



## THAILAND

### BANGKOK

#### SEPTEMBER 1996

- Fri 13<sup>th</sup>** Yukari departed Bangkok. She had to pay 200B at the airport for overstaying 2 days. The service is slow at the airport. She had run to the plane, but the door was already closed! She had an 8hr stop-over in Jakarta. I caught a train back to the city. There were no single rooms at Peachy guesthouse, so I moved into a pokey room at Roof Garden guesthouse for 60B per night (~NZ\$3.75). It was OK though – friendly staff, and quiet. I booked my flights: BGK-CCU / DEL-LON, 10700B.
- Mon 16<sup>th</sup>** I went to the Indian Embassy for a visa – a 3-month multiple-entry for 920B. To get to the embassy, I walked to Golden Mount and caught a big boat to Tha Prasanmit, Asoke, for 9B. The boat was powered by a big Hino V8 diesel in the back, with the driver up front sitting in a car seat, using a steering wheel. The boat was long, wide and low to pass under bridges. It seated about 100 people. Fare collectors wearing crash helmets walked along the edge. The boat was very fast, with lots of spray – much quicker than travelling by bus. On the return journey, I caught a long boat taxi to New World shopping centre – flat rate, 6B. This boat was narrow to fit through very narrow parts of Bangkok's khlongs. The water was smelly, but some people are swimming in it!
- Sat 14<sup>th</sup> –  
Fri 20<sup>th</sup>** I tried to fill in time, by writing many postcards (stamps 10B), shopping on Khoa San Rd, and posting souvenirs back to NZ (~NZ\$80 worth + \$6.50 p+p). I went to a Thai kick-boxing match at Rachdamnern, 50B. A Japanese group was seated ringside, in seats worth about 500B per person. The match consisted of nine brutal and bloody fights, by teenage boys. There were two KO's. The concrete seats were hard, and the air-con very cold. I left before the end. There was plenty of action also outside ring, as men gambled on the winner – red shorts or blue shorts. I went to the movies twice at Pinklao – 'The Rock' and 'Independence Day'. I gave the lens-vaselined version of 'Striptease' (Demi Moore) the miss, and also miss Tarantino's 'From Dawn To Dusk'. Pinklao Plaza was a HUGE shopping centre on 5 levels, with a water fountain from floor to ceiling. A Mercedes Benz showroom was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. There were many cell-phone accessory shops (selling aerials, hard and soft cases, different colours). Back around the Khoa San Rd area, I met Ulrich Gupta, an anaesthetist from Germany, and Ian from the UK. I also visit the library and go on a tour of the National Museum. I phoned JPH to get his date of birth for an ISIC card I bought for him. The call cost NZ\$24 for 8min 40sec. Paul, Mark, and David were also at John's place. The ISIC card works out just as expensive as a genuine one in the end!
- Fri 20<sup>th</sup>** I got talking to Ulrich and arrived 15min late at the Indian Embassy. I was told to "come back in 2hrs", so I walked along Sukhumvit, through a park, and fed some fish. I saw Soi Cowboy and a middle-aged farang drinking already! Back at the embassy, I was rudely told to wait another hour, but I got my visa after about 30min. I met an American guy also departing Sat 21<sup>st</sup>.
- Sat 21<sup>st</sup>** I went to the GPO, and received a letter from Mum. I post the souvenirs I'd bought, and collect a fax from JPH at Pra Athit photoshop. I caught an air-con airport bus to the airport, 70B. Traffic was heavy, and the trip takes >1hr. There was chaos at check-in – hoards of Indians severely overloaded with luggage. I think 'will plane be able to lift off?' I managed to squeeze past them and checked-in. On the plane, I sat next to Chris from Derbyshire, UK. An air hostess was curt with some Indian passengers who weren't in their seats. It was only ~2½ hrs to Calcutta. I met Julia and Sara from Copenhagen and we shared a taxi to Sudder St, Rs25 each, and shared a room at Calcutta Guesthouse, Rs75 each.

