



Northeast States

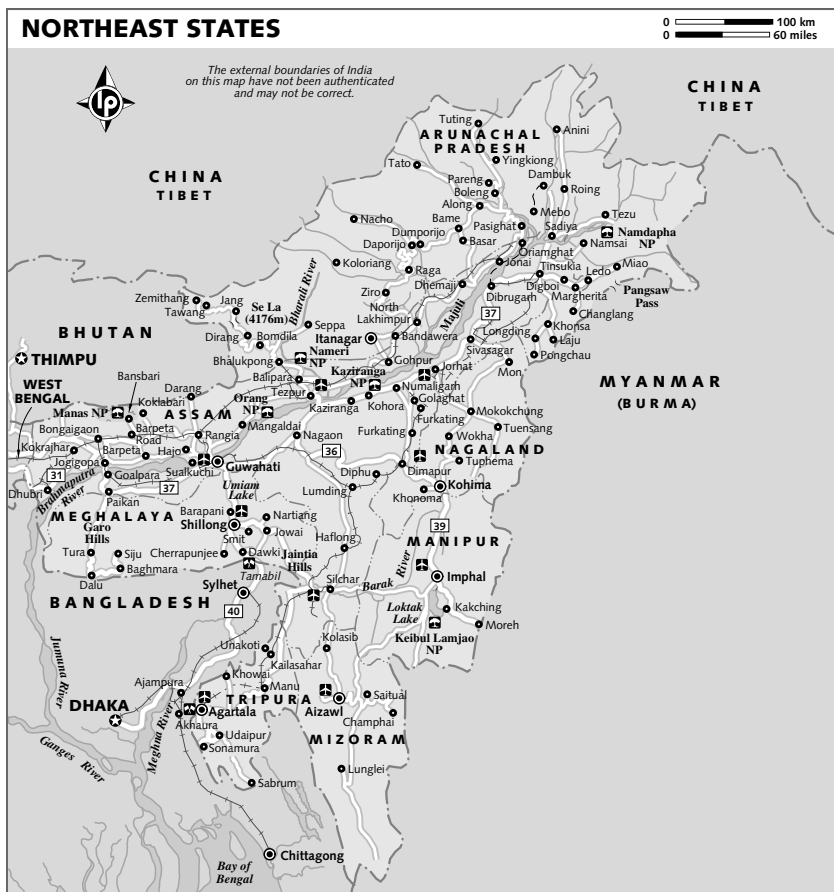
India's 1947 partition left the northeastern states dangling like a crooked cartographic handle, way out on the edge of the national map and consciousness. Yet the great, flat Brahmaputra valley was traditionally a Vedic heartland and backdrop to several Krishna tales. And Assam's beautiful tea plantations remain India's most productive. In contrast, most of the mountainous surrounding states are home to a fascinatingly fragmented jigsaw of 'tribal' peoples. Cultures and facial features there have more in common with Burma and Tibet than with mainstream India. Arunachal Pradesh offers an especially phenomenal patchwork of hill tribes amid seemingly endless mountain ranges. These are mostly forested but crest in a series of gorgeous Himalayan ridges dotted with colourful Tibetan-Buddhist monasteries, including India's largest at wonderful Tawang.

In recent decades many ethno-linguistic groups have jostled – often violently – to assert themselves in the face of immigration, governmental neglect and heavy-handed defence policy. Along with the infuriating permits (not required for Assam, Meghalaya or Tripura), and the lack of any truly iconic 'must-see' attraction, it's the somewhat exaggerated safety worries that deter most travellers from visiting the northeast. That means you'll meet very few foreigners in the region's magnificent national parks. And you'll get vast tracts of fabulous rice, tea and mountain scenery all pretty much to yourself. Quite a few insurgency campaigns do rumble on, but generally the people here are among the friendliest in the whole subcontinent. Although fabled as head-hunting warriors, most citizens of tribal states, like Mizoram and Nagaland, seem more interested these days in perfecting their English and penning rap songs about the love of Jesus.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Scramble through Tolkienesque root bridges in the magnificent canyon land below **Cherrapunjee** (p611)
- Feast on scrumptious Assamese food at Wild Grass Resort before creeping up on a rhino in **Kaziranga National Park** (p602)
- Explore the awesome **Tawang Valley** (p621), Arunachal's 'little Tibet'
- Visit picture-perfect thatched Adi villages around **Along** (p620) and meet the last of the bizarrely adorned Apatani women at **Ziro** (p619)
- Unwind in calm semi-luxury at a colonial mansion on one of Assam's delightful tea plantations around **Jorhat** (p604) or **Dibrugarh** (p606)





Information

PERMITS

Permits are essential for Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Manipur. Entry without one is a serious matter. Indian citizens need an inner line permit, issued with little fuss at each relevant state's office in Guwahati (addresses, p597), Kolkata (p491) or elsewhere. The rest of this section applies to foreigners who'll require a Restricted Area Permit (RAP).

Minimum Group Size

Permit applications generally need a four-person minimum group. Exceptions include the following:

- Nagaland for a legally married couple with marriage certificate

- Arunachal Pradesh for smaller groups if you pay the full four-person fee (US\$200), through travel agencies only

Once you arrive, authorities will be unimpressed if some people listed on your permit are 'missing', especially in Nagaland where the group must also stick together for crossing district boundaries. However, in Mizoram things seem much more flexible, so should the other three people on your four-person Mizoram permit become inexplicably incapacitated, you'll probably be allowed to continue alone.

Validity & Registration

Permits are normally valid for 10 days from an exact, specified starting date. You *might*

FAST FACTS**Arunachal Pradesh**

- Population: 1.1 million
- Area: 83,743 sq km
- Main languages: dozens

Assam

- Population: 26.6 million
- Area: 78,438 sq km
- Main languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo

Manipur

- Population: 2.4 million
- Area: 22,327 sq km
- Main languages: Manipuri (Meitei), Assamese, Bengali

Meghalaya

- Population: 2.3 million
- Area: 22,429 sq km
- Main languages: Khasi, Garo, Assamese, Bengali

When to Go

Tourist season is October to April. However, most national parks only open from November and you'll see many more of the big animals if you wait till February.

Mizoram

- Population: 895,000
- Area: 21,081 sq km
- Main languages: Mizo, English

Nagaland

- Population: 2 million
- Area: 16,579 sq km
- Main languages: Nagamese, various Naga languages, Hindi, English

Tripura

- Population: 3.2 million
- Area: 10,486 sq km
- Main languages: Bengali, Kokborok

be able to extend your permit, but only in state capitals at the Secretariat, Home Department. In Arunachal, extending permits will cost another US\$200 for up to four people. Be aware that permits allow you to visit specified districts only; you'll need to plan carefully, as changing routes might be problematic.

Be sure to make multiple photocopies of your permit to show at checkpoints and police registration. Registration is compulsory both on arrival and on each night that you stay in a new location. If travelling on a tour, your guide will do this for you. Travelling without a guide (or 'guardian') can confuse authorities in Nagaland and Arunachal and might result in you being refused entry, though on-the-ground realities vary widely between individual checkposts and officers.

Where to Apply

Applications through the Ministry of Home Affairs (Map pp132–3) in Delhi can take months and end in frustration.

If it works, the best option will be the new system operated at Kolkata's Foreigners' Regional Registration Office (FRRO; see p491).

Otherwise the most reliable way to get permits is by booking a tailor-made tour through a reputable agency:

Agency	Based in	Best for
Himalayan	Bomdila	all, notably Arunachal
Jungle Travels	Guwahati	all
Omega	Aizawl	Mizoram
Purvi Discovery	Dibrugarh	Arunachal, Nagaland
Rhino	Guwahati	all
Tribal Discovery	Kohima	Nagaland

Start the application process at least six weeks ahead.

Costs

Costs per person:

State	Through FRRO Kolkata	Through agency
Arunachal Pradesh	free (not Tawang)	US\$50 + commission
Manipur	free	Rs 1500 + commission
Mizoram	not possible	commission (Rs 400)
Nagaland	free but limited	commission only

Climate

Until October you'll generally need decent air-con (AC) anywhere that is not set well up a mountain. But by December even sweaty Guwahati can feel chilly at night. Warm clothes will be useful at any time in Tawang where temperatures can dip to -15°C in January.

ASSAM

Fascinating Assam (Asom, Axom) straddles the fertile Brahmaputra valley, making it the most accessible core of India's northeast. The archetypal Assamese landscape offers mesmerising autumnal vistas over seemingly endless gold-green rice fields patched with palm and bamboo groves and distantly hemmed with hazy blue mountain horizons. In between are equally endless, equally gorgeous manicured tea estates. Unlike Sri Lanka's or Darjeeling's, Assamese tea estates are virtually flat and take their particular scenic splendour from the dappled shade of interplanted acacia trees that shield sensitive tea leaves from the blazing sun.

Assamese people might look 'Indian', but Assamese culture is proudly distinct: the neo-Vaishnavite faith is virtually a 'national' religion (see the boxed text, p605) and the *gamosa* (a red-and-white embroidered scarf worn for prayer by most Assamese men) is a subtle mark of 'national' costume. Despite similar-

FESTIVALS IN THE NORTHEAST

Tribal dances linked to the crop cycle take place year-round.

Brahmaputra Beach Festival (Jan; Guwahati, opposite) Elephant races and adventure sports.

Kaziranga Elephant Festival (late Jan; Kaziranga, p602) New tourist tempter.

Torgya (Jan) and **Losar** (Feb/Mar) Tibetan-Buddhist *chaam* (masked dances) held most spectacularly at Tawang Gompa (p621).

Chapchar Kut (Mar; Mizoram statewide; <http://mizotourism.nic.in/festival.htm>) Annual forest clearance dances.

Ashokastami Mela (Mar/Apr; Unakoti, p616) Shivaite pilgrims bathe amid Tripura's greatest ancient sculptures.

Rongali Bihu (late Apr; Assam statewide) Assamese new year.

Ambubachi Mela (Jun; Kamakhya Mandir, Guwahati p597) Tantric rituals and even more animal sacrifices than usual.

Behdienkhlam (Jul; Jowai, Meghalaya, p611) Jaintia cultural festival.

Kang (Rath Yatra; Jul; Manipur & Assam, statewide) Chariot fest for Krishna's birthday.

Durga Puja (Oct; all Hindu areas) The region's biggest festival (see p487).

Nongkrem Dance (Oct; Smit, p610) Five-day Khasi royal festival.

Buddha Mahotsava (variable; <http://tawang.nic.in/tawangbm/main.html>; Tawang, p622) Government-sponsored Buddhist cultural festival.

Diwali (Oct/Nov; all Hindu areas) Lamps lit on banana-stem posts outside homes, Kali images dunked in rivers, general good humour.

Wangala (Oct/Nov; Asanang, p612) Four-day Garo harvest festival.

Ras Mahotsav Festival (third week of Nov; Majuli Island, p604) Major Vaishnavite festival with plenty of Krishna-epic recitations and dance-theatre.

Pawl Kut (Nov/Dec; Mizoram statewide) Mizoram's harvest festival.

Hornbill Festival (Dec; Kohima, p617) Nagaland's biggest event with wildly costumed dance performances by all main Naga tribes.

TRAVELLING SAFELY IN THE NORTHEAST STATES

A wide variety of insurgent groups are active in the northeast. Some want independence from India, others want linguistic autonomy, yet more are effectively fighting clan or turf wars. Although many Western governments currently advise against travel in Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Assam (an announcement that might affect your travel insurance), it's worth noting that not all of these states are equally affected. Generally Manipur really is too risky to contemplate. However, the most accessible tourist areas of Tripura and Nagaland are usually OK, and within the huge state of Assam pockets of rebel activity are mostly limited to the Cachar Hills and remote patches of the far east. The problem is that trouble can flare up suddenly and unpredictably. One-off bombings have hit the normally safe cities of Guwahati and Dimapur just as they have struck London and Madrid, so the level of danger to travellers is hard to quantify. A flare-up of attacks by ULFA (an Assamese independence outfit) in late 2006 made headlines, but most locals see these as a last gasp from a discredited organisation rather than a popular uprising. Still it's wise to keep abreast of latest news with the **Assam Tribune** (www.assamtribune.com). Mizoram, Meghalaya and the vast majority of Arunachal Pradesh are considered safe. Some areas, including Manas National Park, have a relatively high malaria risk.

ties between Bengali and Assamese alphabets, Assam is vehemently NOT Bengal. Indeed the influx of Bengali migrants to the state remains one of Assam's hottest political issues. The Assamese have long bemoaned a perceived neglect and imperial attitude from Delhi for failing to stem that tide of immigration.

However, by no means all of Assam is ethnically Assamese. Before the Ahom invasions between the 13th and 15th centuries, much of today's Assam was ruled from Dimapur (ironically now appended to Nagaland) by a Kachari-Dimasa dynasty. The Chutiaya (Deori-Bodo) kingdom was an important force further west. While this might seem of minor historical interest, the Dimasa and Bodo peoples didn't just disappear. During the 20th century, increasing ethnic consciousness led their descendants to resent the Assamese in much the same way as the Assamese have resented Bengal and greater India. The result was a major Bodo insurgency that was only settled in 2004–05 with the creation of a partially self-governing 'Bodoland' in northwestern Assam. In the Cachar Hills around Haflong, the Dimasas continue a violent campaign for autonomy.

Don't let that put you off. Assam is a delightful, hospitable and deeply civilised place that you can easily grow to love. Its national parks protect a remarkable range of wildlife. And don't miss the delicious Assamese food: fruity, mild and finely pH-balanced using a unique banana-alkaline extract called *khar*.

Assam's beautiful rice fields look their emerald best in October. However, the national parks rarely open before November

and, even then, the state's iconic rhinoceroses will remain hard to spot amid elephant-height grasses. These grasses have burnt off by February, but by that stage the plains will have turned a relatively drab brown.

For more information, visit www.assamtourism.org.

GUWAHATI

☎ 0361 / pop 964,000

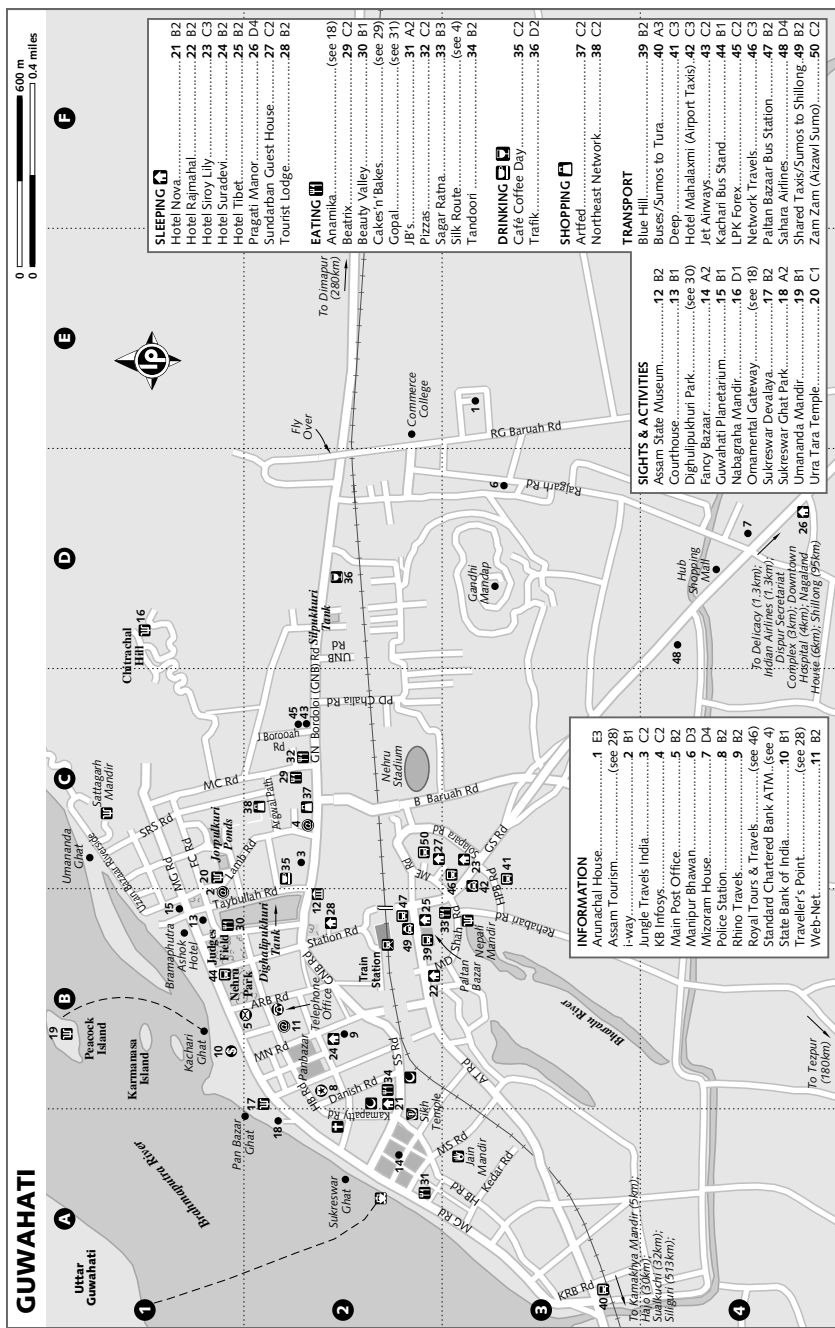
The northeast's main gateway city isn't beautiful, but green, temple-topped hillocks rise curiously above Guwahati's noisy smog, and it's tanks (artificial lakes) and riverbanks are pleasant. Come here to arrange tours to other northeast states then move on swiftly.

