

Travel for
WILDLIFE

01

*Go beyond the usual suspects and uncover
the less-known creatures and forests
that lurk and loom about our country*

GIBBON

IT BACK TO NATURE

India's densest rainforest opens itself up for a couple of months in the year, and if you can squeeze your way in, you're in for a world of surprises. Namdapha National Park will engulf you in its gorgeous greenery and spit you back out, leaving you feeling rejuvenated and just a little itchy

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There is a leech on my foot. I watch it for a while, regarding its swollen, slimy, black body with disgust as it glistens

in the sun. It squirms a bit, probably taking one last swig, before it retracts its sucker and rolls off in a state of gluttonous languor. I resist the urge to squish it as my foot continues to bleed. Now if only I had some snuff...

Over the next five days, the leeches become a familiar part of our trek through the dense and incredibly gorgeous Namdapha Tiger Reserve, now more commonly known as the Namdapha National Park. The ‘tiger’ bit is currently under dispute because no one’s seen a tiger here in ages, and even the camera traps haven’t managed to snag a picture of one, but they *used* to live here, so I guess that counts for something. This is one of India’s densest rainforests, and being as it is in the less-explored eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh, not too many people venture out here. It’s one of the last few untouched wildernesses in the country, one that’s not been commercially exploited by resorts and hotels looking to cash in on its beauty. It’s like the final frontier of the Indian outdoors, and it looks like it plans to stay that way for a while, because it’s not exactly easy to get to. First off, Namdapha is too wet to walk through for nine-and-a-half months out of the 12 in a year (let’s not forget it is a *rain*forest, after all). Also, because AP falls in what’s called ‘restricted area’, getting an Inner Line Permit to trek through the forest

is about as easy as developing a fondness for leeches. But maybe that’s a good thing, because if you can squeeze yourself through the window of opportunity, you’re golden – the rainforest is spectacular.

As we make our way across a rickety bamboo bridge over part of the Noa Dihing River from our camp at nearby Deban, the full spectrum of the rainforest comes into view. There’s a solid wall of green in front of us, and breaking into it looks like it’s going to be impossible. We tread carefully over the dry, smooth boulders that form the riverbed of the now trickling Noa. That’s when we hear the laughing. Loud cackling and hooting like we’re the Three Stooges and the symphony is our background score. “The hoolock gibbon,” says Piran, our guide and trip organiser. The only ape found in India, the gibbon spends its entire life up in the trees, falling to the ground only when it dies. It brachiates through the branches with its long arms, covering great distances. And all the while, it laughs.

The sound gets louder as we approach the green wall. It is then that the smell hits my nostrils. It’s a wet, mulchy smell, not altogether unpleasant, and it’s escaping from a tiny breach that the forest seems to have allowed in its otherwise impervious exterior. It’s the smell of rainforest. We follow the smell through the hole and are suddenly engulfed in a wave of green. The sun trickles through the thick foliage overhead, and the temperature drops by a couple of degrees. Namdapha has begun.

I suddenly feel like an explorer. I push my imaginary monocle higher up my cheek and adjust my khaki safari hat while I take a swig from my imaginary canteen. Jolly good, old fellow.

It’s quiet now – the gibbons seem to have gotten bored and gone off to hoot at something else. →



1 & facing page 1. The park is teeming with bird life, with some biggies like the hornbill and smaller ones like the wagtail (above, left) and the sultan minivet (right). Spotting them is another issue altogether

2. Elephants are often used as porters through the rainforest, carrying loads of more than 100kg

3. If you can’t spot any birds or animals, content yourself with examining the interesting fungi that grow on the forest floor

4. A gibbon skull, placed on a bamboo stick for effect, watches while we eat dinner at the Hornbill campsite

5. You’ll spot most locals wielding a menacing-looking *dao* or dagger that they use for everything from clearing a path to slicing fruit

6. Tawang, our local guide and handyman, knows his way around the forest like the back of his hand

Facing page:

Trees as old as the earth tower above you in the rainforest, some of them blocking out the sun almost entirely





Here and there a leaf spirals to the ground and we can actually *hear* it fall. With every rustle, we spin around, hoping to see a monkey or a bear or even a just a bird (something! Anything!), but it's always just the leaves. The creatures of Namdapha are elusive. Though the forest teems with life (it is home to a variety of primates, small mammals and birds), we see nothing through the dense vegetation. What a tease. There are places when the trees seem to close in on us, blocking out light and sometimes even blocking our path. Every so often, fallen logs seem to stand in our way, telling us to turn around and go back, but, still channeling our inner pioneers, we adjust our monocles and bash on. We're determined to find out what the forest hides in its depths.

