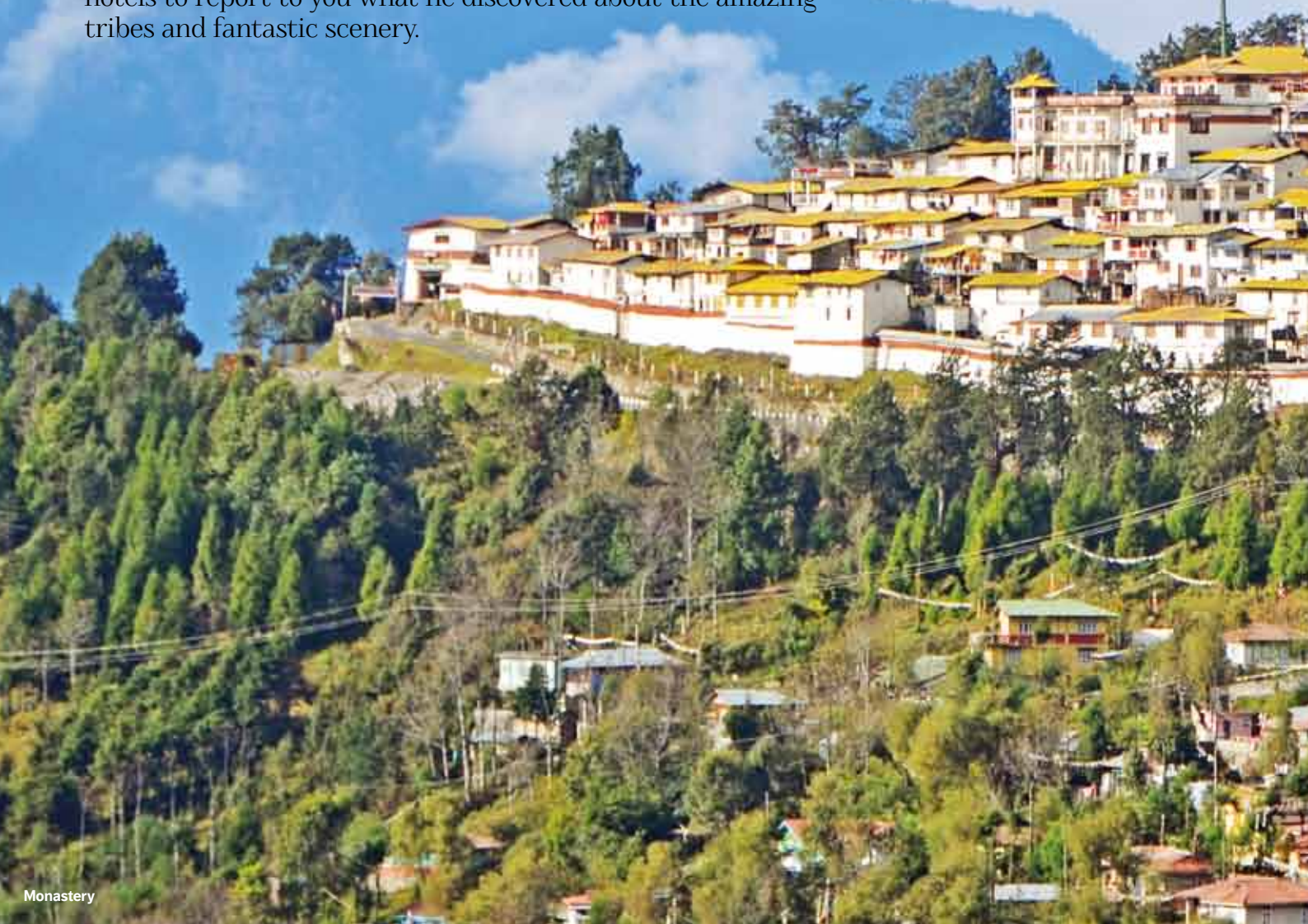


# From Tea in Tawang to **Tribes in Ziro**

Some claim North East India is the last Shangri-la. **Mike Smith** travelled endless hours over challenging roads and slept in basic hotels to report to you what he discovered about the amazing tribes and fantastic scenery.





**T**he vibrations and noise increased. With its crew of three and 15 passengers the Russian-made helicopter rose slowly, hovered just a few feet off the ground then accelerated gently above the runway. The drone of the engine ended conversation as we gained speed and height going from Guwahati to Tawang in North East India.

### **Cool Air and Warm Welcomes**

North East India has majestic mountains, raging rivers, dense forests, colourful tribal people and a rich cultural heritage of music and dance. It does not have good connectivity via air or rail, and travel by car is challenging. Roads are narrow, winding and often unsealed. Some areas, which are heavily militarized because of shared borders with Bhutan, China and Myanmar, require entry permits. However, if you enjoy eco travel and don't need 5-star comforts, consider visiting soon before the rest of the world discovers it!