Notes / observations:

- There were many motorcycle accessories in SE Asia, esp. in Thailand and Malaysia, selling things like camouflage Air Force-style helmet covers, alloy wheels, low-profile tyres, seat covers, custom graphics, strobe brake lights, after-market shocks, and flashers to make the brake light and rear indicators flash alternately. Bikes were small, mostly step-throughs, but were very sporty – water-cooled, 6spd g/box, blue and red anodised screws/bolts – the works! Mostly 100-150cc 2-strokes. Bigger bikes are restricted.

**INDIA****SEPTEMBER 1996**

**Sun 22<sup>nd</sup>** Chris & I walked to the Victoria Memorial. Kids were literally hanging off our arms asking for money. Afterwards, Chris went to book a train, and I just continued wandering around. There were many Hindustan Ambassadors (Morris Oxfords) on the streets. Also 800cc Maruti's (Suzuki's) – cheaper than Ambassadors. More expensive Ambassador models come with an Isuzu motor, seatbelts and 5spd gearbox. Also many Enfield Indian motorbikes (Royal Enfield Bullets) – cheap, but the quality's a bit iffy (something like 30% rejects?), and Vespas (India bought up Vespa when production ceased in Italy). I'd have to check the price of Vespas in the UK. A 4 speed hand change would be fun! There were also double-decker buses – trucks pulling a double-decker trailer, always overloaded, and always on a lean to one side! Urinals on the streets in Calcutta were completely open, and *smelly*. (With no toilet paper, Indians use their left hand). A man apologised to me about the people in Calcutta – beggars (milk women) hassling tourists, and some being ripped off. He was ashamed. He said people “add a zero to the right hand side”, so something selling for Rs120 becomes Rs1200 for tourists!

Notes: Tata trucks are Mercedes Benz trucks, and Maruti cars and vans are Suzuki's. Other brands are Hero Honda, Kawasaki/Bajaj, and Escort Yamaha.

**Mon 23<sup>rd</sup>** Booked a train to NJP (New Jalpaiguri). Chris left. Sara, Julia and I stay one more night, Rs100 each.

**Tues 24<sup>th</sup>** I went to a doctor, with sore throat, and was directed to go to lab for a blood test. The doc says I must stay in Calcutta another day to recover, so I had go to the rail office and cancel my ticket (for a fee of Rs46). I went back to the lab at 6pm for my results, then took them to the doctor. I asked for a receipt and he charged me an extra Rs150 (Rs300 total). I went with a boy to a pharmacy by rickshaw, Rs50! Julia and Sara caught their train. I moved to Modern Hotel, but it was far from modern! Also staying there was a big American family (3-4 young kids). The whole family were dressed in Indian 'suitings and shirtings'! The room rate was Rs60 per night(?), and the electricity was erratic. Another guest, Michael, was in hospital, and had been for one week already, after he collapsed at Blue Sky Café.

Notes / observations:

- A friendly guy led me one night to a restaurant to give money to buy himself a blanket to sleep on.
- Lots of touts at New Market. In a souvenir shop, when I was just browsing but didn't buy anything, the irate shop owner says, “Do you think this is a museum, sir?”
- On the Metro, Calcutta's underground railway system: In Calcutta, usually I got stared at, being a foreigner, but a big group of poor people had saved up for a ride, with a pile of coins. They got looks from everyone instead of me for a change! One old man was standing in the middle of the moving join between two carriages, barefoot, and told to move! It was obviously a treat and a big thrill for them to ride on the Metro.
- Donation at a Jain temple: I was running low on rupees. I had just paid Rs20 for some

postcards, so I put my loose change into the donation boxes directly (and not to the men who asked for the donations themselves)! Then I only had Rs2 and Rs5 left. I gave the Rs2 to the temple guide, but I needed the Rs5 note for the Metro back to Sudder St (tickets were Rs3). Had to say I'd come back tomorrow to make a donation. Yop!

- Kali Temple: I was asked to pay a guide enough rupees for a bag of rice, Rs1500! Yeah right! A bag of rice does not cost NZ\$75!
- I witnessed a colourful and noisy Hindu street procession – good costumes. I was handed a picture of Ram Devji (or Baba Ram Dev) of Rajasthan - a popular historic Hindu figure who showed tolerance of all religions and caste. Even his horse is holy, and both are worshipped.
- The Indian Museum was huge. The collection included small meteors.
- There were *many* beggars in Calcutta.
- The Maidan: A park and sports ground, that doubles as a massive outdoor toilet!
- I changed some US cash, at a good rate.

