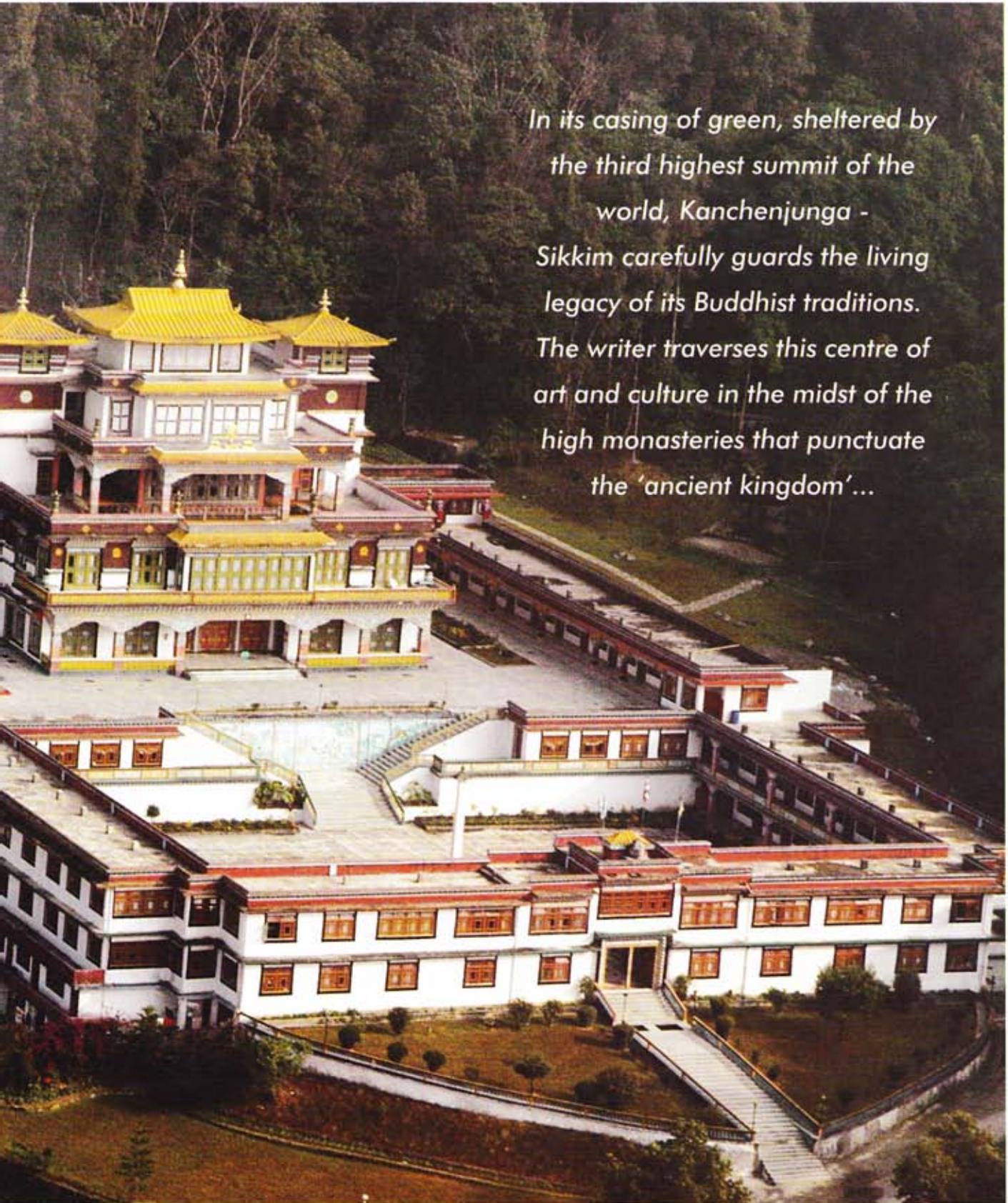


On the trail of Sikkim Monasteries

By Mireille-Josephine Guezennec



In its casing of green, sheltered by the third highest summit of the world, Kanchenjunga - Sikkim carefully guards the living legacy of its Buddhist traditions. The writer traverses this centre of art and culture in the midst of the high monasteries that punctuate the 'ancient kingdom'...



ABOVE: Traditional ceremony in a gumpa
FACING PAGE: Tantric painting. Sublime union of God and Goddess

The small, erstwhile Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim retains in its memory the footprints of an exclusive tradition and of Buddhist wisdom when, in 1642, a very well-read and Holy Lama came from Tibet to consecrate the first king of the Namgyal dynasty, under the title of 'Chogyal' or the 'virtuous King'.