I have a checklist of things I want to see here that includes said primates, mammals and birds. There are blue-throated barbets, pied wagtails, sultan tits (now, now), scarlet minivets and the five species of the famed hornbill that are found here, among a bunch of other fine feathers to be seen, but they've chosen to hide today. I fish my phone out of my pocket to take a couple of pictures of some fungus instead, and notice how the phone signal is all but gone. The last bar faded in Miao, now three-and-a-half hours away. We are completely out of touch and completely alone. It's rather liberating.

Three hours into the trek, one of our Chakma porters finally spots a pair of gibbons. The Chakma are a small tribe of Bangladeshi immigrants who

moved to India in the '70s. Refugees who fled their home country in search of asylum from predominantly Islamic Bangladesh, a small group of them has settled along the opposite bank of the Noa Dihing River in Deban, offering their services as porters to those who wish to venture into the forest. Our gaze follows his pointing finger and we see the trees shaking violently near the tops, not too far away. Two apes, a black male and a buff female, are swinging through the branches. We catch a brief but certain glimpse before they disappear into the leafy canopy. That was to be my only sighting of the famed gibbon for the next five days. For all the ruckus they create up in the trees, they sure know how to hide.

As the day progresses, the temperature within the rainforest remains cool, the thick canopy shielding us from the sun's harsher rays. The surroundings, however, change. It's like the backdrop of a high-school stage that's Swiss Alps for one scene and a dry desert for the next. You go from lush vegetation of cane, ferns and tropical plants, to hanging vines straight out of Babylon, on to arched bamboo forests and then to grassy plains by a gushing river. One minute you're picking leeches off your feet, the next you're expecting to see a panda clinging to a branch of bamboo, and the next, you think you see a tiger-shaped shadow skulking in the tall, ochre grass. It's all very unreal and it's very, very easy to forget where you are. It is utterly beautiful. Sometimes →

The people from this area are a hardy lot – this old man from a local village, and one of our porters, was spotted making his way through the rainforest wearing rubber slippers and a *lungi*, carrying a gas cylinder on his back

Hoolock gibbons are monogamous, travelling in pairs and mating for life. The males have a black coat with a thick white brow, while the females have a greyish-brown coat with white circles around their eyes, giving them the appearance of wearing a mask. Their loud and distinctive call requires so much energy that they have to cling to a branch while they holler.



I have to stop walking and simply stand for a spell, just to take it all in. Sometimes I stop for so long that Rajmala, the elephant carrying our equipment, catches up with me. When I hear the tinkling of her chains through the forest, like the bells of a dancer, I know it’s time to hustle.

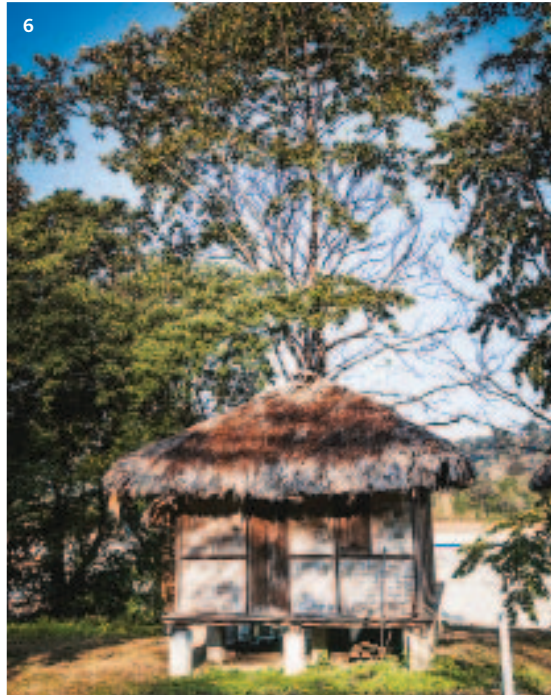
As we walk through the changing forest, an alarming call rings out through the still air. It sounds like a dog... a dog with a cough. That’s the barking deer, Piran tells us. But I don’t believe him. Like a stubborn child, I ask how he knows for sure that it’s a deer and not just a dog, and he laughs at me as you would at a child asking dumb questions. I should’ve known better: this guy’s been trekking here for ages. He knows his stuff.

