



North East

India's Paradox Worth Visiting

James M. Perry



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Tea gardens in Assam

Assam

Situated below the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, Assam is surrounded by all the other six states. In fact all of these six states are connected to the rest of India through Assam's border with West Bengal. The largest and most accessible of the North Eastern states, Assam grows over 60 per cent of India's tea as well as a large amount of the country's oil.

Assam – Fast Facts

Airports: Guwahati, Tezpur, Jorhat, Silchar and Dibrugarh

The largest airport is Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, 21km from Guwahati. It has daily flights by various airlines to all major Indian cities, as well as one international destination - Bangkok. The airports at Tezpur, Jorhat and Silchar are not as well connected, though all have daily flights to Kolkata, and a few other North East cities like Dimapur (Nagaland), Aizawl (Mizoram) and more in the future, as the speed of globalization comes.

Railheads: Guwahati is the main railhead for the region. The other towns in Assam connected by rail include Haflong, Lumding and Tinsukia, potential for railheads in Mizoram and other places are on the drawing table.

Roads: Other than air and rail, most places can be reached by car or bus. Personally, I prefer a car because there is a lot of local activity one can see along the road.

Best time to visit: Non-Monsoon months between October and March are ideal. It is relatively cooler in the plains of Assam, though woollens are necessary in some parts of Upper Assam, which are at a higher altitude. The rest of the year is muggy and humid, with temperatures going over 35°C in mid-summer.

History: Following the trend of states reverting to their native names, Assam is now known as Asom. It draws its name from the Ahoms or the Mongoloid rulers who invaded and captured the state way back in the 12th century. Having been ruled by the warrior class for centuries, the state has many a memorable battle connected to its history.

Meghalaya

Snuggled close to Assam is Meghalaya — really a place between heaven and earth or, rather, where the clouds dwell. Plateau-shaped, the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills endow the region with their majestic charm. The state was granted autonomy in 1972 and is home to the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes, famed for their unique matrilineal societies. Its capital, Shillong, is only a three-hour drive away from Guwahati, and is the most common route taken by visitors traveling to the state. As you drive out of Guwahati, you will be greeted by spiraling roads, and undulating hills, which keep appearing and disappearing. The weather changes its garb, the view is pastoral, the roads are dotted by some shops and eating places for travelers. The primary source of livelihood here is cultivation — of betel nut, ginger and turmeric. A unique characteristic about Meghalaya is the huge amounts of rainfall it receives — Mawsynram and Cherrapunjee is generally considered to be one of the wettest places on earth.

Meghalaya – Fast Facts

Airports: The nearest airport is Guwahati in Assam, a three-hour drive from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. There are also good roads from the airport to other parts of Meghalaya, such as Tura in the Garo Hills, and Cherrapunjee. There is also a small dilapidated airport at Umroi, a one-hour drive from Shillong, which has a few flights a week by Alliance Air, to places such as Guwahati and Kolkata. However, the flights are sporadic and unreliable, and, quite honestly, I don't recommend taking them!

Railheads: The nearest major railhead is again at Guwahati, which has numerous trains to places all over India, and also a few destinations in the North East, such as Dimapur in Nagaland. There are taxis available for hire, at both Guwahati and Shillong, to go to and from both the airport and the railway station, as well as for trips around the state. The Meghalaya Transport Corporation has buses that leave every hour to Guwahati, and other places in Meghalaya. There are also overnight buses to Dimapur (Nagaland), Silchar (Assam), Aizawl (Mizoram) and Agartala (Tripura). Apart from this, numerous private companies run transport services around the state. Meghalaya is well connected by road to the entire North East, though the drives tend to be long due to the hilly winding roads.

Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is the most spartan of all the North Eastern states, with a very thin populace. Originally part of Assam, this state is surrounded by countries like China, Bhutan and Burma on its fringes. Arunachal or 'Land of the dawn-lit mountains' lives up to its name -- enchanting all those who set foot on it.

Primarily a Buddhist state, it has several monasteries. The people here are calm and peace loving and happy in their self-sustained economy. There is rainfall throughout the year, making the valley rich in flora and fauna. Replete with numerous rivers and lakes, apart from the alluring mountains, the state is a favored destination for adventure sports such as rafting, angling, trekking, hiking and mountaineering.

Arunachal Pradesh – Fast Facts

Airports: Dibrugarh and Tezpur, both in neighboring Assam, are the nearest airports for most destinations within Arunachal. They are relatively small airports, but have regular flights to places such as Guwahati, Kolkata and Dimapur.