History

Guwahati is considered the site of Pragjyotishpura, a semi-mythical town founded by Asura King Naraka who was later killed by Lord Krishna for a pair of magical earrings. The

TOURS

Visiting the permit states by tour smoothes the bureaucracy but travel is still comparatively slow and rugged. Agencies simply supply a sumo jeep, translator and driver-cum-mechanic, plus a tent for emergencies. Accommodation is often relatively basic, meals are haphazard and delays commonplace. It's all part of the experience and still vastly more comfortable than travelling by rare, packed-full, over-fast local transport.



city was a vibrant cultural centre well before the Ahoms arrived, and later the theatre of intense Ahom-Mughal fighting, changing hands eight times in the 50 years before 1681. Most of the old city was wiped out by a huge 1897 earthquake followed by a series of devastating floods.

Capital of Assam since 1972, the Asom State Government is ensconced in a Disneyesque new secretariat complex 6km south of the train station in the Dispur district.

Orientation

Hectic commercial bustle animates the central Fancy- and Pan-Bazaar areas, and stretches 10km southeast down GS road from Paltan Bazaar (the bus station area).

Information

EMERGENCY

Police Station (☎ 2540138; HB Rd)

INTERNET ACCESS

i-way (Lamb Lane; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 9am-last customer)

KB Infosys (cnr GNB Rd & Lamb Lane; per hr Rs 15;

☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) Above a silk shop.

Web-Net (NCB Rd, Panbazar; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-10pm; 📶)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Downtown Hospital (☎ 2331003; GS Rd, Dispur) The area's best.

MONEY

Stock up on rupees: beyond Guwahati the northeast's currency-exchange facilities are very limited.

LPK Forex (J Borooah Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Top rates for cash and travellers cheques in a booth behind Jet Airways.

Standard Chartered Bank (GNB Rd) ATM (24hr) but no exchange.

State Bank of India (MG Rd) Has ATM and changes major currencies and travellers cheques.

POST

Main Post Office (ARB Rd) Chaotic.

PERMITS

Indian citizens can pick up Inner Line Permits at the relevant state offices. However, foreigners shouldn't expect the slightest morsel of permit assistance at these offices (see p592).

Arunachal House (☎ 2452859) Head south from the GNB flyover, take the first left off RG Baruah Rd, then turn right up an unmarked dead-end lane.

Manipur Bhawan (☎ 2540707; Rajgarh Rd)

Mizoram House (☎ 2529411; GS Rd, Christian Basti)

Nagaland House (☎ 2332158; Sachel Rd, Sixth Mile, Khanapara) New office at the southeast city limits.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Assam Tourism (☎ 2547102; www.assamtourism.org; Station Rd) Operates an informal help desk within the Tourist Lodge and a tour booth just outside.

Sights

KAMAKHYA MANDIR

When Sati's disintegrated body parts rained toes on Kolkata (see p486), her yoni (female genitalia) fell on Kamakhya Hill. This makes **Kamakhya Mandir** an important centre for sensual tantric worship of female spiritual power (Shakti). Goats are ritually beheaded in a gory pavilion and the hot, dark inner sanctum is sticky with sacrificial blood. The huge June/July **Ambubachi Mela** festival celebrates the end of the mother goddess' menstrual cycle with even more blood. Nine nearby mandirs represent incarnations of Shakti.

Kamakhya is 7km west of central Guwahati, 3km off the airport road by a spiralling side road. Occasional buses from Guwahati's Kachari bus stand run all the way up (Rs 5, 20 minutes). Continue 1km further for sweeping Brahmaputra viewpoints.

RIVERSIDE GUWAHATI

Umananda Mandir complex sits on a pretty forested river island, accessed by 36-seater **cruise boats** (Rs 10 return; ☎ 9.30am-4pm). They depart when full (about half-hourly) from **Kachari Ghat**, which itself offers attractive afternoon river views.

Sukreswar Devalaya comprises three mostly modern-looking temples, including one where holy water dribbles continuously over a Shiva lingam from a suspended bell-metal amphora. Almost adjacent, little **Sukreswar Ghat Park** (MG Rd; adult/child/camera Rs 5/2/5; ☎ 9am-9pm) contains a playful, multi-arched **ornamental gateway** built by the British.

FANCY BAZAAR

Guwahati's commercial centre, Fancy Bazaar, offers a fascinating discordant melange of images with a silver-spired church, a Sikh temple dome, and minarets rising like lighthouses above the stacked signboards and shop fronts. At night Guwahati's homeless curl up here while the nouveau riche nibble cones (Rs 47) of Baskin Robbins ice cream.

ASSAM STATE MUSEUM

The excellent **Assam State Museum** (☎ 2540651; GNB Rd; adult/camera/video Rs 5/10/250; 🕒 10am-4.15pm Tue-Sun) displays tribal artefacts, ancient Asamese coins, fabrics and fabulous sculptures that hint at Guwahati's 14th-century grandeur. You get to walk through reconstructed tribal homes, while upstairs there's an engrossing reference library.

OLD GUWAHATI

The distinctive beehive dome of the **Courthouse** (MG Rd) rises above mildly attractive **Dighuli-pukhuri Park** (HB Rd; admission Rs 2, boats per adult/child Rs 15/10; 🕒 9.30am-8pm) tank. The nearby **Guwahati Planetarium** (☎ 2548962; MG Rd; star shows Rs 15; 🕒 noon & 4pm) looks somewhere between a mosque and a grounded UFO. The half-hidden **Urta Tara Temple** (Lamb Lane) is Guwahati's second holiest, backed by the gently attractive **Jorpukhuri ponds**.

OTHER SIGHTS

Around the city there are several more hill-top temples, while some 30km northwest, the pleasant little town of **Hajo** attracts Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims to its five ancient temples topping assorted hillocks. Pious Muslims need to walk (or drive) 4km further up a spiral road to reach the holy if visually underwhelming hill-top **Poa Mecca mosque**.

Tours

Traveller's Point (☎ 2604018; www.assamtourism.org; Tourist Lodge, Station Rd), in Assam Tourism's commercial booth, runs day excursions to the gently atmospheric temple town of Hajo via the dreary silk-weaving centre Sualkuchi (adult/child Rs 450/375, minimum five people). It also offers two-day all-inclusive packages to Kaziranga National Park (Indian/foreigner from Rs 1280/2280).

Jungle Travels India (☎ 2660890; www.jungletravelsindia.com; 1st fl, Mandovi Apt, GNB Rd) is a highly experienced agency in an office beneath the 'Not Just Dosaz' sign. It covers the entire northeast with wide-ranging tailor-made tour options, and fixed-date departures for Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh proposed. It is an agent for Brahmaputra river cruises (www.assambengalnavigation.com) and Bansbari Lodge (p601).

Rhino Travels (☎ 2540666; MN Rd) is a helpful, professional agency with a wide range of tour possibilities and its own river lodge (p604).

It's an agent for Manas multiday elephant safaris (p600).

Sleeping**BUDGET**

Sundarban Guest House (☎ 2730722; ME Rd, first side lane; s Rs 150-600, d Rs 300-800; 🕒) At this well-kept, friendly if unfinished hotel, the bargain top-floor options (singles/doubles Rs 150/300 with shared bathroom) are possibly the cleanest rock-bottom rooms in town. Many nastier cheap hotels line the surrounding lanes.

Tourist Lodge (☎ 2544475; Station Rd; s/d Rs 275/330, d with AC Rs 633; 🕒) Convenient for the train station, the fresh, clean rooms have fan, geyser and balcony. It's a genuine bargain, though be prepared for some train noise and up to five-storeys of stairs.

Other cheap possibilities:

Hotel Suradevi (☎ 2545050; MN Rd; dm Rs 85, s/d with shared bathroom Rs 100/170, with private bathroom Rs 150/230) Well-organised warren of Spartan rooms.

Hotel Tibet (☎ 2639600; AT Rd; s/d/t from Rs 150/250/350) Perfectly survivable bed-factory, very handy for the bus station.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

All the hotels listed here offer cable TV and private bathrooms with hot water. Many add a 25% tax and service charge.

Hotel Siroy Lily (☎ 2608492; Solapara Rd; s/d Rs 550/750, with AC Rs 850/1050; 🕒) Professionally run, well-maintained hotel with a lift, a pleasantly air-conditioned foyer and complimentary newspapers delivered to your door. Try the Manipuri food in its modest restaurant.

Hotel Nova (☎ 2523464; SS Rd; s/d from Rs 680/890, with AC Rs 890/1090 plus 25%; 🕒) In the buzzing Fancy Bazaar area, this 15-room hotel is immaculately well kept and has a striking 1960s feel. Beneath the ceiling fans of the recommended restaurant (mains Rs 50 to 120) one could imagine stoned Vietnam War journalists scribbling reports between slices of cold turkey.

Hotel Rajmahal (☎ 2549141; www.rajmahalhotel.com; AT Rd; s/d with fan from Rs 1200/1800, with AC from Rs 1900/2500 plus 25%; 🕒 🚿) If you pick this 10-storey semi-international tower-hotel, pay the extra Rs 100 and upgrade to the attractively remodelled super deluxe rooms (singles/doubles Rs 2000/2600). The rooftop swimming pool would be a great attraction if it was cleaned more regularly.

Pragati Manor (☎ 2341261; pragatimanor@lycos.com; GS Rd; s/d from Rs 1800/2100; 🕒) Were it nearer the

centre, Pragati Manor would be Guwahati's undisputed upmarket pick. A costumed doorman ushers you into this 47-room oasis where modern architecture is softened with Indian art. Back rooms look out over palm-swathed hilllocks and there's a glass-pod elevator.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

As well as the restaurants reviewed here there are many floating boat-restaurants moored between Kachari and Sukreswar Ghats.

Silk Route (☎ 2608024; GNB Rd; mains Rs 25-80; ♿) Reasonably priced *momos* (dumplings), Chinese and Thai food are served in a cosy, two-storey place, with cheaper Indian food available in friendly, simpler places next door.

JB's (MG Rd; mains Rs 30-95; ♿) All-in-one complex with bakery, ice-cream parlour, somewhat Mexican-styled snack bar and (upstairs via the sweet counter) a restaurant serving world-class Indian vegetarian food.

Gopal (☎ 2510364; Kamrup Chamber Rd; mains Rs 45-70; ♿) Just around the corner from JB's, Gopal is another decent veggie option whose stylish décor has an appealing, low-key modern vibe.

Delicacy (☎ 2233402; cnr GS & RGB Rds, Ganeshguri; dishes Rs 20-100; ☎ 9am-4pm & 8-11pm; ♿) Tucked beneath a repulsive overpass junction, the odd location is far from central but worth the trek for Guwahati's very best selection of northeastern cuisine styles. There are almost a dozen types of rice alone. Take buses 1, 2, 3 or 21 from near the museum.

Sagar Ratna (☎ 9954097416; MD Shah Rd; mains from Rs 45, coffee Rs 26; ☎ 8am-11pm; ♿) This sparkling, modern chain restaurant specialises in vegetarian Indian food with wickedly delicious coconut dosas. Big windows and good AC.

Tandoori (☎ 2516021-5; Dynasty Hotel, SS Rd; mains Rs 100-300; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Majestic North-Indian cuisine served at stylish low tables by waiters in Mughal uniforms accompanied by gentle live tabla music.

QUICK EATS

MC Rd offers several tastefully appointed fast-food joints. Choose **Pizzas** (☎ 2663329; pizzas Rs 40-285) for tasty if breadly pizzas, cartoon-walled **Beatrix** (Rs 30-70) for burgers and **Cakes'n'Bakes** (mains Rs 15-25) for delicious fresh pastries (from Rs 6).

Beauty Valley (Dighulipukhuri Park) and **Anamika** (Sukreswar Ghat Park) offer inexpensive alfresco snack dinners.

Drinking

Café Coffee Day (Taybullah Rd; espresso Rs 23; ☎ 10am-11pm; ♿) Guwahati's most central answer to Starbucks pumps out contemporary music and attracts the city's gilded youth with perfect (if very slow) macchiatos.

Trafik (☎ 2661275; GNB Rd; beers Rs 60; ☎ 10am-10pm) This hip, under-lit bar rolls out a vast screen to show key cricket matches.

Shopping

Northeast Network (☎ 2603833; www.northeastnetwork.org; JN Borooah Lane; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) This nonprofit NGO seeds self-help projects in rural villages including several handloom weaving cooperatives. Buying beautiful (and good-value) cottons here supports this fine work and allows you to peep inside one of old Guwahati's few remaining colonial-era mansions.

Artfed (☎ 2548987; GNB Rd; ☎ 10am-8pm) Well stocked with bargain bamboo crafts, wickerwork and many a carved rhino. Several nearby shops specialise in Assam's famous golden-toned silks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Guwahati's pleasantly orderly Lok-Priya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport is 'international' thanks to Indian Airlines' Wednesday flight to Bangkok. For details of some of the flights from Guwahati, see the table, p600.

There's considerable competition between domestic carriers:

Air Deccan (DN; ☎ 1-800 4257008; www.airdeccan.net)

Indian Airlines (IC; ☎ 2264425, Ganeshguri)

IndiGo (6E; ☎ 9910383838; http://book.goindigo.in)

Jet Airways (9W; ☎ 2668255; GNB Rd)

Kingfisher (IT; ☎ 1-800 1800101; www.flykingfisher.com)

Sahara Airlines (S2; ☎ 2548676; GS Rd)

spiceJet (SG; ☎ 1-800 1803333; http://book.spiceJet.com)

Helicopter

Pawan Hans Helicopters (☎ 2416720) shuttles to Shillong (Rs 725, 30 minutes, twice daily), Tura (Garo Hills, thrice weekly), Naharlagun near Itanagar (Rs 3000, 1¼ hours, six weekly) and Lumla (Rs 3000, twice weekly) for Tawang. Phone your booking then pay at the airport if the service actually decides to fly.

Helicopter travel in India has a poor safety record (see p1170).

FLIGHTS FROM GUWAHATI

Destination	Duration	Airline/Frequency
Agartala	40min	DN & IC daily; 9W Mon, Tue, Sat, Sun; IT Mon, Fri, Sun
Aizawl	1hr	IC Wed, Sun
Bagdogra	50min	IC Tue, Thu, Sat; 9W Mon, Wed, Fri; DN Mon, Wed, Fri, Sun
Bangkok	2½hr	IC Wed
Delhi	2¼hr	9W twice daily; IC, 6E, DN & S2 daily
Dibrugarh	55min	DN Mon, Wed, Fri, Sun; IT Tue, Thu, Sat
Gaya	70min	IC Wed
Imphal	50min	6E & DN daily; 9W Mon, Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat; IC Wed, Sun
Jorhat	50min	9W Thu, Sun
Kolkata	1hr	DN, IC & 9W twice daily; 6E, SG, S2 & IT daily
Lilabari	1hr	IC Tue, Sat; DN Tue, Thu, Sat
Silchar	40min	IC daily

BUS & SUMO

Various government buses use **Paltan Bazaar bus station** (☎ 2730410; AT Rd), while dozens of private operators have ticket offices on surrounding roads and lanes. Companies with extensive networks include **Network Travels** (☎ 2522007; GS Rd), **Assam Valley** (☎ 2631843; GS Rd), **Royal Tours & Travels** (☎ 2519094; GS Rd), **Deep** (☎ 2152937; HPB Rd) and **Blue Hill** (☎ 2607145; HPB Rd).

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)
Agartala (Tripura)	355-500	24-26
Dibrugarh	265-320	12
Dimapur via Numaligarh	218-250	10
Imphal (Manipur) via Mao	500	18-20
Jorhat	210-250	8
Kaziranga	150-210	6
Kohima (Nagaland)	310	13
Shillong (Meghalaya)	64	3½
Silchar	310	12-15
Sivasagar	240	9½
Tezpur	110	5
Siliguri (West Bengal)	330	13

For Shillong shared taxis/sumos (Rs 110/150) leave from outside Hotel Tibet. For Aizawl (Mizoram), **Zam Zam** (☎ 2639617; ME Rd, 2nd side lane) runs several daily sumos (Rs 650, 16 hours) via Silchar (Rs 350, 11 hours).

Buses/sumos to Tura (Rs 175/230, six/10 hours) in western Meghalaya depart from KRB Rd.

