputation, and experience in conducting similar tours with finesse, inspired Naval Veterans and Veer Naris to rush to be in the 'first 40' to be selected to visit these rarely traversed parts of our great country. The promise of a meticulous, comfortable, well-planned holiday (based on reputation from earlier tours) resulted in a long waiting-list of disappointed late-comers, looking for drop-outs for last- minute inclusions. Cdr. Vijai Vadhera did not disappoint the selected group. He roped in the knowledge and experience of veteran Col. Mani Gahatraj (an expert on tours of NE States), and a Travel Agency (See World Destinations), to chalk out a programme that would take into consideration sensitive needs like age-factors, physical limitations, medical requirements, dietary considerations, climatic conditions (in places being visited), et al.
- Three Zoom meetings in the months of Aug., Sep., and Oct. 2023 were conducted, to put faces to names, to invite suggestions, to brief everyone on what was being planned, and to advise participants on how to prepare themselves for the tour.

#### **The Assembly**

- On 30 October 2023, the tour commenced. While the bulk of the group came from Mumbai, others from Pune, New Delhi, Kolkata, and Bangalore formed 'the group of forty'. Movements were deftly planned for everyone to catch suitable flights to converge and meet up in Bagdogra airport within hours of each other. Departure photographs were shared as journeys commenced from different airports. The first meeting of 'the group of forty' at Bagdogra airport was a joyous one with some getting to see others years after shedding uniforms. Ms Shirley Dias, from 'See World Destinations', accompanied the group to look after details of guides, hotel and transport arrangements, local tours and other bookings, and to smoothen out unexpected situations if and when they arose. She was a definite asset to the group as was discovered as the tour proceeded.

#### **Departure Mumbai Airport**



#### **Onboard Indigo Flight with Captain**

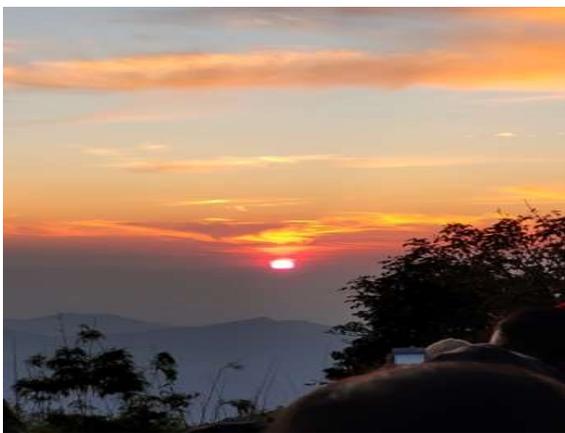


## Bagdogra – Darjeeling (30/31 Oct)

- Eleven Toyota Innovas – four persons per vehicle - took us from Bagdogra airport to Darjeeling via Siliguri, Kurseong, and Ghoom, with a brief stopover for lunch enroute.



- A late evening arrival at Hotel Sumi Queen's Yard in Darjeeling gave us time to rest and get over travel fatigue and recharge, in time for an early morning wake-up call (0315h!) to watch the sun's first rays falling on Kanchenjunga mountains, from Tiger Hill. It was cold! Very cold! It was also a long wait. As the first rays lit up the mountain range in white and golden hues, the sky portrayed a canvas of blue, pink, and purple. What a magnificent sight that was! – well worth the effort.



### Kanchenjunga at Sunrise

- During our stay in Darjeeling, we were able to eat authentic, Nepali food in thalis, in Kathmandu Restaurant, walk through Happy Valley Tea Estate and taste tea, visit a Peace Pagoda (Buddha Temple), and take a ride in Darjeeling's famed steam engine driven Toy Train.
- Full of tourists, Darjeeling needs to spruce up and work on cleanliness.



