

DEEP FOREST

T.R. Shankar Raman takes the road less travelled into the spectacular forest wilderness and ranges of Namdapha. Photographs by **Kalyan Varma**

At the foot of snowcapped Dapha Bum (4,571m), a strip of land pokes its way along the spectacular valley of the Noa-Dihing like a finger into Myanmar. Spanning nearly 2,000 sq km of rugged terrain, swathed, in large part, by tropical rainforests of incredible biological diversity, this land—the famed Namdapha Tiger Reserve in eastern Arunachal Pradesh—is a wellspring of nature. Over the next 12 days, we are to trek through this landscape; there is much to see and work to do, too.

To reach Namdapha, we enter Arunachal Pradesh by the road from Dibrugarh to Miao. At the state border checkpost, we have a moment to pause and reflect; the

cultivated plains of Assam are behind us, and ahead, like a dream turned real, an undulating landscape stretching into unknown hills: Arunachal awaits!

Our journey into Namdapha begins at the rather undistinguished town of Miao, where we obtain our permits to enter the Tiger Reserve. We are accompanying Aparajita Datta, our colleague at the Nature Conservation Foundation, to learn about and help with her research and conservation work. And the only way to do that: on foot on a long trek deep into Namdapha and beyond to the village of Vijaynagar. The walk will take us through the spectacular, lofty forests in the tourism zone up to Firmbase, beyond which we will

traverse the core area of the Tiger Reserve, not open to tourists. Depending on logistics, weather and landslides, the trek could take anywhere from five days (if one was superbly fit and in a rush) to 15 days or more. We are in no rush, yet the dictates of logistics will keep us moving. The first night, we rest in the wood and bamboo home of Akhi Nathany, our Lisu field co-ordinator at the Lisu basti in Miao.

Awakening the next day, a cool November morning, to the sight of a pair of Wreathed hornbills flying high, we prepare for our trek. Supplies are purchased, porters arranged, leech socks tried on and everything dumped into the back of a 4x4 truck that will take us a short

distance along the 100-mile long Miao-Vijaynagar road (M-V road). The M-V road, we were soon to realise, was a road only in a notional sense. It was wide in parts, reduced to a narrow foot-trail in many places, slushy and overgrown, and punctuated by landslides that had erased its very trace off the slopes.

At the best of times, it is motorable up to Deban in a four-wheel drive. This was not the best of times. In the aftermath of rains from the super-cyclone Sidr that had swept past Bangladesh into northeast India, a huge landslide around the 12th mile had torn down the road. We were dropped off some distance away and our team prepared to go the rest of the journey on foot.

Towering over the Namdapha landscape, the ethereal Dapha Bum gleams in the afternoon light. Namdapha spans an altitude range from around 200m to over 4,500m. The lower reaches are covered in extensive tropical wet evergreen forests.

Higher, one traverses subtropical and temperate broad-leaved forests, and pine forests, into alpine meadows, and permanent snow and ice. One goes from the land of the clouded leopard to the abode of the red panda – and perhaps, the snow leopard.

We stay at Deban Forest Rest House the first night. After a relaxed morning exploring and watching gibbons, squirrels and birds, we cross the river by boat to camp on the wind-swept banks of Deban nala. In other places, the rivers had swelled with water

and we would form a human chain to cross at specific locations known to experienced Lisu guides. Fed by rain gathered in the vast watershed, and by snow-melt, the streams and tributaries course into the sparkling waters of the Noa-Dihing.



As we shoulder our backpacks, our assistants and porters strap sturdy cane baskets across their heads. Even with their heavier loads, they walk easy and fast, as if they were built for the terrain. We squelch through the slush of landslides, sinking knee-deep at times, soldiering on along the forest tracks and river crossings, even as our Lisu assistants walk and climb expertly, cross landslides and rivers; all with a smile on their lips. With cane, bamboo and a handy *dao* (machete) the Lisu can work all manner of wonders from utensils and baskets to pipes and shelters in no time.





Namdapha comes alive when hornbills are in flight. Five species of hornbills are found here, including the rare Rufous-necked hornbill, the majestic Great and Wreathed hornbills and the smaller Oriental pied and Brown hornbills. In their itinerant wanderings across vast areas of forest in search of fruiting trees, large flocks of Wreathed hornbills criss-cross the skies every day, the whooshing of their wing beats audible from afar. Aparajita's work on hornbills in Arunachal's forests have established their importance as seed dispersers and architects of the rain-forest plant communities.



