



SIKKIM: THE HIGH CIRCUIT



This information should answer some of your questions about the trip and give you a better idea of what we do day-to-day. It doesn't hope to answer everything. If you have any questions please get in touch.



High camp near Danphe Bir

All photos in this itinerary were taken by trekker Phil Millner. Thanks Phil.

- **A rewarding circular trek, not the standard 'up and back' route**
- **Magnificent high level sustained walking dominated by Kanchenjunga massif**
- **Yak supported**
- **Darjeeling visit after trek**

Sikkim

Sikkim is a special place. A high mountain kingdom, tiny in the Himalayan scale of things and barely 120 km across. It remained independent until 1975 when it became the 22nd Indian State, in mutual recognition of its vulnerability and closeness to Tibet and Chinese ambitions. Dominated from every corner by the great massif of Kanchenjunga, Sikkim retains much of the qualities of its isolation. It is predominantly Buddhist and was the haven for many Tibetan refugees escaping over high passes in the 1950's. The landscape is indisputably beautiful - ferns and flowers, birds and butterflies, orchids and bamboo, forests of cherry, oak and pine set among fast-flowing rivers, terraced paddy and barley fields and, in April & May, blazing rhododendrons. It is also a land of monasteries and gompas, where monks and teachers, more Tibetan than Indian, practice the ancient rituals of Tantric Buddhism in peace and purity. From the tent door at Dzongri, the hotel window in Gangtok or the monastery steps at Pemayangtse, there can be seen a startling Himalayan skyline of some of the highest mountains on earth.

High Places in Sikkim

There were few companies visiting Sikkim when director Bob Lancaster first arrived on a research trip in 1989. From the outset we have dealt with local people of Tibetan origin, some of whose families fled over the mountains from the Chinese invasion of Tibet over forty years ago and now High Places enjoy a certain exclusivity in Sikkim. Unlike most western companies who use support teams imported from Darjeeling and West Bengal, we still work with a trekking outfit based in Gangtok itself. Our good friend Tsewang Ngodup and his team seem to have relatives at every stage of the trek and ensure that we have the richest experience possible.

The trip

This trip is not the standard 'up and back' trek to the Goeche La. Through our good contacts in Sikkim we pioneered a new approach route to produce a longer, more challenging high circuit, with magnificent views of the Kanchenjunga range and the Himalayan skyline of eastern Nepal. Other groups (not many) now trek this route, but it still feels remote. The daily trekking is never excessive and remains steady throughout although we have graded it 'steady plus' because of the altitude element. For twelve days we trek and camp above 3000m, and on half of these days are close to or exceed 4000m. Altitude and cold nights may make greater demands.

On trek

In Sikkim we are supported by a team of Dzogs, a cooking and camp team. Tents, food and baggage accompany us. We carry only what we need for the day: camera, water bottle, spare clothing etc. A typical day starts at 6.30 am with a steaming mug of tea brought to our tents. Packing is followed by breakfast in the mess tent and away by 8.30 am in order to catch the best weather. A picnic lunch stop at around 12 noon when a stove is lit and tea is made. Arrival in camp is usually mid-afternoon in time for tea and a tasty snack of pakhora, or 'finger' chips or similar. After sorting camp out, we can relax pleasantly and build up to the main meal of the day at about 6pm. 'Trekking bedtime' is seldom later than 9pm.



Some of our local helpers

Accommodation

In the main towns we stay in comfortable hotels with en suite rooms. Our hotel in Gangtok is run by Buddhists and with an office for the Dalai Lama on the upper floor, is simple but with charm, friendly and full character. Whilst on trek we camp, using 2/3 person tents. In the latter stages of the trek we stay in a trekking lodge owned by Tsewang's family in the high village of Tshoka with basic mountain hut-type facilities - mattresses, cold water, outdoor toilets etc. There are a number of other huts on the popular part of the trail but they are often busy and increasingly run down. We prefer to camp along the trail.

