

Trek To Dzongri

Yuksom was supposed to be a 9 hour drive by bus from Darjeeling. I remember someone shrilling at the sight of the first snow-capped mountains! Ah! What a sight! Our heads were stuck out of the bus windows trying to see the scenery through a thick canopy of trees to catch another glimpse of the mountains and if we were incredibly lucky, capture it in our cameras. That wasn't going to happen, and we didn't give up until we had absolutely lost sight of them.

YUKSOM (5400 ft.)

Meaning: 'Yuk' – Buddhist monk and 'som' – three. So essentially it means the meeting place of the three Lamas. Set in the Rohtang Chu Valley, it is the starting point of the Kanchendzonga National Park and other treks like Goechala and Mt. Kanchenjunga.

The place is so beautiful.. There are small houses and a big school on the way and much bigger forests and mountains surrounding it.. It was as if people there dwelled in their own little world. That was the first place that gave me a feeling of gradually moving away from civilisation and its trivial concerns.. And the change was welcome.. We spent the evening walking about its mud roads, digging trenches around the tents and basking in its peace and serenity. The air felt purer, the moon lit the night (luckily, it was Buddha Purnima, a full moon day) and (after a slightly disturbed and eventful night in the tents), the next morning, the sun shone brighter..

Truth is, I don't remember most part of the walk to our next camp Bakhim. All i remember is crossing three big bridges, and reading 'Welcome to Kanchendzonga National Park' and bits of the conversations I had with the instructors. I fell ill the morning we were supposed to leave for the trek. Very first day of our upward climb! I felt weak, physically and emotionally.

And then this incident happened in the evening.

We were sitting outside a little house nearby, I walked up to our field director and told him I wanted to go back tomorrow morning. He said "Aye, bilkul nahi! And then he said something that'll stay with me forever. "See, it's written, here", he said pointing at his forehead, "if the mountains want you to make it, you'll complete the climb!" Look at the place, look how beautiful it is.. Look how far you've come, he said pointing to the other side of the valley. I think that only then did I really look around, breathed in its beauty and brought myself back to the present – to the jokes and conversations and stories.. No, I wasn't going home as yet.

BAKHIM (9000 ft.):

Bakhim means a house made of bamboo/wood. We were housed in an abandoned Forest Guest House. And by the look and feel of it, I wouldn't doubt any of the creepy stories associated with it! □ a small wooden kitchen hut was right in front.

Next morning we went for an acclimatisation walk to Tshokha. Trust me, on my way there, I finally realised what people mean when they say Paradise. The untouched paths, the mist, the blood-red rhododendrons, the slight chill, the quiet... Even in the company of about 35, I felt I was all by myself. I felt like I was walking in the gardens of Manderley.. It did have that mystic air too..

Tshokha is such a beautiful place to halt at! I was willing to go down all the way back to Bakhim and come up again just to spend night there! Apart from the pretty little wooden huts, there is a small lake and a monastery besides it. That is where a local friend told me of the mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum'.. I repeated it as I was rotating the prayer wheels. I didn't know what it meant, all I knew was, it made me feel at peace, it gave me strength and I said it in my prayers..

The next morning we started our trek to Dzongri at 7. This was

the third day we were trekking over uneven terrain. Uphills to muster our strengths at and downhills to rejoice, all with the load of clothes and equipments on our back. The air, damp and cool, moved forever. It started to get cooler where we halted at Phedang. An alternate route goes to Kanchenjunga Base Camp from Phedang. But we continued our trek forward. The surroundings are nothing short of a landscape on an artist's canvas.

Devrali top was the last halt I remember before reaching Dzongri. It was a garden of rhododendrons! There were also some prayer flags around, as on so many other places. It adds in giving the whole place an ethereal air. Wild untouched rustic beauty..

While going up and down, up and down the terrain, walking along with a friend, I came up a small platform again, and preparing to go down another slope, on the other side.. Was Dzongri!! And my mind goes... Surprise!!

DZONGRI (13,200 ft.)

Dzongri, meaning, meeting of man and the mountain God. And the experience is true to its name! There was a wooden hut with four rooms inside (not prepared to house the large number of us!) and yet we spent the cosiest night there! We walked into a little hut the evening after chatting with some of the other trekkers halting there. It was such a cozy little place, a kitchen, an improvised sofa and a big window (the room with a view thing we talked about, yea, that!) no kidding.

At night the skies finally cleared and we could get a view of the stars. It was endless, and endlessly inspiring. I realised that 5'5" was in fact very small.. And at the same time I felt so lucky to be gazing at stars reflecting light a million years old! I was a 5'5" part of them at the end of the day! ☐

Imagine the skies changing its shades, snow peaked mountains brilliant in the morning sunlight, and fresh light wind

blowing your hair to your face.. All as you are groggily brushing your teeth and getting for the trek ahead.

You just want to halt everything and sit there and admire it.. But again, that's how every inch, every minute, every kilometre of the place is! It's so pretty!

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