**Kathmandu Restaurant**



**Happy Valley Tea Estate**



**The Peace Pagoda**



**Steam Engine Toy Train**

**All Aboard!**

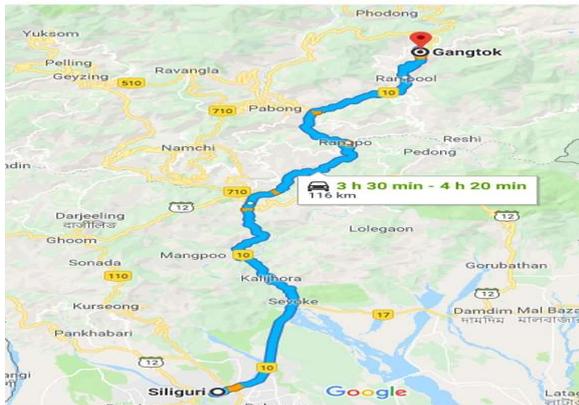


**War Memorial**



## Darjeeling – Gangtok (01 Nov)

- Leaving Darjeeling, we made our way to Gangtok by road, in the same Innovas. (These SUVs would be dismissed thereafter. All future trips would be in two 22-seater Force Tempo Travellers).



- The road clings to the hilly contours and winds its way along the main Teesta River which is joined by its tributary, the Rangit River (see pic) at a place close to Teesta Bazaar, and known as Triveni. We passed areas affected by the Teesta breaching its embankments due to a dam burst in Sikkim a few days earlier, leaving behind devastation of fauna, flora, and civilization. A four-hour journey got us to Gangtok and to our Hotel Suhim Portico located near the Police Bazaar, away from the hustle and bustle of the main town. In contrast to Darjeeling, Gangtok and its surrounds were squeaky clean after having just hosted a G-20 Meet.
- Our group split into two the following day, with one sub-group heading for Nathu La, and the other opting to visit locales in and around Gangtok.
- The Nathu La sub-group collected their sheaf of permits (signed, sealed, and stamped) and commenced their mountain journey. Numerous Check Posts, manned either by the Sikkim Police or the Army, were encountered on the high and winding highway. All

along, sign boards proclaimed the successes of the Border Roads Organization in keeping the artery open 24/7. The vehicles crawled past growling bulldozers clearing away landslides, and labourers tarring freshly resurfaced stretches of roads.



**Yak Ride!**



**Nathu La BRO Camp**



**Tsomgo Lake (Chho)**

- The sub-group that stayed back visited the Bakthang (water) Falls, the Ganeshtok temple, the Enchey Monastery, a Flower Garden, and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. Some scenes portrayed below will give the reader an idea of what was visited and seen.



**Bakthang Falls**



**Ganeshtok Temple**



**The  
Enchey  
Monastery**



**The Flower Garden**



**Namgyal Inst. of Tibetology**

- No visit to Gangtok would be complete without a walk-through MG Road and Lal Bazaar! – All spruced up for a G20 Meeting held earlier in the year.



**MG Road by Night**



**Lal Bazaar**

## Siliguri – A Fun Evening (03 Nov)

- After a sumptuous breakfast, we bade farewell to Hotel Suhim Portico and left Gangtok on 03 Nov, heading for Siliguri. Enroute, we stopped over for lunch in an interesting place just off the highway. The food was wholesome and tasty. They were expecting us. Shirley (See World Destinations) had ensured that through her channels.



- Arriving in Siliguri late afternoon, we checked into Hotel Tania's for the night. This halt was primarily to meet up with Col. Mani Gahatraj and Commodore KS Rai and their ladies, and to host them that evening to show our appreciation for all their help and advice that went into planning and making this trip so successful.



**Our Guests**



## A Vandhe Bharat Ride (04 Nov)

- The ‘morning-after-the-night-before’ is always a challenge, and particularly after a late night of merry-making! This was just such a morning. We had to check-out of the hotel before break of dawn to be transported to Jalpaiguri Railway Station to catch the Vande Bharat Express to Gauhati. The distance was too long for ‘weak and weary bones’ to travel (some with a hangover to boot!) by road, and our wise Tour Operator decided to give us a feel of this recently introduced new train and to let us sleep it off while it sped on to our next destination. With the high speeds the train is capable of, the journey could have been shorter had there not been so many stops enroute.



