



„Hooker is calling.....“

In 1854 Joseph Dalton Hooker, a well known british botanist, travelled to the kingdom of Sikkim in the himalayan mountains....

Nearly 158 years later we are on our way to the smallest state of India, nestling between Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan.

We, that is a group of 12 perennial-plant-lovers of the ISU from 5 nations. Our swedish colleague Jonas Bengtson has been in Sikkim a few times and we can accompany him this year.

We nearly all know each other, have been on excursions together, which gives us a good and secure feeling.

I have never been to India before, but my head is full of clichés like blocked roads, cramful busses, colourfully clad people, prayer flags, dirt and garbage – but I am nevertheless surprised to see exactly that!

Our group has been divided, we go from the airport of Bagdogra to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, in three crosscountry cars.

It is nearly impossible to take in everything we see:

A barfooted, emaciated man with a washing machine on his back, three very fat ladies in pastel saris hung with tassels and the prim schoolkids in uniform with snowwhite stockings, bows in their neat plaits, colourful kiosks with garlands of bonbons, dirty legs of a sleeping man sticking out from under a corrugated iron shelter, mud, lovingly painted lorries...

My shock is diminishing only slowly – there are no rules concerning the traffic, the quickest and boldest one with the loudest horn wins. Our drivers look like children, stinking exhaust gases get into the car.

We need about an hour to get out of the worst crush, but the stinking continues – it's our cars!

The horns, too, are still in action all the time, I can't quite see why, there are only cows and dogs on the street. Placidly they give way, It's incredible that we don't hit at least one in 14 days.

But now – nature! Gigantic ferns, 3-4-m high, beautiful Cryptotenia, tree ferns, Monstera, Schefflera, Aralias, all pot plants I know, here as trees, and of course bamboo with shoots thick as arms. Mussaenda roxburghii glow through the thick green on the road's edge with their white bractea .

It is getting uphill all the time, Lachung is our destination, a small villagw at 2800 m altitude.

The roads are a nightmare – in September there was an earthquake in Sikkim- the damage can be seen everywhere and the monsoon doesn't make it any better.

Quite often we have to wait, because a landslide blocks the road.

Road worker remove rocks and stones, mostly women in colourful saris and children.

A heartbreaking sight?

No, they smile at us, „Namaste“ (Good day) and ask, if they can take a photo of us with their mobiles.

Our hotel is enchanting, built like a tibetian temple, cheerful, colourful.

We are happy to have brought our sleeping bags, the beds are damp because of the high air humidity.

The sanitary equipment is not quite what we are used to, but there is a paper bandarole round the scratched toiletseat, promising „indian hospitality“!

At night I wake up, my heart races – oh my, we are going to go up to about 4800 m altitude!

How will it behave there?

We chose the middle of the rainy season, but the next day is sunny and dry.
Our first trip is to the Yumtang-valley, about 3600 m high.
We pass lots of military controls, the Chinese border is only about 8 km away.

Alistair and Biswass, our two guides, do not only see to all the necessary special permits, but look after us in quite an extraordinary way. They are always there, ready to answer any question, but in no way dominating. They give us orange 'leech-socks', cotton bags (unisex), worn from shoe to knee (in attractive folds) to prevent the small leeches to get at our blood.

Well protected we dive into the woods – botanizing, just like J.D.Hooker in former times.

The first *Arisaema* makes us queue up for photos. A little later we stand in a forest full of *Arisaema*, we trod on them by accident, in the end we shove them aside to marvel at other plants!

Our drivers have carried our lunch in cartons. It's potatoes, noodles, hardboiled eggs and wonderfully hot tea. Gives us strength for-

Smilacina oleracea, a beauty with snowwhite fluffy flowers,
Senecio laetis, nothing special perhaps, but really beautiful,
Parochetus communis, pansylike small flowers of a funky blue,
Streptopis simplex, *Hypericum uralum*, *Iris klattii*.

Unfortunately, nearly all of the uncountable *Rhododendron* have finished flowering, but *Rhododendron lepidotum* var. *Album* enchants us with beautiful creamwhite simple bowls of flowers and the leaves of some other species (name forgotten) smell heavily of honey.