Food

Whilst 'on trek' all meals are included. In towns we provide breakfast only. This allows you the option of trying a wide range of local restaurants which is very much part of the adventure. Food is inexpensive and a meal would seldom exceed £6/NZ\$17 excluding drinks. See day to day itinerary for which meals are included. We always try to advise on eating in towns and the group often

decides to eat together. On trek we eat Indian and Tibetan food prepared to a surprisingly high standard. There is always a choice of dishes, dhals, vegetables and sometimes meat when fresh yak or lamb is available. Breakfasts and lunches are varied and appetising.

Health and hygiene

We have an excellent record of staying fit and well in India. The key seems to be our enthusiasm for Indian vegetarian food, (most of India is vegetarian). Avoiding meat in towns before the trek starts is a good tactic and care with water, avoiding salads, peeling fruit etc pays dividends. Serious illness or accident is extremely uncommon. Laundry facilities are usually available in Indian towns where your bag of dirty and crumpled trekking 'rags' can be transformed into a pile of pristine, folded and ironed 'new' clothes on the same day!

Altitude

Above 3000m, the air is thinner, the pressure is lower and there is less oxygen available in the atmosphere. Acclimatisation is the process by which the body adapts to these conditions. The key to acclimatisation is a good itinerary with a gradual initial height gain, walking at a slow and steady pace, and increasing fluid intake – drinking at least 4 litres a day is advisable above 3000m.

Many people have some minor side effects from altitude, such as headache, nausea or general lassitude. The optional use of 'Diamox' has proved useful for some people, as this drug can reduce these symptoms. You will be given more information on 'Diamox' with your Final Information, between 8 and 10 weeks before departure.



Monks at Yuksam

Climate

Escaping from the sticky heat of the plains to the cool hills is particularly welcome in April and May when temperatures in Delhi and Calcutta often exceed 35°C. Temperatures at Gangtok and the foothills are pleasantly tempered by altitude to around 22-24°C and hotter in the sunshine. Cloud tends to build up early in the day and rain, occasionally heavy, often falls in the afternoon. Mornings and evenings are often fine and clear. Above 3500m, nights are cold with frost and perhaps snow. October and November are noted for clearer visibility and more settled weather but will be colder than the pre-monsoon period. There are usually a few leeches around on the spring trip but only in the lower valleys.

Transport

Whilst in Sikkim we normally travel by mountain bus or jeeps suitable for the conditions of the mountain roads.

Tipping

It is custom and practice to tip in India. You should perhaps allow the equivalent of around £30-40/NZ\$80-100 or so in local currency for the whole holiday. The trek leader will be pleased to discuss this with you and will advise on appropriate amounts, which would normally be given by the group. Try to avoid giving sweets, biscuits, pens or cash to children or anyone who has not rendered a service.

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

This itinerary is flexible and should be seen as a guide only. Local conditions, weather or fitness could lead to changes in our daily plans. All times and distances are approximate. 'B,L,D' refers to meals included in the trip cost, i.e. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.

This trip is 22 days ex Delhi. The first and last days refer to the days of arrival and departure to/from Delhi and are not necessarily the days you depart from or arrive back home. It is also possible to join this trip via Calcutta.

DAY 1 Arrive Delhi. Hotel.

DAY 2 A flight across north India to Bagdogra to be met by our Sikkim friends. We drive to Gangtok and leave behind the plains of W Bengal to climb up the wooded Teesta valley into Sikkim (110km). Our hotel with its ornate monastic frontage, is a reminder that we are now in a predominantly Buddhist kingdom. (B)

DAY 3 Wake up to a dramatic early morning view from the hotel windows of Kanchenjunga and the skyline of the eastern Himalayas. Gangtok at 1500m, will be cooler than Delhi and there is plenty of interest in the town, with its markets, monasteries and gardens. (B)