## Dinner Cruise on the Brahmaputra River (04 Nov)

- In the evening, after rejuvenating ourselves in Gauhati, in Hotel Vishwaratna, the group headed for the banks of the Brahmaputra River where we boarded ‘MV Manashputra’ (a river cruise boat). Yet another evening of wine, singing, dancing, and dinner, was in store for us while the boat quietly cruised up and down the placid river. We celebrated birthdays and wedding anniversaries of some of the members of our group, with traditional cakes. The evening was a great success, as can be seen from the few pictures that follow. Tired, but happy, we returned to the hotel to get some sleep.





## Two (!! Visits to Kamakhya Temple (05 & 10Nov)

- The famous Kamakhya Temple, located near Gauhati, was a ‘must-visit’ for those that follow the faith. But there was a problem. As ordinary pilgrims, we would have to join endless, serpentine queues to get a ‘darshan’, and we did not have the time. Hence, the services of the Indian Army, stationed locally, was sought in advance, to arrange for darshan through the ‘VIP route’. However, a visit by the King of Bhutan on the same day saw our numbers cut down to half. Only twenty could gain darshan through the VIP route. Understandably, there was disappointment written on the faces of those who were missing out. This was when our Group Leader, Cdr. Vadhera, showed his initiative and leadership qualities yet again. He arranged, through a special VVIP he knew, for the balance lot to visit the temple on our last day of the tour, while on our way to the airport, heading back to our respective homes. Not only was this achieved, but a few from the first batch managed to join the second group for a second darshan!





## Gauhati to Shillong (05 Nov)

- Earlier in the day, we had boarded two x 22-seater Force Tempo Travellers from the railway station, heading for Shillong – about 4 hours away, with a stop-over for lunch enroute. The first group visited the temple in the forenoon enroute. There was plenty of singing and cheer as the journey progressed. The four-hour's journey did not seem that long! (These two vehicles, plus a third one, only for luggage, took us everywhere and stayed with us right till the end of the tour.)





### **Stop-Over for lunch (Both groups joined up)**

### **Shillong & its Surrounds (06 to 08 Nov)**

- Also referred to by some as the Scotland of the East, there is so much to see in and around this former capital of Assam (Dispur is the present Capital). We anchored in Hotel Nirvana Orchid for three days and made forays to places of interest, returning to our rooms at the end of each day.



### **Hotel Nirvana Orchid**

### **Off on our Jaunts**

### **Day 1 - Dawki / Umngot River**

- Located on the Indo-Bangladesh border, this site offers boating in crystal clear water, clearly showing the rock bed beneath. The more adventurous from our group went boating while others whiled away their time on the embankment.



- We lunched at 'Ka Bri War Resort' on the Dawki Road and then moved to the next place of visit for the day.



## Mawlynnong – Asia’s Cleanest Village & Living Roots Bridge

- **Mawlynnong** is a village in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. Notable for its cleanliness, it was chosen by Discover India magazine as the cleanest village in India. After lunch, from Dawki, we drove across to this village.
- Mawlynnong is also known for its **Living Roots Bridge**. The beauty of this bridge makes one forget the hassles of going down all the way to the stream across which the locals have built this bridge, and then climbing back all the way up.
- We decided to spend a few minutes taking in the **waterfalls** before going down to the bridge. It was getting dark, and by the time we returned from the Living Roots Bridge, it was totally dark (gets dark in Eastern India early). We were disappointed to see Asia’s Cleanest Village in total darkness!!
- This terminated our days’ activities and we headed back to our hotel for a late dinner and to bed – thoroughly exhausted (at least those who descended and ascended to see the bridge)!



