

Enchanting North East, Meghalaya



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(The author is a renowned travel columnist for various newspapers in India)

With an abundance of natural beauty, North East region is one of the most fascinating and adventurous travel destinations in India. If you want to be with nature with the least possible human interference, I feel that there is no other place like the North East for you. Travel across the mighty Brahmaputra and you reach the land where even the smell in the air is so refreshingly fresh that one can't help but get hooked. This region will whet the appetite of the traveller, the tourist and the anthropologist alike. A visit to any of the eight states of North East region of India will have you returning for more..... one of the states being Meghalaya,

I found it to be amazingly beautiful but still unexplored. Meghalaya's terrain consists more of rolling hills and less of steep climbs. There are beautiful meadows, fringed by pine forests everywhere. Shillong, the capital is also the busiest hub centre of Meghalaya. We set off for our journey to explore some of the interesting places, Shillong and beyond... Shillong is approximately 103 kms away from Guwahati. Driving through one of the most beautiful mountain roads in India, we reached there within 3 hours with a mid way stop at Nangpoh to refresh ourselves over the fresh seasonal fruits. What appealed us about Shillong is that it is a unique mixture of the traditional and the modern. People are fiercely proud of their roots and yet British influence is pronounced. We were mesmerized by the town covered with clusters of Pine Trees. It is bounded on all sides by beautiful hills on whose slopes are dense forests which are under Government protection. We started off for our local sightseeing with a visit to Shillong Peak. A mere 10 kms away from the town, it is an ideal picnic spot which offers the panoramic view of the scenic country side. Our next destination was the Ward's Lake situated in the heart of the town. It is popular for short garden walks and boating and we enjoyed both, specially boating, feeding the colourful fishes in the lake. Umiam Khwan (Barapani Lake) is 17 kms from Shillong, offers water sports facilities including sailing, water skiing, and water scooter. The Botanical Garden is a captivating spot with plethora of indigenous and exotic plants and is located just below the Ward's Lake. Shillong is also the home to the third oldest golf course in India. Developed in 1889 as a nine hole course, it was later converted to 18 holes in 1924. Short of time, we could not visit it for which we regret till date for having missed some British history attached to it. The capital is also full of waterfalls around. The amazing Spread Eagle falls which got its name, being in the shape of an eagle with spreaded wings, the Bishop and Beadon Falls are the twin Falls and the Elephant Falls.

Our excitement was in abundance when we set off for Cherrapunji the next day. A 56 kms drive from Shillong took us there. Situated in the misty valleys, foaming rivers and hidden in the rolling clouds, Cherrapunji is about 4500 ft above the sea level. It is a spectacular location with the year-round rain. It also had earned the coveted place in the Guinness Book of World for being the wettest place on the earth. Here, the rainfall can be recorded in feet rather than in millimetres. Perhaps, it is the only place in India, which has just one season-the monsoon. But ironically, in the recent past, the increases in pollution and deforestation resulting in environmental changes has affected the rainfall here thus loosing the honour of being the wettest place on earth. Mawsynram, 3-4 kms away from Cherrapunji is currently the wettest place in the world. In and around Cherrapunji, waterfalls leap and roar from the edge of the road into deep gorges. Not to be missed among these, was the roaring Nohsngithiang Falls which falls from a height of 1000 ft. The point from where it could be seen has quite a few tea stalls where we sat pensive, listening to some local music, enjoying our tea amidst the foggy weather. Meghalaya is also home to some 1000 odd caves. While we did not have much time to explore many of them, we certainly didn't miss the Mawsmai Cave. Nothing deterred us to set in for our journey inside the cave, not even the fear of snakes. The kilometer long cave is dark inside, but when lighted by torch or other source of light, of any type, the reflection of light enlivens the internal environs and the cave seem to radiate a million crystal colours off its walls, stalactites and stalagmites. With dripping waters from the roof, the cave was large enough inside to facilitate easy movement barring one or two wherein we had to actually step further on our belly. The experience left us a desire on us to explore many other caves.

Our next destination was the beautiful Thangkharang Park which offers almost 180 degree view of the vast plains of Bangladesh. From this park, we could also see the Kynrem Falls cascading down majestically. The park also had a little Bird Sanctuary which came as a blessing for my 2 year old son who was tired of their ever enthusiastic and adventurous parents who did not spare him even in Mawsmai Cave. We were ready to explore further only to realise that it was time for us to move on.

Many years later, I still cannot forget the spectacular sight of Cherrapunji that I captured in the full moon night. No photograph can ever substitute what I captured in my bare eyes for my lifelong memories..... North East India has much more to offer than this.

Surprisingly, friends from our big cities consider it to be a place alien to them or a place from other part of the world. Believe me, with nature abound, you just need to set off for your journey to find the region welcoming you with open arms.....

editor

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