

Sikkim

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 - 3

To Sikkim and the Kyongsola Alpine Sanctuary

After a night in Delhi we fly eastwards along the southern edge of the great Himalayan Mountains to Bagdogra Airport. If the weather is clear we'll have fabulous views of many of the world's highest peaks including Kanchenjunga and Everest. We'll drive through the tall forests of Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary before starting our first sinuous Himalayan climb. Numerous roadside Rhesus Macaques monitor our progress en route to Sikkim's capital, Gangtok. Our first taste of Sikkim's astounding rhododendron flora will be at the Kyongsola Alpine Sanctuary where at around 3300m above sea level we'll enjoy a multitude of blooms including deep red *Rhododendron barbatum*, purple *niveum* and pink *hodgsonii* set amidst gnarled silver firs with deep pink *Primula boothii* alongside the small streams. Feeding on the abundant blooms will be the stunning Fire-tailed Sunbird and both Green-backed and Rufous-vented Tits. Lower down is a stunning forest of big-leaved *Rhododendron falconeril* with their creamy-white candelabras of blooms.

Days 4 - 6

Monasteries, Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary and the Yumthang Valley

Buddhism Sikkim-style is quite different from that practised in neighbouring Tibet, and en route to Lachung in northern Sikkim, we'll see both old and new monasteries. Around these grow plenty of the elegant cobra-lily *Arisaema speciosum*. Crested Serpent Eagles glide over forested hills and we'll see Lineated Barbet, White-faced Laughingthrush, Spangled Drongo and abundant Blue Whistling Thrushes. The pleasant village of Lachung nestles in a valley of tilled fields and prayer flags all dramatically hemmed in by towering snowy peaks. Our hotel is superbly placed above Lachung and has stunning rooftop views. The scenery grows ever more impressive as we head into the Yumthang Valley. Bright yellow bushes of *Piptanthus nepalensis* line the road along with the scrambling stems of *Holboelia latifolia* from which hang sweetly-scented pink flowers and then thick stands of blood-red *Rhododendron thomsonii*, swathes of white *Rhododendron ciliatum*, pink *Rhododendron campanulatum*, soft yellow *Rhododendron campylocarpum* and also its sumptuous peachy-pink colour form. Rhododendrons are ever present and changing as we ascend reaching pure stands of cream flowered *Rhododendron wightii* all set among an ocean of thousands of purple *Primula denticulata* that carpet the ground. As we reach Yumthang a great flat-bottomed valley opens out before us with Dzos (like Yaks) grazing on the pasture studded with yellow *Anemone obtusiloba* and on the river's shingle bars we may find Ibisbill, though their beautiful colouration camouflages them well. Returning to Lachung, we can find *Rhododendrons triflorum* and *virgatum* in the hills behind the hotel and with a bit of determination we can climb

up to enjoy elegant *Arisaema utile*, the pretty alpine *Androsace rotundifolia* and the huge white bells of *Rhododendron lindleyi*.

Days 7 – 9

Lachen & Thangu, Chopta & Zemu Valleys – Kanchenjunga National Park (north)

The valley leading to Lachen is a spectacular forest-cloaked defile with lovely specimens of *Rhododendron griffithianum* and epiphytic *edgeworthii* growing by the roadside. Alpine shrubberies are home to Robin Accentors, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and White-browed Rosefinch.

No less than fifteen species of rhododendron flower at this season amid the majestic scenery of Kanchenjunga National Park. We follow the course of the Zema River through idyllic forests with superb deep red *Rhododendron arboreum*. Primulas are plentiful too with marvellous displays of *Primula gracilipes*. Equally impressive is the vast quantity of cobra-lilies with *Arisaemas nepenthoides* and swathes of the bizarre recurved spathes of huge *Arisaema griffithii* beneath big purplish leaves. Along the way are White-throated and Black-faced Laughingthrushes.

Magnificent stands of silver fir dominate the higher slopes with an understorey of almost pure *Rhododendron hodgsonii*. The scenery becomes ever more impressive as we move north towards the Chopta Valley and Thangu's Tibetan landscapes finding a dazzling mixture of *Rhododendron glaucophyllum*, the narrow orange-yellow bells of *Rhododendron cinnabarinum*, lavender *campanulatum* and red *thomsoniae* together with *Clintonia unesi* and *Gentiana pedicellata*. Sikkim's national bird, the Blood Pheasant, is common, and so too are White-capped Water Redstarts, Dark-rumped Rosefinch, Rufous-vented Yuhina and White-collared Blackbird.

Days 10 & 11

Ravangla & the Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary

The route to Ravangla takes us through some marvellous forests where Sikkim's national flower *Dendrobium nobile* will be in flower. Epiphytic on both trees and rocks, these beautiful orchids are joined by *Dendrobiums aphyllum* and *moschatum*. We'll explore Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary where there are abundant arisaemas including *Arisaema concinnum* and *Arisaema speciosum*, and masses of the white orchid *Coelogyne corymbosa* decorating the trees along with the big creamy bells of epiphytic *Rhododendron dalhousiae* and greenish *dalhousiae* ssp *tashii*. Birdwatching is very good with Large Hawk Cuckoo, Large Niltava, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie and Red-tailed Minla. In the mid-forest level are huge *Rhododendron falconeri*, *Paris polyphylla* and the fragrant climber *Holboelia latifolia* whilst Royle's Pikas scurry about the rocky areas. Reaching the summit requires a degree of stamina but the prize for those that reach the summit is the Primula-relative *Bryocarpum himalaicum* with its elegant yellow bells.