The rainforests beyond Deban must rank among the most biologically rich forests in northeast India. Around Hornbill, our next campsite, the forests yield their riches. We watch Hoolock gibbons, Capped langurs and Malayan giant squirrels. Also, a

thrilling array of birds, many to be found only in northeast India within the country. Even the names are enticing: mesias and tesias, malkohas and hornbills, peacock-pheasants and wren-babblers, cochoas and laughing thrushes, parrotbills and yuhinas.

As we walk, our assistants go ahead to pitch camp. After the trek, punctuated by exciting wildlife sightings, we welcome the sight of the pitched camp and hot cups of tea. The vista of the Namdapha river valley bounded by forest-clad hills and snowcapped peaks, seems like one of the last truly wild places in India. By the murmuring river, under silvery starlight, we huddle by the warm glow of the fire and tuck into a simple but tasty dinner of rice, dal and boiled *lai patta*.



The wide river valleys strewn with rounded boulders are punctuated by stretches of tall grass, the home of the hog deer and birds of the open grassland such as chats and shrikes. We learn it is as easy to lose one's way in the tall grass as it is in dense forest, and are glad to have our trusty Lisu guides on hand to show the way. The Noa-Dihing river is alive with birds: black storks and cormorants, sprightly black-and-white forktails and wagtails, dippers and ibisbills, redstarts and river lapwings.



Wading waist-deep across the Noa-Dihing, we trek to our next camp at Ngwazakha, or 38th-mile settlement, a reference to a notional milestone on a nearly non-existent road. The next morning, with misty vapours rising from unexplored forests in

the distance, we trudge on to camp near 52 Mile. Another day of walking brings us to our putative campsite near 62 Mile, only to find it all wet and sloping. We have to move camp a mile or so further; in our tiredness, this seems the longest mile yet.



Our walk took us through dense rainforests and bamboo thickets, rivers and streams, over boulders and landslides, partly along the notional Miao-Vijaynagar Road, but in fact frequently off-road. The M-V road, built in 1972 and defunct since the 1990s, serves more as a frame of reference in the landscape than as a genuine path. We did parts of the last stretch towards 77 Mile and on to Gandhigram village on the M-V road, catching glimpses of enthralling forests and wildlife, but with little time to stop, admire and absorb.





Finally, eight days and nearly 140km after we left Miao, we behold the village of Gandhigram (or Shidi to the Lisu). With rice-fields and bamboo houses, pigs and chicken, and children playing, the village seemed little conscious of its isolation at

India's eastern extremity. After two days of rest and feasting on delicious pork, pineapples, native popcorn and rice cakes, we move on to Vijaynagar. The final 18km trek takes us past forests and jhum fields, crossing cane bridges and streams.

Vijaynagar, at Namdapha's doorstep and yet quite detached from it in spirit, marks its events by the arrival and departure of the irregular AN-32 flights. With the weather threatening to worsen, we decide to wait for a sortie to head back. It is a tense wait, since there is little assurance of a flight, but luckily we get a flight on the second day. Strapped aboard along with luggage we are off, and below us, the landscape that took us 12 days to trek through flashes past in 20 minutes. Yet, the range after range of hills and unbroken forest entice us; even as we leave, we feel we shall come back.





Clockwise from left: Medo's pit viper, found only in Namdapha within India; Small niltava; Malayan giant squirrel; Slaty-backed forktail; and the Hoolock gibbon, India's only ape

With more than 1,000 plant species, over 500 bird species and a documented diversity of animal species that is still climbing steeply, Namdapha will entrance any wildlife enthusiast. It is the home of the leopard, clouded leopard and tiger, and at the higher reaches, possibly even the snow leopard.

The flagship mammals, and the most likely to be seen, are the primates and the Malayan giant squirrels. Hoolock gibbon families, with their resounding calls carrying for miles, troops of handsome, leaf-eating capped langurs and itinerant Assamese and stump-tailed macaques are likely. At night, one could see slow loris and flying squirrels or, with luck, one of the elusive smaller carnivores: the cloud-

ed leopard and marbled cat or spotted linsang and civets. Several squirrels, deer, takin, bamboo rats, hog badger and wild dog add to the diversity.

Among birds, the forests shelter many rare and threatened species found only in northeast India within the country such as Grey peacock-pheasant, Red-headed and Ward's trogons, Wedge-billed wren-babbler, Snowy-throated babbler, Hill partridges and Beautiful nuthatch, to name a few from a long list. A great diversity of insects, fish, amphibians and reptiles also mark the forests and rivers in Namdapha.

Yet, seeing wildlife is hard work here; the rainforests are dense and the legacy of hunting persists.



