

The red panda is related to raccoons as well as the more popular black-and-white pandas. They have bushy tails that grow up to 18 inches in length, which they wrap around their bodies for warmth in chilly weather.

Up the Rathong Valley

EXPLORING THE KHANGCHENDZONGA NATIONAL PARK ON FOOT

By SUJATHA PADMANABHAN AND ASHISH KOTHARI | Photographs by DHRITIMAN MUKHERJEE

We stood transfixed, greedily drinking in the beauty that lay before us. At our feet, was a verdant valley with thick forests clinging to its hillsides and a silvery river snaking through its heart, the waters dancing merrily over moss-covered boulders. The warmth that the pristine view sparked within us was followed by a sobering thought: If it weren't for an untiring campaign by local Buddhists and backed by NGOs over the last two decades, this dance would have been silenced forever by a dam.

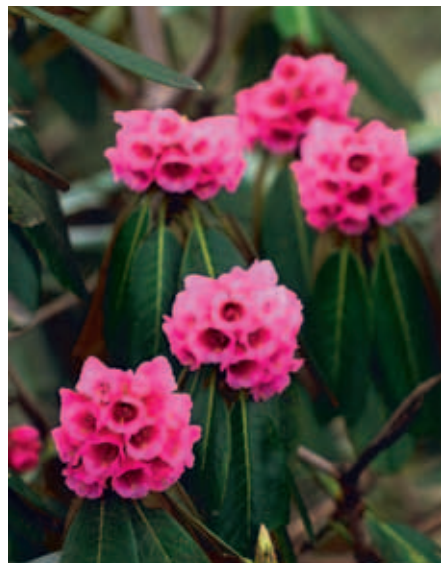
We were in Khangchendzonga National Park (also spelled Kanchenjunga), slowly making our way up the valley of the River Rathong Chu. The sanctuary, which is spread over 1,784 km in Sikkim, varies in altitude from 2,000 to 8,585 m, creating a diversity of habitats. Khangchendzonga's rhododendron forests, high altitude lakes, and glacial slopes are a haven for threatened animal and plant species, including the snow leopard and red panda.

Both the river and valley are held sacred by Buddhists—among the major reasons huge stretches of this forest have remained

untouched. The only way to explore the region is on foot. We had set out earlier that day from the village of Yuksom, after a delicious breakfast of *kodu* (millet) parathas served with local honey. The homely meal had been prepared by Dolma, the daughter-in-law of our homestay host, who had cajoled us into having one more paratha, “one for the trek,” she said, reminding us that it would be a few hours before our next meal.

Our last visit to Yuksom had been exactly 13 years ago, and we were pleasantly surprised to see that the village hadn't

SBI



The Yuksom-Goecha La trail follows the icy Rathong Chhu River (top right) through rocky valleys and groves of wild roses; There are over 1,000 species of rhododendron (bottom left) on Earth, and the largest diversity of these pretty plants are found in the Himalayan hills of Uttarakhand, Nepal, and Sikkim; The forests are also home to exotic-looking birds such as the elusive blood pheasant, monal pheasant (bottom right), and the quaint looking slender-billed scimitar (top left).

succumbed to the haphazard development that has inflicted other Himalayan destinations, despite it being the take-off point for the region's trekking routes.

EXPLORE

The most popular trek is from Yuksom to Goecha La (about 5,000 metres/9-11 days). Along the trail, visitors are treated to spectacular views of Himalayan peaks and high-altitude lakes. Also popular is the 8-day trek to Dzongri (about 4,000 metres).

With only a few days at our disposal we made it to Tsokha and enjoyed bird watching, plant identification, photography, and immersed ourselves in nature.

WILDLIFE

Khangchendzonga teems with birdlife. As we made our way through the thick of the forest, we heard the resonant voice of the Himalayan cuckoo and the cackle of the exquisitely marked spotted laughing thrush. The pretty bird is one among the 15 species of laughing thrush that inhabit Sikkim. We saw four others, and caught a brief but clear glimpse of a peculiar, tailless songbird called the chestnut-headed tesia. We had to be careful though, for every once in a while a mule or dzo (cross between yak and cow) would lumber onto our trail laden with tourist luggage or provisions. Many an unwary birder has been knocked of their

feet by these hulking beasts.