In the evening, in the hotel we do our homework. Everybody tries to classify the plants on the photos using „Flora of the Himalaya“. We drink Tomba, a light alcoholic beverage – fermented grains are filled up with hot water, we drink it with a bamboo-, straw' from wooden beakers.
It tastes a little like thin warm beer, but it's very companionable.

We stay in Lachung and go to the alpine region of the Yumtang valley on the third day.
We pass again the military camp and start at the beginning of a comfortable track.

We planned to go up 300 m in altitude, but after 300 m distance I already gasp for air, again and again resting and panting. Luckily we stop to marvel anyhow all the time.

Meadows of *Meconopsis paniculata*, the yellow form,
Primula sikkimensis, tiny and lovely *Juncus leucomelas*.
Ligularia hookeri, *Pedicularis siphonantha*, *Primula capitata* ssp. *moreana*, *Dracocephalum wallichii*, *Anemone rivularis*, *Cotoneaster microphyllus*, *Cirsium eriophoroides*.

Our drivers overtake us laughingly carrying our lunch in cartons – bare feet in flipflops.
On Friday 13th July we go up even higher, to the Yume Samdong, a high valley about 4500 m altitude. With luck one can see the high Himalayan mountains from there, but we are unlucky and can see nothing.

Our drivers insist on taking us up as high as possible. Very adventurous, the roads are no longer roads to speak of, on the left side is the deep abyss, there is of course no guard railing. In the meantime we know, how well our drivers steer the cars, otherwise I'd have got out immediately.

We see our first yaks.

It's not a nice day, cold, wafts of mist, a nearly mystic atmosphere.

Again every step is hard and a challenge, but it's a bit better than yesterday.

We are driven by the hope to see the promised blue *Meconopsis* and *Rheum nobile*.

We see phantastic masses of *Pedicularis sifulanta*, *Anaphalis nepalensis*, *Androsace lehmannii* and *Cremathodium campanulatum*, *Primula primulina*, *Cassiope fastigiata*, *Spongiocarpella purpurea* and and and ... at last blue poppies: *Meconopsis grandis* and lots of beautiful *Meconopsis horrida*. 1000 photos are made.

A bit further on meadows of *Codonopsis clematidea*, their stink can be smelt from afar, I feel nearly sick; how can such a lovely plant smell so awfully bad?

Rheum nobile seem to be very near – they gleam from the slopes like lanterns in the moor. But every meter is a challenge.

Our drivers come down again from above, in wellingtons this time they hop down the mountains, in their backpacks bright yellow bractea of *Rheum nobile*. So they are to be found here after all. They are going to cook and eat the leaves – I can hardly believe it!

,Hooker is calling!' With these words the younger ones in the group jump up after lunch and really and truly make their way up to the fascinating and desirable plants! But I give up: To see *Rheum nobile* is my unachievable ambition and to surrender is a big challenge as well! On the way back again past the *Meconopsis horridula* and then the ultimate experience: A bath in hot springs at 4000 m altitude, temperature outside 6° , water 40° - it's absolutely great!

The next 3 days we spend in Thangu, a small village in the north of Sikkim, in the northern valley of Lachen, very agricultural with vegetable fields.

Women in colourful saris feed and milk the cows in small sheds of corugated iron.

We live at 3800 m altitude. The earthquake of 2011 has killed the electricity supply, a little mast with a few solar cells is of no relevance in the misty rainy season.

The house we sleep in consists of 5 small bedrooms with 2 beds each, a bedside table and a candle, painted in different colours and brought to perfection lovingly with a picture on the wall.

Our room is pink and green and there is a picture of the Matterhorn.

There is a toilet with buckets for flushing and the ,bathroom' consists of two buckets of hot and cold water outside.

The house with the kitchen is on the other side of the road (attention: cows have the right of way!). Here they cook for us. The walls are lined with newspaper, the oven is just an open block, fired from a hole at the bottom.

Two beautiful women squat on the floor, they cut vegetables looking like spinach and beat meat on a block of wood.