TRAIN

Trains to Kolkata take around 24 hours, so to arrive early morning take the 7.15am *Kamrup*

Express to Howrah (sleeper/2AC Rs 299/1212). For Darjeeling or Sikkim take the 10.30pm *Kanchenjunga Express* to New Jalpaiguri (sleeper/2AC Rs 164/663) arriving at 7.35am. For Jorhat (6½ hours) the 6.30am train via Dimapur (four hours) is much faster than buses (no service Sunday). Trains to Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia cut through Nagaland, but you don't need a Nagaland permit as long as you stay on the train (that's not true for buses).

Getting Around

Shared taxis to the airport (Rs per person/car 100/500, 23km) leave from the driveway of **Hotel Mahalaxmi** (GS Rd). From the Kachari bus stand city buses run to Kamakhya Mandir, Hajo (bus 25; Rs 15, one hour) and Sualkuchi (bus 22; Rs 15, one hour). Autorickshaws charge Rs 20 to 50 for shorter hops.

NORTHWESTERN ASSAM (BODOLAND)

Manas National Park

☎ 03666

Bodoland's Unesco-listed **Manas National Park** (www.manas100.com; ☞ Oct-Mar) has two 'ranges'. National park fees are as for Kaziranga (p603).

EASTERN RANGE

This is *the* place to spot an ultrarare Bengal Florican (what a bustard!). Inspiring community-based management led by **MMES** (Manas Maozigendri; ☎ 268052; mahammes4_U@yahoo.com) imaginatively employs former Bodo insurgents to protect the forest from poachers. The gateway village of **Koklabari** has a fascinating little **museum** (admission Rs 30) displaying impounded poaching weapons, and a **handicraft workshop**

that sells traditional Bodo *aronai* scarves. The **Jhobgang Jungle Camp** (d Rs 600) will soon offer accommodation in traditionally styled Bodo stilt cottages with private bathrooms. Homestays are planned.

WESTERN RANGE

Famous for tigers (though you'll probably only see their claw marks), this range is comparatively accessible and can be appreciated in delightful comfort from **Bansbari Lodge** (www.as.sambengalnavigation.com/bansbari.htm; d Rs 1250). Bookings (100% essential) are handled by Jungle Travels in Guwahati (p598), which sometimes demands that foreigners buy full jungle-tour day packages.

Access is from Barpeta Rd, where **Manas Guest House** (☎ 260935; Durgabari Rd; with shared bathroom d/s 60/100, private bathroom s/d from Rs 150/250, with AC d Rs 850; ♿) is excellent value, two blocks east of Main Rd behind the sprawling Municipal Market.

MOTHANGURI LODGE

Staying at Mothanguri within the park is Manas's top highlight. Two simple, lonely lodges are 20km north of Bansbari beside the unguarded Bhutan border crossing. Choose the seven-room upper lodge with its enchanting views across the Beki River and a stuffed man-eating tiger in the lounge. Bring food and diesel fuel (for the generator). Book months ahead through the **Manas Field Director's Office** (☎ 261413; abhijitrabha@hotmail.com; Main Rd, Barpeta Rd).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Guwahati–Kokrajhar buses serve Pathsala junction and pass within 3km of Barpeta road. A single daily Pathsala–Koklabari bus (Rs 15, two hours) departs around 2pm, returning at 6am. Barpeta Rd–Bansbari buses (Rs 10, 1½ hours) leave twice hourly till around 4pm from just north of the railway line. Trains run from Barpeta Rd to Guwahati (three hours) at 9.40am and 1.10pm, and overnight to New Jalpaiguri at 11.15pm. To reach Mothanguri jeep rental is available at Koklabari, Barpeta Rd and (for guests) at Bansbari.

TEZPUR

☎ 03712 / pop 59,000

Tezpur is probably Assam's most attractive city thanks to beautifully kept parks, attractive lakes and the enchanting views of the mighty

Brahmaputra River as it boldly caresses the town's central underbelly. Internet access is available at **Softec Point** (NB Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am–10pm), 250m north of the Baliram Building restaurants.

Sights

At **Chitrallekha Udyan** (Cole Park; Jenkins Rd; adult/child/camera Rs 10/5/20; ☎ 9am–8pm), a U-shaped pond wraps around pretty manicured lawns dotted with fine **ancient sculptures**. The bearded chap in Mesopotamian-style costume is Banasura. A block east then south, **Ganeshgarh temple** faces a ghat on the wide, sandy Brahmaputra banks. Nearly 1km east along the narrow, winding riverside lane, **Agrigarh Hill** (Padma Park; adult/child Rs 10/5; ☎ 8am–7.30pm) can't be proven to be Banasura's fire fortress site. Nonetheless river views are lovely and plentiful statuary vividly illustrates the Usha legend.

Cross town to boulder-strewn **Oguri Hill** (adult/child Rs 5/2; ☎ 11am–4pm) for even better views of both across the river and towards the white-toothed Himalayan horizon (if the haze clears).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Durba (☎ 224276; KK Rd; s/d Rs 250/400) Around 400m north of the bus station, Durba's clean, windowless rooms have sit-down flush toilets and geysers in tiled private bathrooms.

Tourist Lodge (☎ 221016; Jenkins Rd; r without/with AC Rs 330/550; ♿) Facing Chitrallekha Udyan, two blocks south of the bus station, the Tourist Lodge offers excellent-value spacious rooms with bathrooms and mosquito nets.

Hotel Luit (☎ 222083; Ranu Singh Rd; s/d 'old wing' Rs 200/300, 'new wing' Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 1000/1200) Close to the bus station, the Luit is on a

SOME LIKE IT HOT

How hot is a chilli pepper? Incredibly there's a whole science to measuring spiciness. A grading system assesses peppers in Scoville Units of pungency. Pimento scores 500, Tabasco sauce tops 2500 and Jalapeño peppers go up to 8000. But that's nothing compared to Tezpur's *bih-jolokia* (literally 'poison-chilli') which has been recorded at a phenomenal 1,041,427. That made it the world's hottest pepper. At least until March 2006 when it was out-hotted by a Dorset Naga chilli grown in unexotic rural England.

small lane linking KK/Jenkins Rd with Main Rd. Reception is professional and budget rooms are remarkably reasonable, but the AC offerings have aging bathtubs and require a sweaty climb to the 5th floor (unless the lift is mended). Taxes 25%.

The modern glass tower **Baliram Building** (☎ 232726; cnr NB & NC/SC Rds) contains several floors of good dining. The ground-floor **dosa house** (🕒 6am-9pm) serves South Indian fare and cheap breakfasts. Semismart **China Villa** (🕒 10am-10.30pm) offers Indian and Chinese food in AC comfort, while the rooftop **Chat House** (🕒 8am-9.30pm) is an open-sided snack bar with city views.

Getting There & Away

Near the Tourist Lodge, **Anand Travels** (☎ 220 083/231657; Jenkins Rd) is the Indian Airlines agent. Direct flights to Kolkata (US\$94, 1¼ hours) operate on Wednesday when you could arrive from Shillong. On Tuesday and Sunday Kolkata flights (\$170, 3¼ hours) go via Jorhat (US\$64, 40 minutes). The airport is an intimidating military affair ringed with razor-wired fences. Its guarded gates are 10km up the NH52 (along which Balipara-bound buses pass regularly), then 600m east.

The busy **bus station** (KK/Jenkins Rd) has regular departures for Guwahati (Rs 110, five hours) and for Jorhat (Rs 90, four hours) via Kaziranga (Rs 50, two hours). APST buses for Dirang (Rs 205, 7½ hours) via Bomdila leave at 6.30am. Private buses leave from outside the bus station.

BLOODY TEZPUR

Banasura, the thousand-armed demon-king was so overprotective of his beautiful daughter Usha that he locked her into an impregnable 'fire fortress' (Agrigarh) to keep away unwanted suitors. The ploy failed. A dashing prince, Aniruddha, magically found his way in and secretly married her. Banasura was not a happy demon. He pondered feeding Aniruddha to his pet snakes as punishment. But the lad turned out to be Lord Krishna's grandson. Krishna sent in his troops and an almighty battle ensued. The resulting carnage was so appalling that the site has been known ever since as Tezpur (or Sonitpur), the City of Blood.

Sumos for Ziro, Along, Bomdila, Dirang and Tawang have their booking counters around Hotel Durga.

Buses to Bhalukpong (Rs 28, 1½ hrs) via Balipara and Gamani (for Nameri) leave roughly twice hourly from the northwest corner of Padun Pukhuri lake.

AROUND TEZPUR

Picturesque **Nameri National Park** (Indian/foreigner Rs 20/250; 🕒 Nov-Apr) specialises in low-key, walk-in bird-watching strolls not elephant-backed rhino adventures. Access is from **Potasali**, 2km off the Tezpur-Bhalukpong road (turn east at one-house hamlet Gamani, 12km north of Balipara). Potasali's delightful **Eco-Camp** (☎ 9435250052; dm/d Rs 100/1150 plus Rs 60 per person 'membership') organises all Nameri visits, including two-hour ornithological rafting trips (Rs 1305 per boat). Evening dances round the fireside are magical. Accommodation is in 'tents', but colourful fabrics, private toilets, sturdy beds and thatched-roof shelters make the experience relatively luxurious. A bigger thatched construction offers great-value dorm beds and there's an atmospheric open-sided restaurant. At dawn, walk 1.3km to the idyllic Bharali riverbank, above which rise layers of forested foothills crowned by a line of white-topped horizon peaks.

If the Eco-Camp is full, you could continue to **Bhalukpong** where the **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 03782-234037; cottage Rs 550-650) has appealing cottages arranged around a raised grassy area overlooking a sweep of the Bharali/Kameng River. The Tourist Lodge is 300m east of Bhalukpong's busy market. Turn right shortly before the Arunachal 'border'.

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 03776

Assam's must-do attraction is a rhinoceros-spotting safari in the expansive flat grasslands of **Kaziranga National Park** (🕒 1 Nov-30 Apr, elephant rides 5.30am & 6.30am, jeep access 7.30-10.30am & 2.30-5pm). Kaziranga's population of around 1800 Indian one-horned rhinos (up from just 200 in 1904) represents over two-thirds of the world's total. There are several 'ranges', but the central and most accessible one generally offers the best viewing chances for rhinos, elephants and swamp deer along with plenty of bird life, including greater adjutant storks (take binoculars). One-hour elephant-back rides are especially satisfying when a 'team' of several

elephants makes pincer movements, surrounding rhinos without frightening them off.

Elephant rides start from November, but at that time grass is elephant-high so the ride can feel like sailing mysteriously on a green sea. The grass burns off in December or January improving visibility, and by February new sprouts and cooler temperatures tempt more big game to venture into the open. In especially dry years the park opens for jeep safaris from mid-October.

Information

For Kaziranga's central range, everything is close to Kohora village. That's marked by an obvious Rhino Gate near the Km 378 marker on the NH37. Don't head for the park entrance (2km north) till you've paid relevant fees at the **Range Office** (☎ 262428; ☹ 24 hr) within the Kaziranga Tourist Complex, 800m south of Rhino Gate. Jeep rental (from Rs 550) is available across the complex's grassy central square, just east of which is the **elephant-ride booking office** (☹ 6-7pm only). A taxi to and from the elephant-ride departure point costs Rs 150 extra.

Better hotels can organise all bookings, paperwork and jeep rentals for you at minimal extra cost.

National park fees for Indians/foreigners:

- Entry fees Rs 20/250 per day
- Camera Rs 50/500
- Video Rs 500/1000
- Elephant ride Rs 120/750
- Vehicle toll fee Rs 200/200, including the services of an armed escort (Rs 50 tip customary)

Sleeping & Eating

When Kaziranga Park closes (May to mid-October) prices drop at least 30%.

TOURIST COMPLEX

All of the following are within a five-minute walk of the Range Office. Booking ahead is wise and advance payment is often required. **Kunjaban Lodge** (☎ 262423; dm without/with linen Rs 25/50) has perfectly passable three- and 12-bed dorms. **Bonoshree Lodge** (☎ 262423; s/d Rs 210/260) offers aging but well-renovated rooms with tile-floored bathrooms in a long, green bungalow. **Bonani Lodge** (☎ 262423; s/d ground floor Rs 320/380, 2nd floor Rs 350-410) has spacious, whitewashed rooms in a two-storey building with wicker furniture. The excellent **Prashanti Cottage** (☎ 262429; d Rs 690) has six modernist split-level units. Bigger

and less attractive, **Aranya Lodge** (☎ 262429; s/d Rs 630/690, with AC Rs 750/860; ♿) is a could-be-anywhere concrete hotel but the better rooms have AC and there's a restaurant and bar.

Cafeteria meals (Rs 30 to 50) are served at the two-room **Network Travels Motel** (☎ 262699; d Rs 450).

BEYOND THE COMPLEX

Uninspired Rs 500 house-hotels are sprinkled along 2km of the NH37 east of Rhino Gate. None are great value, nor as good as equivalents in the Tourist Complex. However, there are two much better options.

our pick Wild Grass Resort (☎ 262085; www.oldassam.com; d season/low season Rs 1600/900; ♿) This delightful, ecofriendly resort is so justifiably popular that it doesn't even bother with a sign. Raj-inspired room décor makes you feel like you're on safari, the atmospheric dining room serves fabulous Assamese food and there's a jungle-edged summer-only swimming pool. Accomplished Krishna dances are performed nightly in the garden folly. Wild Grass is 600m off the NH37, south of Km 373 (4km east of Kohora). In season, bookings are essential.

Bonhabi Resort (☎ 262675; www.bonhabiresort.com; s/d Rs 1200/1400; ♿) Suave modern rooms, some with AC, are very comfortable but the experience is marred by all-night generator noise.

Getting There & Away

Buses between Guwahati (Rs 150 to 210, six hours) or Tezpur and Jorhat (Rs 60, two hours) or Dimapur all pass through Kohora on the NH37. Many Network buses even divert the 800m up to the Tourist Complex for a lunch stop. A small Public Call Office (PCO) directly west of Rhino Gate can book bus seats. If stranded you could increase your chances of a ride by taking the twice-hourly local bus to Bokakhat (Rs 10), 20km east. Overnight tours to Kaziranga run regularly from Guwahati (see p598).

UPPER ASSAM Jorhat

☎ 0376 / pop 70,000

Bustling Jorhat is the transit point for reaching Majuli Island. The 1876 **Gymkhana Club** (☎ 2311303; Club Rd; green fees Rs 100) offers bargain-value golf if you can rustle clubs. Jorhat's commercial street (Gar-Ali) meets the main east-west thoroughfare (AT Rd) in front of a lively **central market** area where giant hornets

buzz around golden-brown piles of jaggery. Head 400m west along AT Rd then south to find the small **museum** (admission free; Postgraduate Training College, MG Rd; ☎ 10am–4.30pm Tue–Sun) and nearby **Assam Tourism** (☎ 2321579) in the good-value **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 2321579; MG Rd; s/d Rs 210/330).

Handy for the train station, **Hotel GK Palace** (☎ 2309972; Gar–Ali; r fan/AC from d Rs 650/1100; 🍷) is a smart new business hotel with obliging staff, a ‘Chill Bar’ and acres of marble.

Tucked conveniently behind the ASTC Bus Station (on AT Rd), Solicitor Rd has half-a-dozen passable hotels. **Hotel Janata Paradise** (☎ 2320610; Solicitor Rd; d Rs 200–400) has budget fan rooms with a little soul. Its lobby–restaurant (open noon to 4pm and 8pm to 9pm) serves excellent-value 10-dish Assamese thalis (Rs 35).

Hotel Heritage (☎ 2321719; Solicitor Rd; d fan/AC Rs 425/950; 🍷) is a reliable new midrange choice, next door to the faded Hotel Paradise in which you’ll find **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2320011) and **Jet Airways** (☎ 2325652) offering twice-weekly Kolkata and Guwahati flights, fog willing.

ASTC buses run several times hourly to Sivasagar (Rs 25, 1½ hours) and fairly frequently to Tezpur or Guwahati (Rs 200, eight hours) passing Kaziranga en route. Trains to Guwahati (2nd/AC chair Rs 127/420, 6½ hours) depart at 1.45pm, except Sunday.

Around Jorhat

TEA ESTATE GETAWAYS

Colonial-era tea estate bungalows offer relaxing, do-nothing heritage-style getaways. Bookings are essential.

Sangsua (☎ 2385075; bookings 9954451548; www.heritageourismindia.com/sangsua.html; d Rs 1500–1800) Sangsua dates from the 1870s and has wonderful lawns and verandas. There’s some antique furniture but standards are homy rather than lavish. The site is 7km down rural tracks from Km 442 on NH37 (the Jorhat–Deragaon road) or take Jorhat–Furkating local trains (7am and 5pm) to Moabondha station (Rs 7, 45 minutes).

With classical portico and wide, cow-mown lawns, **Thengal Manor** (☎ 2339519; bookings 9954451548; Jalukanburi; s/d/tw Rs 2300/2875/2300) looks incredibly grand. Old photos, four-poster beds and medal certificates from King George VI add atmosphere but some walls have damp patches and there are hot-water issues. The cheaper twin is smaller and windowless. Opinions on the Rs 360 set dinners vary wildly. Thengal is 15km south of Jorhat down MG Rd towards Titabor.

