Trekking in the Shadow of Kanchenjunga
By Liz Cleere

Translated as "Five Great Treasures of the Snow", Kanchenjunga's sacred peaks are said to contain divine texts, gold, grain, gems, and salt. As a mark of respect, when the first climbers attempted to conquer it in the mid twentieth century they stopped short of the summit. Sadly, modern day mountaineers no longer honour that ancient tradition.

Wilting in the pre-monsoon heat of Kerala, Jamie and I discuss ways of keeping cool and decide, just like the British Raj before us, it is time to head north.

"I've wanted to see the Himalaya since we arrived in India," says Jamie.

Thirty-six hours later we're drinking tea in Darjeeling. At 6710ft, 'The Queen of Hills' clings to the side of a steep valley, its narrow roads almost vertical in places. Our room is on the top floor of a five story house, and the nightly trek up to bed is good training for what is to come. Norbu and Sangay Dekeva's traditional home is snug and welcoming, its floors and walls decorated with photos and flags. Sweet masala tea is handed round in the wood panelled lounge, amid comfy sofas and a central wood burning stove. The view from our corner room offers the first panoramic view of the Himalaya: one window faces two kilometres down the valley; the other faces north west, across town to the Kanchenjunga massif. India's highest mountain (the third highest peak in the world) plays hide and seek with its admirers, sometimes appearing through the clouds at dawn or hanging in the sky at night. Although distant, the view is a spectacular, and memorable introduction to the Himalaya. The air is satisfyingly cool.

Before we can continue towards our goal, we have to visit the Magno Vale Academy in neighbouring Sukhia Pokhri. A friend of ours was a volunteer there, and we have promised to act as "ambassadors" for her UK charity, the Mondo Challenge Foundation.

After a few days of discovery in Darjeeling – visits to gompas, hill tops and forests, as well as joining a day-long procession to celebrate the birth of Buddha – we set off for the school.

Jiwan Rai, the Foundation's local smiling face, drives us over rock-strewn roads that twist and turn past jaw-dropping passes on one side, and pastel-coloured timber and clay houses on the other. The school is reached from a stony path, down which we walk in single file. At the end we climb over a slippery dirt wall into the playground (the path and wall were washed away during the monsoon later this year, closing the school for a week). The building is half completed, with no glass in the windows, no plaster on the walls and a precarious attitude to electricity. We are met by cries of welcome from the children, who range between four and sixteen.

"Some of them walk for three hours to come here every day," says Deven Subba, the young headmaster.

"They walk up through the fields and forests. There are no roads." He points across the valley. "Most of the children's parents work in the tea or quinine plantations and can't read or write."

There are no computers or televisions at home; the erratic power supply, (sometimes there is no electricity for days) means they are often in darkness. Deven introduces us to a class of seven year olds, all keen to show us their book work. The entire school is eager to meet us, so we make a point of visiting each of the tiny, cold classrooms. With saucer-eyes, they drink in everything we say. We play games, swap stories, listen to them sing and watch long and intricate dances.

We spend the final hour with six of the older children, and are astonished by their high level of spoken and written English. We ask them if they have any questions, and are surprised by the topics they raise.

“Do you think Osama bin Laden is really dead?” (The news that week has been about the US hit on bin Laden's fortress in Pakistan.)

“Do you believe in the Big Bang theory?”

“Has man finished evoluting [sic]?”

When it is time to leave we are given a loud send off by children and teachers, all asking when their next volunteer will arrive. We promise we will tell the Foundation to send someone soon.

Jiwan asks if we'd like to see some of the other mountain schools. How can we refuse?

Over the next week we put our plans on hold and visit a further seven schools: all are dependent on charity; all are crushingly poor; all are run by dedicated and knowledgeable staff. Best of all, they are all populated with healthy little sponges, eager to soak up information and knowledge.

Before we leave, our new friends take us on an afternoon tour into Nepal, where we drink beer and are served noodles by the family of one of the school children. We ask them where we should go for the best view of Kanchenjunga. Jiwan tells us to avoid Tiger Hill, where the noisy domestic tourists from Darjeeling come by Jeep every morning. Deven insists we try the view from 10,170ft Tonglu: it's closer (just) and clearer. It's also a pleasant walk. They persuade us to take a trek in the Singalila National Park, and arrange a guide for us. Great believers in local knowledge, we happily accept the invitation and the following day we set off just after sunrise.

Pemba is a 21 year old local student, who has recently trained as a guide; he is eager to practice his new job and excellent English on us. We soon learn that the Nepali idea of an easy walk is quite different to our own. The first day includes the steepest part of the journey and takes eight hours. It drizzles. It thunders. The lightning crashes around us. The Tibetans weren't wrong when they named Darjeeling the 'Land of Thunderbolts'. In fact it rains during the entire trek.

