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#VISISHTAVIKAARI

VISISHTA VIKARINAMA SAMVATSARAM - UGADI GREETINGS

TRAVEL

SATURDAY 06.04.2019

# A WALK THROUGH CLOUDS IN DARJEELING

**THE 'QUEEN OF HILL STATIONS' BOASTS OF THE HIGHEST RAILWAY STATION IN INDIA, AND A MONASTERY LOCATED LITERALLY AMONG THE CLOUDS!**



net signals are weak and sporadic. By 5 pm it was dark and our path was covered in fog. But the expert cab drivers here are used to the sudden onset of mist and they know how to manoeuvre through the hardly visible roads.

"Sterling Darjeeling" is situated in picturesque settings: the rolling hills with tiered houses and misty mountains offer a picture postcard visual. My well appointed spacious 'Privilege Suite' came with a big bonus: a view of the spectacular Kanchenjunga! Right from my bedroom window, I could see the beauty in all its glory: I would often sit in the balcony with Kl as my silent companion and enjoy a cup of delicious 'Darjeeling Chai' while admiring the Magnolias in full bloom. The well-furnished 101 rooms are spread across skillfully giving a sense of space. Families with children have interesting indoor activities to entertain them: evenings are filled with bonfires, music, dance and fun activities. In fact, soon after we landed we joined a group at the bonfire to dance and drive away the cold.

My first day started with a gorgeous breakfast: Sterling Darjeeling seems to pamper their guests with lavish spreads at every meal: a minimum of 14 to 16 dishes catering to a cosmopolitan crowd, all made with care and served with smiles. The indigenous cuisine with its fresh local produce is

simple yet distinctive: more about it later.

The Ghoom Railway Station (the highest in India at 7,407 feet) is literally next door to the resort thus giving an opportunity to hop onto the toy train whenever you feel like. But I took a ride from Darjeeling to Ghoom. The long wait for the train was spent in studying the history of the train, thanks to huge black and white pictures that were displayed: prominent among them is a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi walking along the DHR tracks in 1925. Among other famous people to have travelled on DHR are the American author and travel writer Mark Twain and Mother Theresa. Our train's steam engine arrived at last, shunted a number of times, then fresh coal was fed and it was ready for a new start. Darjeeling's icon, the much-loved toy train moved majestically, snaking its way through busy thoroughfares, houses and lonely roads, brushing past shops, goods, houses, and plants. It was virtually like moving amidst people. I was reminded of my Tram No: 29 ride in Lisbon few years ago. Literally touching people and their lives: the proximity gives closeness with local life. I can say that going by the Toy Train in Darjeeling was certainly my most thrilling and memorable experience. The steam engine brought back memories of childhood: the familiar and much-loved whistle of the train, the smell of burning coal and the smoke that is belched by the 'Koo chuk chuk'...who doesn't love it?

The next morning, I explored the Yiga Choeling Monastery (the oldest






in Darjeeling, established in 1830) next door. As I sat listening to the birds: there were hundreds of them singing each in their own sweet voice - an early morning symphony that is occasionally disturbed by a car horn. The chants in the background and the occasional monastery bells, all gave me an unsurpassed peace. Soon a passing cloud covered the environs. I got up to leave. Walking through the clouds? Yes, I did and I felt good doing so: the tallest, the highest in Darjeeling as close to the skies as possible. When I turned back to have one last look and bow to the monastery, lo! It's gone! The monastery disappeared!! A thick cloud enveloped us, the monastery and me, acting like a curtain dividing the real and the illusory.

*(To be continued)*

**Fact file:**  
[www.sterlingholidays.com/resorts-hotels/darjeeling](http://www.sterlingholidays.com/resorts-hotels/darjeeling)  
*(The author is a documentary filmmaker and travel writer; she blogs at vijayaprataptravelandbeyond.com)*

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