NIMATIGHAT

This windswept sandbank is the departure point for photogenically overcrowded ferries to Majuli Island. On an otherwise deserted river–island reached from here by private launch (Rs 50), newly opened **Mou Chapori River Resort** (☎ 9435357171; hornbill121@rediff.com; furnished tent/bamboo hut/luxury cottage d Rs 600/1200/2000) has traditionally styled hut-accommodation. From here the one-day group tours (Rs 800 per person) are a particularly convivial way to visit Majuli Island. Book via Rhino Travels (p598).

Nimatighat is a very potholed 12km from Jorhat by shared autorickshaws (Rs 10, 40 minutes).

Majuli Island

☎ 03775

The great grey Brahmaputra River’s ever-shifting puzzle of sandbanks includes **Majuli**, the world’s largest river island. Amid the gently contemplative landscapes of rice fields, water meadows and fish traps here, attractions include meeting the local Mising people and learning about neo-Vaishnavite philosophy at one of Majuli’s 22 ancient *satras* (see the boxed text, opposite).

Ferries arrive 3km south of **Kamalabari**, from where the main village **Garamur** is 5km further north. The most interesting, accessible *satras* are the large, beautifully peaceful **Uttar Kamalabari** (1km north, then 600m east of Kamalabari) and **Auniati** (5km west of Kamalabari), where monks are keen to show you their little **museum** of Ahom royal artefacts. The best chances of observing chanting, dances or drama recitations are around dawn and dusk or during the big **Ras Mahotsav Festival** (third week of November).

SLEEPING

Accommodation is very basic: bring a sleeping bag.

La Maison de Ananda (☎ 274768; dm Rs 150) On a green Garamur back lane, this is a new but traditionally styled thatched house on bamboo stilts with three bamboo beds and locally made fabrics. It’s run by local guide/fixer Danny Gam (☎ 9435205539).

At the central crossroads in Garamur, **Hotel Island** (☎ 274712; s/d/tr Rs 120/240/350) is a less-than-exciting dive. Those actively interested in neo-Vaishnavite philosophy can usually arrange space at a *satra* guesthouse.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Packed-full little passenger ferries from Nimatighat depart at 10.30am and 3pm (adult/jeep Rs 12/450, 2½ hours) returning at 7.15am and 2pm. The ferry schedule makes day trips pointless unless you charter your own boat (Rs 4000); ask the **harbour manager** (☎ 9435203421).

GETTING AROUND

Jam-packed buses meet arriving ferries then drive to Garamur (Rs 10) via Kamalabari where three-wheelers are easier to rent.

Sivasagar (Sibsagar)

☎ 03772 / pop 64,000

This oil-service town was once the capital of the Ahom dynasty that ruled Assam for over 600 years. Sivasagar takes its name ('waters of Shiva') from its graceful central feature, a rectangular reservoir dug in 1734 by Ahom queen Ambika. Three typical Ahom **temple towers** rising proudly above the tank's partly wooded southern banks include 33m-high **Shivadol Mandir**, India's tallest Shiva temple. Its uppermost trident balances upon an egg-shaped feature whose golden covering the British reputedly tried (but failed) to pilfer in 1823. Several sadhus sit along the temple approach path and its interior is eerie. Dominating the tank's western side is the red-painted **Assam Tai Museum**. At the tank's southwest corner, **Assam Tourism** is within the great-value **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 2222394; s/d Rs 210/260), whose six large rooms have clean tiled floors.

Around 500m from Shivadol (south then east on Hospital Rd) are a gaggle of hotels along AT road close to the ASTC bus station. The most appealing of these is the surprisingly swish **Hotel Shiva Palace** (☎ 222629; fax 225184; economy s/d Rs 480/576, with AC & hot water from Rs 875/1000), incorporating a decent, AC restaurant.

The ASTC bus station has several hourly services to Jorhat (Rs 26, 1½ hours) and Dibrugarh (Rs 38, 2¼ hours). Many private buses have ticket counters on nearby AT Rd. For Kareng Garh, use Gargaon buses (Rs 10, 45 minutes), which depart from an unmarked stop on BG Rd, 300m north up AT Rd then 50m right.

Around Sivasagar

Dotted around Sivasagar are many lemon-squeezer-shaped temples and ochre-brick ruins built by the Ahom monarchs during their 17th- and 18th-century heyday.

TALATALGARH

This famous (if not incredibly dramatic) Ahom ruin complex is 4km down AT Rd from central Sivasagar. Some 2km beyond a WWII-era metal **lift-bridge**, look right to see **Rang Garh** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 8am-5pm). From this two-storey oval-shaped 'pavilion', Ahom monarchs once watched buffalo and elephant fights. Just beyond turn left, continue 700m passing the **Golaragh** (Ahom ammunition store) to reach **Talatalgarh** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 8am-5pm), the extensive, two-storey Ahom palace ruins. Like Rang Garh, the lumpy brick structure and its beautifully tended gardens are arguably most attractive viewed at a distance from the entrance gate.

KARENG GARH

Dramatic if largely unadorned, this 1752 brick **palace** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the last remnant of the Ahom's pre-Sivasagar capital. The unique four-storey structure rises like a sharpened, stepped pyramid above an attractive forest-and-paddy setting that's slightly spoilt by nearby electrical transformer substations. It's 900m north of the Sivasagar-Sonali road: turn just before Gargaon (14km).

GAURISAGAR

Like a practice run for Sivasagar, Gaurisagar has an attractive tank and a trio of distinctive 1720s temples built by 'dancing girl queen' Phuleswari. Most impressive is the **Devidol** (admission free; ☎ 24hr). It's not as tall as Sivasagar's

SATRAS

A *satra* is a monastery of neo-Vaishnavism, Assam's distinctive form of everyman-Hinduism. Formulated by 15th-century Assamese philosopher Sankardev, the faith eschews the caste system and idol worship, focussing on Vishnu as God, especially in his Krishna incarnation. Much worship is based around dance and melodramatic play-acting of scenes from the holy Bhagavad Gita. The heart of any *satra* is its *namghar*, a large, simple, prayer hall usually open sided and shaped like an oil tanker sailing west. Beneath the eastern end, an inner sanctum hosts an eternal flame, the Gita and possibly a horde of instructive (but not divine) images. *Satras* are highly spiritual, but don't expect anything enormously photogenic.

Shivadol but sports finer stone carvings, even if they're significantly eroded. Gaurisagar is just 50m off the main NH37 Sivasagar–Jorhat road at Km 501.5.

Dibrugarh

☎ 0373 / pop 122,000

Travelling to 'tea-city' Dibrugarh usefully closes a loop between Kaziranga and the Ziro–Along–Pasighat route (see p620).

From Dibrugarh Town train station, RKB Path follows the rail tracks northeast passing HS Rd (which leads to the market area). After 800m RKB Path meets Mancotta Rd. Around this junction are many places to eat, plus there's fast-connection internet at **Ajmera** (Sachit Studio, Mancotta Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 10am–9pm). Across the railway tracks, 1km south on Mancotta Rd then 300m right on Convoy/TRP Rd is the main bus station.

Purvi Discovery (☎ 2301120; www.purviweb.com; Medical College Rd, Jalan Nagar) organises regional tours, vehicle rental and **horse-riding** trips (around Rs 7000 per day, including meals) with set date departures (October to April). Given three days' notice it can organise two-hour **tea estate visits** (admission Rs 400; ☎ Tue–Sat Apr–Nov). Purvi also handles bookings for two colonial-era tea bungalow retreats: the delightful 1849 **Mancotta Chang Bungalow** (Mancotta Rd, Mancotta; s/d main Bldg Rs 2000/3600, s' executive' Rs 1000), 4km from town, and **Jalannagar South Bungalow** (Convoy Rd; s/d upstairs Rs 1500/2600, downstairs Rs 1600), 700m from the bus station. In both cases choose the upper rooms that have polished hardwood floorboards and a wonderful heritage feel.

East End Hotel (☎ 2322698; New Market; s/d from Rs 230/345), just off HS Rd, is conveniently central, with tired, basic but clean budget rooms and attached cold showers.

Near the train station, **Hotel Indsuriya** (☎ 2326322; RKB Path; s/d fan Rs 345/564, AC from Rs 805/1035; ☎) has bright, modern rooms, a children's play area and some local furniture motifs. Spot Princess Diana amongst the lobby's Assamese textiles.

H20 (Mancotta Rd; mains Rs 50–110, beers Rs 55) is an upstairs bar-restaurant with elements of space-ship décor. Upbeat little **Flavours** (☎ 2326438; Mancotta Rd; mains Rs 20–60; ☎ 10am–10pm) nearby serves doughy pizzas. **El Dorado** (☎ 2326805; City Regency Hotel, RKB Path; beers Rs 90) is a suave, underlit lounge with bottle-spinning barman and Indian trance music.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air Deccan (www.airdeccan.com) and **Kingfisher** (www.flykingfisher.com) fly to Guwahati, while **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2300114; Circuit House Rd) flies to Kolkata. Mohanbari airport is 16km northeast of Dibrugarh, 4km off the Tinsukia road. Shared three-wheelers (Rs 10) from AT Rd stop 500m short at Mohanbari market.

From the main bus station ASTC buses depart three times an hour till mid-afternoon for Sivasagar (Rs 38, 2¼ hours), Jorhat (Rs 68 to 90, four hours) and Tinsukia (Rs 23, 1½ hours). Various overnight services to Guwahati (Rs 265 to 320, 12 hours) leave from Mancotta Rd or from outside the train station. The best-timed overnight train for Guwahati (3AC/2AC Rs 865/1275, 14½ hours) is the 4pm *Kamrup Express*.

The rough-and-ready DKO Ferry (passenger/bicycle/motorbike/elephant Rs 67/44/199/4190, vehicle Rs 1500 to 3087) cruises daily to Oriamghat where it's met by a bus to Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh, p621). It can carry just two jeeps. There's little shelter and the journey takes around eight hours (5½ hours downstream on return), so bring an umbrella and sunscreen. Brief stops en route give scenic glimpses of isolated riverside hamlets like **Berachapuri** and **Tinmil**, where fishing canoes sport domed central sun-shelters. Exact departure points vary according to the Brahmaputra's water level. Dibrugarh's **Kusum Hotel** (☎ 2320143; Talkiehouse Rd) sells a jeep-ferry-jeep combination ticket to Pasighat (Rs 250, 10 hours).

SOUTH ASSAM

The attractive **Cachar Hills** are suffering serious insurgency from DHD Dimasa separatists whose poetically named subfactions (like 'Black Widow', led by Jewel Gorlosa) are also embroiled in a bloody 'turf war'. Visiting **Haf-long**, once a popular hill station, is not advised, but further south, the predominantly Bengali city of Silchar is safe.

Silchar

☎ 03842 / pop 155,000

Flat, sprawling Silchar offers a welcome break in long journeys between Shillong and Mizoram or Tripura. Club, Central and Park Rds converge at a small roundabout near the main bus station. There's patchy internet access at **CyberMagic** (☎ 261837; Park Rd; ☎ 8am–10pm). Hotels are great value.

SERVICES FROM SILCHAR

To	Bus fare (Rs)	Sumo fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Agartala	220	250	11+	6.30am
Guwahati	310	375	12-15	7.30am, 7pm
Jowai	205 (ASTC)	325	6-9	6.45am, 7am, 7.45am
Shillong	250	325	8-11	7am, 5.30pm

Four minutes' walk from the bus station, down a narrow passageway before Indian Airlines, **Hotel Geetanjali** (☎ 231738; Club Rd; s/d from Rs 150/265, with AC d Rs 550) has budget rooms that are much better than its gloomy foyer suggests.

Hotel Kalpataru (☎ 245672; s/d from Rs 170/290, with AC d Rs 550; ☺) is neat, new, if not quite as plush as its lobby suggests, and right beside the bus station.

Hotel Kanishka (☎ 246764; Narsingtola; s/d from Rs 290/520; ☺) is a new six-storey tower with Art Deco designs on doors and a grandfather clock in the little lobby. It's cheaper and more stylish than better-known Hotel Borail View. Take the first paved link street between Park and Central Rds.

Silchar's **Kumbeergam airport** (☎ 282311) is 30km northeast. Shared Ambassador taxis (per person/car Rs 70/350) depart from outside **Indian Airlines** (☎ 245649; Club Rd; ✈ 10am-5pm), which flies daily to Kolkata (Rs 5675), Guwahati (Rs 3855) and Imphal (Rs 2810, 30 minutes), and thrice weekly to Agartala (Rs 3855, 35 minutes). Air Deccan has daily budget flights to Kolkata.

Buy bus and sumo tickets from various counters around the bus station; see above.

For Jowai you'll usually pay the full Shillong fare except on slow ASTC buses. For Agartala, buses join guarded military convoys making progress dreadfully slow: consider breaking the trip via Kailasahar (for Unakoti, p616).

MEGHALAYA

Carved out of Assam in 1972, hilly Meghalaya (The Abode of Clouds) is a cool, pine-fresh contrast to the sweaty Assam plains. Set on dramatic horseshoes of rocky cliff above the Bengal plains, Cherrapunjee and Mawsynram are statistically the wettest places on earth. Most of this precipitation falls April to September (and mostly at night), creating some very impressive waterfalls and carving out some of Asia's longest caves.

Eastern and central Meghalaya are mainly populated by the closely related Jaintia, Pnar and Khasi peoples (see p609), originally migrants from Southeast Asia. Western Meghalaya is home to the unrelated Garo tribe (see p612). Despite their different ethnic backgrounds, these two groups both use a matrilineal system of inheritance, children taking the mother's family name and babies often carried on the father's back.

SHILLONG

☎ 0364 / pop 268,000

From 1874 until 1972, this sprawling hill station was the capital of British Assam. Since Independence it has developed into a fairly typical modern Indian town, but it still retains elements of charm and the air is refreshingly cool, if you don't mind a good chance of rain.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

None are fast, all charge Rs 20 per hour.

CyberTech (Thana Rd; ☎ 9am-9pm) Central but very cramped.

Enter-The-Web (Malki Point; ☎ 10am-7pm)

Mookherjee's Cyber Café (Keating Rd; ☎ 9am-8pm)

Techweb (☎ 2306102; Zara's Arcade, Keating Rd; ☎ 9am-8.30pm) Bright and relatively comfy.

MONEY

Cash and travellers cheques of many currencies can be exchanged, but not Bangladesh Taka.

Indian Overseas Bank (Excise Lane, Kacheri Rd; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri)

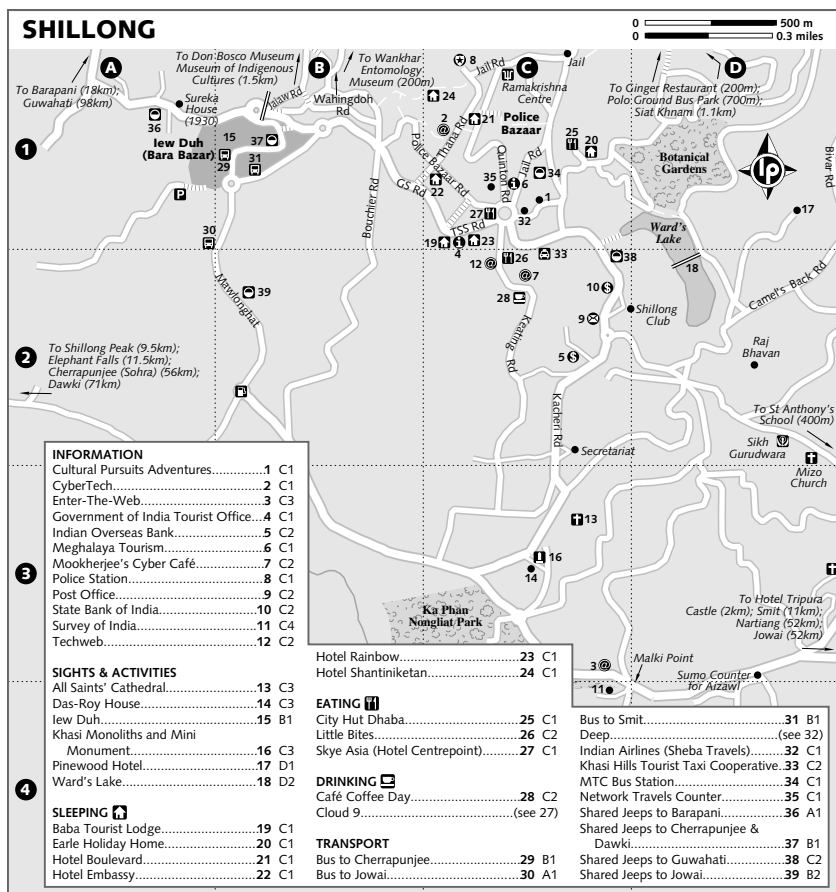
State Bank of India (Kacheri Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Exchange upstairs.

