

# Trek to Sandakphu

## A memorable journey to West Bengal's highest peak



**Habiba Mitun** is a student of journalism at the University of Chittagong, and an avid traveller. She loves to explore places

Want to share your travel experiences with us? Please send your stories to [holiday@thedailystar.net](mailto:holiday@thedailystar.net)

HABIBA MITUN

We had no idea that we slept away the past twelve hours, the whole journey from Kolkata to Siliguri.

After getting off the bus, my sister and I checked into a hotel. We freshened up and went out for a walk in Siliguri, primarily to look for food. We had time as we waited for six more team members to arrive.

Yes, we were going to undertake the famous Phalut-Sandakphu trek.

Sandakphu is the highest peak in West Bengal with a height of 3,636 meters (11,930 feet). This summit is the highest point of the Singalila hills on the West Bengal-Nepal border on the edge of the Singalila National Park in Darjeeling. Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu – four of the world's five highest peaks can be seen from Sandakphu.

It's not for nothing that the Sandakphu trek is so popular.

After having breakfast at a Bengali restaurant, we went to the city centre to purchase some trekking gear.

By the time we reached our hotel, our teammates arrived. Finding them was a little challenging because nobody knew anybody.

Our journey began after lunch. We were 11 people in two rovers.

It was around 3:00pm when we left for Dhotrey. On one side of the road were mountains, on the other side were sloping tea gardens. By 6:00pm, we reached Mirik and decided to take a snack break.

As I stepped out of the car, the air felt chilly forcing me to put on my sweater.

Vegetable momos and hot tea felt good. After snapping a few photos when we resumed our journey, it was already dark.

As we progressed, the fog made our journey difficult. It was hard to see even ten meters ahead of the road.



start early, it took 9:30am to finally begin the trek that I longed for a long time.

At first, for 15-20 minutes, we were accompanied by a group of 3-4 years old school students. They told us that they take this path daily to reach school. How lucky are they!

After walking for a while, we quickly realised the weather was warmer than expected, prompting us to shed our jackets.

We moved through a vast valley, the trail weaving along high and low terrain. As we approached Tonglu, the weather took a turn for the worse. Cold winds picked up, and jackets were hastily put back on.

Upon reaching Tonglu, hopes for a warm meal were dashed; we were informed that we

hailstorm ensued, forcing everyone to hastily don raincoats. While the rain was repelled by the coats, small hailstones continued to pelt our heads, and the downpour soaked us even through the rain gear.

Arriving in Jaubari half soaked, we sought refuge in the warmth of a homestay. A quick meal of soupy noodles and hot tea felt comforting.

We had no time to lose and the rain was pouring heavily. As we were confused about what to do, one of us donned his raincoat. The signal was enough. We opted to walk, braving the rain, cold and the steep path ahead.

As we approached Gairibans, a breathtaking view of mountains and a lake captivated us.

time at Sandakphu. Our guide had also warned about the steep ascent ahead. I was a little apprehensive at first, as I had developed a back pain from the previous day's trek.

However, the excitement of realising a long held dream overshadowed any physical discomfort.

Setting out at 7:30am, the trail immediately revealed its steep nature. We were supposed to reach Kalapokhri by 11:00am, the initial checkpoint of the day. Amidst blooming rhododendrons and picturesque landscapes, we ascended together. However, contrary to Vikram's ominous warnings, the path seemed navigable, prompting suspicion that the warnings were exaggerated to expedite the trek.

The ascent became a test of endurance, especially when someone was carrying a 60 litre backpack. The load was getting heavier with time, forcing me to remove some stuff.

As the road got steeper, suddenly, I found myself alone, walking slowly amid strong wind.

However, I found a canine companion who accompanied me to Kalapokhri, a village at an elevation of 2,991 meters, straddling India and Nepal.

We had a hearty lunch at Diku Sherpa's residence. From there, the journey to Sandakphu, stretching six more kilometres, promised a blend of challenge and awe.

From Kalapokhri, a single-lane road goes up through the mountain. Walking through the mist, we made it to Bikavanj.

Sandakphu was still 4 km away from there.

The final leg, from Bikavanj to Sandakphu, emerged as the most challenging segment of the trek. The challenging path, weather, and back pain got another companion: a breathing problem.

The strong winds threatened to sweep us away. It became hard to move forward. However, I was determined to make it at any cost. After passing some goods from my backpack to my sister's, I resumed my journey slowly.

After a relentless battle against the mountain winds and physical difficulties, we reached Sandakphu by 5:30pm.

We took some photos at the top of Sandakphu before sunset. Exhausted, we all went to bed after dinner.

The following morning, we woke up at 5:00am and headed to the viewpoint from where the sleeping Buddha could be seen. Unfortunately, it was too cloudy for that spectacle. But we had glimpses of Mount Janu (Kumbhakarna), Kanchenjunga, Kabru north, Kabru south, Rathong, Kotang, Phray, Everest, Makalu, and Lhotse.

Those few moments were enough to make all the pain I endured in the last two days.

By 7:30 am, we all packed our bags and started our return journey on two rovers. We needed to avoid a delay at the border.

It was sad to depart so soon, but the thought of going back home with a backpack full of lovely memories cheered me up.



PHOTO:  
HABIBA MITUN

We reached Mane Bhanjang after an hour. Here we showed our passport with visa to the BSF and returned to the car.

It took another hour to reach Dhotrey. The temperature drop here was dramatic. After checking in at the pre-booked homestay, I slid under the blanket. We had a much-needed dinner with rice, potato curry, chicken and chilly pickles.

We went out to see the city briefly. However, the shivering cold made us fall back to our homestay for a good sleep. Our trekking would start tomorrow early morning.

We woke up early because we had to cover 12 km that day to reach Gairibans. When I opened the window, the beautiful landscape of moving clouds and a dense forest of pine trees in the distance was charming.

After putting on trek-friendly clothes and packing my backpack, when I reached the dining room, Vikram, our guide, was already there. We all had homemade bread and cooked potato for breakfast, followed by a cup of tea.

It was a cloudy morning. Though we tried to

needed to reach Tumling for that. Undeterred, we pressed on. The path to Tonglu had been steep, but the journey ahead became less arduous, with a mix of ups and downs. Within 30 minutes, we reached Tumling, a village with homestays and eateries. Seeking refuge from the chilly atmosphere, I ordered hot tea and biscuits. Despite the weather making the tea lukewarm, it felt like the most delectable cuisine on the planet.

A leisurely 20-minute break flew by, and as we resumed our trek, ominous black clouds hinted at an impending rainstorm. Hastening our pace toward Jaubari, we found ourselves walking through dense clouds, visibility reduced to a mere five feet. The wind was blowing fiercely, and. As I enjoying this environment, disaster struck. Without warning, a

The view was so mesmerizing that I just stood there!

Darkness almost engulfed the surroundings when we reached our destination, the GTA Lounge, in Gairibans.

Dinner was ready in a short while. After dinner, we went to bed right away because the next morning we would start trekking very early.

The next morning, everyone was up by 5:00am. We had to trek almost 17km from Gairibans to Sandakphu.

Over breakfast, our conversations centred on the day's challenges and the expected arrival