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DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

GETTING THERE Miao is 605km from Guwahati and can be reached by taking an overnight bus to Jagun near the Arunachal border. From here to Miao (39km), hire a taxi (Rs 800) or take a bus (Rs 30). Alternatively, one can also reach Dibrugarh and then on to Miao (160km) by taxi (Rs 2,400) or Arunachal Pradesh State Transport bus (Rs 80). One can also directly reach Vijaynagar at the eastern end of Namdapha by air sorties (Antonov-32 airplanes) operated by the Indian Air Force to ferry supplies and people (civilians and Assam Rifles staff). Permits are required from the Deputy Director of Supply and Transport (DDST) at Mohanbari (0373-2382609) or Circle Officer, Vijaynagar, to take the flights from Dibrugarh (Mohanbari) to Vijaynagar or back (Rs 700) and they are not regular. One may have to wait for days or even weeks to get on a flight.

STATE ENTRY PERMITS To enter Arunachal, permissions needed include Inner-line Permits (ILP, for all non-Arunachal Indian citizens) and Restricted Area Permit (RAP, for foreign nationals). ILPs may be obtained (Rs 25) at Kolkata, Guwahati or Miao, from the Deputy Resident Commissioner's office. Applications are made in the morning and permits are issued in the afternoon, but may take up to two days.

FOREST DEPARTMENT PERMITS Tourist permits to enter Namdapha up to Firmbase may be obtained at the Field Director's office, Miao (The Field Director, Project Tiger, Namdapha National Park, Miao - 792122, Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh, 03807-222249). Entry fee is Rs 10 (Indians) and Rs 50 (foreigners); vehicle, elephant, camera charges extra. Permits are not normally given to tourists to enter into the core area along the defunct Miao-Vijaynagar road; these are normally approved only for bonafide research or special purposes. Special requests to the Forest Department may be made for treks through the park but groups must be accompanied by Forest Department staff.

PREPARATIONS Permits, supplies, transport and guides are best arranged beforehand to avoid problems. Tents, sleeping bags, leech-proof socks and other camping essentials will be extremely useful as there is no accommodation along the route except at Deban Forest Rest House (26km from Miao). Cerebral malaria is prevalent and many people die from it every



year, so take all needed precautions and medicines strictly as advised by a good doctor.

CAUTION Take care to engage reliable local guides/porters with the assistance and permission of Forest Department staff, preferably Lisu tribals who are familiar with the Miao-Vijaynagar route. It is not advisable or safe to enter any area without prior Forest Department permits and reliable local guides. Sudden rain and landslides may require waiting for rivers to abate or changes of route and only with reliable and experienced locals is there any assurance of a safe journey. Local porters from other communities may also be engaged at Miao/Deban. Verify reliability and antecedents of local guides/porters with Forest Department staff or Phupla Singpho (from SEACOW, a local NGO, see below).

ACCOMMODATION The Eco-Tourist Guest House run by a local NGO, SEACOW (Contact: Phupla Singpho, 03807-222296) and the Circuit House and Inspection Bungalow (Contact: Addl. Dist Commissioner, 03807-222245) offer the only accommodation in Miao. There is a Forest Rest House at Deban (Contact: Field Director, Miao, 03807-222249). Camping is permitted at designated sites only.

TREK ROUTE Day 1: Miao to Gibbon's land (10 Mile) camp. 3hr walk through lovely forests to Motijheel, a forest pool on a plateau. Day 2: On to Deban Forest Rest House, explore forests around, good mammal sightings, birding along

Dihing river. Day 3: Cross the river by boat and walk along Deban nala and on to Haldibari campsite. Day 4: On to Hornbill camp. Some of the best forests are around here, take time to explore and look for all manner of interesting rainforest creatures; also visit sulphurous hot springs at Bulbulia (2hr). Day 5: Walk up to Ranijheel (4-5hr) and detour to Rajajheel (1hr). See interesting swampy pools in the rainforest and camp at a designated spot near Ranijheel. Day 6: On to Firmbase, a moderate trek through some steep downhill stretches and bamboo thickets to end at Namdapha river, where the tourism zone ends. Day 7 to 10: Venture beyond Firmbase only if permitted by Forest Department and with reliable guides. Ideally, proceed only during good, clear weather. Beyond Firmbase, one has to cross the Namdapha river, head via 38 Mile settlement, ford the Noa-Dihing near the Burma nala, continue along the south bank of the Dihing for a day past Nibudi, the 52 Mile settlement and then climb back along the M-V road with numerous shortcuts, to camps near 52 Mile, 65-67 Mile, 77 Mile, and then out of Namdapha past 80 Mile to Gandhigram village. Do not deviate off-route as it is very risky and few people, even experienced guides, know the trails well enough. Day 11: Walk to Vijaynagar (18km).

INFORMATION For further information see www.namdapha.in, www.changlang.nic.in/namdapha.html and www.projecttiger.nic.in/namdapha.htm.