### Wed 25<sup>th</sup>

I caught a rickshaw to Sealdah Station. I tried for a taxi, as it was too far by rickshaw, but a rickshaw wallah insisted – Rs30. Deal! It took 30-40 min. I felt like Raj sitting up so high. At Sealdah, I went to pay, but I didn't have any change – only a Rs50 note. I got back only Rs5 change from the rickshaw wallah, and he wanted to swap his worn out Batas for my sandals. Thinking of 'The City of Joy' and the poor treatment r/shaw-wallahs get, I accepted his Rs5 change, ie I had paid him an exorbitant Rs45! On the train, I met Rebecca (from the UK, teaching in CCU for 1 month), Desiree (from Canada), Magnus and Pontus (from Sweden), Paul (a watchmaker from around Gisborne, NZ), and Christoph (from Germany). A stubborn Indian man wanted his bunk bed put down where we were sitting, early on into the journey. It was 12-15 hrs to NJP, 579km, Rs183 (equivalent to AKL-WLG for \$10!). I'd bought the ticket from Tourist Quota – a special ticket desk for tourists, thus avoiding massive queues that the locals needed to face. There were many chai stops on the train. From NJP, we all took a jeep to Darjeeling (Rs75, 3-4 hrs), except Paul who was going to Kathmandu. Magnus and Pontus related their experiences – their drinks were drugged by a 'friend' in a Thai bar, and in their groggy state, agreed to pay him 5000B (US\$200)! They shared a sandwich with a prostitute's kid in a bar. They were ripped off by a taxi driver in Calcutta while looking for a hotel. Magnus had tried deep-fried crickets in Bangkok, but tried only one, and gave the rest away. On the way to Darjeeling, we passed several humorous road signs:

- "Better to be 15min late in this life, than 15min earlier in the next" (for those who believe in reincarnation?!).
- "Don't lose your nerve when on a curve."

At Darjeeling, Christoph and I stayed at Aliment Hotel – cheap at Rs30 each with WC. We ate at Glenary's restaurant, which was quite expensive. I bought a cassette by Ravi Shankar (a famous sitar player) for Rs65. George Harrison was a chela (pupil or follower) of Shankar, who lives in Varanassi when not on tour overseas. It was cold in Darjeeling. Electricity was very erratic. I bumped into Sara and Julia, and Chris. Christoph and I looked around. On his last trip to India, Christoph got sick in Delhi and lost 10kg in one week. We visited the Himalayan Mountain Institute where people train for alpine climbing. It was also the resting place of Sherpa Tenzing Norgay. At 'Hot Stimulating Café', a sad story was relayed to us. The husband of the woman who ran the café walked out on her and their four kids 15 yrs earlier for a Swiss woman. We walked down to a Tibetan self-help centre, but it was closed. It was a *long* walk back uphill. We took a narrow gauge 'toy train' to Ghoom, Rs2. There was a fine of Rs100 and/or three months prison for travelling without a ticket! The little train was slow and noisy. I'm glad I didn't catch it from NJP to Darjeeling! We visited Ghoom monastery and another near Tiger Hill, but unfortunately there was no view. Christoph left to NJP and Calcutta. I posted a packet of tea to Mum – 'super fine tippy golden flowery orange pekoe', Rs100 for 200g. I needed to prepare the package thoroughly before posting – packing cloth (Rs6), a tailor to sew up the package (Rs10), and air mail Rs69. The whole process took about 1 hr. I met Rebecca, Desiree, and Magnus and Pontus where they were staying (Shamrock Hotel) for dinner – yummy Tibetan home cooking, Rs25. The rooms were more expensive than Aliment, but warmer. Pontus was in bed with a fever/flu despite cocktail of pills his father (a pharmacist) had packed for him. Rebecca and Desiree were off trekking with porters, weather pending. I bought a large embroidered patch for Rs175.