Railheads: Tinsukia, North Lakhimpur and Balukpong are the most convenient railway stations, though all are in Assam.

Both airports and railway stations have taxis available for hire to most destinations in the state.

Best time to visit: September to mid November, and March to June.

History

Arunachal Pradesh became a Union Territory in 1972 and a full fledged state in 1987. The ruling Ahom dynasty of Assam has a policy of non-interference with most hill-tribes of Arunachal, which continues even today. Development and security was beefed up after 1962, when China invaded India through Tawang in Arunachal, as part of its campaign to claim all areas that were formerly came under Tibet.



Monks outside a monastery.



Naga headman in full traditional attire with headdress made of tiger claws.

Nagaland

Much in the limelight for the altercation between ethnic Kukis and Nagas, Nagaland has been able to maintain its sanctity as a region that strongly believes in its culture and traditions. A mountainous state, the Naga Hills cover the region in its folds. Winding paths, serrated ridges, scrub forests and the predominantly monsoon climate all combine to make Nagaland a place visitors crave to see.

Though traditional Naga culture is vanishing rapidly, thanks in part to modernization, Nagaland still offers a small window into a lifestyle and culture that most people are used to seeing only on Discovery channel. It is possible to visit most tribal villages with the permission of the local chief or headman, which is what I usually do when taking people to any village for a stay.

Nagaland – Fast Facts

Airports: The one and only airport is at Dimapur, Nagaland's uninspiring commercial center, on the border with Assam. There are several weekly flights to Guwahati and Kolkata.

Railheads: Dimapur also has a busy little railway station, which has a number of trains to Guwahati and Tezpur, and onward to other parts of India. There are also regular buses to regions all over Nagaland and the North East. Alternatively, taxis can also be hired.

Best time to Visit: October to March

History: Nagaland, with its diverse tribal ethnicity, is a narrow strip of mountainous territory with craggy hills, emerald valleys, luminous streams and a rich variety of flora and fauna. The 16th State of the Indian Union has a salubrious climate throughout the year. It is bounded by Assam in the west, Myanmar in the east, Arunachal Pradesh in the north and Manipur in the south. Sometimes referred to as the Switzerland of the East, Nagaland represents unimaginable beauty, molded perfectly for a breathtaking experience. For the adventurous, the state is an ideal place for trekking and jungle camping and offers limitless possibilities for exploring its lush sub-tropical rainforests, which are a treasure trove of medicinal plants.



A child monk at a Buddhist monastery

Sikkim

Sikkim's spectacular mountain terrain makes it a thriving visitor destination. This ancient Buddhist kingdom is a sight to behold. Bounded by China, Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim has a unique blend of culture from all its neighbors.

SIKKIM FAST FACTS

Airports: The nearest airport is at Bagdogra, in West Bengal, 112 km from Gangtok, the Sikkimese capital. Bagdogra is a small military airport, but well-connected. From here, one can hire a taxi for Sikkim, or take one of the daily helicopter flights operated by the Sikkim Helicopter Service between the airport and Gangtok helipad, 6 km north of Gangtok.

Railheads: The main railhead for Sikkim is located at New Jalpaiguri, also in West Bengal. Taxis and buses operate regularly from here, to places all over the North East, as well as Sikkim.

Best time to visit: September to April

History: The region is the home of the Lepchas, a tribal group of Tibetan origin, who migrated to Sikkim via Assam and Myanmar. Sikkim also has a large Tibetan refugee population, people who escaped from Tibet after the invasion by the Chinese. The Chogal dynasty of Sikkim came into being in 1641, and at the height of their power, ruled over a vast kingdom that stretched over Tibet and parts of Bhutan and West Bengal.

Socio-cultural setup: Most of the men here eke out a living from tourism, apart from the harvests of terrace farming; the women work hard to attend to the guests in the cottages. The inhabitants of this indolent hamlet as also the rest of Sikkim are content and happy in their self-sustained economy. The cuisine is distinctly eastern, partly because of the predominant mix of Bengali and Nepali cultures; demolishing the succulent, mouth-watering momos (a kind of dumpling) is an experience to relish.

