crossing point yielded some beautiful scenery: field after neatly-cultivated field of rice, wheat stalks waving gently in the wind, the plains stretching out into the distance, meeting the spot where the hills lay waiting to greet them. Several strands of cascading water could be seen from a distance. The individual waterfalls flaunted their charms with pride, their foaming white torrents dancing down through the dense green foliage that carpeted the hillsides.

We had reached the border post early in order to avoid the hartal picketers that day, so we had to wait until the officials arrived to do their jobs. I was grateful that this border crossing with India sees a fraction of the traffic that Benapole does - even more so, after I had ventured into what was claimed to be the toilet. So here is a sincere piece of advice: please spare yourself some unpleasant-



Shillong

ness and be prepared to use the toilet on the Indian side. Dawki is a simple outpost, but we were treated very politely by the officials there and the system functions well - which is important, because as the sign outside the toilets on the Indian side helpfully informs you, "cleanliness is hygienic"!

The taxi driver on the other side had an interesting array of objects on his dashboard. Alongside the inevitable picture of a beatific-looking Jesus (an important reminder that this part of India is home to a large Christian population), a dashboard magnet featured the logo of Liverpool football Club with the proud slogan "You'll never walk alone" kept company with some Disney Princess stickers. And, hanging from the rearview mirror, there was a bizarre air freshener in the shape of a marijuana leaf.

Choosing to believe that the driver put more faith in Jesus than in smoking narcotic substances (and dismissing the princesses and football club slogans altogether), I decided to buckle in and enjoy the ride. As it turned out, there was much to enjoy. I had many times been told how beautiful Meghalaya was, and I was well aware of Shillong's reputation as a holiday spot. But I had no idea of the breathtaking views that lay in wait as we began the winding ascent up to the hills.

Along the way, heavy machinery and compact men could be seen digging away at the rock surfaces, laying bare the oddly anaemic-looking rock-face, which displayed the marbled hue of mince-meat that has been soaked in water for too long. At a couple of points along the way, signs warned of the possibility of landslides. Examining the top-heavy appearance of the uneven rock-face that had been gouged out by the workers, it wasn't hard to believe that those areas might have seen a rockslide or two.

But on the whole, it was a peaceful ride. I have never encountered a landscape like that outside of Northern Europe - I suddenly understood why they referred to this as Asia's version of Scotland. Thickly forested mountains fell away into steep gorges, the majestic sweep of the land occasionally interrupted by small brick huts with tin roofs tucked into the greenery of the hillside. Strangely, unlike most mountainous regions, the top of the hills greeted us with wide plateaus and open spaces.

And perhaps the best part of all was snaking your way up that road until you actually reached the clouds; and then continuing to drive onwards and upwards, until at some point you could actually see the clouds below you! As my friend, the poet Jerry Pinto later said, the sensation of actually driving through those clouds was incredible. It was not at all cold, but it made your arm tingle as you stuck it out of the window, as if tiny champagne bubbles were fizzing against your skin...

(...to be continued)