

Just a quick message to say that I arrived here safely and not too late after a good journey from the UK, changing in Dubai in the middle of the night. Emirates looked after me well, but my luggage took a long time to arrive on the carousel - literally the last item but one. The taxi I'd booked was waiting, but it took plenty of time to the hotel because of the traffic.

The hotel in Dhaka is right in the middle of things, with lots of rickshaws and taxis clogging the streets. Yesterday I went walking through the old city and managed to find two churches from Raj times, a mosque, the national museum and the Buriganga, part of the Ganges that flows through the city. It's warm (30 + deg) and humid, but my room has AC which is reasonably effective. The staff are helpful and arrange my coach travel to Chittagong on Thursday - the train was fully booked (40th anniversary of independence coming up at the weekend). I did manage to get a first class seat on the train to Kolkata for next week when I move on to India.

I'm now in Srimongol (spellings vary) in the heart of the tea growing industry, staying in a bungalow on a tea estate. It's very disorganised but pleasant and well away from the bustle of the town. Lots of insects during the evening, but a balcony for day time use (no Gin and Tonics in Bangladesh). I think the country could be described as an adventure tourism destination - not white water rafting, but just finding things and getting to places.

Dhaka was interesting with various churches and mosques and a couple of museums. It's growing fast with much concrete and bamboo scaffolding.

The bus trip to Chittagong was exciting. The coach was comfortable and A/C but had large cracks in the windscreen. The driving is interesting - biggest wins and with lots of slow trucks the overtaking (and undertaking) can be breathtaking. But I got to Chittagong safely and I find the city, although large, friendly. Not too many sights but plenty of street life, the water front and views because of the hills.

I got the train from there to here supposedly six hours in a grubby first class compartment for L2.20. Plenty of room but a bit 'numbing'. Interesting people in the compartment and some good views.

Two hours late and the rickshaw driver had difficulties finding my hotel but settled now. Tomorrow by bus to Dhaka and then the train to Kolkata on the day after.

There are virtually no westerners here and so one is a source of much interest but it does mean that people have lots of time to talk and seem very friendly.

From Srimongol I had to get the bus to Dhaka as the only train tickets were on the afternoon train. More hair raising driving but we got to the capital safely with an hour needed for the last mile or so into the bus station. I went back to the same hotel, the Ornate and was welcomed back like an old friend. The drawback was that I had to get up at 4.42 for my taxi to the out of town station from where the train to Kolkata departed with a 1.5hr check in time at the very run down station with lots of insects as dawn broke. Eventually we were of in an admittedly very comfortable train in which I had a compartment to myself. The scenery was much the same as the previous days with the highlights being crossing the Jamuna and Ganges rivers on high and long bridges. The formalities at the border took a total of three and a half hours (less than Mongolia/China) but after that we were soon speeding to Kolkata, again to a station out of the centre. I managed to get a taxi driver to reduce his fare from 250 to 150 rupees and then helped him to find the way.

I'm now in a hot and humid Kolkata (what used to be Calcutta). It seems a million miles from Bangladesh; now there are lots of westerners, internet cafes, coffee shops ... This makes life easier but not so exotic. Since I was last here the city seems to have developed and is not so ramshackle nor as dirty as it used to be. The hotel is one that has been a family hotel since 1936 (<http://www.fairlawnhotel.com>) and is quite an institution with afternoon tea in the garden.

I have a large air conditioned room and now I have got them to sort out the hot water (although a tepid bath in this weather isn't that bad). I had my English breakfast this morning (with proper marmalade) with a mother and daughter. The mother was born in Germany and the daughter in India (they had been to revisit her birth place) and both now live in South Africa and so they were giving me hints about safety there for September, even in the countryside of the National Park. You meet such interesting people. I spent the day shopping for books, eating and checking how to get a permit for Sikkim and of course taking afternoon tea with cucumber sandwich. Tomorrow I get the overnight Darjeeling Mail train to be met on Friday morning by my jeep transfer for four nights in the hills near to Darjeeling.