Days 12 - 14

Pemayangtse, to Kalimpong and travel to Delhi

We'll descend to the comforts of the Pelling resort where the antics of White-crested Laughingthrushes will keep us amused as they party through the gardens that surround our bungalows. From here we make the short journey to the Pemayangtse or 'Perfect Sublime Lotus' Monastery one of the oldest in Sikkim with its brightly painted wooden model of the seven stages to Nirvana. The flamboyant *Bauhinia variegata* lines the roadsides as we descend through rice terraces and fields. Red-rumped Swallows swoop across the waters of the broad Rangit River whose course we follow before climbing once again to the peaceful tree-lined town of Kalimpong at 1250m, famous for its orchid and cut-flower nurseries, and close to several more fine Buddhist gompas. Our hotel doubles as a museum full of old Raj memorabilia and set in beautifully kept gardens where Yellow-breasted Greenfinches flit among the treetops. The afternoon will be free to explore the horticultural pleasures of Kalimpong before our descent to Bagdogra airport the following morning.

Please note that if the Dzhongri Trekk Extension (see below) is happening then Kurt, your leader, will take the trekkers on the evening of Day 12 and local orchid expert Sailesh Pradhan will join the main tour party for Days 13 and until you reach the airport on Day 14. If the trek extension is not running then Kurt will stay with the party until the tour's end. An early afternoon flight on Day 14 takes us to Delhi where we can relax and enjoy dinner before flying home the next morning.

Day 15

Return to UK/Europe

or...

Dzhongri Trek Extension

Days 13 - 17

Dzhongri Trek - Kanchenjunga National Park (south)

On Day 12 those on the extension will finish the day at Yuksam, those doing only the main tour will have gone on to Pelling. The base camp at Yuksam village nestles beneath a magnificent swathe of subtropical forest festooned with epiphytic orchids such as *Cymbidium devonianum* and both *Coelogyne ochracea* and *Coelogyne cristata*. The striking cobra lily *Arisaema tortuosum* is common and as we move higher we'll find another unusual aroid, *Remusatia hookerana*, its small yellow spathes emerging from mats of yellow *Sedum multicaule* and hairy *Ajuga lobata*. The birdlife is prolific with Green Magpie, Cutias, Collared Owlet, Golden-throated Barbet, Chestnut-crowned Warbler, both White-browed and Black-eared Shrike Babblers, and the incomparably coloured and aptly-named Scarlet Finch. Moving higher and the vegetation changes to Silver Fir and Hemlock forests with red *Rhododendron arboreum* and dangling

from the bigger trees white flowered *Rhododendron pendulum*. Both Darjeeling and Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers scour bark for juicy grubs. An understory of *Rosa sericea* and *Viburnum cotinifolium* hides more arisaemas and mossy banks are scattered with the deeply incised petals of *Primula irregularis* and delicate white violets, whilst wet banks are smothered in *Primula gracilipes* and close to our campsite there will be stands of gorgeous purple *Primula calderana*. Himalayan Monal pheasants call from the dense *Rhododendron hodgsonii* woodland as Spotted Nutcracker search for ripe fir cones and diminutive Chestnut-headed Tesia flits among the tangled undergrowth. Huge swathes of *Rhododendron wightii* clothe the Dzongri plateau itself at 4000m, where we will find delicate little *Primula glabra* and *Primula deuteroneura* blooming against a backdrop of sensational Himalayan peaks. Those wanting to get up early will have the chance to walk up to the higher viewpoint and watch the stunning dawn across this incredible landscape dominated by several peaks above 6000m, and of course mighty Kanchenjunga, at a mere 8598m! White-browed Rosefinch, Grey-sided Bush Warbler, White-winged Grosbeak and Hume's Warbler all live among scrub together with the many Rufous-breasted Accentors that are sought out by the Cuckoos that haunt this high landscape - it's a little odd to hear their familiar call at over 4000m! Up here we may find the stunning blue Grandala as Tibetan Snowcock yodel from ridges where Bharal Sheep graze and Long-eared Pikas call sharply from boulder fields. Even on the descent we'll find new species with the first waxy white flowers of *Theropogon pallidus* and tantalising tall non-flowering spikes of *Cardiocrinum giganteum* emerging from the deep leaf litter.

Days 18 & 19 To Kalimpong and Delhi

We'll descend to the comforts of Kalimpong (see main tour description) and on the afternoon of Day 19 a flight takes us to Delhi where can relax and enjoy dinner before flying home the next morning.

Day 20 Arrive UK

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our previous tours to Sikkim. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from www.greentours.co.uk (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post to Greentours, 8 Eliot Close, Armitage, Rugeley, WS15 4UP, UK. Tel +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Flower, bird and mammal checklists are available.