Tripura

The second smallest state in India, Tripura changed its status from a union territory to a state in the year 1972. The state is surrounded by Bangladesh on the west, south and north, Mizoram on the east and Assam on the north east. Sitting comfortably in the midst of picturesque hills pregnant with the Khowati, Manu, Haorah, Muhuri and the Gomati rivers, Tripura is rich and fertile and primarily an agrarian economy. The region is interspersed with clumps of forest, the climate is hot and humid, and the monsoons span over April to September. Although there are many tribes in this little state, Hinduism dominates, primarily due to the large Bengali population. Tripura is also known for its exceptional handicrafts, like the hand-woven cotton fabrics with tribal motifs, wood carvings and bamboo and cane furniture and decorative articles.

Tripura Fast Facts

Airports: The only airport in the state is located at Agartala, the capital of Tripura. It has daily flights to Kolkata and Guwahati. Foreigners arriving must register at the airport.

Railheads: Kumarghat is the nearest railhead, 140 km from Agartala.

Best time to visit: October to March

History: Tripura became a separate region, under the rule of the Indo-Mongolian tribal chiefs, at the end of the 14th century. It was taken over by the Mughal rulers in 1733, and then invaded by the British in 1808. Post independence, it became an Indian state in 1972. Before India's independence, there were some attempts to make Tripura part of East Pakistan, but the ruling Queen led the state into being incorporated into the Indian Union.

Considerations and Entry Formalities

It is generally safe to travel around most of Tripura. It is however recommended to seek reliable advice before making your plans as certain travel restrictions may exist. Permits are not required.

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Manipur

Manipur received autonomy as a state in 1972. It is part plateau and part hills. Manipur, as the name insinuates, means the land of jewels — the state was, in fact, granted the 'Jewel of India' title by India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The land is encapsulated by hills, which are part of the Himalayan range of mountains. Kongba, Eeril and Thobal are the three main rivers that spring from the hills and traipse down the plains. The valley is replete with small lakes and swamps — perfect add-ons to the natural beauty of the state. Rich in flora and fauna, the primary attraction is the iridescent rhododendron that blooms during spring.

History: Manipur was an independent Hindu kingdom, but after bitter wars with the Burmese, they joined the British Raj. Most of the state was occupied by the Japanese during World War II. The ruling Maharaja led the state to join the Indian Union following India's independence. Manipur became a formal Indian state in 1972. It has a history of insurgent violence, particularly between the Kuki and Naga tribes. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) is also active in Manipur, and wants to merge Manipur with Nagaland. This has led to widespread violence and the ceasefire agreed to in 2001 fell through in 2002.

Manipur Fast Facts

Airports: Imphal is the only airport in the state, with flights to Kolkata, Guwahati and Silchar.

Railheads: There are no railways in Manipur

Travel in and around Manipur has to be by car or bus, both of which are readily available. There are also buses and shared jeep services for Assam, Nagaland and Mizoram.

Best time to visit: October to March

Culture and people: Manipur is home to over 29 tribal groups, including the Naga, Chin, and the Meitei. The Meitei are the majority group, with Hinduism being the main religion. Manipur's claim to fame is the invention of the sport of Polo. The main livelihood of the state is agriculture and handloom weaving.

Sociable, welcoming and high-spirited, with very strong community bonds, the Mizos are often referred to as the 'Songbirds of the North East'. In fact, they are considered to be one of the finest choir singers in India.

Mizoram

Mizoram means 'land of the Mizos' or 'highlanders'. It is surrounded by Myanmar in the east and south, Bangladesh and Tripura in the west, Assam and Manipur in the north. Mizoram is of great strategic importance in North East - it has a 630-mile border with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Mizoram has variegated hilly terrain. The hills are steep and separated by rivers, which flow either to the north or south creating gorges between the ranges. The word Mizo is a generic term and used to mean "hillman" or highlander.

Mizoram is a kaleidoscopic treasure trove for the discerning visitor, with its wide array of festivals and dances, handicrafts, flora and fauna, breathtaking natural beauty and temperate climate. The Mizos are friendly and hospitable people. English is one of the commonly spoken languages here. The gusto and gregarious spirit of the local people has been hugely responsible making Mizoram a visitor destination. Sociable, welcoming and high-spirited, with very strong community bonds, the Mizos are often referred to as the 'Songbirds of the North East'. In fact, they are considered to be one of the finest choir singers in India.

Today, Mizoram is a dazzling mix of cross-cultural vibrancy with 87 per cent literacy (second highest in India - a fact in which every Mizo takes genuine pride), gender equality and a vigorous pursuit of its ancient cultural traditions and social mores. Mizoram has a pleasant climate. It is generally cool in the summer. During winter, the temperature varies between 11 degrees centigrade to 21 and in summer, it varies between 20 and 29. It rains heavily from May to September. Winter in Mizoram is rain free and very pleasant.

