



Waiting for Nohkalikai falls to come out of the clouds.

PHOTO:
ZIAUS SHAMS

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It covered my bag, I could keep my arms inside, and not one droplet of water could penetrate that strange-looking piece of apparel. Do not wear shoes, because they will get wet and heavy. Take a pair of quick-drying sandals with good grip.

So we donned our ponchos, flexed our extreme travel preparedness at other tourists, and stared at the mist in Mawkdok viewpoint while eating a warm bowl of Maggi noodles. The little shop there serves large portions of soupy noodles with chunks of roasted meat and lots of coriander, and I will always crave that beautiful bowl of noodles whenever it rains.

Our last stop in Cherrapunjee was Mawsimai cave. The only information I knew about this cave was that it was "slightly dangerous", and this came from our travel agency's local contact. I was sure it was just a nice limestone cave, albeit wet, but I was used to that by then.

The entry point of the cave was dark, damp, and full of people, most of whom were aborting the mission. One saree-clad lady from West Bengal seemed quite annoyed as she hurriedly crossed the shallow waters on the floor, saying "Boddo shoru poth re baba ekhane keno jabo bolo dekhi!"

My curiosity got the better of me. Along with my friends Erad and Shams, one nonchalantly chewing a Chupa Chups bubblegum-filled cola flavoured lollipop, and another with an action cam, I decided we had some *shoru poth* to go before

we sleep. That cave made me feel like a video-game protagonist, because I had to jump, crawl, and perform strange aerobics with all four limbs to pass through the obstacles.

Mawsimai cave is beautiful. The smooth limestones glimmer when sunlight streams in, and while you're inside the cave, it feels as if you have been transported into some strange world straight out of a storybook. I am writing all of this in hindsight—I was actually quite shaken while we were inside the cave and my sole purpose was to get out of there. We bumped our heads a few times, Shams caught me flailing around in my poncho because he filmed the entire journey, and Erad never let go of that lollipop, even when we felt like we would be stuck down there forever.

Many times we thought we were near

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the exit, only to discover more cave. When we finally made it out, I felt particularly accomplished, because I am extremely unathletic and I can injure myself simply by existing. But even I got by with a little help from my friends.

We made the mistake of not staying the night in Cherrapunjee, because we had booked a pre-planned tour. Transportation is easily available in Meghalaya, the people are friendly, and places are safe and clean. If we had a little more time, we could've planned the itinerary to our own liking with a little research online. However, I have no regrets about staying in Shillong's Police Bazaar every night, taking long drives around Meghalaya in the day.

The next day, we made the nearly

three-hour journey to Jaintia Hills, which is right near Sylhet. This part of the tour was initially planned for the day we had reached Meghalaya, but immigration at Dawki border on the day after Eid was nothing short of a nightmare. Tamabil border is dominated by third-party "brokers" who make it impossible for general tourists to pass through, while the Indian side was too understaffed to handle the huge rush of tourists. After a staggering seven-and-a-half hours at the border that day, all we could do was binge on street food at Police Bazaar.

So we decided to make the long journey to and from Mawlynnong, determined to find out whether it really is the cleanest village in Asia. We ended up not going to the village due to fatigue from another pointless uphill climb, but it was a wonderful day regardless. We visited Bophill falls, and I remember thinking we were way too close to the waterfall, it couldn't be safe. Dammar *ji* said the next waterfall was even better.

Then we saw Pangthumai falls, a sight like no other. The water was falling with incredible force, making the same patterns over and over again, splashing all around us as we stood on the bridge. It wasn't raining, but you would need a poncho just to get close to the falls.

The long drive to Shillong from Dawki is one of the most beautiful journeys I have ever been on. It makes you realise that Meghalaya is a very literal name, it's the abode of clouds. On this return journey, Dammar *ji* stopped in the middle of the clouds for a cup of tea.