Getting to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh is quite an adventure. We flew from Singapore to Kolkata, staying overnight at the excellent Swissotel, before flying to

Guwahati. From there we took a Pawan Hans flight. The helicopter ride was smooth, but the constant background noise of the engine and propellers dulled our senses. We passed over green valleys, rice fields, forests and mountains before descending to a landscape dotted with monasteries. We landed with a gentle thud.

Stepping out into thin air at 10,000 feet above sea level we received an offering of Khata, a traditional Tibetan styled scarf, and a cup of warm sweet tea as symbols of welcome and good luck from our government hosts. Novice monks stared at the new arrivals as we took their photos.

### **Venturing Out**

We had barely time to unload our bags at our modest but comfortable hotel before setting off to Jung Waterfall, an hour away on a rather primitive road (the first of many!) where we were greeted by smiling women of the Monpa tribe in their national costumes.

Dinner was accompanied with generous quantities of local distilled liquor made from rice and infused with spices to add flavour. It warmed us through; a necessity as the temperature had dropped below 10°.







Mountain Road

## From the Room A View

By 5.15am it was light. Opening my curtains the beautiful, white walled Tawang Monastery dominated the hill opposite. It is the largest Buddhist monastery in India and the biggest in the world outside of Lhasa in Tibet. It's interesting to visit in the mornings when monks play cricket, devotees turn prayer wheels and women sit, knit and chat.

We were in for a long, but spectacular day; starting off with tea at a Thukje Chueiling Nunnery where very young girls were accepted into the lifestyle.

We continued our tour high into the Pangadeng Mountains on a dirt path full of potholes, through a heavily militarized area to briefly view the preserved Dalai Lama's footprint. A picnic lunch and stroll to stretch our legs awaited us at the picturesque Pangadeng Lake approximately 15,000ft above sea level.

## Monastic and Ministerial Performances

Bouncing our way back to Tawang we took a brief siesta at the hotel before one of the highlights of the entire trip; a visit to Tawang



Monk Pouring Water

Monastery where a festival with monks and monastic dancing took place. The Tibetan horns were blown to start the prayer ceremony; masked performers ran into the courtyard to entertain both foreign visitors and the local Monpa women and children.

The International Tourism Mart officially



Monks with Horns



opened in the evening with the objective of facilitating meetings between travel agents and media from more than 20 countries with North East Indian tour operators and government agencies. The government is clearly supporting the nine states which have only 4% of India's population. A massive 28% of the tourism budget is allocated to the region. Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Mr Nabam Tuki, explained that improvements to roads, telecommunications and hotels were scheduled and a major promotion of the area was being undertaken with emphasis on festivals, culture, natural beauty, unique wildlife, sport and tribal villages.

Presentations were made by state representatives from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and West Bengal that were followed by an energetic cultural show.

### **A Festive Life**

Next morning, walking through the rice terraces, I could hear the sound of chanting as the villagers threshed rice in the same manner used by their ancestors many generations ago.

The Tawang Festival began that evening.

I travel lightly, but was glad I had packed a thick coat, gloves and hat as it was very cold. After the formal speeches the singers and dancers put on a dazzling show on the outdoor stage. The festival village had typical tribal houses providing food and drink. The bamboo rice, spicy fish and pork barbequed on a skewer were excellent.

India is not Singapore! Accept rubber time and itinerary changes and you will have fun! Our 7:00am start turned into a 9.30 departure from Tawang; our initial destination Itanagar changed to Bomdila, still a nine hours drive away in a cramped car on unsurfaced roads, with more bends than an over submerged diver.

### **Zig Zag Yaks!**

Leaving Tawang we started to climb. Slowly ascending the zig zag roads, with honking horns at every turn, we had spectacular views over green forests, rivers and mountains. With time the terrain became more barren, the roads rougher and often under repair, and the animal stock more solid. We were in dzo or yakow, a cross between a yak and cow, and mithun territory! The first sprinkling of snow was spotted on the hills as we drove in and out of cloud.

Hissss!!! Our rear tyre rapidly deflated as we hit a jagged hole in the road. Fortunately, we were near our lunch stop. We would do what the truckers do – eat fast food Indian style at a roadside shack. The noodles and hot, sweet chai tea refreshed us and we were soon on our way.

### **Above Sea Level**

We had a long way to cover so stops were minimal, just time for an occasional photo as we continued our ascent. Eventually we reached the summit and walked alongside Sela Lake out of the Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh and into West Kameng at the top of the Sela Pass 13,700ft above sea level.

What goes up must go down and we started our descent, with a stunning view of the road below.

We advanced through beautiful countryside, but primarily saw it from the car window. Our longest break, ironically, came at a check point when security said we didn't have the right entry permits and delayed us for 40 minutes!