Mizoram Fast Facts

Airports: Mizoram's only airport is at Aizawl, the capital. It has regular flights to Kolkata, Imphal and Guwahati.

Railheads: There are no railways in Mizoram. All travel in and around the state has to be done by road. The railhead closest to Aizawl is at Silchar in Assam, at 180 km.

Best time to visit: September to March.

TOURS BY CULTURAL PURSUITS IN THE NORTH EAST:

When we take people on a tour of any kind, I encourage them to stay at one particular place for a couple of days, in order to get a feel of the culture and people. We do not just advocate just basic sightseeing and hopping on and off a bus to take pictures. By staying with the locals, visitors gain invaluable insights into tribal culture and lifestyle. Besides, I like to take people to places that are not on the usual visitor trail, so that they see things and places that are far removed from the typical postcard pictures as well the local people benefit financially from our visit.

Ethnic Tours

We offer mostly tailor-made tours, depending on what kind of client I have and what they want to do. However, the main tours I do are mostly ethnic, which means we stay in tribal villages, live the local lifestyle and try to take in as much of the culture as possible. Some of the ethnic-oriented tours I do are:

1. Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland (15 days): To get a real feel of these states, one needs at least 15 days. In this tour, we cover Balukpong and Tawang in Arunachal, besides a few villages and the Buddhist Gompas. We might also spend a couple of nights at the local women's monasteries (nunneries) called Ani Gompas.

On the way to Nagaland, we usually spend a night or two at the nameri eco-camp or Kaziranaga in Assam. From there, we go to Sibsagar, which is just before the Nagaland border, and visit the old Ahom temples.

Once in Nagaland, the main highlight is Mon district, which is home to the Konyak tribe. Longwa village is great to see local activity. We also visit some neighboring villages on foot over two-three days. Mokokchung is the next stop, which is the center of the Ao tribe, where we also spend some time in the villages. From there, we drive to Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, do a little shopping for souvenirs, and drop by a village called Konoma. After that, we head out to Dimapur and Assam.

2. Garo Hills (15 days): Siju in the Garo Hills is one of my favorite places. Here, we will hike to the surrounding villages, to the Chitlang Peak, go to the Siju cave, take a boat ride on the river on a dug out teak canoe and generally relax and be a part of the local activities and observe people going about their daily life.



A family in a local Khasi home.

Other Basic Information

Caving in Meghalaya is best done in the winter months – December to March – when water levels are at their lowest inside the caves. As most of the caves are located in the southern part of the state, it is best to camp somewhere close to the entrance. Caving gear includes colored jumpsuits, fiber helmets fitted with carbide lamps and all other essential gear needed for a full-length cave exploration.

Top 5 Adventure Travel Destinations in the North East

1. Mountaineering and hiking in Arunachal Pradesh
2. Trekking in Namdapha National Park
3. Caving in Meghalaya
4. Balpakram National Park, Garo Hills
5. Rafting in Arunachal and Sikkim

CUISINE OF THE NORTHEAST

The food in the hilly North East is fascinating. The region has a richness of culinary wealth, which is often underestimated – not just by foreign visitors, but also by people from within India.

The staple diet is rice, which is grown in many varieties. Rice is consumed at almost every meal, and goes by different names in different dialects. It is cooked in various ways -- boiled, steamed, steamed in banana leaves, mixed with various meats and seeds, and also pounded in order to make rice flour for cakes and breads. Rice, again, is the chief ingredient for the local rice beer, made in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and parts of Meghalaya and Manipur. This beer is considered quite a tonic, consumed by both men and women, and the alcohol content varies from tribe to tribe. It is also an integral part of many local festivals and celebrations.

Most tribals are non-vegetarian and a surprising number rear poultry and livestock at home for their own consumption. Animals are also slaughtered for special occasions – this is a facet of most tribal communities. The most well-liked meats are pork, beef, mithun, fish and chicken. Mutton and lamb are not popular choices, though with changes in lifestyle and influence of North Eastern cooking, it is slowly making its way into tribal kitchens.

Typically, all tribal food is simple, without much use of spices or oil. In fact, most of the dishes are boiled or steamed. Chillies, ginger, garlic and pepper are the main spices used. There are many foreign influences on tribal cooking -- Tibetan, Nepali and Chinese. One thing all tribal communities have in common is the making of fermented food. All sorts of things are fermented – fish, potatoes, bamboo shoots, soy beans, even some meats. The fermentation process is carried out differently for different foods, but they are all extremely pungent! Most fermented foods are not eaten alone – they are used primarily for adding flavor to the other dishes.