## Shillong & Its Surrounds (07 Nov)

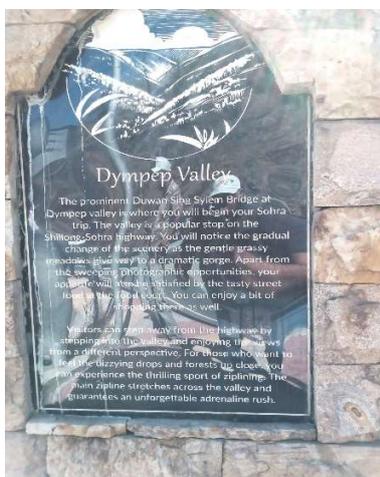
### Day 2 - Cherrapunji & Places Enroute

- On our second day-trip from Shillong, we got on to the road to Cherrapunji, or 'Sohra' as the locals call the place. While negotiating the roads in Shillong, we drove past **Ward's Lake**, which is a horse-shoe shaped artificial pool next to the Raj Bhavan, crowded with tourists, boating. Over a hundred years ago, in pre-Independent India, Chief Commissioner Sir William Ward planned this lake, and hence the name. We left the town behind and got on to the highway.



Ward's Lake, Shillong

- The two-plus hours trip by road was interesting and scenic. We passed waterfalls, lakes, breathtaking views of valleys, and interesting rock formations even while the road hugged the contours of the hills.
- We pulled over at **Mawkdok Dympep Valley** view point. The 'V'- shaped valley with green hills on either side made it irresistible us reach not to reach for our cameras and take shots.



Dympep

Valley





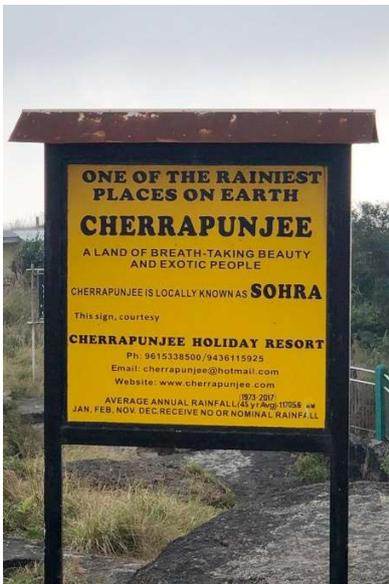
- The **Umiam Lake** was our next halt, just 15 kms north of Shillong. It was created by damming the Umiam River to provide hydro-electric power to the neighbourhood. Encircled by lush green panoramic hills, it was a sight to behold and photograph. We did not stay here for long as Cherrapunji, and lunch was beckoning us.



**Umiam Lake**



- **Cherrapunji, or Sohra**, was once thought to be the Rain Capital of the world, recording unbelievable levels of rainfall. The deep gorges in the area help in funneling low-forming rain clouds through this area which provide very generous condensation. Some of us carried raincoats and umbrellas, but were sorely disappointed to find the place cloudy but very warm. The reputed waterfalls were down to a trickle. We will never know if climate change has brought about this dry period, or was it just our bad luck to get there at the wrong time. We did not get wet!



**Dancing on top of the World!**



**Nohkalikai Falls**



**Seven Sisters Water Falls**



- Leaving Sohra behind, a little disappointed, we moved to ‘Orange Roots Vegetarian Restaurant nearby, for a quick lunch as we had more to see before darkness overtook us.



- **Mawsmmai Cave** was created as a result of torrential rains in the Khasi Hills regularly flowing through the only limestone rock formations in the region. Located a short distance away from Cherrapunji, it is in Mawsmmai village and a frequented haunt of tourists. The cave has a wide opening at both ends but there are sections where one has to squeeze and crawl through, to get to the other end. It is a one-way street! Once you enter, there is no going back, and you have to keep going till you reach the exit. It was a challenging experience and quite a few from our group undertook this tour, including the oldest member of our group!



- While returning to our vehicles through Mawsmat, we found a musical group performing in the village square. Spontaneity knows no bounds, and some of our group, led by Cdr. Vadhera, joined in the fun by taking over the mic and doing a jig!