DAY 4 To Pelling. An early departure by bus for the trekking area and West Sikkim, 6 exciting hours along winding, wooded valleys and over hills clad with cardamom plantations. We swoop down to cross the wild Rangit River before climbing steeply up to Pelling (2045m). Guesthouse. (B,L,D)



Pelling hotel

DAY 5 Nearby is the beautiful Pemayangtse Monastery perched dramatically on an airy ridge looking out onto a panorama of Himalayan peaks – the Kanchenjunga skyline. It is a small working monastery and we may be able peep in to see the boy monks at their lessons. Nearby also are the ruins of Rabdentse Palace, Sikkim's old capital set in peaceful landscaped gardens. We have time at both places.

A short walk today to allow for the trek logistics, yaks, yak men and porters, tents and supplies to all come together. We drop down through agricultural land and forest brings to our first riverside camp at the village of Rimbik. 2 hours (B,L,D)

DAY 6 To Chongri. Today we follow the river and walk through terraced farmland, meeting local people. We should see our first orchids and also lots of birds. Around lunchtime we cross the river by an ancient prayer flagged bridge before climbing out of the valley to reach the village of Chongri. (2280m) Camp. 5 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 7 To Fedhi. We leave the river and climb steeply up to the last permanent settlement of Chunzam, once famous for its exceedingly chewy yak cheese. Ahead lies a tranquil wooded landscape of old cedar and occasional high pasture clearings. Our camp at Fedhi is in a wooded clearing. (2950m) 6 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 8 To Yambong. We begin to feel the altitude as the trail threads its way up a rocky ridge and over a small pass to eventually reach the open pastures of Yambong on the edge of the treeline. (3500m). The trek team are happy because two old yak huts will provide the last good shelter for several days and fires are soon lit. A short distance above camp are inspiring views of the Singalila ridge and beyond. 5 hours. (B,L,D)



Camp at Yangbong

DAY 9 A first foray into high mountain terrain close to the Nepal border where we will see a host of Khumbu giants dominating the distant skyline including Everest, Makalu, Baruntse and Chomolongo. A steady morning ascent to reach our high point of the approach trek, the esoteric sounding Danphe Bir – the Pass of the Pheasant at 4630m. We drop down after the pass to reach a grassy shelf and a fine campsite. (4370m) 6 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 10 Rest and acclimatize. Most likely a dawn awakening to reach a fantastic viewpoint a few minutes above camp for panoramic views of the Himalayan giants in both Nepal and Sikkim including Kanchenjunga and Kabru. Easy high level walking options for the energetic. A campsite to savour (B,L,D)

DAY 11 To Yangsap. It is with reluctance that we begin our steep descent down to our riverside lunch spot of Gomathang, an ancient trading place with Tibetan and the birth place of our guide Beichung. Climbing out of the valley through a forest of sweet smelling silver fir we arrive at our camp in the high pasture of Yangsap (3900m) 5-6 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 12 To Tikip Chu. We leave our lovely meadow camp to climb briefly through forest to the rocky cliffs of our next high pass, the Kokling La 4200m. Look out for the brightly coloured Danphe birds which nest in the high crags around here. Another pass, 4300m, which is gained by a steady ascent up steep scree reaches a skyline dominated by the dizzying pinnacles and ice cliffs of Kanchenjunga. Once again we finish our day with a steep descent to a good campsite at 4000m by a rocky stream, the Tikip Chu. 8 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 13 To Dzongri. We drop pleasantly down the Tikip valley to eventually cross the main Rathong river and begin the long haul up to the Dzongri La Pass and the regular trail up to the Goeche La via the summer pastures of Dzongri. Another high camp (4030m) but we should be well acclimatized by now, probably in contrast to some of the trekkers we meet who could be at 'the headache zone' on day 3 of their holiday! 6 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 14 A rest day at Dzongri and another dawn foray this time to see the sunrise from the nearby prayer flagged hilltop where the King of Sikkim used to come to pay his respects to the Holy Mountains. In clear weather the views here are magnificent. Ahead the elusive peaks of Kabru, Tichenkhang and Pandim, temporarily hide Kanchenjunga (8598m). (B,L,D)