Although we did not see them, the park has a variety of pheasants including the blood and monal pheasant, and babbler like the rufous-throated wren and slender-billed scimitar. Animals such as the snow leopard, Himalayan black bear, bharal, barking and musk deer, flying squirrel, and red panda also live in these forests but are not very easy to spot.

PLANT LIFE

The park's vegetation is equally enchanting. Just above Bakhim at about 3,000 metres, are magnolia trees that flower annually. We missed it by a month but we were in



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NAVIGATE

► National Park

time for **rhododendron** blooms around Tsokha. Bunches of white and deep red rhododendron blossoms would suddenly appear out of the mist as we plodded along the trail. On our last day, we climbed about 300 metres above the village of Tsokha, so we could walk through large groves of rhododendron and **wild roses**. It had rained the previous night, and the moss covered path enveloped in mist gave the forests an ethereal ambience.

SEASONS

The best time to visit is from mid-March to mid-June, and between October and December, when the weather is between 10°C and 15°C. The park receives snowfall during January and February, and is slushy with rain from July to September.

GETTING THERE

Bagdogra, in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, is the closest airport and New Jalpaiguri (also in West Bengal) is the nearest railhead; both are 150 km/about 5 hours away. Buses and shared taxis make trips to Jorethang; from there, taxis will take you to Yuksom.

STAY

Yuksom has hotels and lodges for all budgets. **Homestays** (₹800 to 1000 per person including all meals) provide warm

hospitality, local cuisine, and experienced guidance about local trails and attractions. Visitors should also be very conscious of the ecological and cultural sensitivity of the area, by not littering, plucking wildflowers, bargaining on homestay costs; and try to understand and respect the local customs and livelihoods. Inside the park, there are **trekker's huts** managed by the tourism board at **Tsokha, Dzongri, Thangsing**, and **Lamuney** (₹50 per night; tent pitching fee ₹40). The **campsites** can accommodate up to 25 people and have bathrooms and dining areas where simple meals are served.

NEED TO KNOW

Indians do not need a permit to enter the national park but have to pay an environmental fee of ₹500 per head in addition to tickets. Tickets (₹200 for seven days) and accommodation bookings can be obtained at the park check post in Yuksom. Foreign nationals need a Restricted Area permit, which can be procured at the Tourism Department office in Gangtok and a minimum of two travellers accompanied by a local guide is mandatory (entry ₹400 for seven days). Indians may enter alone. For more information about Khangchendzonga National Park, contact the Forest Environment and Wildlife Management Department, Government

of Sikkim on dfoknpkbr@yahoo.in. To know about homestays and local guides, call Pema Bhutia (9735095543), Chewang Bhutia (9832363255), or Kinzong Bhutia (9733158268) of the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee in Yuksom. ■

YUKSOM

Yuksom is more than a gateway to the national park. Among the attractions that the little village holds is Kathog, a serene, sacred lake that is said to bring peace to even the most troubled soul. Nearby is Norbugang chorten, where Sikkim's first king Phuntsog Namgyal was coronated (Yuksom was Sikkim's first capital). A short trek away stands Dubdi monastery. The 3 km-climb to this 18th century abbey is tiring but Dubdi's beauty and majestic, century-old trees are worth the effort.

Thanks to the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC), locals run homestays, conduct nature tours, create alternatives to wood fuel, and are actively involved in waste reduction. We saw virtually no litter on the trail. Back at our cosy homestay, a warm welcome and hot meal reminded us that travel can be enriching to tourists and the destination. And that sustainable travel initiatives can work to revitalise the environment and preserve local cultures and communities.

TINKLE AD



Blue sheep are the favoured prey of snow leopards that haunt the rocky mountains of the national park. They stand very still to blend into their environment when they spot danger, but will run once they realise they have been spotted.