

# Star HOLIDAY

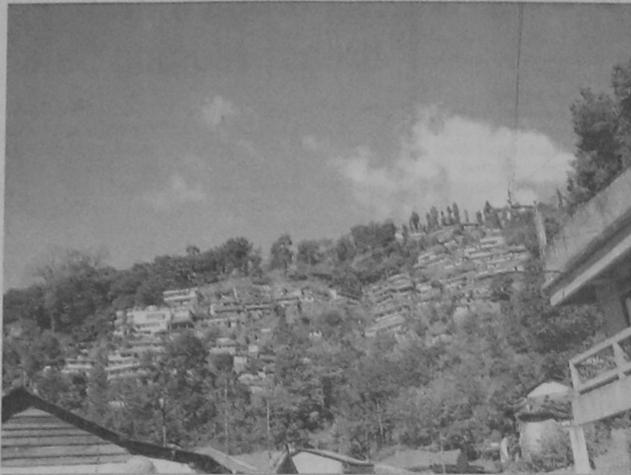
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**BANGLADESH**



## Dancing with Darjeeling Delights

**T**HE Hillman drivers are robotic and emotionless while dealing with the steep, narrow and snaky hilly roads at dizzying heights. But they are very friendly and humorous while talking to their tourist passengers. Still our driver's efforts to dispel height fear could not palliate ours in our nearly vertical journey towards Darjeeling city from Siliguri. Sitting on the front seat beside the driver, my wife and I passed the most nerve-wrecking moment of our life. When the Nepali origin driver stopped midway for a break we could feel the height. As the jeep started to move further up the mountain my mind was gripped by the fear not to climb the top but the ride down the road back home. By the time we reached Kurseong, a suburb of Darjeeling at a height of 4860 feet, our fear was somewhat subdued by less steep road. Fifty one km from Siliguri, the meandering Kurseong road offers an eye-catching hillside view of the lighted Darjeeling city, still 30 km away. The illuminated night view of Darjeeling created illusion that we were traveling through the starry sky.

The West Bengal city, Darjeeling, conjures visions of serenity, of vibrant green hills steeped in splendour, a land of breathtaking beauty crowned by the majestic Himalayas. This heavenly retreat is bathed in hues of every shade. The flaming red rhododendrons, the sparkling white magnolias, the miles of undulating

hillsides covered with emerald green tea bushes, the exotic forests of silver fir - all under the blanket of a brilliant azure sky dappled with specks of clouds, compellingly confounds Darjeeling as the queen of hill stations. The name 'Darjeeling' came from the Tibetan words, 'Dorje' meaning thunderbolt (originally the scepter of Indra) and 'Ling' a place or land, hence 'the land of the thunderbolt'.

The next morning we were joined by two Kolkata families in the jeep for the sightseeing. December is favourite time for Kolkatans to visit Northern tourist attractions of Darjeeling, Gangtok, Mirik and Kalimpong. One from the Kolkata families identified our driver as having appearance very similar to Bollywood bad man Gulshan Grover. Having first name of Gulshan, our driver jokingly said they two were brothers lost in a fair in the childhood. Our Gulshan is a skillful hilly terrain driver and also a jolly companion as a guide. While driving past one of the hundreds of boarding schools for what the hill town is famous for, he identified the architectural marvel as Saint Joseph School. He said only the black money holder parents, a handful from Bangladesh, can afford Rs 4 lac annual tuition fees in the high profile school, also famous for the shooting of Shahrulkh-Amitabh-Aishwarya blockbuster Mohabbatein. We stopped at Japanese Peace Pagoda established by Nipponzan Myohoji.

Situated on the slopes of the Jalapahar Hill, it gave us the first sight of Kanchenjunga in the tour.

Gulshan asked us to tighten seat belts as he would drive 4000 feet down the hill to take us to Rock Garden and Ganga Maya Park. The park offers boating facilities in the lake created by natural waterfalls and is endowed with great scenic beauty.

Tired by long vertical ride, the Kolkata families asked Gulshan not to stop at Ava Art Gallery but the driver insisted us to have a look at the marvelous needlework art at the gallery. Ava Art Gallery was established in 1965 by Late Bhopal Rao Sett and Ava Devi. It is the only Art Gallery of its kind in the Hills. A collection of 60 pieces of art work in water, oil and thread paintings are displayed in the Gallery, one having a price tag of Rs 1 lac. Bangladeshi currencies of different denominations and coins are also prominently showcased in the gallery.

Dropping us at the hotel, Gulshan asked us to get ready at 4:00am in the next morning to go to Darjeeling's most attractive tourist spot of Tiger Hill. Situated at an altitude of 8,482 feet, Tiger Hill has

earned international fame for the magnificent view of the sunrise over "Kanchenjunga" and the great Eastern Himalayan Mountains. Even Mount Everest is visible from here. Wrapped up with all the warm clothes we carried, we reached Tiger Hill at 5:00am only to see thousands of sun enthusiasts battling to position themselves in the best place to view the sunrise over the mountains. A boy measured temperature at 3 degree Celsius. The excitement to see sunrise up from the hill for the first time in life and tension due to disturbing fog down the hill and battle for better place drove the cold spell. At last at 6:20am, the sun peeked out to cheering crowd and light up Kanchenjunga, a scene I will never forget in my life.

Unlike other guides and drivers, Gulshan gave us liberty to take time to visit and see the places so that we did not miss anything. He drove us to Batasia Loop, the marvellous feat of engineering in the hill town. The Batasia Loop is a gigantic railway loop where the Toy Train makes a 360 Degree turn. It was basically

built to make it possible for the Toy Train to cut the deep ascend. Strategically located the Batasia Loop offers a panoramic view of the Kanchanjunga Range. A War Memorial constructed in the memory of the brave sons of the soil who laid down their lives in the different wars since 1947 adds to its attraction.

The next day morning having our breakfast with Alu Parata and Alur Dhom, we boarded a jeep for our return journey to Siliguri. This time the driver was not Gulshan. But as he climbed down the mountainous road I saw the enormous understanding among the Darjeeling drivers in the steep and narrow roads. Without which there could have been fatal accidents. One waits to allow another to pass by, no overtake in turn and steep parts and non-verbal communications with eye and hands. When asked even in the steep turn, why they do not horn, they said it is the inner sense that works tremendously here. May be they are showing respect to the silent mountains. As we descent to the West Bengal Plains the honking level increased and reached its top in Siliguri. We came back home through Burimari land port keeping the sweet memory of the understanding among the mountain drivers and the lighted night view of Darjeeling.

Story & Photo: BY M ABDUR RAHIM