POST

Post Office (Kacheri Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Cultural Pursuits Adventures (MTDF; ☎ 0620-66552; www.culturalpursuits.com; Basement, Hotel



Pegasus Crown; ☎ by arrangement Experienced agency for caving and visits to rural Meghalaya.

Government of India Tourist Office (☎ 225632; GS Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Free, basic maps.

Meghalaya Tourism (☎ 2226220; <http://meghalaya.nic.in/tourism>; Jail Rd; ☎ 6.15am-7.30pm) Mostly interested in selling (good-value) tours.

Sights & Activities

COLONIAL SHILLONG

Colonial Shillong was arranged around the ever-attractive **Ward's Lake** (admission/camera Rs 5/10; ☎ 5.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon) with its photogenic **ornamental bridge**. The city's half-timbered architecture has been rather swamped by drab Indian concrete, but areas like Oakland retain many

older houses and even in the centre a few gems remain. The **Pinewood Hotel**, a 1920s tea-growers retreat, is particularly iconic and looks great at night (at least from the outside). The 1902 **All Saints' Cathedral** (Kachari Rd) would look perfect on a biscuit tin. Nearby the turreted **Das-Roy House** (closed to the public) lurks behind a traffic circle that harbours five forgotten **Khasi monoliths** and a mini Soviet-style **globe monument**.

MUSEUMS

The very professional **Don Bosco Museum of Indigenous Cultures** (www.dbic.org; Sacred Heart Theological College; Indian/foreigner Rs 90/150, student Rs 30/50; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm) displays a truly vast, very well laid-out collection of tribal artefacts interspersed just occasionally with gratuitous

galleries on Christian missionary work. The hexagonal museum building is an impressive, symbolic tower, seven storeys high for the seven states of the northeast. Tours (compulsory) last over an hour departing on the half-hour. For an extra Rs 50, a 16-minute video explains the Nongkrem festival (p610) or you could choose from various alternatives films.

The memorably named **Wankhar Entomology Museum** (☎ 2544473; Riatsamthiah; admission Rs 25; 🕒 11am-4pm Mon-Fri or by arrangement) is a remarkable one-room display of pinned butterflies, gruesome Rhinoceros beetles and incredible stick-insects in the home of the original collector.

IEW DUH

This vast **market** at Bara Bazaar is one of the most animated in the northeast. Thousands of Khasi tribespeople flock in from their villages selling everything from tribal baskets to fish traps and edible frogs. Except, of course, on Sunday when everyone goes to church.

SIAT KHNAM

All around Shillong gambling windows offer 'Forecast' odds on Siat Khnam. This is a unique 'sport': a semicircle of photogenic old Khasi men fire hundreds of arrows at a straw-trussed target. Those that stick are counted and bets predict the last two digits of this total. It's effectively a lottery but the shooting is a gently fascinating spectacle. Shoots are usually at 3.30pm and 4.30pm daily, except Sunday

KHASI CULTURE

Meghalaya is dotted with timeless stone monoliths erected as memorials for tribal chieftains. Local Khasi 'monarchies' are still nominally ruled by a *syiem* (traditional ruler). Although they might lack political power, the Syiem of Myllem remains a considerable economic force effectively controlling Shillong's vast Iew Duh market (see above), while the Syiem of Khrim is elaborately feted at Smit's annual Nongkrem festival (p610).

Many Khasi women wear a *jaiñkyrsha* pinafore in gingham-checked cotton, fastened on one shoulder and overlaid with a tartan shawl. Most Khasis consider *kwai* (betel) chewing a semireligious habit. Khasi markets work on an eight-day rotation and some village fairs feature *yaturmasi* (bull versus bull fights). Thank you in Khasi is *kublei*.

when a different version is played. Timings can vary somewhat by season.

The easy-to-miss Siat Khnam site is a small grassy area approximately opposite the big Nehru Stadium on the south river bank. To drive there head east past the Mizo Church, fork left up Bampfyled Rd, then after crossing the hill and descending to the river, turn left: the ground is almost immediately to your right. If walking, take the footpath down to Ginger Restaurant/Polo Towers Hotel. Continue just beyond to Polo Market, then turn right. Walk in front of the Matri Mandir (north side) and along the riverside road for about 1km. The ground is almost opposite the entrance to an army officers' housing area.

Tours

Meghalaya Tourism's city tours (Rs 120) take unsuspecting tourists to a viewpoint at **Shillong Peak** (1960m) and the picnic spot at **Elephant Falls** (adult/child/camera Rs 5/3/10; 🕒 9.30am-4pm). While pretty enough, neither are exactly mind-blowing.

Sleeping

Tariffs are seasonal and highly negotiable in the low season. During peak periods hotels fill fast, but there are dozens of choices around the Police Bazaar area so just keep looking.

Hotel Shantiniketan (☎ 2500747; Thana Lane; s/d Rs 50/100) Shoebox bed spaces are squeezed into a sagging old wooden house that could use fumigation and fire escapes. What did you expect for Rs 50? No English is spoken.

Baba Tourist Lodge (☎ 2211285; GS Rd; s with shared bathroom Rs 125, s with private bathroom Rs 250-300, d with private bathroom Rs 400-475) Ageing but clean and popular with backpackers, Baba hides behind a deceptively small PCO shop. The best rooms have windows and views onto the rear cherry blossoms. Bucket showers.

Hotel Embassy (☎ 2223164; boulevard@yahoo.co.in; AC Lane; s/d from Rs 200/300) Central yet quiet, bright and very clean compared to the many other cheapies nearby. Beware of hefty 'taxes' (30%) and 'compulsory' meals (perfectly good, reasonable value).

Earle Holiday Home (☎ 2228614; Oakland Rd; d from Rs 350) The cheapest rooms are original half-timbered affairs within a classic 1920 Shillong hill house that has little turrets and looks sweet when decked with fairy lights at night. Pricier rooms are less atmospheric if more comfortable in a new concrete annexe. There's

also a great, inexpensive restaurant (City Hut Dhaba, see below).

Hotel Rainbow (☎ 2222534; GS Rd; d Rs 550-650, tr Rs 750) Nine new, pleasantly styled rooms with sauna-style décor (but no geyser) are managed by a friendly man called Vicky. The best is room 103 with a little balcony.)

our pick Hotel Boulevard (☎ 2229823; boulevard@yahoo.co.in; Thana Rd; s/d from Rs 820/948) Amongst dozens of similarly priced hotels, the Boulevard stands out for its modernist chic and unusually luxurious standards even in the cheapest rooms. Don't miss the view from the stylish top-floor bar-café.

Hotel Tripura Castle (☎ 2501111; www.tripuraroyalheritage.com; Cleve Colony; s/d from Rs 1680/2160) Tucked away on a wooded hillside is the distinctively turreted summer villa of the former Tripura maharajas. It's this private 'castle' that features in hotel brochures, but accommodation is actually in a mostly new, if pseudo-heritage building behind. Pine-framed rooms have a gently stylish, slightly Balinese vibe with some period furniture and a level of service that's hard to beat.

Eating & Drinking

Cheap street stalls abound around Police Bazar with many dreary but inexpensive eateries along Thana Rd. Brighter for microwaved snacks is **Little Bites** (Keating Rd; dishes Rs 10-25), while just beyond there's real coffee and good cakes at **Café Coffee Day** (Hotel Mi Casa, Keating Rd; ☎ 10am-10.30pm).

City Hut Dhaba (☎ 2220386; Oakland Rd; mains Rs 40-110; ☎ 11am-9.30pm) Tucked behind Earle Holiday Home, modestly priced City Hut boasts 'Shillong's best food' and actually delivers. Seating is in attractive, flower-decked pavilions, but they're open-sided so bring a coat for winter evenings.

Skye Asia (☎ 2225210; Hotel Centrepont; mains Rs 70-180; ☎ 1-9.30pm) With wood and rattan chairs and great views, this top-floor lounge-restaurant serves dainty Thai dishes and cocktails, morphing later into the Cloud 9 bar-disco. Downstairs La Galerie (1st fl; mains Rs 50 to 130) is less atmospheric but offers excellent Indian food.

Ginger Restaurant (☎ 2222341; www.hotelpolotowers.com; Hotel Polo Towers, Polo Bazaar; mains Rs 90-200; ☎ 11am-10pm) Sink into designer cream-leather chairs at Shillong's suavest restaurant. Continental dishes include crepes, cannelloni and stroganoff. Attached is the futuristic, metal-plated bar Platinum (beers Rs 120).

Getting There & Away

Indian Airlines (☎ 2223015; Sheba Travels, Ward's Lake Rd) flies from Kolkata to Shillong (Rs 6030) returning via either Jorhat (Monday) or Tezpur (Wednesday). The airstrip is at Umroi, 35km north of Shillong (Rs 600 by taxi).

From an air force base 8km towards Cherrapunjee, **Meghalaya Transport Corporation** (☎ 2223129) offers helicopter flights to Guwahati (Rs 725, 30 minutes, twice daily except Sunday) and Tura (Rs 1525, 1½ hours, thrice weekly). Book at the **MTC bus station** (Jail Rd).

The MTC bus station also has a computerised railway-reservation counter (nearest train station is Guwahati), hourly minibuses to Guwahati (Rs 64, 3½ hours), and overnight buses to Silchar (Rs 151, 10 hours) and Tura (Rs 202, 12 hours via Guwahati).

More comfortable private buses for Siliguri (Rs 350, 18 hours), Agartala (Rs 450, 21 hours), Silchar, Dimapur and Aizawl depart from the Polo Ground; book tickets from counters around Police Bazaar, including **Network Travels** (☎ 2222747; Shop 44, MUDA Complex, Police Bazaar) and **Deep** (☎ 9836047198; Ward's Lake Rd).

From a Kacheri Rd parking area, shared taxis/sumos leave frequently to Guwahati (Rs 125/90, 3½ hours). Some shared taxis continue to Guwahati airport (Rs 170).

For most destinations within Meghalaya buses are infrequent and antiquated. Faster and much more frequent, shared jeeps leave when full from various points around Bara Bazaar, including to Cherrapunjee (Sohra; Rs 40, 1½ hours), Dawki (Rs 70, two hours), Jowai (Rs 50, 1¼ hours) and Barapani (Rs 20, 40 minutes).

Getting Around

Shared black-and-yellow taxis run fixed routes (Rs 7 to 10 per hop) but if empty want Rs 50 for a one-way trip within town. For longer hires, contract a van from the **Khasi Hills Tourist Taxi Cooperative** (☎ 2223895; Kachari Rd).

AROUND SHILLONG

Smit

Framing itself as the Khasi cultural centre, Smit hosts the major five-day **Nongkrem Festival** (October). This features animal sacrifices and a curious slow-motion shuffling dance performed in full costume in front of the thatched bamboo 'palace' of the local *syiem* (traditional ruler). Smit is 11km from Shillong (Rs 8 by chuntering local bus), 4km off the Jowai road.

Umiam Lake

Accessed from **Barapani**, 17km north of Shillong, **Umiam Lake** is a hydroelectric reservoir that's popular for water sports and picnics and has a couple of resort hotels.

Cherrapunjee (Sohra)

☎ 03637

Although straggling for several kilometres, **Cherrapunjee** (known locally as **Sohra**) has a compact centre. The sumo stand, one-computer internet shop and simple two-room **Sohra Plaza Hotel** (☎ 235762; s/d Rs 350/450) all huddle beside the marketplace. Nearby grassy moors somewhat justify Meghalaya's over-played 'Scotland of the East' sobriquet, though they're dotted with Khasi monoliths and scarred by quarrying. Much more impressive is the series of 'grand canyon' valleys that plummet away into deep lush bowls of tropical forest sprayed by a succession of seasonally inspiring waterfalls. The **Nohkalikai Falls** are particularly dramatic. You can see them easily enough without quite entering the official **viewpoint** (admission/camera Rs 3/10), 4.4km southwest of **Sohra** market.

Four buses of Bengali sightseers are whisked on to a minimal museum at Cherrapunjee's **Ramakrishna Mission** (admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm) and prodded through the sad, soot-blackened ex-stalagmites of the mildly claustrophobic, 150m-long **Mawsmat Cave** (minimum fee per group Rs 60; ☎ 9am-4.30pm). Mawsmat's tall row of roadside **monoliths** are much more impressive than the cave.

Better than any of this is descending the 14km narrow road to **Mawshamok** for views back up to the falls and cliffs. Few places in the northeast are more scenic. Just 3km further along the ridge, the six-room, ecofriendly **Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort** (☎ 03637-264218; www.cherrapunjee.com; Laitkynew village; d Rs 720-840) is comfortable and run by truly delightful hosts. They offer a selection of hikes, either self-orientated (using their hand-drawn maps) or with a local guide (Rs 70 to 150). The most exciting of these is a visit to the absolutely incredible '**root-bridges**', living *ficus elastica* tree roots that ingenious Khasi villagers have trained across streams to form natural pathways. Three of these root bridges (including an amazing 'double-decker') are near **Nongriat**. Access requires at least 1½ hours' very steep trek down from **Tyrna**, a pretty, palm-clad village that's 5km from the resort,

2km from **Mawshamok**. This hike is highly strenuous and en route there's a truly hair-raising wire bridge to cross, but the scenery is magnificent.

The Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort also encourages summer 'monsoon tourists' to experience first hand the world's rainiest place, its unforgettable thunder and the drama of its brewing storms.

Dawki

pop 5500

You'll probably only go to Dawki for the Bangladesh border-crossing, but the journey from Shillong includes a dramatic 10km section along the lip of the vast green **Pamshutia Canyon**. It then descends through mildly picturesque Khasi villages like **Pongtung** (Km 142) and **Mawsun** (Km 146) amid waving betel-nut palms, finally crossing a suspension bridge over the surreally blue-green **Umngot Creek** where waters are dotted with flimsy local fishing boats. A colourful boat race is held here every February.

All public sumos from Dawki to Shillong (Rs 70, 2½ hours) depart by 11am (3pm on market days), mostly returning early afternoon. If coming northbound from Bangladesh, sleep in Sylhet and start very early as Dawki's only accommodation, the **Inspection Bungalow** (d Rs 100), usually refuses tourists. Shillong-Dawki-Sylhet is considerably easier southbound.

JAINTIA HILLS

☎ 03562

Situated in pretty, rolling countryside (think Sussex with rice), **Nartiang** (pop 6000) is famous for its **forest of monoliths**, a scatter-brained Stonehenge wannabe tucked behind the village football pitch. Raised to honour the Jaintia kings, the highest stone is almost 8m tall. Around 1km away, the famous but heavily over-renovated **Durga temple** was once used for human sacrifices. Spot the 'endless hole' into which severed heads were once tipped.

Nartiang probably doesn't justify a special trip from Shillong (54km each way), but if you're travelling the Silchar-Shillong route, it offers blessed respite from the endless coal trucks. Nartiang's 12km off the main road: turn northeast at Ummulong. By public transport change in **Jowai** (pop 27,300), the district centre of eastern Meghalaya's Jaintia Hills.

CROSSING INTO BANGLADESH

Border Hours

The border is open from 6am to 5pm.

Foreign Exchange

There's no official exchange booth but ask at the Bangladesh customs office and a freelance moneychanger can usually help out.

Onward Transport

The border post is at Tamabil, 1.7km from Dawki market. That's Rs 30 by taxi (southbound) but northbound expect to walk, as there's usually nothing but massed coal trucks waiting at the checkpoint's Indian side. Northbound beware that Tamabil has no Sonali bank, so prepay your Tk300 Bangladesh departure tax in Sylhet (55km from Tamabil) or in Jaintiapura (17km). Frequent Tamabil–Sylhet minibuses pick up from (but don't terminate at) a triangular junction 350m from the checkpoint: walk through the field of coal stacks! Trains from Sylhet to Dhaka leave at 7.30am.

Visas

The nearest Bangladesh consulates are in Kolkata or Agartala (Tripura), so you'll need to have planned well ahead.

Although architecturally drab, Jowai's vibrant market is full of *kwai*-chewing, traditionally dressed local women. The town gets particularly lively during the July **Behdienkhlam festival** when towers of cloth and wood are erected to the accompaniment of music, dancing and archery competitions.

ASTOUNDINGLY overfilled Jowai–Nartiang share taxis (Rs 10, 35 minutes) leave from the central market. The last one back departs from Nartiang around 3pm. That makes it just about possible to arrive in Jowai on the 7am Silchar–Shillong bus, see Nartiang and continue to Shillong the same evening. Jowai–Shillong sumos (Rs 50, 1½ hours) leave when full till around 5.30pm from just beyond Jowai's sorry **Hotel New Broadway** (☎ 212714; Shillong Rd; s/d Rs 150/300).

GARO HILLS

☎ 03651

Although administratively within Meghalaya, the rolling green Garo Hills are easier to visit from Guwahati than from Shillong. The landscape's undulations vary from charming patchworks of rice field, cassava-patch and orange orchard to sad slash-and-burn hillsides of depleted jungle choked with gourd-creepers and bamboo thickets. Towns aren't visually distinctive, but cottages in small hamlets remain traditionally fashioned from bam-

boo-weave matting and neatly cropped palm thatch. Around 80% of Garos are Christian. Nonetheless 'witch doctors' are still active and superstitious *jhum* villages still practise **Wangala dances** before the harvest. These have been formalised into a four-day **100-Drum cultural festival** (early November) at **Asanang** (Asananggri), 18km north of **Tura**, the Garo capital. Tura's **Rikman Hotel** (☎ 220744; s/d from Rs 390/500) is the best and most central accommodation option. Its restaurant serves excellent Garo food.