DAY 15 To Lamuney. Down the hill to Kokchulang where we will meet trekkers returning from their own journeys and we will really begin to appreciate the peace and solitude of our last few days walking. Well acclimatised, we move easily up the valley passing the busy trekkers' campsite of Thangsing to our own riverside camp a short distance below Samiti Lake. 6 hours. Camp. 4200m. (B,L,D)

DAY 16 We aim for the Goeche La (*The Locked Gate*) at almost 4940m and are away well before sunrise in the clear cold morning air. Around us an awe-inspiring Himalayan landscape of tumbling glaciers, great pinnacled ridges and soaring peaks, the giant snow cliffs of Kabru and Pandim dominated by the mighty bulk of Kanchenjunga towering 3500m above us, although the view from our own 'summit' will be extraordinary. The sight of the sun rising on the mighty South face of Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain will remain with us for years to come, and it will surely be humbling to remember that this summit was first climbed by British climbers Joe Brown and George Band way back in 1955. We return to camp with a huge sense of achievement and satisfaction. 8-10 hours. (B,L,D)



Group at Goeche La

DAY 17 To Tsokha. All downhill today to the main valley where the air will feel wonderfully rich at just 3600m. After crossing the river we traverse around the valley side through rhododendron and fir forest to the village of Tsokha (*white lake*), an enchanting high Tibetan settlement perched on a mountain spur. It will be our first encounter with permanent village life and the novelty of having a roof over our heads at our own private trekking lodge will add a new dimension to the journey. There are some small local souvenir shops and we can also visit the small local monastery whose Lama was with the Dalai Lama in Tibet. 7-8 hours. Trekking lodge, 3000m. (B,L,D)

DAY 18 Our freewheeling final day, downhill almost all of the time. We descend through rainforest rich with birdlife and flowers, across spectacular bridges spanning cascading rivers whose sources are high in the mountains we have so recently left behind. Tired and elated we arrive in Yuksom and our traditional hilltop hotel. In the evening we can celebrate our achievements with locally made 'chang' and traditional Tibetan food. 7 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 19-20 Away from Sikkim now and a 5-6 hour ride to Darjeeling. A memorable hotel and almost 2 days to relax and get down to the serious business of markets, shopping, or seeing the town. Today Darjeeling is overpopulated, under resourced and creaking around the edges but amid the hustle and bustle it still exudes a vitality and excitement and there remain many fascinating reminders of the lavish lifestyles and

days of the British Raj. After our isolation in the mountains it will provide a stimulating contrast - quite overwhelming. A visit here particularly at the end of our Sikkim trek will always be memorable experience.

- Tiger Hill and the viewpoint over the Himalayas
- Himalayan Mountain Institute and Everest museum
- Toy Train
- The Darjeeling Ropeway
- The Planters – The Darjeeling Club
- Tibetan refugee self help centre
- Botanical Gardens
- Visit to a Tea Plantation

Accommodation is in an attractive and comfortable Tibetan run guesthouse/hotel. Hotel. (B)

DAY 21 To Bagdogra and a flight back to Delhi.

DAY 22 Depart Delhi. (B)



Darjeeling

What our clients say.....

What did you enjoy most about the trip?

“The variety of activities and places...the isolation of the trek itself, was wonderful to get truly away from other tourists.”

Pam Bowmaker Sikkim High Circuit 2007

“Fab food throughout the trek, plenty of it and well prepared and presented.”

Jane McLaughlin, Sikkim High Circuit 2007

“Everything was perfect from the group to the leaders to the itinerary”

Would you recommend High Places to others?

“Yes - great hassle free trips”

Julian Jackson Sikkim High Circuit 2006

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