In the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Sikkim inherited from the 17th century onwards, the monastery or gumpa that became the centre of radiance for life and spiritual practice.

In the course of our travels, across the glorious land of Sikkim, we discovered that these preserved places stood testimony to a genuine religious tradition that reflects in different parts of the country today. Towards the west, we first visited the most ancient monasteries of Buddhist tradition, Nyingma-pa, on the Hill Samdruptse

in the south, we paid tribute to Padmasambhava, the revered patron sage of Sikkim and then in the east we discovered the imposing Rumtek monastery, seat of the Kagyupa tradition and the residence of Karmapa. Finally, taking the high altitude road towards the north, we entered the picturesque valleys of Teesta and its tributaries going up to the monasteries of Lachung and Lachen.

Ancient monasteries in the west that form the oldest tradition of Nyingma-Pa

A renowned, wise and distinguished theologian native to India, Padmasambhava, also known by the name of Guru Rimpoche, the 'Precious Master', brought in the 8th century, nascent Buddhism and contributed to its development in Tibet. Stopping to meditate in this Himalayan region, the 'Precious

Master' had prophesied that Sikkim would one day become a Buddhist land beyond excellence.

The day arrived when the revered lama Lhatsun Chempo, a native of Tibet, started a journey towards the west where he met two other distinguished Tibetan lamas. They decided together to honour the prediction, and thus enthroned Phuntsog Namgyal, the first Chogyal or the 'virtuous King'.

After the coronation, the first gumpa of Dubde was established a little above Yuksam in 1642, which to this day remains the most ancient monastery of Sikkim, introducing the order of Nyingma-pa seeped in the most ancient traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. However, it is the





ABOVE: Rumtek monastery, near Gangtok
RIGHT: Prayer wheels with sacred mantras
FACING PAGE: Lamas step out for a walk in the pristine environs, at Rumtek

monastery of Pemayangtse, the 'Sublime Lotus', constructed in 1705 that quickly acquired renown and became the seat of the descendants of Nyingma-pa. Located at an altitude of 2,137 metres, one reaches Pemayangtse by a path edged with white prayer flags, in keeping with the precepts of purity. The elegant harmonious building, constructed on three levels, offer splendid frescoes, amongst which sits the enthroned effigy of the 'Precious Master' of Tantric Buddhism, Padmasambhava, who instituted the Nyingma-Pa tradition. Later we set out for Sanga-Choling, another of the eminent ancient monasteries (1697) which is perched atop a verdant hill, around a half hour walk from Pelling, the central city towards the west.

During auspicious days, most monasteries around Sikkim commemorate religious holidays with festivities, often accompanied by dances that conceal messages to incur the favour of Padmasambhava. At the Tashiding monastery, the important festival of Bumchun that attracts



