

lonely planet

MAGAZINE
INDIA

₹ 125
October 2012

DON'T JUST TRAVEL, TRAVEL WELL

Win!
A TRIP
TO HONG KONG
WORTH
₹ 1.10 Lakh



THE WINTER LIST

AUGMENTED REALITY
SPECIAL

Immerse yourself in travel: videos,
wallpapers and more great
experiences – right on our pages!

7 WONDERS

Winter experiences of a lifetime,
from a frosty St Petersburg
and chasing reindeer in Sweden
to a frozen Yellowstone

MOROCCO

Like India on speed, with *medinas*,
Berbers and gorgeous doors
hidden behind Casablanca



MW80121001

ANTARCTICA

The penguins await:
go conquer your own
super-cool continent!

HIMACHAL

Get snow-bound in your
backyard (it's beautiful,
and belongs in the movies)

EASY WINTER ITINERARIES

LPMI writers plan your
Southeast Asian holidays

NEW ZEALAND

Dig your own spa, eat a
huhu and live it up in the
Kiwi summer



On a clear day, you can see the sprawl of the Gorumara National Park

2 Sinclairs Retreat Dooars, Chalsa, The Dooars, West Bengal

A FAMILY AFFAIR

It's a dusty road you're traversing, all honking cars and exhaust fumes, and you're wondering where that verdant beauty you were led to expect is hiding. You quickly realise you've jumped the gun, though, as you get past noisy Siliguri and the road cuts through the refreshingly quiet calm of the **Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary**. It's a calm that comes and goes as you head towards **Chalsa**, a hilly town tucked away in a pocket of the Dooars region in West Bengal; the

promised greenery, in the form of tea estates, popping up occasionally amid the chaos of small-town India.

You're bedding down at the Sinclairs Retreat Dooars, up on Chalsa Hill-Top, and you're glad you towed the extended family along – it's quite the sprawl, with over 50 rooms ensconced in cottages, just the thing for a raucous, self-contained getaway. The rooms are spacious, though they could do with a little more character, and there's a large lawn bang in

the middle of the property that the kids can head to with their cricket gear. Walk about a bit, and you'll find a pool to one side, with the spa and health club overlooking it, and, in the moss-covered watchtower, an indoor games room.

Plenty to keep you happy, definitely, if you're not looking for a lot to do. But if those ants in your pants awaken and want a slice of the action, they're not going to be left wanting, either. The **Gorumara National Park**, just about 25km (a half-hour's drive) away, is home to its share

of the greater one-horned rhino, elephants, gaur and even the occasional shy leopard, along with a laundry list of smaller creatures that are just as exciting to see out in their element (6am – 8am and 3pm – 5pm; entry: ₹ 25, guide fees: ₹ 100; jeep safari: ₹ 2,300 + taxes for six people). Set out early one morning and bump along the rutted paths, keeping your eyes peeled for any signs of movement. Being in the forest while the wisps of mist still cling to the foliage and the residents stretch their limbs



1. Hot momos make for a quick, satisfying treat
 2. Some tea estates in and around Chalsa are on flat ground, not terraced slopes
 3. If nothing else, you will meet lots of peacocks in Gorumara
 Below: *Thukpa* is a common breakfast dish in this region

GREAT FROM

Kolkata, Guwahati

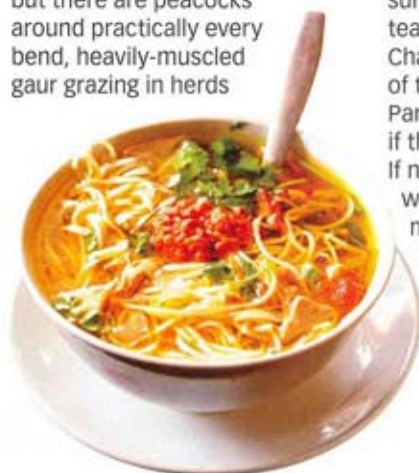
GREAT FOR

Family getaways, lazing about, forest excursions

GO NOW

The national park's reopened after the rains, and the temperatures will have dropped to more bearable levels (see Good to Know).

as they start a new day is worth getting out of bed by sunup for. Chances are, you will not encounter a rhino or leopard, but there are peacocks around practically every bend, heavily-muscled gaur grazing in herds



here and there, and a lame bull elephant who's frequently spotted, too.

