Prayer wheels

Far and Away’s Last Shangri-La tour unveils the hidden secrets of Sikkim, a tiny Indian state tucked into the Himalayas, where the air is thin and the tires are fat.
The land’s earliest inhabitants called it Ny-mae-el, Heaven. The Tibetans called it Denzong, Land of Rice. The Nepalese called it Sukhim, The New Place, and somehow the name stuck. After India declared independence from the British in 1947, Sikkim was recognized as a protectorate of the nation, and then in 1975 became the 22nd State of the Indian Union.

Sikkim is a tiny bump in northeast India, less than one per cent of the country’s total size. With only half a million residents, it’s the least populous state in India. Nonetheless, it contains incredible diversity, soaring from 270 meters (885 feet) above sea level to 8,589 meters (28,180 feet) of Himalayan grandeur. The land rises from subtropical to alpine, blessed with holy lakes, tumbling waterfalls and ancient monasteries.
Delhi

WHEN WE ARRIVE IN DELHI to start the tour, the explosions have already begun. It’s the celebration of Diwali.

Diwali is like putting Christmas and New Year’s together, adding a heaping pile of fireworks, and keeping the whole racket going for five days. It’s a frenzy of horns, explosions and bright yellow-orange marigolds.

Trucks, vans, cars, tuk-tuks, cows, goats, wild dogs and bicycles all vie for space on the roads, where the honking of horns never subsides. Vehicles in Delhi don’t drive on the right or the left, they drive wherever there’s space, and in whatever direction they happen to be going. The city, chaotic at the best of times, reaches a new level of intensity. Festival of Lights? It’s a Festival of Traffic.

A city of 30 million in a country of over a billion people, Delhi is a seething 187-square-mile Petri dish of humanity. I expected the sheer numbers would have created a pushy culture, but walking down the sidewalk is a choreographed ballet where thousands weave around one another but almost never touch. Every street is crowded not only with people but with stores, vendors, food sellers, men operating sewing machines, tables of vegetables and toys, sandals and sweets. There’s something being sold in every space available, no matter how small.

A whiff of urine is followed by a noseful of fragrant cardamom. Then burning wood, mothballs, incense, sweat, perfume. Motorbikes at the roadside, wrapped in black plastic, make Henry Moore shapes. A layer of dust covers everything that’s not moving, and a few things that are. There seems to be a general agreement that the women must dress colourfully and the men must be drab.

Amid the incessant horns, I dodge the traffic, passing the Swastik Medicine Palace, Multi Brand Aircon Shopee, Photostat Scheme, Modern Talk World, wondering how these people can be so calm in the middle of this vortex. Delhi is a city of close tolerances and tight spaces, relentlessly driven by the slow, grinding gears of commerce. A rupee here, and a rupee there, and everyone gets by.

AFTER A BREAKFAST of masala omelette, vegetables and soft, warm aloo prantha bread, Far and Away founder Bob Thompson and the nine riders on the tour board a bus for some Delhi sightseeing. Our driver has a mischievous smile and a Freddie Mercury moustache. The area where the horn is located on his steering wheel is so worn that it’s covered up with reams of black electrical tape. That doesn’t stop the driver from using the horn incessantly. The back of
nearly every truck instructs ‘Horn Please’ and all the other drivers are more than happy to oblige.

There are 1,400 tombs in Delhi, which quickly leads to our day-long expedition being referred to as the Tomb Tour. We visit the colossal India Gate and the Gandhi Cremation Monument. I see my first snake charmer, who’s batting his dozy cobra with a train schedule. We visit another tomb, followed by another, and another, inching through Diwali traffic as motorcycles take to the sidewalks in desperation.

We’re tempted to cut the tour short. The sunlight is fading, as we are, and the Diwali traffic is impossibly congested. But the last two stops, at Qutub Minar and Humayun’s Tomb, turn out to be nothing less than miraculous.

We walk through the entranceway into Qutub Minar, a playground of beautifully carved Indo-Islamic architecture. At the heart of the complex, a minaret of red and buff sandstone soars 72 meters (238 feet). It’s the tallest freestanding stone tower in the world, despite being built over 800 years ago. Around the minaret, a maze of calico arches, walls and pillars are chiselled with exquisite calligraphy.