As I doubt that there will be email in the hills near to Darjeeling, a final greeting from Calcutta (Kolkata). It continues to be hot (34+) and humid (100%?) during the day - 6am is the preferred time for

walking on the maidan - the open park which was cleared of the jungle around about Fort William so that the Black Hole episode couldn't be repeated.. There are lots of people playing cricket, exercising, doing meditation etc. I spent a lot of today sorting out the permit I need for Sikkim - A front line permit - as the state borders Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. One visit to the office with passport, visa photocopies and photo + the inevitable form to fill and back again two hours later to collect the permit. Then I'll have to do the process again if I want to go to more sensitive areas.

Yesterday I had an excellent lunch in a restaurant that I already knew about where they serve Bengali home cooking with lots of dishes that you don't see in main stream restaurants. I book the recipe book, but there are lots of ingredients that are not common in HW. Today wasn't so good - a standard Chinese buffet. The afternoon passed very pleasantly drinking beer and chatting to a couple from Derbyshire; almost as good as Yorkshire. They seem quite adventurous.

Tonight it's the Darjeeling Mail train and a jeep transfer to the hills so it may be a few days before the next episode.

I forgot to mention the cricket, which of course you know interests me greatly. Every shop, restaurant, hotel had the TVs on and tuned in to the India/Pak match and you can perhaps appreciate what it was like when the home side won!. I had felt sorry for the Bangladeshis when they were eliminated on their home ground. The Times of India had seven pages devoted to the match this morning. Must go - the insects are a pest in my little internet cafe cubicle.

The drive to Karmi was five hours through some interesting scenery although it was very hazy. The farm was simple but comfortable with excellent food - three cooked meals a day with tea (from Darjeeling!) whenever desired. The location was stunning, high up on a hillside amongst small farms, with plenty of walks. On my second day, Andrew, the proprietor took for one to view an old Buddhist Temple with original paintings on the walls over 200 years old.

The farm had a marvellous thatched terrace. My room was in the old wooden house with all the creaking you might expect plus an "Altar Room". There were various other guests. When I arrived there was a couple from California who were on a first class round the world trip, and had come from Brazil to this atypical part of India. Next a doctor from Darjeeling who was helping at the local clinic. Also

there was a couple from England and South Africa who talked all the time, and played with I-phone, I-book etc. Not what I visited for!

On Monday at daybreak there was a terrific storm with lightening, thunder, high winds and rain for a couple of hours followed by a cloudy day, but with much improved visibility. There had been snow fairly low down on the hills, much lower than normal apparently. Wednesday was warm with a clear blue sky and excellent views. It was just like the best sort of summer days in the UK. The drive to Kalimpong repeated half the previous one, but with views so plenty of stops for photos, including of Kachenjunga.

The hotel here ([www.himalayanhotel.biz/](http://www.himalayanhotel.biz/)) is very pleasant with a beautiful garden and good views and just far enough from the centre to be reasonably quiet. My room has the usual bed and bathroom but also enclosed and outside sitting areas. After dinner last night (decent) I was asked when I would like 'bed tea' (I had it on my terrace and breakfast. The latter I had in the garden in the early sunshine - fruit, fruit juice, porridge, toast and marmalade, cheese omelette, coffee (instant). All very civilised. I was out walking this morning, sunny and warm. Another storm is threatening.

Kalimpong continued to be very comfortable with some interesting days out. There's Dr Graham's Home which was set up for 6 disadvantaged children a century ago and now has over 1300 in the boarding school. An American couple staying in hotel whom I got to know and ate meals with were visiting as her father had been a boy there in 1947 when Calcutta was not a place to be. There were also good walks and views although again it was very hazy.

On Friday I moved here and I regret to say the hotel is not so good, with a problem over the booking. I was offered a basement room with no window which I rejected and eventually got a mid range room, which was reasonable apart from the hot water not working. So I moved room.

An early breakfast this morning at 6.30 as the tourist office told me I could get a shared jeep to a neighbouring monastery at 7.30. But when I got there, the first was at ten. So I got an expensive taxi. It was interesting and in attractive countryside. Back here at lunchtime for a walk up into the hills but with rain, followed by a mediocre meal! Not the best day.