- We returned to our hotel after this outing and made merry in the hotel, this being our last night there. The morrow saw us heading out to our next destination, but not before visiting another interesting place that Shillong had to offer!

## Shillong & Its Surrounds (08 Nov)

### Day 3 - Don Bosco Museum

- Don Bosco Museum in Shillong provides a glimpse of the rich and multi-cultural lifestyles of the individual peoples of North East India under one roof in one building. Built by the school by that name to enlighten students, it is also a much-visited tourist sight. On our way out from Shillong we stopped and spent a good part of the morning walking around this building. Privately owned by the school, the efforts put in is commendable and very impressive – a must-visit for anyone going to Shillong. A few photographs below elaborate this.

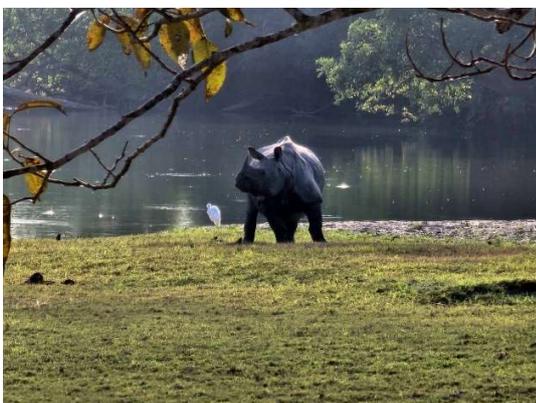




- After the Don Bosco Museum visit, we headed for, and reached, Kaziranga National Park, in Assam, by nightfall. The Park is vast and runs along the southern portion of the Brahmaputra River flowing through the State. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage site. Hotel Landmark Woods is located in the National Park, and that was where we stayed. A drink, a good dinner, and we retired to our rooms for the night.

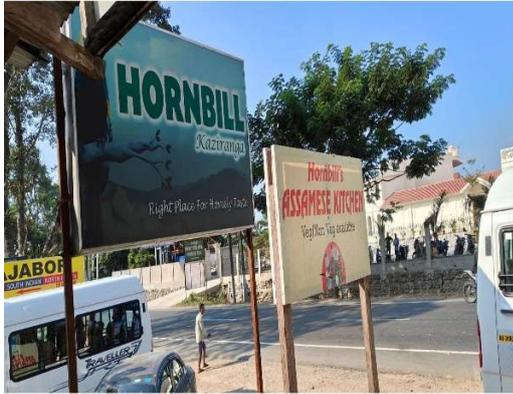
### **Kaziranga National Park (09 Nov)**

- The National Park is well-known, and scripted, and there is no need to write about it here. We had an early morning **Elephant Safari** in two staggered groups, as elephants were available in limited numbers, and there were other tourists too.





- We ate our lunch in ‘**Hornbill’s Assamese Kitchen**’ (a restaurant) within the National Park, and had some authentic Assamese fare.



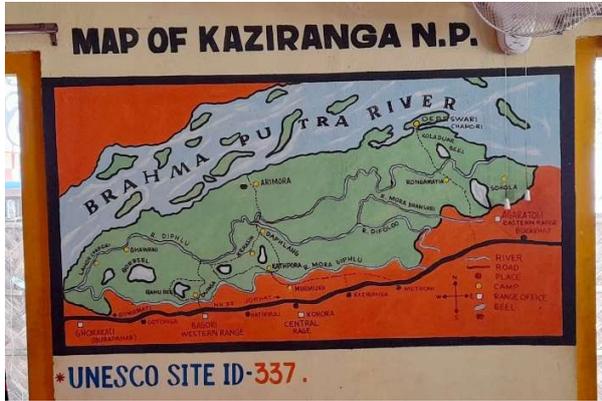
In the evening, around sunset, we embarked on a **Jeep Safari** and took a slightly different route to the Elephant trail.