Humayun’s Tomb is our final stop, and we arrive just as the sun has dipped below the horizon, and the muezzin is calling the faithful to prayer from the loudspeakers of a distant tower. Hundreds of thousands of birds are chattering in the trees surrounding the enormous building. The tourists have all left, and we have this marble marvel to ourselves, painted in rich colours by the dusk.

The building’s powerful symmetry is mirrored in reflecting pools as we approach, and the white marble dome shines like a halo. We walk up worn stone stairs to the vaulted terrace, where geometric and arabesque patterns line the walls and arches. The building is the inspiration for the Taj Mahal, and it’s easy to see why. Its size is breathtaking, its detail is exquisite. Somehow all that Delhi traffic, all that chaotic intensity, was worth this moment of stillness.
Bagdogra - Kurseong

Because of its harsh terrain, there are no airports in Sikkim. So we fly the next morning from Delhi to Bagdogra, just south of the Sikkim border. The flight takes us 1,100 kilometers (650 miles) west, then we travel by bus to Kurseong, where our cycling will begin.

Our lunch stop at the Marina Hotel provides an opportunity to get to know the riders on the tour. Nearly all of them have been on a Far and Away tour before; many have completed several.

Graeme, my roommate for the tour, is an affable Aussie who’s an inveterate traveller. Think Roy Orbison with a Melbourne accent. Clara is a Colombian now living in Washington, DC with her boyfriend Keith, an avid rider who’s also joined us for the tour. Jim is a Brit living in DC, Maryvonne a French woman now living in Colorado, and Janice and Adrienne are an American mother-and-daughter duo with an unwaveringly positive disposition.

Federica is known to her friends as Fede, but for simplicity’s sake we agree to call her Freddie. Inspired by a Far and Away tour, she now guides cycling tours in her native Italy. Animated and expressive, her every sentence seems to include exclamation marks.

That leaves Bob. Tall and blue-eyed with an impish grin, Bob leads the tour with quiet confidence. He left the world of corporate accounting behind some years ago to lead cycling tours, and now has ten tours on the Far and Away roster, including Slovenia, Croatia, Laos and Indochina. He has another Indian tour in the southern region of Kerala, but Far and Away is one of very few tour companies to explore the remote northern state of Sikkim.

All in all, five women and five men, aged thirtysomething to sixtysomething, joined by our Indian crew Neel, Dawa, Norden, Roger, Jiwahn and Chandan. These are the men who will map our routes, serve our afternoon tea and care for us for the next two weeks.

The bus journey from Bagdogra to Kurseong gives us our first glimpse of the mountains. We also get our first glimpse of the damage caused by the recent 6.9 earthquake, which hit Sikkim just a month before our visit. We can see massive fallen rocks on the road, rockslides and areas where sections of the road have simply been swept away.

The tea plantations beside the road disappear as we begin to ascend from 150 meters (500 feet) in Bagdogra to 1482 meters (4,862 feet) at our destination in Kurseong. These ups and downs will quickly become a theme for the trip: we’re about to board the Himalayan rollercoaster.
Kurseong - Darjeeling

AT DAWN, we get our first glimpse of Kangchenjunga. Five lofty peaks along the Sikkim-Nepal border, Kangchenjunga means ‘The Five Treasures of Snows.’ The mountain’s 8,586-meter (28,169 foot) summit is considered the guardian deity of the Sikkimese and most explorers who summit the mountain stop a few feet from the peak out of respect.

The Cochrane Place Hotel, where we’ve spent the night, overlooks the town of Kurseong, with its rusty-striped corrugated roofs and bright-coloured houses. The air is fresh, the morning sun squint-inducing. Clouds creep over distant mountaintops like dry ice. But something seems to be missing. Then I realize there are no horns honking. We’re certainly not in Delhi any more.

We ride from the hotel to the nearby Makai-bari Tea Estate, where owner Rajah Bannerjee schools us in the production – and appreciation - of tea. Established in 1859, the estate produces a wide range of organic teas using sustainable practices, including their Silver Tips Imperial, which commands $1,800 a kilo.

The day’s ride, less than 40 kilometers long, is a slow ascent. From Kurseong, we ride up Hill Cart Road, through small villages where prayer flags mix with laundry lines. As we watch the mist appear, then vanish in the hills above us, we hear a piercingly loud horn approach. It’s the call of the Darjeeling.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, which began running in 1881, is nicknamed the ‘Toy Train.’ It takes all of nine hours to traverse a distance of 86 kilometers (53 miles) from New Jalpaiguri, at an altitude of 100 meters (328 feet) to Darjeeling, at 2,200 meters (7,218 feet).