There was a funny man I saw in Darjeeling, going from shop to shop with a mournful or expressionless look on his face. His face was painted half blue, half white, and he carried a trident. The next day I saw him riding piggyback on a dummy (part of his costume). I think he was collecting money from the shops he visited.

In Darjeeling, by the jeep terminal, there was a dark public toilet. The squat toilet cubicles were completely dark. I couldn't even see if one was occupied or not. I took a pee, and hoped no-one was there! It was too dark even to aim or know where I was peeing! The women's loos were no better. It was hard to understand how they put up with it, with their long, beautiful saris.

## OCTOBER 1996

- Tues 1<sup>st</sup>** I caught a shared jeep to Jorethang, Sikkim for RS60. There was some wait before the jeep was full and we could depart. We passed through the checkpoint without any problems. At Jorethang, no SNT buses were running, and no one spoke English clearly. However, an Indian man from the Forest Service spoke OK. I caught another jeep to Legship, for ~RS15, but before we reached Legship, the road was blocked by a landslide. We had to climb up a steep bank, then back down to the other side of the landslide. It was hot work, and slippery. I should've hired a porter! I caught another jeep to Gezing, via a checkpoint at Legship, then one more jeep to Pelling, Rs15. A bus was only Rs5, but I had no idea what time it departed. I stayed at Hotel Garuda, Rs40. It was quiet and friendly, and the food was OK. There were 3 other Europeans, all from the UK – two girls who worked for a Tibetan charity in London, and a guy, from London also. There were also several Bengalis, on holiday. The loud hawking and spitting at 6am the next morning was *unreal* – gut-wrenching, vomit-inducing, and *loud!* And I thought S.E. Asia was bad! The Bengalis were also noisy eaters – slurping and burping!
- Wed 2<sup>nd</sup>** I walked to Pemayangtse monastery. There was a great wooden model on the top floor, built single-handedly over 5 years. There were rainbows, demons, scenes of daily life, deities. It was still cloudy outside. In the afternoon, I walked uphill to Sangachoeling monastery. Lots of leeches on the way, but there were nice statues inside the monastery. Two boys had a key and let me inside. Back at Garuda, I discovered I had 2 leech bites.
- Thurs 3<sup>rd</sup>** I went on a nice walk to Chhangay waterfall, 10 km each way, taking 2 hrs. There were scattered showers. I met two Danish girls who were freaked out by leeches on their stomach, shoulder, and in their underwear! They were also concerned about a large animal they'd seen, either a giant squirrel or monkey.

Leeches:

There are three types of leech:

1. The harmless(!) forest leech, small and thin (at least they before they feed!).
2. The tree leech, that drop down from trees onto passersby, and can go for the eyes!
3. The water leech. When cows drink, leeches can enter the mouth and may reside in the cow for several days/weeks before crawling out through the nostrils!

I wonder if there are any leeches in NZ, and if there is any risk of introduction?

At Pelling, on my way back from Sangachoeling monastery, I pass a man walking up barefoot!

Leech remedies: Tobacco water, rubbed on the legs, or salt.

Some locals don't mind leeches. When they get home, they sprinkle ashes on the leeches, they drop off, and are fed to chickens! I suddenly lose my appetite for chicken!

- Fri 4<sup>th</sup>** I left Pelling and walked downhill through rice paddies, across a bridge over a raging river, and then uphill to Tashiding. The path was steep, and it was hot, sweaty work. The journey took 5 hrs. I encountered many kids on the way from Pelling, asking for "one photo", or "one pen, one sweet, one chocolate, one rupee". In Tashiding, I stayed at Hotel Blue Bird – a very friendly place, offering large meals, a large room that was OK (Rs20), but the WC was grotty. It was run by the Gupta family – 4 sons and 2 daughters. The eldest son was a teacher, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> son, a jeep driver. One daughter was about to marry a German. Inter-race, and inter-caste, marriage was OK with them.
- Sat 5<sup>th</sup>** It was raining, so I wrote some postcards. In the afternoon, the rain had stopped, so I went for a walk up to a monastery. There were many prayer flags, and an elaborate graveyard of large tombs with carved stone tombstones / plaques. The main temple was undergoing a major rebuild. The interior was being entirely repainted, including all 4 wall murals. It would like great when completed. Not many tourists come to this monastery – there's no ganja at the Siva temple!
- Sun 6<sup>th</sup>** I walked to Yuksam, taking a jungle shortcut, and the road the rest of the way (4-5 hrs). I was passed by a motorcyclist. I caught up with him at Arapan and he made an excuse that the road was rough, otherwise he would've stopped and offered me a lift. I met a guy on a mountain bike who spoke well. He worked at the Wild Orchid hotel – Rs50 (expensive), but it was friendly enough so I stayed. There was no-one else. A group of Swiss or Swedish mountain bikers were at Demazong. Ate Maggi chowmein. *Big* dinner.