Piran Elavia comes from a family of trekkers and outdoorsmen. So when he got sick of his IT job in 2008, the only natural thing to do was to set out into the wild. After helping a couple of NGOs in the Northeast, he decided to dedicate his time to the people and the place, and help them receive the recognition they deserve. The media has made the state out to be something that it isn’t, and he’s hell-bent on changing that image. That’s when Kipepeo, his venture, was born. Swahili for ‘butterfly’, it embodies his personal philosophy of development and conservation going hand-in-hand. Since 2010, he’s been conducting tours throughout the Northeastern states, exposing the culture and beauty of the region to willing visitors.

So when he tells me it’s a barking deer and not a dog, it *is* a barking deer and not a dog. Through a clearing in the bamboo, we see the trappings of a perfect alpine postcard, but, unfortunately for us, a cluster of clouds is hanging around over the peaks, keeping the snowy caps just out of sight. Those are part of the Dapha Bum mountain range of Namdapha, cradled between the Mishmi Hills and the Patkai range. They make periodic appearances throughout our trek, showing themselves in the gaps wherever the trees decide to not grow so feverishly. About seven hours after we first broke into the rainforest (my thighs feel thinner already), we arrive at our campsite for the night. Hornbill, they call it, though numbers of the bird with the bulbous bill have gone down drastically in the last few years, thanks to poaching. There was a time, not too long ago, when the birds used to flock to the area, hence the name. Now you’d be lucky to spot even one. Our crew of porters and cooks and guides (eight men and one delightful elephant) arrived way ahead of us, and we trudge in to see our tents pitched and ready. There’s even a loo tent! Praise the lord and the heavens above. I’ve always dreaded delving into the ‘great outdoors’ for this reason. After all, as much as I enjoy playing the explorer – I love me a spot of adventure and the occasional scrape – when it comes to the call of nature, my motto is, “If there isn’t a toilet, that’s the best way to spoil it.” It’s only 4.45pm, but the sky is darkening. Here in the east, the sun sets early, leaving you with short days and long, chilly nights in the winter. We huddle around the fire that’s been lit, sipping on our hot soup and trying to get as close as we can to the flames without singeing our eyebrows. It’s nice to have a hot meal prepared for you out in the cold jungle, and we’re →



1. Namdapha is also known for its butterfly population – over 350 species can be found here
2. It’s all in a day’s work for our porters. There’s that gas cylinder again
3. Leeches are hard to spot on the ground and are quick to cling. Stand around in one spot for too long and you’ll definitely find a couple in your socks
- 4, The effects of a *dumdum* fly bite: globules of blood dry on the skin after they’ve gorged
5. The male hoolock gibbon has white markings around its eyes that make it seem like it’s wearing a mask
6. The forest guesthouse at Deban is the last place you have the luxury of running water and a toilet before you set off into the wilderness
- Facing page:
1. The Dapha Bum range pokes its hoary head out every once in a while, and, when it does, it’s a glorious sight
2. Fallen logs block the pathway, almost like a barrier, but we push on through, determined to find out what lies ahead



COURTESY INCREDIBLE DIBRU-SAIKHOWA NATIONAL PARK (5)



Walking through the forest with its giant trees and never-ending-ness can have the indubitable effect of making you feel rather insignificant

grateful for the steaming *dal* when it arrives. The sky turns an inky blue and the stars begin to show themselves. If, as a child, you ever tried splatter-painting on black paper with a toothbrush and white paint, you'll know exactly what we saw above us.

Nights in the forest are cold, and when you're sleeping in a tent with nothing but some cloth, a yoga mat and a sleeping bag between you and the freezing ground, waking up stiff and achy is high on the probability scale. The following two nights at the riverside campsites of Firmbase and Embyong are even colder, but we're mollified by views of those mountains and their white caps in the morning once the sun has evaporated the mist away. Hey, if Switzerland's out of the budget, we've got snowy peaks right here in our Northeastern backyard! Waxing eloquent comes naturally in these surroundings, and we all find ourselves getting poetic about our beauteous environs. The gushing river nearby doesn't hurt either... except when we have to cross it. Then it hurts a little.