The journey is a long one because the line reverses every time it’s unable to move forward on a steep gradient. At times the track loops around, crossing itself at a slightly higher altitude, looping and reversing eight times along the route. At Ghoom, the second-highest railway station in the world, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway reaches an altitude of 2,258 meters (7,407 feet).

The Darjeeling’s track runs on either side of Hill Cart Road. In fact, it crosses the road 150 times during its journey, switching back and forth from the left to the right side. For this reason, the engines are equipped with very loud horns that are used without pause, drowning out the horns of Indian trucks and buses. A ticket on the bright blue Darjeeling is just Rs 30 per trip, although a first-class, or rather Sahib-class seat, will set you back a princely Rs 200 ($4 USD).
STOP
LOOK
GO
By the time we stop for lunch at the Darjeeling’s station at Sonada, we’re reached 1,997 meters (6,552 feet). Everyone digs into the cheese sandwiches and fruit. We’ve managed to escape Delhi without anyone suffering the dreaded Delhi belly, although Maryvonne has an ongoing digestive complaint she calls ‘The War’. The War continues to rage for the duration of the trip, but ultimately it’s more a skirmish than a full-on assault.

**Darjeeling - Pelling - Yuksom**

MONKEYS SCAMPER across the road as we set off the next morning. Leaving Darjeeling, we can see Little Rangit, the river we will cross when we’ve descended 1,725 meters (5,660 feet) to the valley floor. The day’s ride will be challenging, with 75 kilometers of distance and plenty of climbing, but will also provide endless forests of oaks, laurels and sycamores. Flowers add colour on every side, and it’s not surprising Sikkim is known as the ‘kingdom of flowers’, with over 4,000 varieties of wild flowers, 700 species of orchids and 20 varieties of rhododendron.

The bottom of the descent leads us to the Sikkim border, where Bob and the crew deal with the requisite paperwork. After only thirty minutes of bureaucracy, we’re ready to set off on one of the toughest climbs of the trip. The previous year, no one finished the rough ascent to Pelling, 25 kilometers of uphill that we must cover before sunset.

“We’re about to test the very limits of human capability,” says Bob slyly.

“Off we bloody well go then,” replies Jim, with British aplomb.

Although the air grows cooler and thinner as we ascend, cycling in the Himalayas is warmer than I’d expected. It’s early November, but I need only shorts and a jersey for the ride. The vegetation is lush and green, and the only snow we can spy is at the top of Mount Kangchenjunga. Beside the road, waterfalls drop from precipitous heights.

I slowly make my way up the climb, past long lines of *langtus*, prayer flags on tall bamboo poles. Buddhists see them as windhorses that ride the winds, carrying the prayers of devotees. In addition to prayers on flags, there are prayers on taxis, prayers on cars, prayers at the road-
side. They must come in handy driving down hills like these.

Freddie, an Italian rider who eats Alps for breakfast, doesn’t seem to have much trouble with the Himalayas. “This isn’t so bad!” she calls out as she passes me halfway up the climb. ‘Drive Slow To Enjoy The Beauty Of Hill’ one roadside sign encourages. As if I have a choice.

By the time we reach the summit, we’ve climbed from 150 meters (500 feet) to 1,905 meters (6,250 feet). We’ve had no flat tires but we have had two broken chains, a testament to the mountains’ steep pitch.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, there’s an aftershock from the recent earthquake that registers 3.5 on the Richter scale, but we don’t feel it. We’re likely distracted by the delicious shel roti, deep fried rice rings served at lunchtime near the sacred lake of Khachod-palri Tsho.

After lunch, our little twenty-wheeled parade continues on, passing yaks herded by sherpas. A few dogs nip at our heels, but most are content to sleep at the side of the road. People come out of their homes to watch us grind past, smiling and raising their hand as they wish us namaste. The Sikkimese work hard and live simply, but they certainly aren’t unhappy.

Asking locals for directions is sometimes challenging, because they want to help, even if they have no idea what you’re asking. At a crossroads, I ask one man the way to the next town. “Down there,” he says, looking down one road while pointing up at another.

After 62 kilometers of riding, we safely reach Yuksom, Sikkim’s first capital. The town’s soundtrack is a chorus of barking dogs. We take a walk to see the stone Coronation Throne of Norbugang. Yuksom was Sikkim’s first capital, and it’s here that Sikkim’s first chogyal (king) was crowned in 1641. The sky above the throne is crisscrossed with flapping prayer flags, endless squares of yellow, red and blue.