Tomorrow back to the wilds. I've booked my seat in the jeep at 7am so I hope I have better luck.

The jeep turned up and it was a wonderful journey to Yoksum, my next place. It took five hours up and down mountain roads with good but hazy views. We stopped for a break where the snowy mountains could be seen. Progress is not fast on such roads. I didn't tell you about one of the taxi driver's techniques in Gangtok - peaking on the mobile phone using right hand, changing gear with left and steering with right elbow. And the road wasn't wide, straight and level (nor smooth).

The weather clouded over on arrival, but the hotel was pleasant, and I had a balcony with a splendid view of the mountains when the clouds allowed. The weather settled into a pattern of clear, sunny mornings, suitable for breakfast in the garden, clouding over in the afternoon with a violent storm with plenty of rain in the late afternoon or evening. Hence electric failure on many occasions. Have you ever showered by candlelight? I did a lot of walking in the four days - there are some good paths, one of which is the start of a trekking route. The trekkers came back wet and cold!

I continue to meet interesting people. On arrival at the hotel there were the three Canadian women that I had last seen in Calcutta and were able to exchange details of our exploits and to share several meals. When they left a man from California turned up and we were soon into American politics and various novels we were reading and should read..

This morning I left by shared jeep at 6.30 (the only one of the day). for the two hour trip to Pelling where I was in time to have breakfast at the new hotel. It's fine although the small town is rather grotty with much new and apparently uncontrolled hotel development. It's big plus point is the view of the mountains including Kachenjunga. After the obligatory rain this afternoon the skies cleared for a wonderful panorama (which I have from my room) of the snowy peaks. I'm now about to go for supper. I stay here for three nights before my next trip which is the last one before returning to Gangtok (to a different hotel!).

Another day, another hotel.

I had three days in Pelling. The hotel was very disorganised (my dirty laundry was still under the reception desk a day and a half after I had handed it in and I had to fight to get it back in time for my departure, Many things were 'off' from the menu, ..). The big plus

was the view from the bedroom window - Kachenjunga appeared every morning at daybreak (about 4.45) with excellent clarity and many of its snowy neighbours. Towards mid morning the clouds amassed and towards evening on most days there was a storm.

There were some interesting walks in the area and the woods are teeming with bird life. There also were two more monasteries, one of which, high on a hill, claims to be the oldest in Sikkim. There are also the remains of the second capital of Sikkim, again on a hill top, which is like a ruined castle in very well kept grounds with wonderful views of the high mountains. On the day I went there I had lunch at a very nice hotel; one that I had rejected on the basis of the cost (about GBP95 per night full board). I wish I had gone there. It was a beautiful place with very comfortable rooms. The manager said that if I had contacted him directly, there might have been a deal possible. He was born in Reading and his wife in Darjeeling. I'm going to take some photographs of Salisbury Road in Reading where he was born and email them to him.

Today my shared jeep left at the civilised hour of 8.30 for the two trip here and again it was a spectacular ride with warm sunshine, hazy views and lots of flowering shrubs and birdsong. Huge Poinsettias seemed to be the speciality of the area. Tomorrow I hope to walk through the local forest park to a local summit but today it has been shrouded in mist. If it's the same tomorrow I might change my mind. On Tuesday I head for Gangtok and from there make my way back to Calcutta for the flight home. I've been checking the dates very carefully after the near disaster on my dates last year!

The weather yesterday at Ravangla was poor - clouds and mist over everything when I woke up and there had been rain overnight, and so I decided not to climb the peak. I would have had to hire a guide and I don't really like that sort of walking. Perhaps next time.

I went for a walk through the local forests in the morning and the weather was mild but misty and so no views of the mountain but pleasant nonetheless. Along the side of the path were lots of what appeared to be strawberries - right looking flowers and fruit, but I wasn't brave enough to try them. A pity as I saw no fruit for a week, neither in the shops nor the restaurants. Then it was back to the hotel for lunch. Apparently the restaurant is being refurbished so again it was room service which is very common in Indian hotels. This can be comfortable, but it does mean that you meet fewer people. The food was tasty and I looked out into the clouds. A procession of monks went by, but the look bedraggled in the rain.

