

Simon Courtauld pays homage to one of the world's great sights

'Road is hilly, Don't be silly' was the advice by the roadside as our Nepali driver safely negotiated yet another hairpin bend and yet another pothole on the way up to the old Himalayan hill station of Darjeeling. Its tea gardens are still flourishing, its Planters Club is still there (though not flourishing), the air is fresh at 7,000 feet and for India relatively clean.

We had come here principally in the hope of seeing the great Himalayan peaks at sunrise, and in particular Mount Kanchenjunga, at more than 28,000 feet India's highest mountain. Having arrived in Darjeeling in a cloudburst, we wondered whether a prayer to a Hindu god (which one?) might increase the prospects of clear weather at dawn the following morning. Meanwhile, it was time for tea.



In Daisy's music room at the Windamere Hotel (endearingly so spelt), there are cucumber sandwiches for tea. The bread, of course, is white, crusts cut off, and the cucumber peeled and thinly sliced, with a little white pepper added. We are also offered homemade muffins and a lemon sponge cake. Around the walls of the music room are framed photographs of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, and a picture of Rupert Brooke

with his words about a foreign field that is for ever England.

For ever English the Windamere may be, but it is now run by a Tibetan family who, among other accomplishments, have perfected the art of making cucumber sandwiches — the equal, at least, of any to be found at the other Windermere in the Lake District. In case any uncouth European or American travellers should decide to take tea at the Windamere, a notice on the mantelpiece asks visitors 'not to take off their footwear, or put up their feet on the furniture, or lie supine on the hearth, or sleep behind the settees, lest unintended offence be given to others'. Quite so.



covering the high tops?

Fires were lit in the bedrooms before dinner (vegetable soup and roast chicken), hot water bottles put in the beds, and we were woken with what in India is called 'bed tea' at 3.15 the following morning. A 20-minute drive in a jeep brought us up to Tiger Hill, above the village of Ghoom, where we hoped to see the mountain reveal itself at around 5.30. There was a sharp frost and a starry sky; but would there be cloud

Huddled together on a wooden platform, almost all our fellow mountain-watchers were Indian. There was a collective gasp as the outline of Kanchenjunga, and the range of peaks on either side, slowly became visible, icy white against the dark sky. Then a blob of pink appeared on the summit of the great mountain. Rosy-fingered dawn had broken at 28,000 feet. It was spectacular, breathtaking and surprisingly affecting.

Now the area of pink was expanding, the rising sun appeared, away to our right, and soon the mountain was bathed in a creamy-orange glow. The whole panorama of peaks was now alight, while the valleys below remained in cold blackness. The morning was so clear that we were even able to see the top of Mount Everest nearly 100 miles away. But it looked rather unimpressive, at that distance of course much smaller and lower than our mountain. In the state of Sikkim, to which the heights of Kanchenjunga belong, the mountain is sacred and no one may climb to the summit. It is not only majestic but, unlike Everest, undefiled.

By about 6.30, as our driver said, the show was over, and we knew that porridge and eggs and bacon would be waiting at the Windamere. Later that morning, a collar of cloud appeared below the summit of the mountain; but it was still looking magnificent as we left Darjeeling for Kalimpong, east towards Bhutan and beyond the Tista river which flows from the Himalayas into Bangladesh.

Kanchenjunga also dominates the landscape around Kalimpong, though we were now viewing it from a few thousand feet below Darjeeling. A school, Dr Graham's Homes, is almost as much a part of the Kalimpong scenery, standing on a hill above the town. It was founded by a Scottish missionary in 1900 for orphaned Anglo-Indian children, and today educates and looks after well over 1,000 students.

Having admired the extensive school grounds and the Anglican church, we took a last look at the mountain, imperious against the sky, and began our descent to the plains. How lucky we had been: a cyclone was forecast to hit west Bengal, clouds were gathering, and Kanchenjunga would not show itself again for several days.

Source: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/style-and-travel/704821/sacred-heights.shtml>