This is the mighty Namdapha River, the selfsame one that lends its name to the reserve – and someone's forgotten to build a bridge over it this year. Walking over the smooth boulders of the dry riverbed was treacherous enough, our ankles getting lodged between stones and our feet slipping at odd angles. Crossing it through ice-cold water where the river still flows, with a current trying its hardest to sweep us away, is considerably thornier. Two porters grab us by either arm and help us across, one by one. The stones underfoot are slimy despite the gushing water, and soon my toes go numb from the cold. We do this about four times over the next two days, getting all kinds of things wet in the process. But the water is crystal clear. We pass streams

and rivers several times on the course of our trek, each time filling our bottles with the fresh spring water. The locals take pride in their rivers and strive to keep them clean. It's a lesson we city-dwellers could do with learning.

From Embyong, it's a two-hour hike to a tribal settlement of a group of immigrants called the Lisu. They trickled into India from Burma in the '40s during WWII, and have occupied a large chunk of land in the reserve. The Arunachal government isn't very pleased with them. Their settlements have resulted in wide logging and forest clearance, not to mention poaching, and their growing numbers means they're only going to spread further into the rainforest. So peeved is the state government that they have refused to acknowledge them as state citizens, although the centre has granted them citizenship of the country. As a result, they receive no benefits from the state and are pretty much fending for themselves. As we approach their village, we see signs of the devastation they've caused. Trees as old as the earth have been cut down to make way for houses and where there should be lush vegetation, there are only stumps and dried mud. A few chickens scratch about in the dirt and fallen fruit underneath rows and rows of fruit trees. The Lisu are self-sufficient, growing everything from rice, vegetables and tea to a wide range of fruit like bananas, oranges and grapefruit. Missionary activity has led to a number of them converting to Christianity, and their settlement has within its boundaries a small but prominent church.

It's the middle of the afternoon and it looks like we've come at nap time. We look around the village of raised bamboo huts, careful not to pry. They're a volatile lot, easily provoked, we're told, →

- 1. The Rufous-necked hornbill is one of the rarest varieties of hornbill found in Namdapha. The distinctive markings on its bill make it a delight to spot
- 2. Persimmons, or Lisu apples as the Lisu prefer to call them, are best eaten when fully ripe, or else you could end up with a horrible case of cotton-mouth
- 3 & facing page. The Lisu village is a large settlement with more than 30 houses and families. Although they seem welcoming of guests, be wary of them, because they're known to be a volatile and unpredictable lot





Bamboo stalks arch over our heads, creating endless archways that shed flaky skin as we walk beneath them

and we don't want to do anything to aggravate them. They've got guns. The village head looks like he's awake, so we head to his house hoping to get some more insight into the people. They're very welcoming towards guests, and while we don't get down to talking about dirty politics, we learn a thing or two about their way of life. They've got solar panels to power their homes, they lead simple, easy-going lives, and they're a generous people. We leave their village, not a single gunshot wound to speak of, our arms laden with fruit.

The walk to our next campsite at 25 Mile (calculated from Miao) reveals some more bloodthirsty critters. As I walk, enjoying the cool breeze on my bare arms, I feel tiny pinpricks along the length of their bareness. I look down expecting to see more leeches, but instead I find tiny black and yellow flies feasting merrily upon my blood. I ask what they are and our local guide tells me they're called *dumdum*. They leave lumps of clotted blood along the length of my arm – bites that begin to itch in earnest a few days later. The rainforest is full of surprises.

There are some steep inclines and declines on today's route, and I find myself trying to hide the fact that I'm wheezing like a pensioner after our first uphill climb. Going downhill doesn't prove any easier, and I fall square on my bottom more than a couple of times after slipping on some nasty, smooth sheets of what looks like bamboo skin that's flaked off the older shoots. This part of the walk does prove more rewarding in terms of bird sightings, though. We finally set our eyes on some flaming scarlet minivets, their feathers glowing in the sunlight. A lesser racket-tailed drongo flits by, its split tail trailing along behind it, and a sultan tit flares its bright yellow crest for our benefit. No sign of that elusive hornbill, though. Still, the forest has redeemed itself. We look up to see a black shape moving swiftly through the canopy. It's a Malayan giant squirrel and it squeaks loudly as it jumps.