Finally, exhausted, we reached Bomdila, had a quick dinner and slept in a rather basic hotel that no one got very excited about. A



Dancers





Lady Carrying Wood



Lady with Nose Plugs



Headman with Horns



Rickshaws in front of Temple





Mountains

quick stroll round Bomdila Temple the next morning and a read of the signs about the importance of hygiene and safety precautions during earthquakes and we were off again on another exceedingly long drive – 11 hours!

### From A to Ziro

The scenery was great with more rainforests and mountains, but the change as we crossed into Assam was welcome. The land was flatter, roads surfaced and wildlife more noticeable. Cormorants, cattle egrets, rollers, monkeys and even an elephant were spotted in quick succession. Beautiful light on tea plantations producing “Assam Tea”, brick factories and ladies carrying turf kept the photographers busy until we eventually reached Itanagar.

We didn't have time to see much of Itanagar, but the morning market was fabulous with friendly stall holders selling fruit, vegetables, fish and meat. The colours and smells filled our senses. The local paper even had our picture on the front page! But we were keen to get moving to Ziro famed for its tribal population.

### Nyishi Tribe

Our first village was Tago, inhabited by the Nyishi tribe who are agriculturists. They grow rice, maize and assorted vegetables and keep livestock including sheep, goats

and ducks. The houses are made of bamboo with a thatch of cane and palm leaves all bound with cane ropes. The houses last about 10 years, but the roofing needs constant repair so there is movement to corrugated iron sheet roofs. The longhouse sleeps several families.

The Nyishi practice polygamy, but the elderly chief assured us he only had one wife. He was wearing his hair in a knot (podum) tied with a cane cap or bopa and hornbill beak for decoration. The antlers he proudly displayed were from a barking deer he had killed with his bow and arrow.

The excited children in the village loved our gifts of potato chips, toothbrushes and pens and willingly smiled for photos before cheerfully waving us off. We were relieved to arrive at our hotel the Ziro Valley Resort and to discover it was great! The next morning I was again up early and enjoyed a quiet walk in the middle of nowhere. Spider's webs glistened in the sun and cows ambled down the road. There was even a small farm growing vines.

### The Mark of Ziro

Top priority the next the day was to visit the Apatani tribe who pray to the sun and moon. To protect against evil spirits they offer sacrifices of chickens and eggs on a regular basis. The two most prominent features of the women is a tattoo on their face created by using sharpened rice stalks to put soot and animal fat under the skin. They had nose plugs of smoothed, burned cane. Legend says the women originally used tattoos and nose plugs to make themselves less beautiful so that other tribes, such as the neighbouring Nyishi, would not come and woo them away. Now they are seen as a sign of courage and beauty. The younger generation no longer follows the practice.

When entering a village the tallest landmark is the babo a decorated wooden pole used for dangerous acrobatics at the Myoko festival.

### Hari and Hong

The villages of Hari and Hong and were relatively quiet and many of the shy women kept out of sight when they knew a car load of camera toting visitors were nearby!

It was rather a dilemma. These are proud people going about their daily life and not living in a human zoo. We tried not to intrude, but to treat the women with dignity, yet of course we wanted to get photos that

will be part of history within a generation. In general, we compromised by keeping the cameras out of sight when appropriate, paid a token sum to those who asked for it and made friends with others who seemed as happy to see us as we were to see them.

The Apatani cultivate the land and work hard in the fields using every bit of land, as we observed wandering through the fields. Women were at work repairing dividing walls in the paddy fields and getting down and dirty to clear drainage channels in the midday sun.

### Song and Dance

In the evening we were treated to a show by a family who performed Apatani songs and dances and also played a rice stalk flute. We drank lots of local beer, made by filtering water through fermenting rice and millet, served in bamboo cups before sleeping soundly until the 6:00am wake up call. What a splendid way to end our two nights in Ziro!

The next day was long and tiring with minimal stops as we returned by road for 13 hours to Guwahati, but thankfully we were staying at the excellent Ashok Hotel when we arrived there. For my last morning I explored the markets and beach at Guwati, which were great fun.

North East India is a beautiful place to visit, but don't expect five star comfort or things to run smoothly all the time. However, you will see wonderful scenery and fantastic tribal people so it makes the time and effort worthwhile. [A](#)

### Fast Facts

#### Airlines

Singapore Airlines flies from Kolkata to Singapore  
[www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)

Jet Airlines flies from Guwahati to Kolokata  
[www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)

Air India flies from Kolkata to Guwahati  
[www.airindia.com](http://www.airindia.com)

Pawan Hans Helicopters fly from Guwahati to Tawang  
[www.pawanhans.co.in](http://www.pawanhans.co.in)

#### Hotel

Guwahati – Brahmaputra Ashok  
[www.hotelbrahmaputraashok.com](http://www.hotelbrahmaputraashok.com)

Kolkata – Swisotel  
[www.swisotel.com/kolkata](http://www.swisotel.com/kolkata)

Tawang - Gakyi Khan Zang