Oct 7<sup>th</sup>

Half a dozen Germans on a guided tour arrive. I walked up to Dubdu monastery, but discovered it was closed when I got there. The track was crawling with leeches! I now had a total of ~12 leech bites (2 from the jungle trek) – 1 on my knee, and the rest on my feet. Some took a while to stop bleeding. My leg brushed past a plant, and a leech jumped on, but I flicked it off fast! I found a very clingy, slug-like one on my hand, but I managed to get it off. I had to be careful not to break my greenstone ring in the panic!

The Germans were up at 6am. They were trekking to Dzongri for 2 weeks. They had a shit load of gear, 4 horses and guides. I wonder if there were any views of Kanchanjunga?! Expensive tour – at least US\$40 pp per day. No sign of service of breakfast in the hotel. I could've walked out without paying! Disappointing. A Rs100 rip-off! I walked to Khechapalri. I took a shortcut downhill to the road, then followed the road, carefully cross a landslide, across a spectacular river and bridge, then took a shortcut uphill to a lake. Up, then down, across a small river bridge, then up again. A trekkers hut I pass is unlivd in. I have tea and biscuits at a shack by a monastery. The lake is not fantastic. It was surrounded by rushes, but considered to be quite holy. No-one around seems to speak English. I decided to wait for bus, having no idea how long I'd need to wait. About 3 hrs later, 3 guys arrive from a 6 hr hell-walk from Pelling – Aaron (US), a Scot, and a Belgian. They'd got lost. A bus arrives, but an overnight stop at Khechapalri is necessary. Boring! Shocking sound system on the bus. We all stayed at Pamela Hotel, Rs25. The meal's OK – a mountain of rice, alu sabzi, and omelette for Rs25. I was hungry! Had Dansberg beer with my meal. That night I had strange dreams. Did something run over my bed? A mouse?

Strange dreams:

(1) Fear: A Mongrel Mob deal is going down in the middle of a shopping centre. The young head-honcho in a leather trench coat criticises my clothes, looking at the Penguin logo on my shorts(?) – “What the f\*\*k's this?” Then he pushed some unconscious guy's head down on the top of an escalator. I worried about his ears! The shoppers are not taking any notice. I took the escalator down, past a *big* mob member with a small kid, and walked quietly away as another member walks past me with a big tray of weed on his head! Then I'm taken at knife/gun point to a bank teller / money changer and calmly asked her for money, otherwise I'd be killed, actually!

(2) I was being chased by someone. I feared they wanted my Mini – a special possessed Mini! It was blowing smoke, but was worth keeping since it was special, so I took it to get reconditioned. My pursuer catches up – it's my high school science teacher, Mr Pollock, warning me that taking the head off the engine could unleash spirits. Dangerous! Weird dreams!

