

Ghosts of the Raj are Alive and Well in India

From Daily Express, Saturday June 16, 2007

Last night saw the start of a new BBC2 documentary series, *The Lost World Of The Raj*. In a country where change is a constant, STEPHEN McCLARENCE visits Darjeeling and discovers a charming hotel where rituals are still very much alive in India.



They have finally pensioned off the old visitors' book at St Andrew's Church in Darjeeling. It did sterling service – started in 1926, replaced in 2006, full of memories of this breath-catchingly high Indian hill station when it was a little Haslemere in the Himalayas.

Miss Strickland, Miss Sword and Miss Macdonald, lodging at the Villa Everest, were the first entries. Then visitors from Kidderminster and Sevenoaks, staying at Marigold Villa, Eden Chine and The Dingle.

They signed in blue-black ink, long faded to grey, like so many memories of the days when British planters spent their lives on tea estates up here near the borders of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan.

"Ferdinand Baker-Baker" says a brass plaque in St Andrew's, a grand Victorian church, utterly English on its own little hill. "For 32 years a planter in this district from 1878 to 1909".

The setting sun casts a rich glow through the stained glass windows, the caretaker locks up behind us, and my wife Clare and I stroll back down the Mall.

There are plenty of pockets of the old charm that justify the long switchback journey up from the plains. The romantic way to come is on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. The narrow gauge "Toy Train", which puffs and wheezes its way up to 7,000ft, was given World Heritage status in 1999.

It is defiantly slow. You set off at 9am and you don't arrive, after much twisting and turning, until 4pm. The plains, with their palm trees and paddy fields, gradually give way to tea plantations and rough forest, with ice-blue mountains stretching across the horizon.

The little blue engine, pistons thrusting, lets out piercing shrieks that echo over the hills, scattering goats from the track.

On arriving in Darjeeling we take a taxi for the steep, half-mile drive to the Windamere Hotel, a spelling mistake cherished for generations.



This is a hotel like no other.

Breakfast (with porridge), coffee, lunch, afternoon tea (those cucumber sandwiches) and a candlelit dinner merge seamlessly into each other.

The luncheon menu cards, with their sketches of Buddhist lamas and Tibetan dancing girls, offer watercress soup and chicken and vegetable pie, and then another whole course of Indian dishes.

In the Forties-style dining room, with its spectacular view of the mountains, the other guests include an elderly Raj enthusiast quietly humming Elgar, the children and grandchildren of tea planters tracing their roots and backpackers taking a break from cheap lodgings and food.

The Raj-era rituals have been studiously maintained. While guests down cocktails in the chintzy music room, with its upright piano, room boys light fires in the bedroom grates and chambermaids slip hot water bottles into the beds. The flames flicker and you doze off into comforting childhood dreams and awake to the distant chiming of Tibetan prayer wheels.

Fitting other activities around the meals at this oasis of charm can be a challenge.

We generally settle for an undemanding routine. Before breakfast, we stride out round the Mall. Cocks crow in the mist, children's songs pipe up from the valley and every so often the clouds part like a theatre curtain to reveal Kanchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain, dazzling white with snow and unbelievably vast.

After breakfast we stroll down to Chowrasta, the square where Indian holidaymakers promenade, children play Ring 'a' Roses and swarthy hill men offer ponies for riding. We browse at the Oxford Book & Stationery Company (Sherlock Holmes always in stock) and in Habib's antiques and curios shop, with its various buddhas and bangles.

We have coffee at Glenary's tearoom, with its "Fruit Cake (big)" and "Cherry Cake

(small)" or at the Planters' Club, where the secretary, Major JS Rama (Ret'd), talks fondly of "British times, nostalgia, memories,

forefathers and all those things". We are then driven down the valley to Glenburn Tea Estate, where a manager's bungalow has been stylishly converted into a luxury guest house. Pansies and snapdragons in the garden, planters' chairs on the verandah, a house party-like atmosphere in the evening.

And peace and quiet.

Returning to the Windamere for afternoon tea, we meet Bob Albert from Redditch. A Darjeeling policeman's son, he left 60 years ago and has come back as a 75th birthday treat.

"The town's nothing like I remember it," he says. "But this hotel is just how it was. It's ideal." He sips his Darjeeling tea and it's as though the sun has never set on the Empire.

- **GETTING THERE:**

The Lost World Of The Raj is on BBC2, Fridays at 9pm.

Western & Oriental Travel (0870 499 0678/westernoriental.com) offers a 15-day tour through the Eastern Himalayas from £2,156pp (two sharing), including two nights at the Windamere Hotel, one night at Glenburn Tea Estate, touring to Calcutta and Sikkim, a ride on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, most meals and flights from Heathrow.

Jet Airways (0800 026 5626/jetairways.com) flies to a range of destinations in India. India Tourism: 020 7437 3677/ www.incredibleindia.org

Source:

<http://www.express.co.uk/features/view/10149/Ghosts+of+the+Raj+are+alive+and+well+in+India>