- We were then led to witness, and sit through, a private **Assamese Troupe Performance** where different dances that are prevalent among the different tribes of the region were performed. Very professional, and beautifully performed – part of the show put up, routinely, for tourists.



- That night, we had our final formal Meeting of minds, opinions, soliloquies, speeches, and votes of thanks to the Originator, the Organizers, and the team that ‘made it all possible’, followed by a group dinner in Hotel Landmark Woods.



## Dispersal (10 Nov)

- Early morning, on the 10<sup>th</sup>, the second party to visit Kamakhya Temple left. They were met by army personnel who conducted them in and gave them packed lunch to be eaten on the trot on their way to Gauhati Airport.
- The group that had already visited the Temple left the hotel at a leisurely hour, and after a lunch stop enroute at '**Anuragh Dhaba**' they reached the airport.
- Final hugs and goodbyes and everyone caught their respective flights and headed home.

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## Takeaways

So, what are the takeaways from this trip?

- Everyone, without exception, thoroughly enjoyed the trip.
- Everyone kept well.
- There were no problems with the food eaten everywhere. Healthy, wholesome food was ensured everywhere.
- Apart from the organizers (!!), no one felt any strain.
- Old friendships were renewed, and new friends made.

- Meticulous planning and foresight had gone into drawing out the programme for this trip, which contributed no end to the success of the tour. There were no ‘snafus’ or hiccups in what was planned and executed.
- The following need special mention and thanks from the group!




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### **LIST OF VETERANS & VEER NARIS WHO WENT ON THIS TOUR**

<b><u>Sr. No.</u></b>	<b><u>Retired Rank &amp; Name</u></b>	<b><u>Location</u></b>
1.	<b>Cdr. Vijay Vadhera &amp; Mrs. Sunita Vadhera</b>	<b>Mumbai</b>
2.	<b>Radm. Prashant Kumar Sinha</b>	<b>Mumbai</b>
3.	<b>Cmde. Rabinder Franklin &amp; Mrs Joya Franklin</b>	<b>Bangalore</b>
4.	<b>Cmde. Mukesh Bhargava &amp; Mrs. Meenu Bhargava</b>	<b>Mumbai</b>
5.	<b>Cmde. Shivaji Tarate &amp; Mrs. Saroj Tarate.</b>	<b>Mumbai</b>
6.	<b>Cmde. Jagdish Bhatia &amp; Mrs. Urmila Bhatia</b>	<b>Mumbai</b>
7.	<b>Surg. Capt. Ram Sharma &amp; Mrs. Lopa Sharma</b>	<b>Vadodara</b>
8.	<b>Capt. Param Pal Singh &amp; Mrs. Kwai Jen Singh</b>	<b>Pune</b>

9. Cdr. Puran Singh Rawat Dehradun
10. Cdr. Kannan Ramdas & Mrs. Harvinder Singh Mumbai
11. Cdr. Surinder Paul & Mrs. Gurinder Paul Mumbai
12. Cdr. Subba Rao Nagarajan & Mrs. Leela Subbarao Chennai
13. Cdr. Kondal Pasumarthi & Mrs. Shashi Pasumarthi Vishakhapatnam
14. Cdr. Sangappa Korti & Mrs. Danamma Korti Mumbai
15. Cdr. Vinay Kumar Rai & Mrs. Anuradha Rai Pune
16. Lcdr. Ashok Kumar Batra & Mrs. Kumkum Batra Mumbai
17. Lcdr. Manjeet Grewal & Mrs. Satwant Grewal Mumbai
18. Mrs. Alka Sarin Delhi
18. Surg Capt. Mrs. Mahendra Ratna Mumbai
19. Veer Nari Kanta Mukherjee Mumbai
20. Veer Nari Mukti Ghosh Mumbai
21. Veer Nari Nanda Maulick Delhi
22. Mrs. Madhu Chopra Mumbai
21. Mrs. Loket Yee Kong Pune
22. Ms. Ananya Singh Pune
23. Dr.Mr. Parth Sharma Vadodara