Oct 8<sup>th</sup>

I woke up, and it was raining. I caught the bus at 7am to Pelling. Breakfast at Garuda, then I took the shortcut down hill to Gezing. I passed a snake charmer and a convoy of VIP cars – the political Umbrella Party. Most of the roads are closed to buses, for safety reasons I think. Only lake to Pelling and Gezing to Gangtok is open, but other roads may be passable by Jeep (but more expensive by Jeep). I had a *cheap* shave (Rs5) – Rs10 in Calcutta and Darjeeling. I get two goings over with the razor, moustache trimmed, and face rubbed with a block of some sort of salt that looks like ice (sometimes a face massage), then aftershave. All this for Rs5, even with one week's growth. I saw a boy with a big bandage behind his ear, but his ear didn't seem to be sitting flat. Poor health standards here. Leprosy is present in India, and is treatable/curable. There are free eye operations though – cataract removal and *intraocular transplants*. What the...?! The 3 guys I meet yesterday head back to Pelling to catch the 6:30am bus to Darjeeling or Siliguri tomorrow. I waited for the 1pm bus to Gangtok. I spotted a big ganja plant right by the SNT office and monastery. I broke a bit off for myself! I didn't grow wild in India as much as I imagined (i.e. everywhere!), but I did see a house on the way uphill to Tashiding that had a large plot.

Sikkim: Mountains cloaked in cloud. Raging rivers. Clean air. Cool. Easy travel. Few people. I will miss Sikkim, but look forward to the holy (smoke) city of Varanassi.

Government: Bang shops sell bang cookies and lassies, and opium chocolate.

The monsoon stayed very late this year. It should've gone by now. Even the locals were surprised. I wanted to see Kanchanjunga! I caught the bus to Gangtok, Rs40, ~5 hrs. The road was bumpy, and only just passable by bus, but at least there was plenty of room on

the bus. We pass many hydroelectric power stations.

Two thoughts: (1) All Indian milk biscuits taste exactly the same! (2) Westerners have bigger bladders than Indians! I out-peed everyone on the bus. I, and they, were surprised! We passed a big old Tata truck on the way – a truck just like the one out the Spielberg movie 'Duel'. I get to Gangtok. Light rain. I found the Modern Central Lodge (recommended in guide book), but it was full. Instead, I found a pokey room next door. Dividing walls are thin, but it's reasonably OK for Rs50. I noticed quite a few Bengali's here in Gangtok. *Great* food at Modern Central Lodge, nice presentation too – cabbage mattar and zanier rice, navratan korma. Yum! I spent a lot on food there. Alcohol was cheap in Sikkim, so I really overspent – Rs60-70 per night! Expensive! Honey Bee brandy, Bagpiper whiskey, rum – Rs8-15 for a double. A big bottle of Dansberg beer, Rs28. Hit, Rs30. He-Man 9000 available elsewhere. Shop signs in Gangtok advertised Bagpiper whiskey as #1 in India, and now #6 in the world, although I wasn't sure that was because of it's quality, or just from the sheer size of the population of India! But it tasted OK. The label on a bottle of Dansberg beer stated 'Consumption of liquor is injurious to health'. The Alfa bar opened at 8am (closing at 8pm). There were many liquor shops. I posted a few postcards (stamps Rs6 each), and bought tea for Dad – Darjeeling tea, 250g, Rs70. I got some flags for my backpack handmade at Lall market while-I-waited – 2x Indonesian flags, and one Indian flag. Rs30 total. Also, my little grey notebook for Rs14. I walked down to the chorten and monastery and Tibetan Institute – they had a huge collection of Buddhist books, including Encyclopaedia Tibetica(!), all 137 volumes, presented by the Dalai Lama. Nice wall paintings (took a photo). Then walked *uphill* to Deer Park – nice views. There was a copy of the Buddha statue at Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh (see *Lonely Planet p288 for photo*). No entry was allowed to the Royal Chapel or Kings Palace. I wished I could've got a photo of a dark-skinned Indian man, dressed all in olive green (even the helmet), on an olive green, ancient, military Enfield. He couldn't have been a Sikh. Sikhs don't wear helmets – they wear olive green turbans!

Oct 9<sup>th</sup>

Gangtok – 1547mtrs  
 Tsongu Lake – 3256mtrs  
 Dzongri – 4020mtrs  
 Tashiding – 1480mtrs  
 Pemayangtse – 2086mtrs  
 Yoksum – 1680mtrs

Have yet to try pan, and Bengali sweets.

There was a water shortage in Gangtok. A landslide had wiped out a water main. Electricity is generally OK – better than Darjeeling, and Calcutta's 'load sharing'. Women in Sikkim wear nose rings (in the 'Bull Durham' style).

Food quiz: What is Pollow, Sahi, Bhindi, Brinjal, Kofta, and Korma?