I did meet one family who were staying for a short break from Calcutta (where it's up to 38deg

C). He works for IBM there and gave me his card and said to ring him if I want when I get to Calcutta, and gave me some restaurant recommendations.

About two the rain eased off and I went out along another path, past a huge Buddha under construction. The rain came back with the afternoon's thunder and lightning. I had a jacket and umbrella but I was rather soggy when I got back for tea. Before sunset the clouds cleared for the mountains to reappear with new snow.

When I turned out the lights I was aware, for the first time that I remember in a hotel, that the ceiling was painted, with luminous paint, with hundreds of stars and planets. So I slept under the stars and didn't get wet!

Today dawned bright and clear with good view up to the snowy mountains. Again I had my breakfast in my bedroom with the balcony door and windows open - juice, coffee (or was it tea, they taste the same), cheese omelet and toastbutterjam (always pronounced as one word, and you always get four slices).

Again the jeep left at 8.30 for another spectacular ride in the sun, about three hours with a twenty minute stop. One man was constantly talking to the driver and the other passengers seemed amused, but my Nepali is deficient so I only caught the numbers which were interspersed in English. I got to Gangtok about 11.30, got a newspaper and a new novel (by Kushwant Singh) and headed down to the hotel (see <http://www.hiddenforestretreat.org/> for details) which is about 2km downhill from the town centre. It's beautiful in lots of gardens and I have a terrace (covered) to sit on. I just think I might relax in the two days I'm here. I got a good lunch as soon as I arrived, and a pot of tea on that terrace!

I did in fact have a very relaxed time in Gangtok, and spent most of the time eating and reading and looking at the view. The garden grows the vegetables and lots of orchids and rhododendrons, and the results are on display. Various people from the UK, SA and Australia passed through. On the Wednesday evening we all drank Chang, the local brew. Its made from millet, drunk from a section of bamboo stalk packed with more millet. Yo can keep on refilling the bamboo with hot water from a flask until it's too weak.

On Thursday morning I got a taxi ride to a viewpoint about 9km out of town, but the clouds were around so the distant views were missing but it was a pleasant spot for a walk in the warm sun. Back to the hotel for another lunch with conventional beer and then my taxi arrive to take me to the station, 120km distant, through spectacular scenery and all for GBP25, but it did take 4.5 hours. I had to wait about 2.5 hours for the train in the heat of the plains and then the train was half an hour leaving. I had the usual bunk in an air conditioned coach and slept on and off until we arrived in Calcutta at 7.30, just an hour later. After a short taxi ride I was in the hotel where my room was available immediately and I felt better after a shower and breakfast.

I've just done my on line check in for the flight tomorrow; I have to be at the airport at 7.30. I change at Dubai and arrive in London at 8.15.

Just to confirm that I arrived home safely.

I spent Friday in Calcutta. After breakfast and the internet cafe, I got the metro to northern Calcutta and visited a couple of Jain temples in the inner suburbs. The weather was hot (30+) and with high humidity; not the conditions to have lots of energy. From there, I got the tram back to the city centre. The trams are ancient and very battered. They are also slow and underused; having to keep to the tracks they can't nip around other vehicles like the buses. But it's an interesting way to see the street life. I walked back to the hotel and spent the afternoon relaxing, and packing for the early departure.

I got the taxi to the airport at 6.30am for the departure at 9.40. At least the early morning has much more pleasant weather than later. The flight to Dubai was half empty and comfortable with Emirates. I had my first lunch - Asian vegetarian which I had ordered in advance; its a way of getting served first. After a two hour layover in Dubai the flight to London was full and noisy with lots of small children - the stewardess supplied me with earplugs as well as a second lunch and then later afternoon tea.

Derek White Taylor picked me up from Heathrow and we got home about 10pm; I was tired.