Tura's **tourist office** (☎ 242394; 🕒 10am–5pm Mon–Fri), 4km out of town towards Nazing Bazaar, can arrange guides for the three-day hike to **Nokrek Biosphere Reserve**, where it's possible to watch for Hoolock Gibbons from a traditional style *borang* (Garo tree house). Tura–Guwahati sumos (Rs 230, six hours) depart at 6.30am and 2pm. **Aashirwad** (☎ 222217) runs handy if grindingly slow night buses to Siliguri (Rs 280, 15 to 17 hours) crossing the 2.3km **Naranarayan Setu** road-rail bridge between Jogighopa and Goalpara. **Dura Travels** (cnr HK & Circular Rds) offers shared sumos to Baghmara (Rs 100, four to five hours, 6am), where a simple **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 222141; dm Rs 100) can organise jeep hire to visit the **Balpakhram National Park** (entrance 45km away), traditionally considered by Garo people as the 'abode of souls'.

TRIPURA

Tripura is culturally and politically fascinating, and the state's royal palaces and temples now draw a growing flow of domestic tourists from Kolkata. However, if you're expecting the exotic grandeur of Rajasthani castles, Tripura might seem a long detour for relatively little.

History

Before joining India in 1949, Tripura (Twipra) was ruled for centuries by its own Hindu royal family (the Manikyas), based first at Udaipur, then Old Agartala (Kayerpur) and finally Agartala. In the 1880s Tripura's maharajah became a major benefactor of Bengali renaissance poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. Indian partition flooded Tripura with Bengali refugees leaving the local Borok-Tripuri people a minority in their own state. Resulting tensions saw dozens of armed groups fighting for – and against – the creation of an independent state.

Dangers & Annoyances

The Agartala, Udaipur and Kailasahar areas are generally safe. However, there is serious instability in north-central Tripura. All vehicles must travel in armed convoys through two sections of the Agartala–Kailasahar road. While attacks are rare, they do happen.

Compared to the shy greetings and glances elsewhere in the northeast, Tripura's more forthright stares and slightly forced hospitality can seem a little invasive. But compared to neighbouring Bangladesh, it feels relaxed.

AGARTALA

☎ 0381 / pop 189,330

Tripura's low-key capital is centred on the imposing Ujjayanta Palace. The town feels refreshingly organised and manageable if you're arriving from Bangladesh, whose border is just 3km east of the centre.

Information

BOOKSHOP

Jnan Bichitra Bookzone (☎ 2323781; JB Rd; ☎ 9am–9pm; 📖) Welcoming, well-stocked bookshop selling local postcards.

INTERNET ACCESS

Bluesky (Santipara; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am–9pm)
Netzone (6 Sakuntala Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 7am–10pm; 📶) Best of several closely grouped options.

MONEY

SBI ATM (Palace Compound West)

State Bank of India (HGB Rd; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Sat, 10am–1pm Sat) Counter 31 (top floor) changes cash and travellers cheques, but allow at least an hour.

UTI ATM (Welcome Palace Hotel, HGB Rd)

TOURIST INFORMATION

TripuraInfo (☎ 2380566; www.tripurainfo.com) Useful news and tourism website.

Tripura Tourism (☎ 2225930; www.tripura.nic.in/tourism1.htm; 1st floor, Swet Mahal, Palace Complex; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, 3–5pm Sat & Sun) Helpful and enthusiastic. With sufficient numbers staff can organise many great-value tours.

Sights

Agartala's indisputable centrepiece is the striking, dome-capped **Ujjayanta Palace**. Flanked by two large reflecting ponds, the whitewashed 1901 edifice was built by Tripura's 182nd Maharaja. It looks particularly impressive floodlit at night, a spectacle that strollers can enjoy for just one hour daily, entering from the relatively grand **south gate** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 5.30–6.30pm). To see the palace's comparatively unspectacular interior (now the Tripura state assembly chamber), sign in between 2.30pm and 3pm, weekdays (admission free) then report to the caretaker. Of four Hindu temples around the palace compound, much the most fanciful is **Jagannath Mandir**.

The small **Tripura Government Museum** (☎ 232 6444; http://tripura.nic.in/museum/welcome.html; Post Office Circle; admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri) has interesting artefacts recovered from excavations around Tripura. The upstairs gallery shows maharajah portraits, including one with Tagore.

Several **royal mausoleums** are decaying quietly behind Batala market.

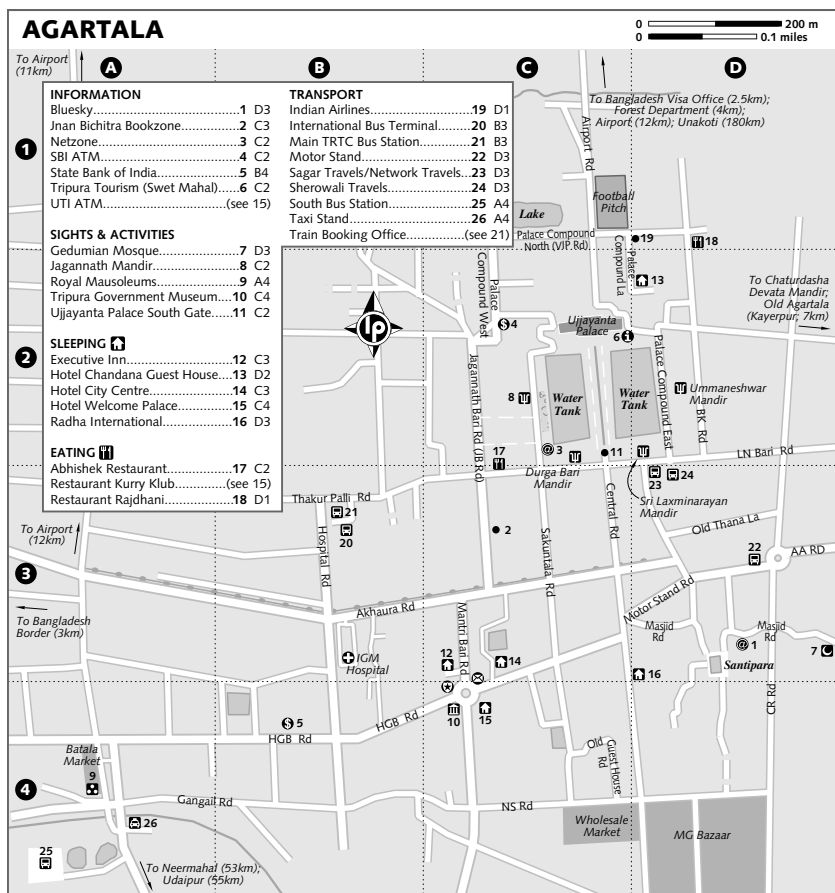
The curious, mosaic-fronted **Gedumian Mosque** (Masjid Rd) is like a mini Brighton Pavilion.

OLD AGARTALA

Nothing much remains of Tripura's second capital, **Old Agartala**, 7km east down AA Rd (the NH44) at Kayerpur, though the small, pointy **Chaturdasha Devata Mandir** (Temple of Fourteen Deities) hosts a big seven-day **Kharchi Puja** festival in July.

Sleeping

All places listed here offer rooms with private bathroom. AC rooms generally have geysers.



Hotel Chandana Guest House (☎ 2311216; Palace Compound Lane; s/d/tr Rs 95/210/285) Lacklustre but cheap and quite bearable, the Chandana's simple rooms have mosquito nets and cold showers. Peaceful yet central.

Hotel Welcome Palace (☎ 2384940; bantob@sancharnet.in; HGB Rd; s/d from Rs 220/330, with AC Rs 550/660; 🏠) This hard-to-beat option has helpful English-speaking staff, zealous room service and superb food. Rooms are neat if not huge with scalding hot showers and multi-channel TV.

Radha International (☎ 2384530; 54 Central Rd; s/d with fan from Rs 375/500, with AC from Rs 500/750; 🏠) This new hotel's great-value AC rooms are neatly tiled and doubles have a little sitting area. However, some bathrooms already suggest damp patches.

Executive Inn (☎ 2325047; 9 Mantri Bari Rd; s old Bldg Rs 275-385, d Rs 495; s/d new Bldg from Rs 660/880; 🏠) The new building has stylishly understated modern rooms with AC and enough space to relax. The old building's fan rooms are overpriced.

Hotel City Centre (☎ 2385099; jaininn_pvtltd@yahoo.co.in; s/d from Rs 385/495, d with AC from Rs 720; 🏠) New and youthful, with 25 rooms in 10 categories.

Eating

Restaurant Rajdhani (☎ 2208635; Top fl, Hotel Rajdhani, BK Rd; mains Rs 35-120; 🏠) Playful fake-forest décor and a birds-eye view on the palm-framed palace add to the pleasure of fine Indian and Chinese cuisine. The chicken *dopiaza* includes half a hen.

Restaurant Kurry Klub (☎ 2384940; Hotel Welcome Palace; mains Rs 40-150; 🕒 10am-10pm) Scrumptious tandoori chicken and gingery 'Thai' soup served in a small dining room whose décor would be rather striking if only the lighting would be turned up.

Abhishek Restaurant (☎ 2328296; Durga Bari Rd; mains Rs 60-100; 🕒 11am-10pm; 🍴) Reliable Indian-Chinese-Thai food served either on an inviting outdoor terrace or in a marine-themed dining room with good AC.

Getting There & Around

Indian Airlines (☎ 2325470; VIP Rd; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-4pm), **Air Deccan** (www.airdeccan.com), **Jet Airways** (☎ 2341400) and **Kingfisher** (www.flyingfisher.com) all fly to Kolkata and Guwahati. Indian also flies thrice weekly to Silchar (US\$91). Agartala's airport is 12km north, Rs 90 by autorickshaw. Arrive early: before reaching the check-in area you must get tickets endorsed at airline counters outside the terminal then visit the immigration desk across the arrivals hall (yes, for domestic departures).

Private bus offices clustered on Durga Bari Rd include **Sagar Travels/Network Travels** (☎ 2222013) and **Sherowali Travels** (☎ 2310398). However, most leave from the **main TRTC bus station** (☎ 2325685; Thakur Palli Rd). Tickets are sold at Counter 1 for

6am and noon buses to Guwahati (around 25 hours, Rs 355 to 500) via Shillong (21 hours) and 6am buses to Silchar (Rs 190 to 220, 14 hours). TRTC state-run buses (Counter 4) are somewhat cheaper and also serve Kailasahar (Rs 68, seven hours). BRTC's daily bus to Dhaka (Rs 232, 1pm) will use the gleaming new International Bus Terminal once that opens.

Northbound sumos use the busy **Motor Stand** (Motor Stand Rd).

For Udaipur (Rs 20, 1¼ hours) and Melagarh (for Neermahal; Rs 20, 1½ hours) use the south bus station.

The planned new Assam-Agartala railway has yet to progress beyond Manu. Construction continues, plagued by extortion and attacks from insurgent groups. There's a computerised **train-booking office** (🕒 8am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11.30am Sun) at Agartala's main bus station.

AROUND AGARTALA

Southern Tripura's best-known sights could be combined into a long day trip from Agartala, though sleeping at Neermahal is worthwhile. All transport passes the gates of **Sepahijala Wildlife Sanctuary** (NH44 extension, Km 23; 🕒 8am-5pm Sat-Thu), a local picnic and boating spot famous for its **spectacled monkeys**.

CROSSING TO BANGLADESH AT AGARTALA

Border Hours

The border is open from 6am to 5pm.

Foreign Exchange

There's no official exchange booth, so changing money is hit and miss; ask local travellers.

Onward Transport

From central Agartala the border is just 3km along Akhaura Rd (Rs 15 by rickshaw). On the Bangladesh side the nearest town is Akhaura, 9km beyond. Locals pay Tk 50 (around Rs 30) by 'baby taxi' (autorickshaw) but supply is thin and drivers often ask over Tk 250. Akhaura train station is on the Dacca-Comilla line. However, for Dacca-Sylhet trains continue 3km further north to Ajampur train station, from where trains to Sylhet (five hours) depart at 9.20am and 4.40pm. Coming eastbound be sure to pay your Tk 300 Bangladesh departure tax at Sonali bank (the nearest is in Akhaura) before heading for the border. On holidays when banks are closed you might be able to negotiate payment at the hut before immigration, but don't count on it (if you can, there will be a modest supplement to pay).

Visas

The northeast's only **Bangladesh visa office** (☎ 2324807; Airport Rd, Kunjaban; 🕒 visa applications 9am-1pm, visa collection 4pm) hides down a small lane in Agartala, about 2km north of the Ujjayanta Palace. Turn right beside Barnali gift shop. The office is 30m ahead on your left. Same-day service.

Udaipur

☎ 03821

Udaipur was Tripura's historic capital and remains dotted with ancient temples and a patchwork of tanks. Ruined but still comparatively massive, **Jagannath Mandir** is the most curious temple, overgrown with creepers Angkor Wat-style. It sits at the southwest corner of huge **Jagannath Digthi tank**, around 1km from Udaipur bus stand, and once held the famous Jagannath statue of Puri (p645). You'll pass three more ancient temple complexes en route to the flimsy **Badashaheb bamboo bridge** (concrete replacement under construction). Cross the Gomati River, turn left and walk 10 minutes uphill to find the **Bhueneswari Temple** (small but celebrated in Tagore's writings) just beyond the lumpy brick ruins of the **Rajbari**, hardly recognisable as a 17th-century palace.

Facing Udaipur bus stand, the friendly **Sarada Guest House** (☎ 225737; d without/with AC Rs 200/400; 🚽) has windowless but well-kept rooms. Manager Guru Prasad is extremely helpful with local tips. In central Udaipur, **Gouri Hotel** (☎ 222419; Central Rd; s/d from Rs 150/250; 🚽) has acceptable fan rooms, plus two relatively smart Rs 600 AC rooms.

MATABARI

When Sati's toes fell on Kolkata (see p486), her divine right leg dropped on Matabari. This gruesome legend is piously celebrated at the **Tripura Sundari Mandir**, a 1501 Kali temple where a steady stream of pilgrims make almost endless animal sacrifices that leave the grounds as bloody as the temple's vivid-red *vihara*. Even more people come here at the big **Diwali festival** (October/November) to bathe in the fish-filled tank over which the two-storey concrete **Gonabati Yatri Niwas Lodge** (dm/d Rs 66/165) offers views from simple rooms. Book through **Tripura Tourism** (☎ 0381-2225930).

The temple is 100m east of the NH44, 4km south of Udaipur.

Neermahal & Melagarh

☎ 0381

Tripura's most iconic building, Neermahal is a long, red-and-white **water palace** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 9am-4pm) shimmering on its own boggy island in Rudra Sagar Lake. The delightful waterborne approach (per motorised/hand-rowed boat Rs 150/75) is the most enjoyable part of visiting this 1930 royal folly, whose interior is

bare and could use a lick of paint. If there are enough people staying at the tourist lodge, the palace organises a sound-and-light show.

Boats leave from near the remarkably decent **Sagarmahal Tourist Lodge** (☎ 0381-2544418; dm Rs 66, d with AC from Rs 330-440, d without AC from Rs 165; 🚽) where most rooms have lake-facing balconies and there's a good restaurant. The lodge is 1km off the Agartala-Sonamura road, 1.3km from Melagarh bus stand.

Getting There & Away

Frequent, ever-stopping buses bound for Belonia or Sapbrum stop briefly at the Udaipur bus stand and Matabari. From Udaipur to Melagarh, minibuses (Rs 13, 50 minutes) leave the Udaipur bus stand at 7.30am, 10.30am, 11.30am and 3.10pm. Alternatively, you might consider chartering a van direct to Neermahal (Rs 450, 25 minutes). The last sumos back from Melagarh to Agartala (Rs 20, 1½ hours) leave around 4pm.

NORTH TRIPURA

☎ 03824

Around 180km from Agartala, North Tripura's regional centre is **Kailasahar**, where the excellent new **Unakoti Tourist Lodge** (☎ 223635; d without/with AC Rs 165/330) is a real bargain. **Unakoti** itself, around 10km away, is an ancient pilgrimage centre famous for 8th-century bas-relief rock carvings, including a 10m-high Shiva. Reaching Kailasahar from Agartala requires transiting Tripura's most sensitive areas. Foreign tourists are very rare and will turn heads.