At dinnertime at the Tashigang Hotel, Adrienne and I enjoy our first taste of millet beer. The toomba, a bamboo mug, is filled with millet grain, then hot water is poured in and left to steep. Within a few minutes, we’re sipping the beer through bamboo straws. It’s grainy and coarse, more like sake than beer, but curiously delicious.
Yuksom - Borang - Gangtok

DURING THE NEXT DAY’S RIDE from Yuksom to Borang, we take a side trip to the Tashideng monastery, Sikkim’s most venerated shrine. Founded atop a heart-shaped hill in 1641, the monastery is a collection of buildings and giant chortens surrounded by stones engraved with Buddhist prayers. The most significant chorten, the golden Thong-wa-rang-dol, is said to absolve sins on sight. I have a good long look at it from every angle, in hopes this is true.

The sound of temple bells and the smell of incense float on the breeze. A ten-foot bronze prayer wheel glows as if lit from within. It’s a reflective place, steeped in Sikkimese history and mysticism that we’re only just beginning to understand.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING’S 20-kilometer journey from Borang to Ravangla is treacherous, which is why I can’t wait to ride it. With loose rock, erosion, steep uphills and downhills, it’s a mountain biker’s map of heaven.

An hour and a half later, sweating and smiling, we celebrate our arrival in Ravangla with sweets at the local bakery. Unfamiliar with their offerings, I point at various sweets stacked inside a glass case, sampling round sweet things, square sweet things, and diagonal sweet things. After much investigation, I conclude that round sweet things taste best.

Then, after our challenging introduction to the day, we enjoy a long descent from Ravangla through Tarku to Singtam. The pavement is smooth, and we hang on to our brakes the entire ride. Once we reach Singtam, of course, it’s up again. Gangtok means ‘hilltop’, and, true to its name, the road climbs and curves to slowly reveal Sikkim’s capital, a town of thirty thousand perched atop a 1,645-meter (5,400-foot) ridge.

From the beginning of the trip, Graeme and James have persisted in their search for good Indian wine. Twice they’ve sampled, and twice they’ve been disappointed. In Gangtok, at the Taste of Tibet restaurant, they finally find it:

THE INSIDE TRACK

For lovers of hops, Delhi offers Kingfisher. In Sikkim, Dansberg beer (relatively mild) and Hit beer (strong) tend to be the two choices available. Of course, there’s always toomba, fermented millet beer. Many varieties of liquor are available very inexpensively in small towns. But remember the next day’s ride!
Zampa Shiraz Cabernet. I join them in a glass, along with a plate of momos, a Sikkimese specialty. Momos are dumplings, steamed or fried, filled with meat or vegetables and spices. Like the toomba, they’re curiously addictive.

**THE LOW CHANTING OF OVER FIFTY MONKS FILLS THE ROOM. WE PAUSE, STRUCK BY THE HYPNOTIC SOUND OF THE MURMURED CHANTS.**

**Gangtok - Rumtek - Kalimpong**

LEAVING GANGTOK, we’re charting a new course. From this point on, the tour has been re-routed because of damage from the recent earthquake. The Yumthang Valley, part of the original route in northern Sikkim, has been closed entirely to traffic until the roads can be rebuilt.

We ride a long, muddy switchback out of Gangtok, descending from urban clutter to terraced yellow fields of rice. In the afternoon, we stop at the Dharma Chakra Monastery, a Tibetan Buddhist temple that offers a long line of mani-lhakor, prayer wheels, to lead us toward the complex. It’s impossible to resist the desire to spin these heavy cylinders carved and painted in red and gold, whispering a prayer or two.

Outside the main building, a half-dozen monks play Hacky Sack, laughing in the afternoon sun. Yet inside, the low chanting of over fifty monks, young and old, fills the room. Their lives, spent in crimson robes and sandals, seem to fuse moments of joy with hours of deep reverence. We pause awhile, struck by the hypnotic sound of the murmured chants, reflecting off walls painted with allegories of the Buddha’s life.