Common ingredients in the food of the North East:

Bamboo shoots: This is an essential ingredient of North East cooking, and is also available commercially. It is eaten both fermented and fresh.

Fermented fish: This is also available in most markets, though some make it at home. Fresh water river fish are used for this purpose.



A sack of dried red chillies often used in North eastern food.

fermented fish product. Almost every home has a good stock of Shidal close at hand. It is prepared by cleaning the fish, adding salt and mustard oil, and leaving it to pickle in a clay pot for about a week or more, till it reaches a certain state of pungency. Needless to say, this is an acquired taste and for most visitors to the region, all fermented concoctions are a bit overwhelming, both in smell and taste! For the natives, things like Shidal are flavoring agents and are used in just a pinch to add a bit of flavor to a stew or chutney.

Some dishes of Tripura

Wasung: This is a vegetable dish, cooked in a hollow bamboo. The recipe varies from home to home, but vegetables like bamboo shoot, peas, beans, mushrooms and carrots are usually used. The vegetable are chopped up and stuffed inside the bamboo tube and the opening of the tube is sealed with a banana leaf tied to keep it in place. The tube is placed over a wood or charcoal fire for about 30 minutes, and when it is done, the liquid is drained out, and the vegetables are eaten with plain rice.

Bhapa Illish Patey: This is a steamed fish, using the locally available river fish. It does not use much spices, apart from turmeric, chilies and ginger.

Chakhui Butwi: This is large fermented fish, boiled with ginger and lime leaves. It is boiled till the gravy thickens, and is eaten with plain steamed rice.

Top 5 Foods That a Visitor Should Eat in the North East

1. **Assamese Thali**: Assamese food is mainly rice and fish. The Assamese thali is a must, which is served on a big platter with small bowls of various items.
2. **Arunachal**: The many varieties of *Momos* (steamed dumpling) -- fish, mithun, yak, beef, pork, chicken, vegetable and also mixed with fermented cheese. Apong is the local beer made from rice or millet that has variations in different states.
3. **Manipur**: *Kabok*, a traditional specialty, is mostly fried rice with many vegetables added in. The *Iromba* is a combination of fish, vegetables and bamboo shoots and is served fermented.
4. **Meghalaya**: *Jadoh* - a spicy dish of rice and pork is eaten almost any time. The other local pork delicacies is cooked Khasi-style, with sesame seeds.
5. **Nagaland**: Pork and mithun cooked with lots of chilies.

PRESERVING CULTURE AND BIODIVERSITY: CULTURAL PURSUITS IN THE NORTH EAST

In my line of work, I strive to educate people about appreciating and preserving the beauty of this region, which is different from any other place in the world. One aspect that particularly interests me is the preservation of the North East's incredible biodiversity. Most people of the region lack education facilities. Though literacy has improved in recent years, there is an extraordinary lack of awareness and options among the tribal people on how to preserve their environment.

For example, the kind of agriculture they practice is a form of slash and burn, which has contributed to the deforestation in the region. And with cultivable land being limited, the man-land ratio is turning increasingly adverse. Jhum cycles have shrunk and shifting cultivation is becoming uneconomical and environmentally unsustainable. Modernization has also reared its head in many regions, especially in Arunachal, and activities like logging have further contributed to deforestation and the depletion of forest cover in most of the states. Aggressive hunting in places like Nagaland has made extinct certain species of flora and fauna. For most of the Nagas as well as other tribes, wildlife means food, and though a part of the more educated and modern Nagas do not eat things like wild birds and dogs, the majority of people in the villages depend on what is available in the jungles for their food. This has made the wildlife population suffer greatly in many areas. The tribals of the North East have depended on the forests for centuries, but with increasing population, and effective modern methods of hunting, the jungles can no longer sustain them.

Often, on my travels, I encourage the local guides and clients to use bio-degradable food packing materials like banana leaves. We also use steel forks and spoons, which we carry with us on the journey and re-use, instead of plastic disposable cutlery. Sometimes we improvise and carve out things like spoons from pieces of bamboo.

As I travel I learn more about what is needed and what is appropriate and possible. I keep looking for some way to help the area develop sustainable travel that will help generate income for the grassroots, rather than only for a few at the top. High-end resorts and hotels may have their place; however, they are not necessarily the best for the general population of an area. Often they hire people from outside the area and the people in the area become marginalized and get little benefit.