NAGALAND

The Naga peoples originated in Southeast Asia and are distributed all along the India/Myanmar border. However, in Nagaland they form a majority everywhere except Dimapur. For centuries some 20 headhunting Naga tribes valiantly fought off any intruders. In between they kept busy by fighting each other and developing mutually unintelligible languages. Today inter-tribe communication uses a 'neutral' lingua franca called Nagamese (a sort of market Assamese). Major Naga groups include the developed Angami and Rengma of Kohima district, the Lotha of Wokha district (locally famed for their cooking) and the Konyak of Mon district, whose

villages have the most striking traditional architecture. For festivals, Naga women wear a hand-woven shawl that's distinctive for each subtribe, while the men dust off their old warrior wear, loin cloth and all.

It's festival Nagaland that most tourists imagine when booking a Nagaland tour. And Kohima's December Hornbill Festival easily justifies the trip. At other times (except perhaps in rural Mon district), some visitors find the contrasting lack of spectacle to be a disappointment. But if you lower your expectations from those *National Geographic* images, there's still lots of interest in meeting a people whose culture, in the words of one Indian journalist, has been through '1000 years in a lifetime'.

See www.nagalandtourism.com for information and p592 for permit advice.

Dangers & Annoyances

Since 1947 Naga insurgents have battled for an independent Nagaland and some remote areas are partially under rebel control. Most major Nagaland towns are stable, though can't be considered totally safe. Always check the current security situation before visiting anywhere in the region. Even in Kohima virtually everything closes by 7pm and travel by night is highly discouraged. You're not expected to wander into Naga villages unaccompanied: ask permission from the local headman. Even if you have a guide, you'll possibly be expected to employ another local guide for each specific district. Guides can be twitchy about taking back roads for fear of jeep-eating potholes and armed bandit rebels charging hefty 'tolls'.

DIMAPUR

☎ 03862 / pop 308,000 / elev 260m

Nagaland's flat, largely uninspiring commercial centre was the capital of a big Kachari kingdom that ruled much of Assam before the Ahoms showed up. All that remains are some curious, strangely phallic pillars of a former palace complex dotted about scraggy **Rajbari Park** (admission free) near an interesting **market**. The only reason tourists visit Dimapur is to transfer to Kohima. Right beside the NST bus station, the **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 226355; Kohima Rd; dm/s/d Rs 40/150/200) is a basic but acceptable budget option. **Hotel Avilyn** (☎ 230245; Kohima Rd; s/d Rs 500/700, with AC from Rs 700/945; 🍷) halfway to Rajbari Park is trendy, friendly and super clean. **Indian (Alliance) Airlines** (☎ 229366/242441)

flies in daily from Kolkata (US\$130, 1½ hours). The airport is 400m off the Kohima road, 3km out of town. NST buses runs hourly services to Kohima (normal/super Rs 55/64, three hours) and daily to Shillong (Rs 284, 12½ hours). Useful overnight trains run to Guwahati at 9pm (6¾ hours) and to Dibrugarh at 10.20pm (eight hours).

KOHIMA

☎ 0370 / pop 96,000 / elev 1444m

Nagaland's agreeable capital is painted across a series of forested ridges and hilltops like span-gled topping on a vast pistachio sundae.

Information

Secretariat, Home Department (☎ 227072; Secretariat Bldg) To extend or add areas to permits.

Tourism department (☎ 222124; cnr HE & Imphal Rds)

Tribal Discovery (☎ 2228751; yiesee

_neitho@rediffmail.com; Science College Rd) Neithonuo Yeise ('Nitonu') is an eloquent guide to local sites. The agency can arrange Nagaland permits for tour guests.

UTI Bank (Stadium Approach) Has an ATM.

Sights & Activities

An immaculate **War Cemetery** contains graves of 1200 British and Indian soldiers killed fighting the Japanese during an intense 64-day WWII battle. This reached its climax on the deputy commissioner's tennis court (still marked) with seven days of incredibly short-range grenade-lobbing across the net. Deuce!

The superb **State Museum** (☎ 2220749; admission Rs 5; 🕒 10am-3.30pm Tue-Sun), 3km north, includes a guide to tribal shawl designs and plenty of mannequin-in-action scenes depicting traditional Naga lifestyles.

At the fascinating if tiny **central market** (Stadium Approach; 🕒 6am-4pm), tribal people sell such 'edible' delicacies as wriggling hornet grubs (*borol*).

Kisama Heritage Village (adult/child/car/bus Rs 5/5/5/10; 🕒 8am-4.30pm winter, 8am-6pm summer) is an open-air museum 10km down the well-paved Imphal road. The collection of traditional-style Naga buildings fully represents differing tribal styles, including traditional *morungs* (bachelor dormitories) and a full-size log drum. Nagaland's biggest annual event, the **Hornbill Festival** (1-7 December), is held here with various Naga tribes converging for a colourful week-long cultural, sporting and costumed dance celebration. This is the best opportunity to see Naga tribal 'warriors' in their traditional garb.

NAGA CULTURE

Naga villages are perched defensively on top of impregnable ridge tops. Although often appearing essentially modern, many are still subdivided into *khels* guarded by ceremonial *karu* gates. The most interesting gates retain their massively heavy, strikingly carved wooden or stone doors. Although exact designs vary considerably, the central motif is usually a Naga warrior between the horns of a *mithun* (distinctive local bovine), with sun, moon, breasts (for fertility) and weaponry all depicted. A sign of wealth, *mithun* skulls also once adorned traditional Naga houses whose designs typically had rounded or Torajan-shaped prow-fronts. Traditional Naga houses are vanishing as the modern world catches up with Nagaland, but you can still see them in rural areas, particularly the Konyak villages of Mon district, where you might also still find vast hollow tree-trunk drums. Villages that are not yet 100% Christian retain *morungs* (bachelor dormitories) where non-Christian young men live communally while learning traditional skills.

Headhunting was officially outlawed in 1935, with the last recorded occurrence in 1963. Nonetheless, severed heads are still an archetypal artistic motif found notably on *yanra* pendants that originally denoted the number of human heads a warrior had taken. Some intervillage war was continued into the 1980s, and a curious feature of many outwardly modern church-crowned settlements are their recently inscribed 'treaty stones' recording peace settlements between neighbouring communities.

Simultaneously Kohima also hosts a play-off rock festival (www.hornbillmusic.com).

Sleeping & Eating

Capital Hotel (☎ 2224365; Main Rd; s/d from Rs 100/150) One of several cheapies across from the NST bus station, rooms are unusually clean for the price and views are fabulous from the shared rear balcony.

Viewpoint Lodge (☎ 2241826; 3rd fl, Keditsu Bldg, PR Hill; s/d Rs 700/1000) Perched above two handy internet cafés at Police Station Junction (1km south of the bus station), Viewpoint Lodge offers sparkingly clean rooms with neatly tiled floors. Curfew is 9pm.

Hotel Japfü (☎ 2240211; hoteljapfu@yahoo.co.in; PR Hill; s/d Rs 900/1200) This high-service hotel on a small hill directly above Police Station Junction has glassed-in balconies, hot showers and only slightly worn décor.

Popular Bakery (PR Hill; ☎ 5.30am-8.30pm) Stroll two minutes down the hill from Viewpoint Lodge for delicious breakfast pastries.

Dream Café (☎ 2290756; cnr Dimapur & Imphal roads; instant coffee Rs 10; ☎ 10am-6pm) Beneath UCO Bank is Kohima's youth meeting point, with twice-monthly live minigigs and CDs of Naga music for sale from hip-hop to choral to heavy rock.

Getting There & Away

The NST bus station offers many Nagaland services, including regular shuttles to Dimapur (normal/super Rs 55/64, three hours). Private buses to Guwahati (Rs 330 to 375, 13 to

15 hours) depart around 2.30pm from Old Minister Hill, some 200m east of Police Station Junction. From that junction, frequent minibuses battle through the traffic to the New Secretariat or pass close to the museum.

AROUND KOHIMA

Khonoma

A painfully potholed 18km from Kohima, this historic **Angami-Naga village** was twice besieged by Brits but now sits idyllically amid flowers and pomelo trees, squash gourd vines, and megaliths, graves and *dahu* circles. Houses are not antique but some are still decorated with mithun skulls (denoting hunting prowess/wealth). Several *karu* stone gateways retain stylised pictogram 'doors'. Through one of these, steps lead up to the 'fort' for panoramic views. The best of three simple homestay-guesthouses is **Via Meru's House** (per person Rs 200).

Tuophema

If you're driving between Kohima and Mokochung, an intriguing overnight option is **Tuophema Tourist Village** (☎ 0370-2270786; s/d/tr Rs 800/1200/1200) where you sleep in comfortable but traditionally styled Naga thatched bungalows set in a delightful flower garden with great sunset views. The cultural programme is excellent.

NORTHERN NAGALAND

To find semitraditional Naga villages that are at all accessible by road, your best bet is exploring the Mon district villages of the **Konyak**

tribe. The town of **Mon** is not an attraction but does have a small tribal **museum** and some basic accommodation. However, in rural Mon villages you're still likely to come across tattooed people in loincloths, some still living in communal longhouses. **Shangnyu** village has a **totem pole** depicting warriors with giant phaluses. **Langmeang** (35km) has a relatively high proportion of traditional Naga houses and a log-drum. Effectively the only way to reach these places is on a tour (see p595 for agencies). Mon is more accessible from Sivasagar (Assam, p605) than from Kohima, and Dimapur–Mon buses drive via Assam.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

The 'Land of Dawn-lit Mountains' grips northern Assam in an embrace of densely forested ridges. These rise to some fabulous snow-capped peaks along the Chinese border. In Arunachal's deep-cut foothill valleys live at least 65 different tribal groups (101 by some counts) with bucolic cultures and photogenic bamboo-house settlements. High in the beautiful Tawang Valley are several splendid Tibetan-Buddhist monastery villages. China has never formally recognised Indian sovereignty here and it took their surprise invasion of 1962 before Delhi really started funding significant infrastructure. The Chinese voluntarily withdrew. Now border passes are heavily guarded by the Indian military, but the overall atmosphere is extremely calm. Sadly permits (see p592) remain annoying and expensive enough to deter most potential foreign visitors.

Arunachal Tourism (www.arunachaltourism.com) offers more information.

ITANAGAR

☎ 0360 / pop 38,000

Built since 1972, Arunachal's pleasantly green, tailor-made capital is named for the mysterious **Ita Fort** whose utterly dull brick **ruins** crown a hill top 2km above town. For tourists Itanagar is mainly useful for its helicopter and sumo connections to Central Arunachal.

With oversized rooms and endless under-utilised foyer space, **Hotel Arun Subansiri** (☎ 2212806; Zero Point; s/d Rs 700/900) is a good accommodation choice. It's within walking distance of the decent **State Museum** (☎ 2222518; admission Rs 50; 🕒 9.30am–5pm Tue–Sat) and a colourful little **Tibetan Temple**. Some cheaper guest-

houses, like **Itafort Hotel** (☎ 2212590; s/d Rs 250/400, with AC Rs 500/600), are 300m west around Bank Tinali junction. Here **Sahara** (☎ 2291284) offers private buses to Tezpur and sumos to Pasighat (Rs 300, 5.30am), Along (Rs 350, 5.30am and 5pm) and Ziro (Rs 300, 5.30am and 11.30am).

From the **APST bus station** (Ganga Market), 3km further west, buses leave at dawn to Along, Tezpur (Rs 110, four hours) and Pasighat (Rs 160) via North Lakhimpur (Rs 42, 1½ hours), where you'll find the nearest airport (Lilabari).

Helicopter tickets are only sold at **Naharlagun Helipad** (☎ 2243262; 🕒 7.30am–4pm Mon–Sat). That's 16km east of Itanagar's Zero-Point. Flights run daily (except Sunday) to Guwahati (Rs 3000) and weekly to many destinations, including Along (Rs 3300), Ziro (Rs 1200), Tuting (Rs 4400), Daporijo (Rs 1550) and Pasighat (Rs 2200).

CENTRAL ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Ziro Valley

☎ 03788

More plateau than valley, Ziro's rice fields and fenced bamboo groves are attractively cupped by highland pine-clad hills. Tall *babo* poles and traditional *lapang* meeting platforms add interest to the tight-packed villages of the utterly intriguing **Apatani tribe**. The voyeuristic main attraction here is meeting older Apatani women who sport alarming **facial tattoos** and

FACIAL TATTOOING

Historically famous for their beauty, Apatani women were all too often kidnapped by warriors of the neighbouring Nishi tribes. As a 'defence', Apatani girls were deliberately defaced. They received facial tattoos, like graffitied beards scribbled onto living *Mona Lisa* paintings and into holes cut in their upper nostrils were fitted extraordinary nose plugs known as *dat*, sometimes the size of US quarters.

Peace with the Nishis in the 1960s meant the end to that brutal practice. But many women in their 50s and older still wear *dat*. Photography is an understandably sensitive issue: snapping a lady because of her imposed 'ugliness' is pretty distasteful and some Apatani women have had cosmetic surgery to remove their tattoos.

CENTRAL ARUNACHAL'S TRIBAL GROUPS

Adi (Abor), Nishi, Tajin, Hill Miri and various other Tibeto-Burman tribes of Central Arunachal Pradesh consider themselves very self-consciously different from one another. But most are at least distantly related. Most traditionally practise Donyi-Polo (sun and moon) worship. For ceremonial occasions, village chiefs typically wear scarlet shawls and a bamboo-wicker hat spiked with porcupine quill or hornbill feather. A few old men still wear their hair long, tied around to form a top knot above their foreheads. Women favour hand-woven wraparounds like Southeast Asian sarongs. House designs vary somewhat. Traditional Adi villages are generally the most photogenic with luxuriant palmyra-leaf thatching and stilted granaries that are ingeniously protected from mice using 'mushroom stones' (sizeable disks between the stone stilts and the base of the building to keep the rats from climbing in).

bizarre **nose plugs** (see above). People-watching is best just before dusk when villagers return from their rice fields. The most authentic Apatani villages are **Hong** (biggest and best known), **Dutta** (atmospheric and easier to reach), **Hari**, **Bamin** and **Hijo**. None are more than 10km apart.

There's a weekly helicopter service to undistinguished **Ziro town** from Naharlagun (Itanagar, Rs 1200). Sprawling **Hapoli** (New Ziro), starting 7km further south, has all the hotels and road transport. **Highland Hotel** (☎ 225238; MG Rd, s/d/deluxe Rs 170/300/400) and **Hotel Valley View** (☎ 225398; JN Complex, MG Rd; s/d Rs 400/500) are acceptable choices near the main markets. **Hotel Blue Pine** (☎ 224812; s/d Rs 300/450) is a friendly alternative with a creditable restaurant albeit a slightly long walk from town (unlit at night). Hot water by bucket.

Sumos depart from Hapoli's main market to Itanagar (Rs 200, 6½ hrs) and North Lakhimpur (Rs 144, 4½ hours) around 5.15am and again around 10.30am. The journey has some particularly beautiful forest sections. Jeeps to Daporijo (Rs 200, 11am) leave from an unmarked **shop** (☎ 225100) beside **Pearl Cafe** (Hapoli-Ziro road).

Ziro to Pasighat

A peaceful lane winds on and on through forested hills and tribal settlements linking **Pasighat** to the fascinating Ziro Valley. Highlights are dizzying suspension footbridges and thatched Adi villages around **Along**. If everything was closer together, this would be one of the northeast's most popular tourist trails. However, as it is, the journey from Ziro to Pasighat typically requires at least three exhausting days of jeep travel, by which time the area's gentle charms can start to wear a little thin.

DAPORIJIO

☎ 03792 / pop 14,000 / elev 699m

You have little choice but to sleep in sprawling, attractively set 'Dapo' if transiting from Ziro to Along. The four-room **Circuit House** (☎ 223250; d Rs 300) is scenically plonked on a hill top overlooking town through a bamboo veil. Otherwise the best market-area option is **Hotel Santanu** (☎ 223531; New Market; s/d from Rs 200/300), with faulty plumbing but serving good local delicacies in the cheerless restaurant (try *papuk* – chicken in banana-flower broth, Rs 60). Nishi and Hill Miri bamboo-and-thatch villages around Daporijo lack the grace of Adi equivalents near Along, but occasional bamboo **totem poles** commemorate the recently deceased. They're strung with cane and bamboo-thread loops and often topped, surreally, with an umbrella.

ALONG (AALO)

☎ 03783 / pop 20,000 / elev 302m

This friendly, nondescript market town has an **Internet Café** (Abu-Tani Centre, Nehru Chowk; ☎ 6.30am-7pm) opposite the APST bus station and an informative little **District Museum** (☎ 222214; admission free; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), 300m east selling Adi-related books. A great guide is English-speaking local farmer **Taje Komut** (☎ 224653; from Rs 1500 per day), who knows many strenuous village trails and is a mine of interesting information.

The best accommodation choice is **Hotel Holiday Cottage** (☎ 222463; Hospital Hill; s/d Rs 250/400) southwest of the helipad.

AROUND ALONG

An accessible yet relatively unspoilt thatched Adi village is **Paia**. Drive 8km west of Along (1km beyond **Podbi**), then walk 15 minutes across the footbridge and up. Returning you

can stroll 3km along the riverbank then cross back to **Kabu** using a picturesque but very wobbly cane-trussed **suspension bridge**. Both Kabu and Podbi are on the Along-Tato road. There are many other picturesque Adi villages en route to **Pasighat**, notably **Lokpeng** (17km) and **Koreng** (88km, 2km before Pangin town).