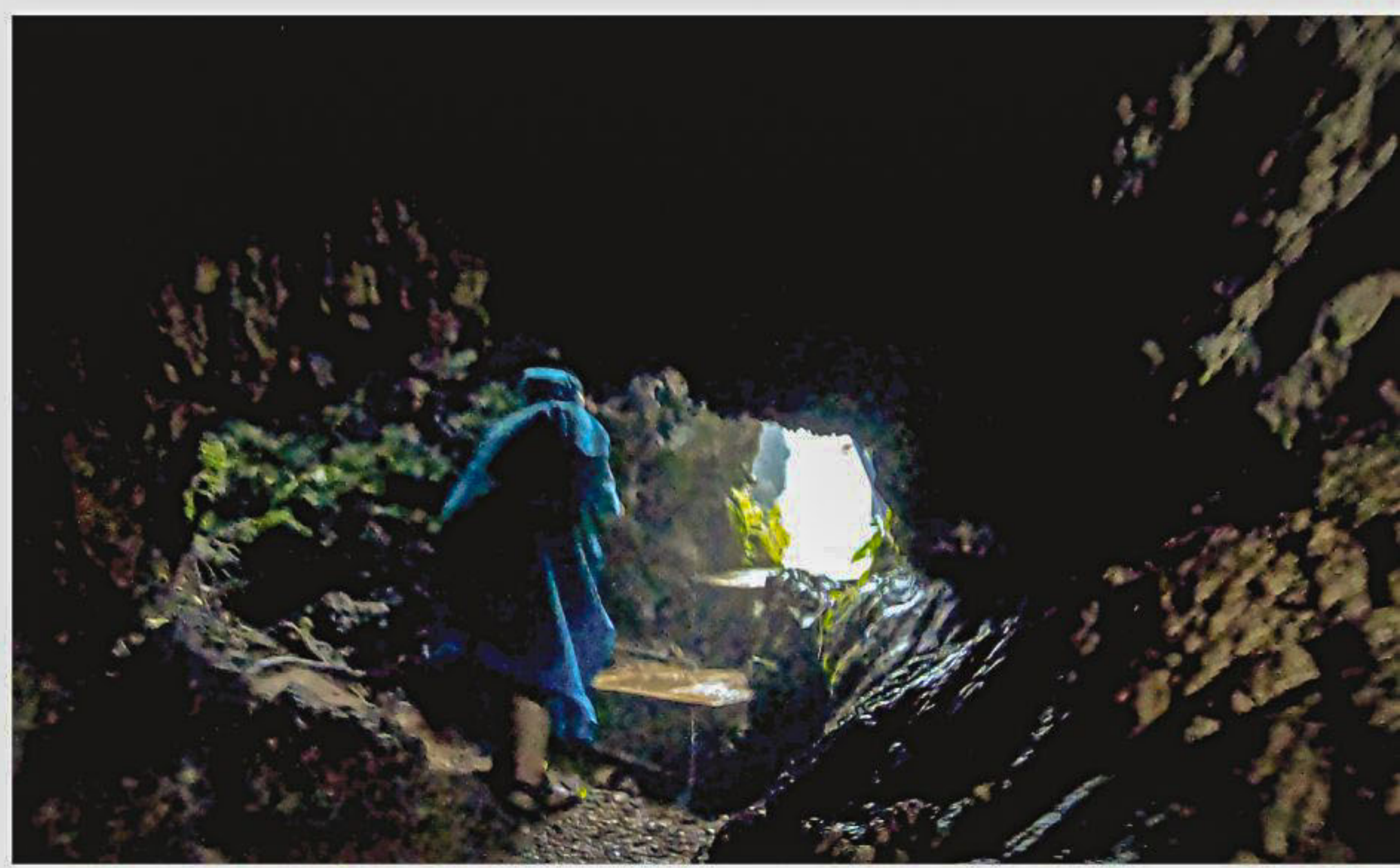
Right there, at a shop by the clouds, we sat down and had the best chicken momos I have ever had, accompanied by tea in colourful cups. I was shocked to find out that clouds aren't fluffy when you're inside them, they're quite watery, but certainly very pleasant.

I have completely gotten over my fear of water. Dhaka rain can no longer faze me for I have returned unscathed from the wettest place on Earth and I am now equipped with a poncho. I am also incredibly sad to have left behind the land of non-fluffy clouds and waterfalls, but I am almost certain that I'll go back on a day when the clouds clear at Seven Sisters falls.

You can send your thought clouds to aanila.tarannum27@gmail.com.



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Three of us and one lollipop found the light at the end of the tunnel.

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