THE NEXT DAY’S RIDE is a long one, with 825 meters (2,700 feet) of climbing, to remind us we’re still in the Himalayas. Reaching Kalimpong, we’re invited to enjoy lunch at Holumba Haven, our guide Norden’s home, brimming with orchids and exotic plants. On the way back to our hotel, I stop for a shave at a local barbershop. Getting a shave in India is one of the most inexpensive pleasures in the world, with the added benefit that Indian barbers are also masseuses, chiropractors, and first-rate pugilists.

The barber lathers my face well, shaves carefully with the straight razor, and then repeats the process. My chin is now baby-smooth, and without a nick. Then he begins the head massage, which starts off gently enough. The barber massages my cheeks, my forehead, my eyebrows, even my eyelids. But then he becomes possessed with a new-found intensity. He rubs my scalp as if trying to remove all the hair, then smacks my head with his hands. I start to feel I’m in a Three Stooges routine as he’s hitting me about the skull every which way.

He then attacks my neck muscles with equal vigour, pushes me forward in the seat so he can have a good punch-up with my back. He pulls my arms out straight and tugs on each finger
until it pops, then, before I know it, he’s cracked my neck to either side with whiplash force. Strangely, it feels fantastic. All this abuse for less than a dollar? I’ll be back.

Kalimpong - Jalpaiguri

OUR FINAL DAY, we have an 85-kilometer ride though forests of tall, arrow-straight Cryptomeria pines, avocado and mulberry bushes. When we reach the high point for the day at 2,195 meters (7,200 feet), the border of Bhutan is only five kilometers to the east.

The crew gathers to brief us on the upcoming ride. It’s our final descent, and will take us from the top of the Himalayan foothills down to Gorubhatan on the plains below.

“It’s a snaking road,” says Neel, as a warning. “It’s a King Cobra,” adds Norden.

Actually, it turns out to be more of a python. But what a ride.

We descend 1,830 meters (6,000 feet) in the rain, then back into sunshine and heat, verdant green tea estates stretching out on both sides of the road. This is the first flat road we’ve enjoyed for two weeks, and because the terrain is flat, we begin to see bicycles. Dozens of them - hundreds of them - thousands of them, it seems.

Our ride, covering nearly 500 kilometers, has included some of the toughest climbing and most beautiful views available anywhere. On every ride, we’ve been treated to rivers and waterfalls, kind faces and great meals. For riders who like steep hills and challenges in an out-of-the-way location, undiscovered by most of the world, Sikkim delivers.

Measuring only 80 kilometers east to west and 100 kilometers north to south, tiny Sikkim is less a state of India than a state of mind. A blissful, joyful state of mind.

Far and Away’s Last Shangri-La tour runs every October. The 14-day tour costs $2595 USD and includes 13 nights’ accommodation, all meals (except Delhi, Darjeeling and Gangtok), baggage transport, stocked sag vehicle, Sikkim permit and transfer from Bagdogra to Kurseong. A mountain bike or cyclocross bike is recommended, and bike rental is available for $250 USD. Assuming the roads to the Yumthang Valley are repaired in time for next year’s tour, there will be an optional 4 day trek from Yuksom to Dzongri for some spectacular views of Kangchenjunga.

ESSENTIALS:
Far and Away Cycling | Arlington, Virginia, USA
571-275-2814 | bob@farandawaycycling.com | www.farandawaycycling.com

THE IDEAL TOUR FOR:
• Riders who love hills - both the ups and the downs
• Those looking for a destination that’s out of the ordinary
• Riders who aren’t looking for perfect roads, just perfect mountain views

WHAT RIDERS SAID

“The tour was nothing short of amazing. Bob and his guides were very skillful, knowing the right balance between structure and freedom. I returned to the world a little wiser and a lot stronger on the bike, with a deeper respect for ‘the road less traveled’.” Keith

“Enlightenment! Not be to missed.” Maryvonne

“What stood out for me was being part of the dramatic scenery . . . thundering waterfalls, wild orchids in verdant forests, roads carved out of mountains, and views of gorges beside us as we rode. Plus accomplishing some very challenging cycling through water, rocks, and washed-out roads with an enthusiastic and fun-loving group of cyclists.” Janice

WHAT RIDERS SAID

“Enlightenment! Not be to missed.” Maryvonne

“What stood out for me was being part of the dramatic scenery . . . thundering waterfalls, wild orchids in verdant forests, roads carved out of mountains, and views of gorges beside us as we rode. Plus accomplishing some very challenging cycling through water, rocks, and washed-out roads with an enthusiastic and fun-loving group of cyclists.” Janice