At Tumling, after a toasty night under thick blankets in a mountain hut, Jamie dutifully rises at 5:30 for a hike up to Tonglu; he hopes to catch the sun hitting Kanchenjunga with his camera. Unfortunately the vision lasts only a few seconds before the clouds come lumbering across the horizon, gobbling up the mountain and valley.

We stop at the homes of Pemba's friends along the way, and drink an odd assortment of tea, sometimes with butter and at other times with salt. We gulp down anything they throw at us. At 'Chitray' ('Bamboo House') we meet a young Lama and his entourage of monks. The place, with goats, dogs and chickens mooching around the yard, is a farm. The largest building doubles as a family home and restaurant. We fall into the warm, dry dining room, steam pouring off us, and sit knocking back masala chai as we chomp on biscuits. After a while we notice an old man sitting in the shadows. He smiles and raises his glass to us, so we nod and say hello. He is 'Chitray Pala' ('Bamboo House Papa'). We chat to him and, through Pemba, learn he is 80 years old and comes from Tibet. 58 years ago he was imprisoned by the Chinese. It was a deadly situation, so after twelve days he escaped and ran, taking his mother and father with him. He doesn't know how many miles they walked over the mountains, but he knows it took two months to get here and build their first farm out of the local bamboo. He finishes his coffee and goes to talk to the Lama, who blesses him. Chitray Pala shouts goodbye to us all and sets off up the hill in the rain, carrying a huge piece of corrugated iron on his back.

“He's going to mend one of the shacks on his farm,” says Pemba.

We never manage to glimpse Kanchenjunga during the trek, the clouds never part for long. But we see bunches of orchids garlanding the forest trees, fill up on wild strawberries, spot eagles and meet maroon-clad Tibetan monks in sandals playing football with a can.

With the school visits over, we are still no closer to Kanchenjunga, instead we find ourselves trekking alongside the quinine plantations surrounding Kalimpong. Jiwan has invited us to his brother's house for the night, and is taking us on an afternoon's traverse across the mountains to his family's village of 'Barranumber'. Having learnt our lesson at Singalila we are prepared for vertical climbs and knee jarring drops, but the walk turns out to be gentle and dry. Barranumber village is only accessible by foot, so the valley is quiet: there are no roads or tourists. We arrive at the home of Jiwan's brother, Santa Rai, in the late afternoon.

Santa's wife, Kabita, stokes the hearth in preparation for our evening meal, while their fifteen month old daughter, Sumnima, plays in the ashes. Houses of the Lepcha, Nepali and Bhutia tribes are constructed of wooden frames, slatted bamboo, and cow dung. At first glance they are indistinguishable from our own twee wattle and daub dwellings. It is disorientating to see what appear to be Tudor houses lining the roads in the Himalaya. The roses, geraniums and other English country garden flowers lined up outside in pots only add to the effect. Inside, however, there are no chintz suites, no clever paint-effect walls or walk-in power showers.

Santa's kitchen is coated entirely in smooth odourless cow dung. The low range, also made from dung, grows organically out of the floor. Its two open fires give off plenty of smoke, and the food is cooked directly on the flames. In the semi darkness we crouch and eat fresh momos, noodles and pork, while Santa plies us with 'Tiger's Milk', a gently fermented maize left to work its magic in a bucket. The baby greedily sucks the opaque liquid from her cup, while we move on to Tongba (millet beer) then a much stronger Himalayan hooch called Rakshi (pronounced 'roxy'). It is a hot version of alpine schnapps, and comes in a variety of flavours from apple or maize to rhododendron (or anything else the maker chooses to add).

The next morning Kanchenjunga beckons, so we spend one more day walking in Kalimpong before driving to Gangtok, Sikkim's capital. In 1975, pinned between Nepal, Tibet, India and Bhutan, the little Kingdom of Sikkim sloughed off three centuries of Chogyal rule and welcomed the protection of its largest neighbour. Now the second smallest state in India (Goa wins the top prize) sits high and alone at the eastern end of the Himalaya. Deep river valleys slice through its vertiginous mountains, each fold in the earth's crust looming higher as it marches towards Asia.

Running out of time, we move higher up, to Pelling. Really just a row of hotels along a ridge, it is a characterless place full of smart domestic tourists, and yet it has some exciting treks, is close to the Rabdentse ruins and the magnificent Pemayangtse Gompa, and is a springboard to the Kanchenganga National Park. Sitting with a beer later that first evening, we watch the sun go down behind India's highest mountain range, and decide we will walk the 34km trail to sacred Kechopari Lake.

The next day we heave ourselves out of bed to catch the sun's first rays as they caress India's highest mountain. In the silence of a crystal clear Himalayan dawn we watch tiger-toothed caps emerge from the blackness, changing from pink to peach and finally to a pure, glistening white. One kilometre below us, the valley is tucked under eiderdown clouds as we begin our trek in the shadow of Kanchenjunga.