Samsing, a little hamlet surrounded in forests and tea gardens, lies 15km from Chalsa. It sits at the edge of the Neora Valley National Park, and offers long views if the weather's on your side. If not, comfort yourself with a plate of steaming momos from one of the many eateries along the village's main stretch (veg momos from ₹ 20). Walk a further four

kilometres from Samsing and you'll hit **Suntalekhola**, a burbling stream with basic accommodation on its banks, and the start of many a trek into the national park. Wade in the shallows, wander a bit into the surrounding forest (sticking to the trails, of course) and thank your foresight at having requested a picnic lunch as you while away yet another afternoon, watching over your family and other animals.

WORDS RADHIKA LALLA
 PHOTOGRAPHS HASHIM BADANI

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro:

Kolkata (640km)

Closest city:

Bagdogra (80km)

Closest airport:

Bagdogra Airport (80km)

is about two-and-a-half hours away by car, and the road is rutted in sections. JetKconnect and SpiceJet fly between Kolkata and Bagdogra (return fares from about ₹ 6,400).

Closest railhead:

New Jalpaiguri (NJP: 70km)

is about two hours away by car. Try the superfast, overnight 12343 Darjeeling

Mail on your way there (leaves Sealdah 10.05pm, arrives NJP 8am; ₹ 673 Third AC) and return on the

superfast, overnight 12346 Saraighat Express (leaves NJP 7.25pm, arrives Howrah Jn 5.10am; ₹ 673 Third AC).

superfast, overnight 12346 Saraighat Express (leaves NJP 7.25pm, arrives Howrah Jn 5.10am; ₹ 673 Third AC).

GETTING AROUND

It's a long drive from Kolkata (over seven hours on not-so-great roads), but you'll be restricted to using the property's transport if you don't have your own wheels.

We travelled with **Clubside Tours & Travels Pvt Ltd**

(00-91-33-22253937/

22257053; clubside.in,

kolkata@clubside.in;

4, Gangadhar Babu Lane,

Firingi Kali Tower, Kolkata;

car hire from ₹ 3,300 per day.



Wild elephants are only one of the many creatures you'll bump into at Gorumara

WHERE TO STAY

Sinclair's Retreat

Dooars: This stay option has 60-odd Deluxe Rooms, all in the same style, as well as three themed Premier Suites – the Burra Sahib Kothi, the Bandoob Babu Kothi and the Nouveau Ville, inspired by, as the names suggest, a colonial-era home, a hunter's getaway, and a touch of France (00-91-3562-260282/200179; sinclairshotels.com, dooars@sinclairshotels.com; Sinclairs Retreat Dooars, Chalsa, Chalsa Hill-Top, Jalpaiguri; Deluxe Room from ₹ 6,500 with breakfast, Premier Suites from ₹ 11,000 with breakfast,

special high-season rates from Dec 21 – Jan 3, check website for deals and offers).

WHAT TO EAT

This isn't a foodie trip, but that's for sure, with not much in the way of great food available in the area. Expect standard buffet fare at the Sinclairs Retreat Dooars – a selection of mostly North-Indian vegetarian and non-vegetarian eats, with a smattering of Bengali specialties. There are a few continental offerings on the menu; stick to the Indian, though (see *Where to Stay*;

buffet lunch/ dinner ₹ 450 per person). You could also try a roadside shack in Chalsa town for *thukpa* and momos; do so at your own risk, though; we were put off by the flies. The momos at Samsing are a much better bet; you'll also get Indian-inspired Chinese food here (veg momos about ₹ 20/ plate).

WHAT TO PACK

Woollens for nippy mornings and nights, sturdy shoes if you're visiting Samsing, group-oriented board games and cricket gear, motion-sickness meds in case you're prone to upchucking on mountain roads

SHOPPING

Don't come with empty bags – there isn't much worth taking home here. Although there are lots of tea estates in the area, the best crops are exported, and don't make it to the local markets. You'll find fresh fruits in Chalsa; the sour green limes are a local speciality.

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

Stick to the loos at the hotel, you won't find them anywhere else.

SAFETY

The property is gated and safe enough, though it does sit atop a hill, and has no barriers at the edges – keep an eye on the little ones, and have a torch handy if you're wandering about in the dark.

MEDICAL AID

Sinclair's Retreat Dooars can organise a doctor for you on request. Siliguri has a multi-specialty hospital (**Medica North Bengal Clinic**; 00-91-353-2460011; medicanorthbengalclinic.com; Meghnad Saha Sarani, Pradhan Nagar, Siliguri).

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

As long as they have enough company, kids will be well-entertained, having a free run of the property; do carry games, balls and the like to make use of on the lawn, though!

GOOD TO KNOW

- ◆ Gorumara National Park is closed from mid-June to mid-September. As we go to press, the Supreme Court is still deliberating on what access is to be allowed to national parks.

