



**ORIENTAL CHARM** Clockwise from left: Inside a guestroom at Mayfair Gangtok, Sikkim; at the cosy Nettle and Fern Hotel; exterior view of The Elgin Nor-Khill; at Rumtek Monastery.



# GANGTOK GLAMOROUS

SIKKIM'S COSMOPOLITAN CAPITAL IS BECOMING THE NEWEST CULTURAL HOLIDAY HOT SPOT IN THE NORTH-EAST, WITH A WIDE ARRAY OF ACTIVITIES. T+L GIVES YOU THE LOWDOWN. **BY MAHIMA SHUKLA**

**FOOD** Local Sikkimese cuisine goes way beyond the humble momo—an amalgamation of the local Tibetans with the Nepalese and Bhutanese, ensures a wide variety of local delicacies that are a must-try. Delicious Tibetan fare like stinging nettle fern soup or *sochhya*, *ningro* (fern) and bamboo shoot are just a few of the rare gems found at the **Tangerine Restaurant** (*Chumbi Residency, Tibet Rd.*; 91-3592/226-618). Try and make it in time for the Sikkimese buffet that they offer and sample other tasty delights like *shabalay* or crispy baked pockets with meat, a delicate steamed bread called *tingmo*, *shapta* or pork slivers fried with spices, and *gyuma* or Tibetan sausages. Another great restaurant (that also offers lodging) where you can sample the best of both modern and traditional cuisine is **Nettle and Fern Hotel** (*Jiwan Theeng Marg, Development Area*; 91-3592/209-377; [nettleandfernhotel.com](http://nettleandfernhotel.com)). The menu features an assortment of local dishes like *daatchi* (a Bhutanese dish made from cheese and chillies), local meat curry *phing sha*, *thukpa* or traditional noodle soup and local flat noodle *thenthuk*. Nettle and Fern

also offers a variety of modern continental dishes like chicken stroganoff and roast pork, along with sumptuous baked specialties like cupcakes and chocolate cakes. The Sikkimese are also great pork lovers and an ode to this is the institution of **Porky's** (*No. 44, Super Market*; 91-3592/281-715), which is also a hot local favourite for their confectionary and bakery offerings. Needless to say, the pork dishes are the best on the menu. Order the special Porky's sizzler which offers a melt-in-your-mouth tenderloin of pork cooked to perfection. If you're looking for a quick bite with some gourmet flair, make a beeline for **Café Cacao** (91-3592/204-418). Bang in the middle of M.G. Marg, sample exotic coffees, croissants, quiches and various pastries as you soak in the hustle and bustle of the busy street from your balcony seat.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF MAYFAIR GANGTOK; COURTESY OF NETTLE AND FERN (2); COURTESY OF THE ELGIN NOR-KHILL

**ROOMS** Choose from old-world elegance, modern or a traditional stay with the many options available. The ultra-traditional **Netuk House** (*Tibet Rd.*; 91-3592/206-778; [netukhouse.com](http://netukhouse.com); doubles from Rs 2,800) is a heritage hotel run by the direct descendents of the royal family—the Denzongpas. Guests can look forward to royal Sikkimese hospitality along with an ethnic décor, with tastefully done rooms featuring authentic Bhutia furniture and carpets. Their in-house eatery is known to serve some of the best local fare and comes with a colonial working fireplace. Looking for a more holistic experience? Then the **Mayfair Gangtok** (*Lower Samudar Block, Ranipool*; 91-3592/250-555; *monsoon package for Rs 22,999 for two nights, including breakfast and dinner; till Sept. 25*) with its monastic theme, award-winning spa and Sikkim's colonial architecture might be a better bet for you. The hotel comes complete with all mod-cons, and even houses one of the biggest casinos in the state. Looking to rub shoulders with the likes of celebs like Michael Douglas, Shirley MacLaine, or even his holiness the Dalai Lama? Then **The Elgin Nor-Khill** (*Paljore Stadium Rd.*; 91-3592/205-637; [elginhotels.com](http://elginhotels.com); doubles from Rs 8,200, including meals) might be more up your alley. This former royal guesthouse was built by the king of Sikkim in 1932 and seeks inspiration from the natural beauty—the mountain, the valleys, the flowers and fruits—on display. All the 25 deluxe rooms and suites offer beautiful views of the Kanchenjunga range. Be sure to enrol for the afternoon tea session at The Tea Lounge, where a Brit-style high-tea complete with scones, marmalade and finger cucumber sandwiches awaits you. Or, grab some *tongba* or fermented millet beer at the Dragon Bar.

**SCENE** Gangtok's urban youth like most of the North-East are avid music lovers and performers. To catch a few live gigs over some local Danny Denzongpa-produced Dansberg beer, head to **Café Live and Loud** (*Tibet Rd.*; 91/99885-35929). Famous for showcasing local bands from the region like Soulmate along with well-known rockers like Rudy Wallang, the café features a live stage area where you can catch some great performances, along with a dining area and bar. **Morf Club and Lounge** (*Adam Phool*; 91-8001/347-239) is another great hangout with the same premise and has a discotheque and restaurant. What's more, they even have a swimming pool and offer activities like mountain climbing and other extreme sports. If you're looking to mingle with the locals, Morf is also the best place in town on



the weekend to grab cocktails and shake a leg. The newest pub in town which is a replica of a traditional English pub is **Pub 25** (*on M.G. Rd.*; no contact number) and has liquor procured from the local breweries at Rangpo. Also on the menu is food from Israel, Chinese gourmet, Italian delicatessen and steaks.

**SIGHTSEE** A lush sight not to be missed would have to be a day trip to **Tsongmo** or Changu Lake—a natural marvel as the frozen lake lies at 12,000 feet and can be viewed enroute to Nathu-La pass. Usually covered in snow, do not forget to carry your woollens and wellingtons as the snow rises up to 12 inches in peak season. Since Changu Lake falls within the restricted area of the Indian Army, an inner line permit is required for all Indians; while foreign nationals will have to get special permission to visit the spot. Another iconic must-see place is the **Rumtek Monastery**, the largest one of its kind in the state. A short drive out of the main city of Gangtok, the route is lined with hundreds of prayer wheels that end atop the hill where the main structure lies. It also houses the **Karma Shri Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies** and one can interact with several monks, including many of the younger recruits as their quarters line the main *stupa*. ✚

**GOURMET GANGTOK** Clockwise from top: A view of Tsongmo in winter; tasty delights at Nettle and Fern; the weekly specials menu board at the restaurant; inside the Royal Dining Room at The Elgin Nor-Khill.