Everything tastes wonderfully, only the yak-stew is not quite to the taste of everyone.

For me it's a phantastic experience – I do not miss anything, apart perhaps from electric light.

To read or write by candlelight is quite amazingly strenuous.

From Thangu we go on different tours and see quite another flora.

Sambucus adnata, *Gymnadenia*, *Thalictrum*...

Heracleum canescens, *Anemone rupicola*, *Cyananthus incanus*, *Taraxacum album*...

Halenia elliptica, meadows of *Bistorta*, *Anaphalis* and *Erigeron*.

And completely unexpectedly: *Saussurea obvallata*, a really ludicrous thing with bright bractea, similar to *Rheum nobile*. Hooker's followers are beside themselves with delight.

It is once again one of these mystic days, wafts of mist billow round bizzare trees and formations of rocks. An atmosphere for meditation. Tracks that have been trodden on by cattle and sheperds for decades ascend in the misty light, if one would follow them one would certainly end up in Nirwana.

After 8 days we leave Sikkim reluctantly .



But before we visit the biggest buddhist monastery of Sikkim in Rumtek. A breathtakingly colourful palace with very poor toilets and souvenirshops – Buddhas and prayer flags for the tourists. Our guide Biswass gives us an excellent tour, but after a while I am no longer able to follow the complex contexts of this religion.

The boys in dark red robes and Adidas sneakers, temporary monks, don't seem very dignified, but the grandeur of the place, about 1000 statues of Buddha and quite a lot of offertory boxes, where amazing lots of money and sweets are lying about, are nevertheless impressing.

Darjeeling in the Indian state of West-Bengaly, the town famous for tea, is our next destiny. With great eagerness we wait to see the huge tea plantations – and are lucky enough even to see a group of teapickers – with umbrellas!

The visit of the 'tea estate' is rather disillusioning, the factory has some ramshackle charme, but we don't see anything of the real production of tea.

Anyhow, we join a wonderfully mise-en-scene tea-tasting and buy much too expensive Darjeeling tea, that tastes much better here than at home – but everyone knows that beforehand really.

Kalimpong ist the last station of our journey – we arrive in colonial times!

We feel a bit like lords in this antique hotel with the beautiful rooms, a balcony running round the house and magnificent views. Very british, what a lovely place.

In the evening we are invited to see the Pradhan family, gardeners Jonas met 10 years ago.

The nursery is specialised on the export of orchids, Arisaema, Achimedes and many other specialities. Hemlata Pradhan, the daughter, is a wellknown and highly gifted artist and beside that maintains a school center for poor boys and girls of the region, a few of them we meet, very shy but proud they show us the things they have made. The children get respect here and support, their self-confidence can grow and their trust in themselves and so they might be able one day to break free from poverty. A truly impressing project.

After ten days an indescribable journey comes to an end.

A lot too much and still not enough of everything.

It will take time to settle down mentally and physically at home and in the nursery...

Thanks a lot to Jonas, who shared this precious time with us.

Doris Pöppel Octobre 2012
translation by Maria Hokema

PS: As a 12 day-room-mate to Doris, I like to add a PS: to her wonderful report (she bravely took the discipline for candlelight-notes every evening).

Yes, Hooker called. It was a great journey on the footsteps of our old masters.

I was a great experience meeting the perennials we love – where they love to grow.

It was mostly wonderful to share the mutual love for beauty within nature with all the international travelers – foundation to friendship and love. This is ISU!

Since travelling was a challenge and an experience, we all came together very close – union to each other and to ourselves. Sharing a bucket of warm water to celebrate the morning glories up at 4000m in Thangu is a lifelong – experience!

The spirit of Buddhism was a travelling companion and the clear spirits of the Himalaya are now playing around my life in lovely Ronsdorf – reminding me each morning – while brushing my teeth (with a big smile) - of all the great moments we shared.

THANK YOU JONAS, for taking us there! Anja Maubach



Thank you Doris for your report , Maria for translation and Anja for the nice PS ! Lovely !
Have a look at the Pictures Album at the Pictures Album from Jo .