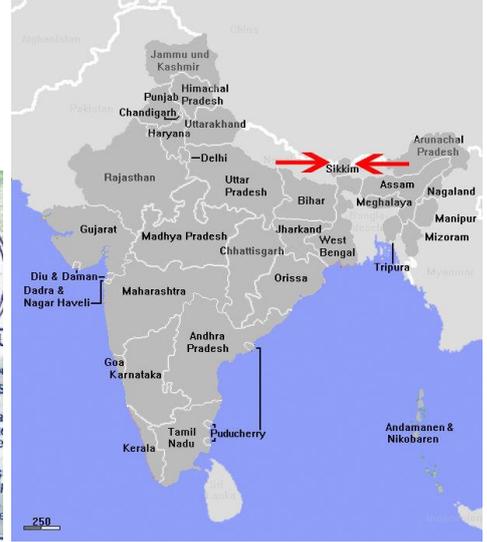


# সিঙ্গিম ট্রেফ

NOVEMBER 2019



Sikkim is a part of North East India, bordered by Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and the Indian state of West Bengal. It joined India in 1975, having previously been an independent kingdom. We needed a permit to enter Sikkim and there is still a border control point.



We flew from the UK to Delhi, and then on an internal flight to Bagdogra, where we were met by the local team in jeeps, and then headed to Sikkim. We stayed in a comfortable homestay in Rinchonpong, before the next morning our bags were loaded on the roof of the jeeps and we set off to the starting point for the trek. Many of the roads have been affected by landslides and rockfalls, and at times we had to wait for a bit of rock-breaking before we could proceed.



There were some wobbly road bridges to cross on our journeys (one jeep at a time!). Many of the roads had rocky surfaces so it was a bone-shaker trip. It was good eventually to be walking, and there was no more vehicle access until the very end of the trek.



Much of the trek was in the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. There was a very grand gate, but this was a remote and wild area, with huge rhododendron and bamboo forests. We knew that the rhododendrons wouldn't be in flower at this time of year. They must make a spectacular sight when they are. Many rhododendrons in country parks in the UK originate from Sikkim.



Our route was not often walked, and had become quite overgrown in places, even though an advance party had attempted to clear the worst areas. Where they had hacked down bamboo growing on the path, they had left incredibly sharp stumps - one slip and we were in danger of impaling ourselves!



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Eventually we reached our first campsite. It was cloudy, but one of the local guides said that the best time to see the mountains would be at sunrise at 4.30am. We dutifully set our alarms, only to discover that it was still dark at that time in the morning. But it was worth waiting, as the sun hit the Himalayas an hour later and we had spectacular views, which changed minute by minute as the sun climbed in the sky.



From then on, we were so fortunate to have views each day from our campsites, and our paths, of the Himalayan range, including Kanchenjunga - shown here - the third highest mountain in the world, rising to 8,586m (28,169ft).



The views certainly lifted our spirits whenever we were feeling a bit sorry for ourselves. The trekking was challenging, with some very steep climbs over rough terrain, and the camping conditions were basic. The route took us to about 3,000m which is high enough to start to feel the effects of altitude in terms of breathlessness, but no one had any serious symptoms of acute mountain sickness. It was warm during the day - some days warm enough to have breakfast and lunch outside, but by 5pm it was dark. As the sun disappears behind the mountains, the temperature plummets and we huddled together in the mess tent for hot drinks, wearing several layers of fleeces, hats and head torches.



*Home sweet home - our two person tents, with a sleeping bag each side and our bags down the middle.*

We used our drinking bottles as hot water bottles, getting some boiling water from the cooking area. Often we woke up with a heavy frost, and ice on the tents. It stayed cold until the sun made it above the hilltops.

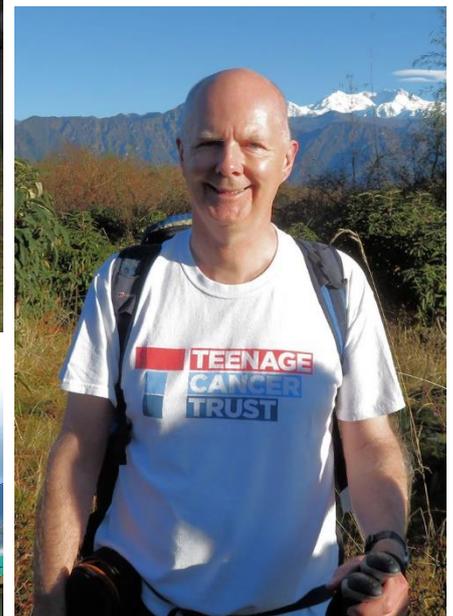


Our toilets were field toilets - a hole dug in the ground, with the luxury bonus of a toilet seat on a small frame precariously balancing above the pit. Best not to sit down until the ice had melted a bit!

We had a large team of local support staff, acting as porters, cooks, guides. One evening they invited us to join them round their fire, and performed some local dancing and singing.



*Thankfully this colourful spider was spotted at a lower altitude and nowhere near any of our campsites.*



On the final day, we had a long steep descent, away

from the mountains, back to the local villages and the road where we met our vehicles, and said goodbye to most of the support team.

It's hard to believe that this was my 18<sup>th</sup> trek for Teenage Cancer Trust, an amazing charity which makes sure young people do not have to face cancer alone. The charity's work ranges from giving straightforward answers about diagnoses and treatment, to developing specialist units in NHS hospitals, and delivering specialist nursing care. Much of this has been possible through your generosity. I hope to trek again in 2020, and my fundraising page is open most of the year at: <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/trekrise>

तृप्तियै युवय तद्वानि विर युवय स्वर्षितः!

*Nigel*

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