Pasighat

☎ 0368

Nestled before a curtain of luxuriantly forested foothills, Pasighat holds the Minyong-Adi tribe's **Solung Festival** (1–5 September), while **Adi Banekebang** (☎ 2104075; taringtabi@rediffmail.com) publishes Adi books and is making a movie about Adi history. Sleep at friendly, central **Hotel Oman** (☎ 2224464; s/d Rs 300/450) or plusher **Hotel Aane** (☎ 2223333; tw/d Rs 600/1000, d with AC Rs 1500), which has hot showers and an appealing rooftop terrace.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Helicopters from **Pasighat Aerodrome** (☎ 2222088; ☹ 8am-noon Mon-Sat), 3km northeast, serve Naharlagun (Itanagar) via Mohanbari (Dibrugarh) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Guwahati via Naharlagun on Tuesday and Tuting via Along on Friday.

The inconveniently located APST bus station has services to Along (Rs 100, 5½ hours) at 7am daily (except Wednesday) and Itanagar (Rs 170) at 6am (except Monday). Sumos run to Along (Rs 200, 5½ hours) at 6am and **Hotel Siang** (☎ 2224559) sells jeep-boat-jeep combination tickets (Rs 250, eight hours) to Dibrugarh via the DKO ferry. This departs from Oriamghat (Assam), a lonely sandbank 30km from Pasighat (7km off the NH52). En route notice photogenic **Sille** village set in wide rice fields 20km from Pasighat (NH52, Km 523).

WESTERN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Culturally magical and scenically spectacular, a mountain-hopping journey to Tawang's 'little Tibet' is one of the northeast's greatest attractions. Ideally budget at least five days' return from Guwahati (or Tezpur) breaking the journey each way at Dirang or less interesting Bomdila. Consider stopping at Nameri's wonderful Eco-Camp (p602), too. Be prepared for intense cold in winter.

Bhalukpong to Tawang

Permits are checked in Bhalukpong (p602). The road winds up through lush mature for-

est then through once-lovely river dales (now marred by military camps) before mountain-top **Bomdila** (☎ 03782, elevation 2682m). Bomdila has sumo connections, many hotels and the reliable tour-agency **Himalayan Holiday** (☎ 222017; www.himalayan-holidays.com; ABC Bldg, Main Market). However **Dirang** (☎ 03780, elevation 1621m) is more appealing. Fabulous **Old Dirang** is an almost picture-perfect Tibetan-Monpa stone village. The main road divides its squat, rocky **minicitadel** from a huddle of photogenic stream-side houses above which rises a steep ridge topped with a timeless **gompa**. All Dirang's commercial services are in **New Dirang**, 5.5km further north. New Dirang is, by contrast, an ordinary valley town, but it's not unpleasant and there's a small huddle of cheap hotels, eateries and sumo counters around the central crossroads. **Dirang Resort** (☎ 242352; IB Rd; d Rs 650-700) is a friendly, family hotel in an old-style hill house with walls like Battenburg cake and a wooden wraparound balcony. Dirang's most comfortable option is **Hotel Pemaling** (☎ 242615; d standard/deluxe/ste Rs 700/1500/2000), 1km south overlooking New Dirang. Suites have great views towards the sometimes snow-bound 4176m Sela Pass, across which the endlessly zigzagging road continues eventually to Tawang.

Tawang Valley

☎ 03794 / elev 3048m

Calling the Tawang Valley a valley just doesn't do justice to its incredible scale. Ringed by immense mountains, it's a vast sweep of field-patched sloping plateaux dotted with Buddhist monasteries, prayer wheels and archetypal Tibetan-style villages. Semi-hidden **Rhou**, 18km before Tawang, is an especially picturesque example. By far the valley's biggest tourist drawcard is magical **Tawang Gompa** (☎ 222243; admission free; ☹ dawn-dusk). Founded in 1681, this self-contained medieval citadel is reputedly the world's second-largest Buddhist monastery complex. The 3km approach from Tawang town offers several wonderful vantage points, the gompa framing a spiky backdrop of snow-speckled peaks. Within its fortified walls, narrow alleys divide three whitewashed rows of monks' dwellings leading up to the hulking, colourful **prayer house** (heavily restored between 1992 and 1997). Across the gompa's central square is a small but interesting **museum** (admission/camera/video Rs 20/20/100; ☹ 7am-sunset on request).

Many other enchanting **gompas** and **anigompas** (nunneries) offer great day hikes from Tawang, including ancient if modest **Urgelling Gompa**, the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. By road, that's 6km from Tawang town but it's much closer on foot, directly downhill from Tawang Gompa. About 10 minutes' walk from Urgelling on the main Dirang road, **Tenzing Guesthouse** (☎ 222893; s/d Rs 450/750, tr Rs 850-1000) is a wonderfully inviting, six-room homestay. Owner, Prem, speaks faultless English and can make suggestions for many fascinating hikes.

Tawang Town

☎ 03794 / elev 3048m

Tawang town, 3km from the gompa, is a transport hub and accommodation base whose setting is more beautiful than the town itself. Nonetheless, colourful **prayer wheels** add interest to the central old-market area. These are turned by apple-cheeked Monpa pilgrims, many of whom sport traditional woolly black *gurdan* skull caps that look like giant Rastafarian spiders. Just 50m east is **Monyul Cyber Café** (Rs 50; ☎ 8.30am-8pm). **PL Traders** (☎ 222987) sells handicrafts, including embroidered shoulder bags (Rs 100).

Tawang has roughly around 20 small hotels. **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 222359; tw Rs 200) is a slightly tatty but very good-value option with hot showers and renovations underway. It's 150m above the main drag. Outwardly smart, pseudo-Tibetan **Hotel Gourichan** (☎ 224151; s Rs 350, d Rs 600-900) dominates the upper old-market area and although rooms aren't as plush as the exterior suggests, they all have bathrooms with geyser. If Gourichan is full, try the **Hotel Dungphoo** (☎ 223765; d/tr with shared bathroom Rs 350/400, d with private bathroom Rs 600) behind it. **Tawang Inn** (☎ 224096; d/ste from Rs 880/1650), which you enter from a back lane 400m southeast of the market, is central Tawang's most polished choice.

Getting There & Away

From Lumla, 42km towards Zemithang from Tawang, helicopters (Rs 3000, two hours) fly Monday and Wednesday to Guwahati. APST buses run Tezpur-Dirang (Rs 205, 7½ hours) daily and Tawang-Bomdila (Rs 170, eight hours) via Dirang (Rs 130, 6½ hours) on alternate days. Public sumos to Tezpur depart at dawn from Tawang (343km), Dirang (218km) and Bomdila (162km).

MIZORAM

Seen from the sky, Mizoram seems to have been ploughed by a forgetful god who left the deep north-south furrows with a green fuzz of bamboo. Mizoram is tidy and almost entirely Christian. You'll see very few Indian faces amongst the local Thai-Chinese style features. People are surreally but uninvensively friendly. Don't be surprised if you're warmly thanked by total strangers for bothering to visit their state.

Mizoram runs entirely to its own rhythm. Most businesses are long shut by 6pm, and virtually everything closes tight on Sunday. Forget breakfast-lunch-dinner, Mizos traditionally have two main meals, *zingchaw* (morning meal, 9am to 10am) and *thaichaw* (afternoon meal, 4pm to 6pm). Both feature rice, boiled leaves, boiled vegetables and boiled fatty smoked-pork alongside. Flavour is added using *rawt*, a salsa of diced chillies, ginger and onion. On paper Mizoram is a dry state but friendly, wobbling drunks are surprisingly common.

Mizo culture has no caste distinctions and women seem pretty liberated; in Aizawl girls smoke openly, wear jeans and hang out in unchaperoned posse meeting up with their beaus at rock concerts on the central field. Musical tastes favour gospel, Megadeath and Avril Lavigne, preferably all combined (yes, they try!). Similarly curious are the Aizawl Thunders, Mizoram's local biker gang who despite their leathers and growling Enfields are determinedly democratic.

History

About every 50 years Mizoram's endless bamboo forests flower for three seasons, producing millions of egg-shaped fruit. Although inedible to humans, these fruit are adored by rats, which multiply rapidly to enjoy the free feast. But after the third year the bamboo stops fruiting. Suddenly hungry, the rats swarm onto anything else edible, notably human crops. This last happened in 1959 causing a serious famine. The Indian government's inept response left Mizos feeling entirely abandoned. The Mizo Famine Front (MFF) later spawned the Mizo National Front (MNF) insurgents. In 1966 they launched a stunning surprise raid, briefly capturing Mizoram's then-tiny capital Aizawl. India's appallingly heavy-handed response was the infamous 'grouping' policy. The entire rural

population was corralled into virtual concentration camps. The old *jhumming* hamlets were then destroyed to deprive insurgents of resources (so don't look for ancient 'traditional' homes in Mizoram). Obviously such tactics backfired massively, creating a huge wave of support for the rebels. However, after two decades of fighting, the 1986 cease-fire led to a lasting peace settlement. Today the MNF holds a majority in the democratically elected state government and Mizoram is proud of being the safest state in the northeast. Many Mizos remain bemused as to how their 'country' ever got attached to India. But everyone's relieved that at least they didn't end up within Myanmar. In late 2006 the bamboo forests started flowering again. Let's hope that everyone will be better prepared for the inevitable in 2009.

Information

PERMITS

Agencies, notably Omega Travels (below), can arrange paperwork and fax you a permit copy. This gets you through arrival formalities, but once in Aizawl collect the original and take it to SP-CID (see right) for registration. Officially permits limit you to Aizawl district but with an unofficial nod from SP-CID you might be OK travelling further afield.

AIZAWL

☎ 0389 / pop 275,000

Balanced precariously on a razor-sharp ridge, Aizawl (pronounced eye-zole) could well be the world's steepest capital. Homes at road level might be held there with rear stilts three times higher than their roofs. In comparison, San Francisco seems as flat as Florida.

Addresses refer to areas and junctions ('points' or 'squares'). The unnamed spaghetti of roads and steep linking stairways are confusing, but the central ridge road is reasonably flat linking Zodin Sq (old bus station), Upper Bazaar (shops), Zarkawt (hotels and long-distance sumos) and Chandmari (east Mizoram sumos). This section is walkable, although appalling rush-hour traffic creates suffocating fumes.

Information

Dazzlechips Cyber Cafe (Zarkawt; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 10am-10pm) Slow connection, 200m beyond David's Kitchen.

Directorate of Tourism (☎ 2333475; <http://mizo.tourism.nic.in/>; Chandmari)

Newslink (<http://newslink.in/>) Mizoram's English-language newspaper.

Omega Travels (☎ 2323548; omegatravel89@yahoo.com; Zodin Sq; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Can arrange tourist permits (Rs 400 for up to eight people).

Zova (☎ 9436142938) speaks good English.

SP-CID (☎ 2334082, 2243697; Khatla Maubawk; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri). Compulsory police registration.

Sights

Mizoram State Museum (☎ 2340936; Zarkawt; admission Rs 5; ☎ 11am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) has interesting exhibits on Mizo culture. It's up a steep lane from Sumkuma Point past Aizawl's most distinctive **church**, whose modernist bell-tower spire is pierced by arched 'windows'.

The **Salvation Army Temple** (Zodin Sq) has bell chimes that are endearingly complex.

The **KV Paradise** (Durtlang; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, noon-9pm Sun) site is 8km from Zarkawt, 1km off the Aizawl-Silchar road via an improbably narrow mud lane. V is for Varte who died in a 2001 motor accident. K is for her husband Khawlhing who has since lavished his entire savings and energy creating a three-storey mausoleum complex to her memory. The marble fountain-patio has wonderful panoramic views. Inside an odd collection displays Varte's wardrobe and shoe collection. Locals call it Mizoram's Taj Mahal, but being a school principal not a Mughal emperor, Khawlhing's 'Christian Taj' isn't quite Agra-sized.

Sleeping

ZARKAWT

There's a convenient concentration of lower midrange hotels around Zarkawt's Sumkuma Point.

Chawlhna Hotel (☎ 2346418; s Rs 170-300, d Rs 260-600, s/d with shared bathroom Rs 100/200) The ever-popular Chawlhna has a mixed bag of rooms and is entered from a side alley 200m south of Sumkuma Point.

Hotel Tropicana (☎ 2346156; hoteltropicana@rediffmail.com; s Rs 170-250, d Rs 450-550) Right at Sumkuma Point roundabout, the Tropicana's better doubles are rather cosy with fitted curtains, ethnic furniture and balcony.

Hotel Chief (☎ 2346418; s Rs 480-540, d Rs 540-650) Almost next door to the Chawlhna, the friendly Hotel Chief is somewhat more polished with neat tiled floors and almost-hot geysers.

ZEMABAWK

Tourist Home (☎ 2352067; Mizoram Science Centre; d Rs 350-500) High above Zemabawk, some 11km

from Zarkawt, the peaceful Tourist Home has great new rooms and older, mustier cottages. The hill top setting is idyllic and Aizawl's best viewpoint is just a 10-minute stroll away.

Eating

David's Kitchen (☎ 2341263; Zarkawt; mains Rs 65-210; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) David's fine Indian, Chinese and continental food, mocktails, friendly staff and pleasant décor are undermined by incessant Kenny G music. It's 200m south of Hotel Chief.

Miso food can be found around the bazaar but is especially good at roadside family restaurants in Selling village, halfway to Saitual.

On Sundays hotels are pretty much your only hope for sustenance.

Getting There & Away

Indian Airlines (☎ 344733) and **Air Deccan** (www.airdeccan.com) fly Aizawl-Kolkata (one hour) daily. Indian also serves Guwahati (US\$91, one hour) most days and Imphal (US\$61, 30 minutes) thrice weekly. Efficient little Lengpui airport is 35km west. Taxis charge Rs 500. A 9am **airport minibus service** (☎ 2573384; Rs 100) runs from Hotel Ritz (Upper Bazaar) returning around 2pm once the Air Deccan flight has arrived. Obliging minibus-organiser **Malsoma** (☎ 9436374454) also rents a new sumo jeep (Rs 15 per km, Rs 2000 per day minimum).

Counters for long-distance sumos are conveniently clustered around Zarkawt's Sumkuma Point. For Saitual the most central are **RKV** (☎ 2305452) and Nazareth in Chandmari. For details, see below.

Getting Around

Frequent city buses run Zodin Sq-Upper Bazaar-Zarkawt-Chandmari-Lower Chatlang-Zasanga Point, then either climb to

SERVICES FROM AIZAWL

Destination	Cost (Rs)	Duration (hrs)	Departure
Guwahati	530	14-18	4pm
Saitual	70	3	1pm, 3pm
Shillong	430	15	4pm
Silchar	230	5½	6.30am, 10am, 1pm

Durtlang or curl right round past the new Chunga Bus Station (6km) to Zemabawk. Maruti-Suzuki taxis are ubiquitous and reasonably priced.

RURAL MIZORAM

Mizoram's pretty, green hills get higher as you head east. **Champhai** is widely considered the most attractive district. But for a more accessible taste of small-town Mizo life, visit **Saitual**. An incredibly good-value **Tourist Lodge** (☎ 2562395; d Rs 150) in a hill-top garden, 700m north of Saitual market, offers extensive views. There's little to do but meet the locals and find some biscuits for dinner. However, a very bumpy 10km side trip to **Tamdil Lake** is mildly memorable. This local beauty spot is ringed by lush mountains, patches of poinsettia and a few musty if pleasantly situated **cottages** (d Rs 300). There are paddle boats to rent (Rs 10), but no café.

MANIPUR

This 'Jewelled Land' is home to Naga, Kuki, Chin and many other tribal peoples but the main grouping is the predominantly neo-Vaishnavite Meitei, who are battling to have Meitei script used in local schools. Manipuris are famed for traditional dances, spicy multidish thalis and the sport of polo that they claim to have invented. Manipur's forested hills provide cover for rare birds, drug traffickers and dozens of guerrilla armies making it by far the northeast's most dangerous state. Foreigners who miraculously manage to get a permit are required to fly in and out via the capital, **Imphal**. Even there safety can not be assured.

Imphal has a **tourist office** (☎ 224603; http://manipur.nic.in/tourism.htm), **State Museum** and what is supposedly the **world's tallest topiary bush** (http://imphalwest.nic.in/sambanlei.html). The **Shri Govindajee Mandir** has two rather suggestive domes.

Lokpaching battlefield (Red Hill), 16km south of Imphal, has WWII graves and a Japanese memorial. **Loktak Lake**, known for floating 'islands' of thick matted weeds, is reportedly home to the rare Sangai 'dancing deer'.

Air Deccan (DN; ☎ 1800 4257008; www.airdeccan.net), **Indian Airlines** (IC; ☎ 2220999) and **IndiGO** (6E; ☎ 9910383838; http://book.goindigo.in) all offer flights into Manipur.

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