We break out of the forest onto the Miao – Vijoynagar Road a few hours later, a dirt track that serves as the only road between the small settlements in Namdapha. Recent rains and underground water seepage have made the track slippery and muck-ridden, and passing trucks have left deep trenches in the middle of the road. But the forest is less dense here because of it, and, ironically, it's here that we see the most birds. A bird's call sounds out and echoes in the silence. It's a staccato squawk and a fellow trekker remarks that it sounds a bit like Shahrukh Khan laughing his creepy *Darr* laugh... A black shadow launches out of one of the trees up ahead and for a second, I catch sight of its brightly-coloured bill. →

As it flies through the air, the wings make a soft whirring sound, like a small helicopter. That is a hornbill, and a rare one at that – the Rufous-necked hornbill. My checklist of things to see in the forest is almost complete.

THAT night, we settle into bamboo huts at the 25 Mile campsite. There are army men posted here, their red gums peeping out whenever they smile, revealing the betel nut addiction that most people here seem to have. They have satellite phones, which they use to make calls back to Deban and Miao. The white noise crackles every now and then and reminds us that we're nearing civilisation.

Back on the road the next morning, I see a variety of butterflies flitting in and out of the leaves. There are about 350 species of butterfly found here, and each one I see is prettier than the last. I'm also rewarded with my final sighting of the trek. A familiar whirring sound draws my floating attention to the sky. From behind a thicket of trees, six black-and-white birds with yellow bills fly out in a perfect triangle. The hornbills are travelling in a posse, and it's a beautiful sight. It doesn't matter that I haven't been able to see a jungle cat or that barking deer, the last creatures on my checklist. I've seen seven hornbills instead. I think I'm good to go.

We're welcomed back into the real world by loud pings on our phones and electricity the next day, but our journey isn't over yet. Our last stop involves a dose of culture in the neighbouring state of Assam before we return to our humdrum city lives. Tipam

Phake, a small village outside Dibrugarh along the Buri Dihing River, is home to the Tai Phake tribe, immigrants from a region in Thailand that's now modern-day Myanmar, who came here in the 1700s. Looking at them now, they don't look very different from most people in the Northeast. But then again, if you put them in bustling Bangkok or a small *koh* back in their mainland, they wouldn't look out of place.

We walk among their bamboo houses set above the ground on concrete pillars to keep out snakes and the cold, watching the ladies weave beautiful traditional *mekhlas* in the evening light. Most of them wear what they weave – striped cloth wound around their bodies like a tube dress. They speak a little Hindi, but are more comfortable with their Tai dialect. Staunch Buddhists, they have a small monastery nearby that they frequent. Many of them invite us in for some tea and a chat, all of them curious about what brings us to their village. They're all smiles, just like their people back home.

This week in the wilderness has made a true-blue explorer out of me. All this making headway into uncharted territory (east Arunachal Pradesh is yet to claim its place), camping by rivers, having an elephant carry our stuff and an entire troupe of men to tend to us, has made me feel like a character out of a Wilbur Smith book. Every pug mark, every cluster of feathers on the ground indicating signs of a struggle, every swipe of the bare bottom with what one hopes isn't poison ivy, and every bird and animal call has awakened a deep lurching somewhere in the pit of my stomach. (I have also returned with a ravenous appetite.) Namdapha, with all its mysteries, hiding animals and coughing dogs, has wrapped its tendrils around my ankles and wrists. I am unequivocally and undeniably hooked. Right ho, then! 🍵

There are more than 20 major tribes and 100 sub-tribes that inhabit the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Each tribe has their own language, culture and even religion. So diverse are their languages, that the tribes have adopted Hindi as their lingua franca for inter-tribal communication. Some tribes are still animist in their beliefs, while others are Buddhist, and yet others still have adopted Christianity as their religion, owing to missionary activity in the region.

1. Simple and hard-working, the people of Namdapha survive the hardships of the rainforest and thrive despite it all
2. The Tai Phake Village at Tipam Phake is slowly beginning to change, with traditional bamboo houses giving way to concrete and brick. Let's just hope it doesn't fade away completely