(Pollow is similar to fried rice – not so fatty).

Oct 10<sup>th</sup>

Who is the holy man in orange, with the big afro? (Sai Baba). The whole of India has one time zone – IST ('Indian Stretchable Time')! Sikkim manufactures SITCO watches. They looked OK. The top model was ~\$30. There were many lodgings and foodings in Gangtok. It was cloudy today, so no good for scenic lookouts, so I took a MCL jeep to Rumtek Monastery, Rs40 one way. A share jeep would've been only Rs25, but it could've made many stops on the way. At least the MCL jeep was direct. Also in the jeep were some friendly people from the State Bank of India, Calcutta, on holiday. SNT had a bus service for Rs7, but it would've been necessary to stay overnight at Rumtek. Anyway, the MCL jeep was still cheap by NZ standards (NZ\$2). We had to stop at a checkpoint at Rumtek. I spotted the names of a Kiwi or two, recorded in the book. I was searched with a metal detector. Banks too had signs saying 'no weapons or firearms inside' (except maybe Sihk's kirpan swords!). Rumtek was a *huge* monastery – nice murals, and gold statues up stairs. The current lama is only 11 years old. He resides in Tibet, and is the reincarnation of the previous lama. Old Rumtek was, perhaps, slightly nicer – it had been recently repainted. I chose to walk, ~12km, back to the highway. I had to shelter from the rain under a bridge for ~½hr. I walked a bit further before having to take shelter again in an abandoned shed. Eventually I reached the highway. I caught an unofficial taxi (a Maruti minivan) for Rs10. I doubted it at first – I was the only passenger, so I sat in the back seat in case. But it was OK – some school boys piled in at another stop. The driver

just stopped in the middle of the highway to pick up the school kids, while a Tata truck was bearing down on us from behind! In the end, there were 15 people in the taxi, incl. the driver. Nearer Gangtok, the driver *reversed* down the highway into a parking spot, causing a bit of a traffic jam! I had to walk the rest of the way to M G Marg in the town centre.

The lunar calendar is used here for festivals, etc. E.g. the fifth lunar month is July, and January is the twelfth lunar month.

<u>Holidays:</u>	Oct 19-23	Durga Puja
	Nov 2	Lhabab Duechen
	Nov 11-13	Laxmi Puja

☺ Funny food names – see Lonely Planet, p 157!

**Oct 11<sup>th</sup>**

The Tibetan Charitrust had nice jackets for sale (Rs500-1500), shirts, woolly jumpers, and shoulder bags (Rs400). Too bulky to carry to the UK though.

It was a problem getting washing dry, especially in cold and cloudy Pelling. Enough sun in Gangtok though, between showers. In Calcutta, I hung wet washing up in my room, and it was dry by morning. I went to the railway booking office and tried to book NJP to Mughal Serai for Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, but it was fully booked until the 15th. Doh! Luckily there was room on the 15th, because that's when my Sikkim visa expired. I got a 2nd class sleeper for Rs240, incl. the bus from Gangtok to Siliguri. My guidebook said it was 848km, 15½hrs. I posted tea – Rs126, registered airmail. More expensive than Darjeeling, I think because the tea was 280g, and different rates apply >250g. The postage was more expensive than the tea itself! I inquired with Sonam at Modern Central Lodge, about the next trip to Tsongo Lake (Rs250), since I now had a few more days in Gangtok. It would take a day to get a permit, and tomorrow was a holiday (every 2nd Saturday), so I'd have to wait till Monday to get a permit for Tuesday's trip, but I was to leave on Tuesday, so I had to miss out on the trip to the lake. Doh! I went to the Tourist office, and a cultural performance at 5pm – nice costumes and dance. There were many Indian tourists there. I then went to Alfa for dinner, and had a nice rum truffle for dessert! I bought an immersion heater for Rs35 so that I could use up my tea and coffee. Now I just had to wait until I got a room with a power point that worked! At Choley, there were 2 power points, but they didn't work. I couldn't use my Good Knight Mosquito killer either.

**Oct 12<sup>th</sup>**

I moved into Modern Central Lodge – luxury – hot showers!

to be cont'd/...