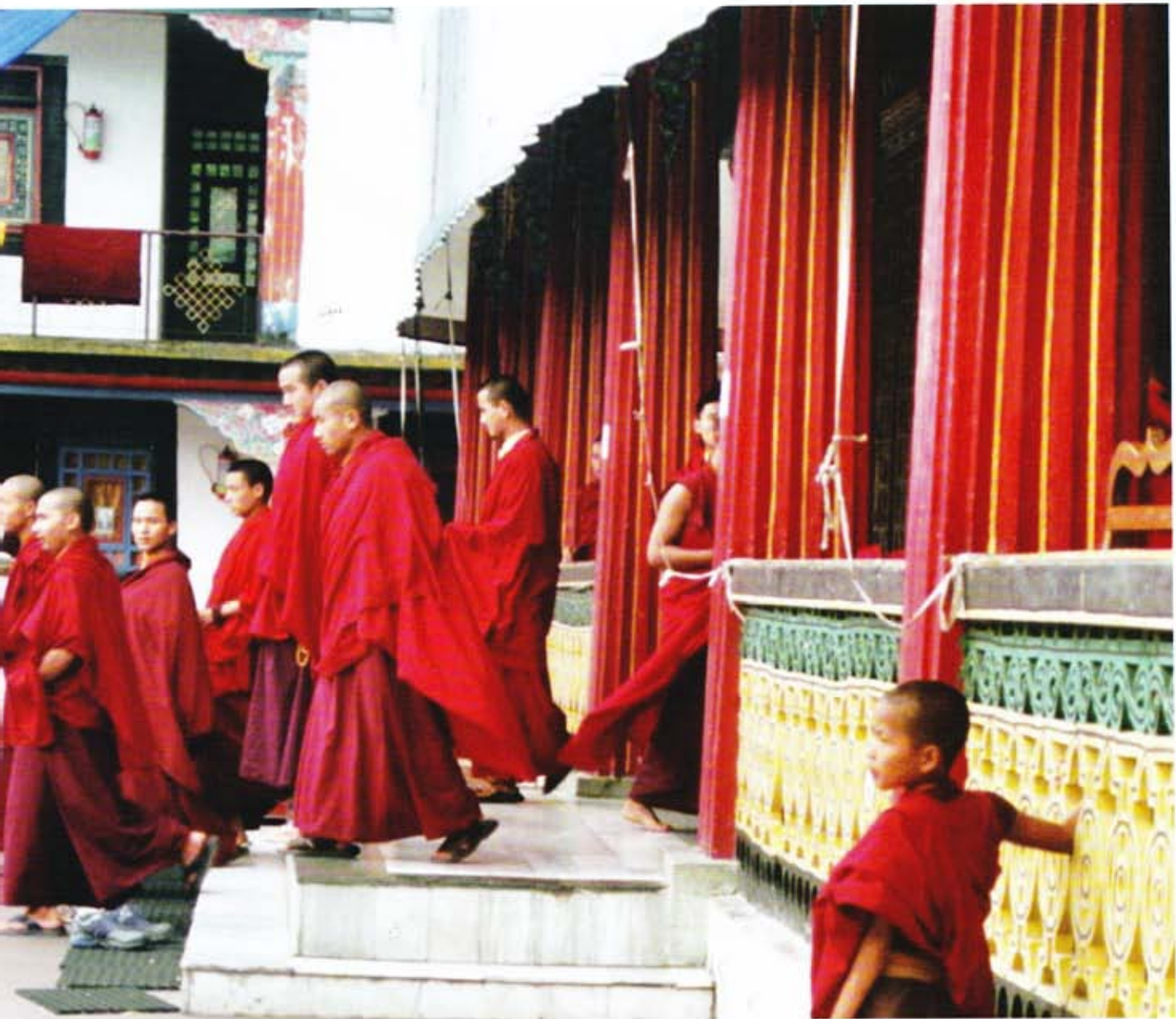
numerous Buddhists is held on the 14th and 15th day of the 1st Tibetan month (February-March).

Its walls are coloured and engraved with precious mantras. Constructed in 1716, the monastery of Tashiding is particularly venerated, for, as legend goes, it was here that an arrow shot by the 'Precious Master' embedded in the soil. The annual big festival of Bumchun attracts hordes of pilgrims who assemble to hear the predictions concerning the fate of the country in the following year.



Samdruptse: A brief rest in South before reaching, in the East, the monastery of Rumtek

On the way eastward, we make a brief stopover near Namchi to pay tribute to Padmasambhava at the top of Samdruptse, the 'wish fulfilling hill', where presides his huge statue, over 40 metres tall. The fruit of an initiative by the chief minister of Sikkim, its sanctity was consecrated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was invited to lay the first stone in 1997,



assuring that a message of peace and harmony would go across the country and the world from this hill, where would sit enthroned the masterly statue of the Lord of Compassion.

Next to the ancient tradition of Nyingmapa, the monastery of Rumtek became the seat for the Kagyupa order, an ancient form of Tibetan Buddhism. Forced to flee from Tibet in 1959, the 16th Karmapa was invited by the Chogyal of Sikkim to base the ancient monastic order in Rumtek. After a few

years, the distinguished Gyalwa Karmapa decided to build a new monastery inspired by that at Tsurphu in Tibet, the ancient personal residence of Karmapas. This imposing monastery built on four floors, manifests the traditional artistic wealth of architecture and iconography that is synonymous with Tibet.

Located about 24 kilometres to the south of Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, one reaches Rumtek by a path edged with small mills and the

requisite prayer flags in lively colours. As soon as we enter the vast rectangular courtyard that opens to an imposing building built to harmonious dimensions, we are marked by the sound of cymbals intersected with the powerful and portentous sound of the horns that reverberates in the prayer room, an overpowering call that encompasses everyone... Clad in sombre red ochre robes, the lamas sit in ranks facing the central path, chanting incantations,



ABOVE: Lachung monastery (TOP) and Phodong monastery, both in North Sikkim
FACING PAGE: Giant prayer wheels and intricate paintings typify and adorn the monasteries

accompanying their prayers with ritual gestures or mudras and an imperceptible sway of their bodies.

Near Gangtok lies the small monastery of Enchey, 'Centre of peace', built in the middle of the 19th century. Enchey belonging to the Nyingma-Pa order, exercises one very important role today, for here reside the lamas who have the ultimate responsibility to teach a large number of young initiates.

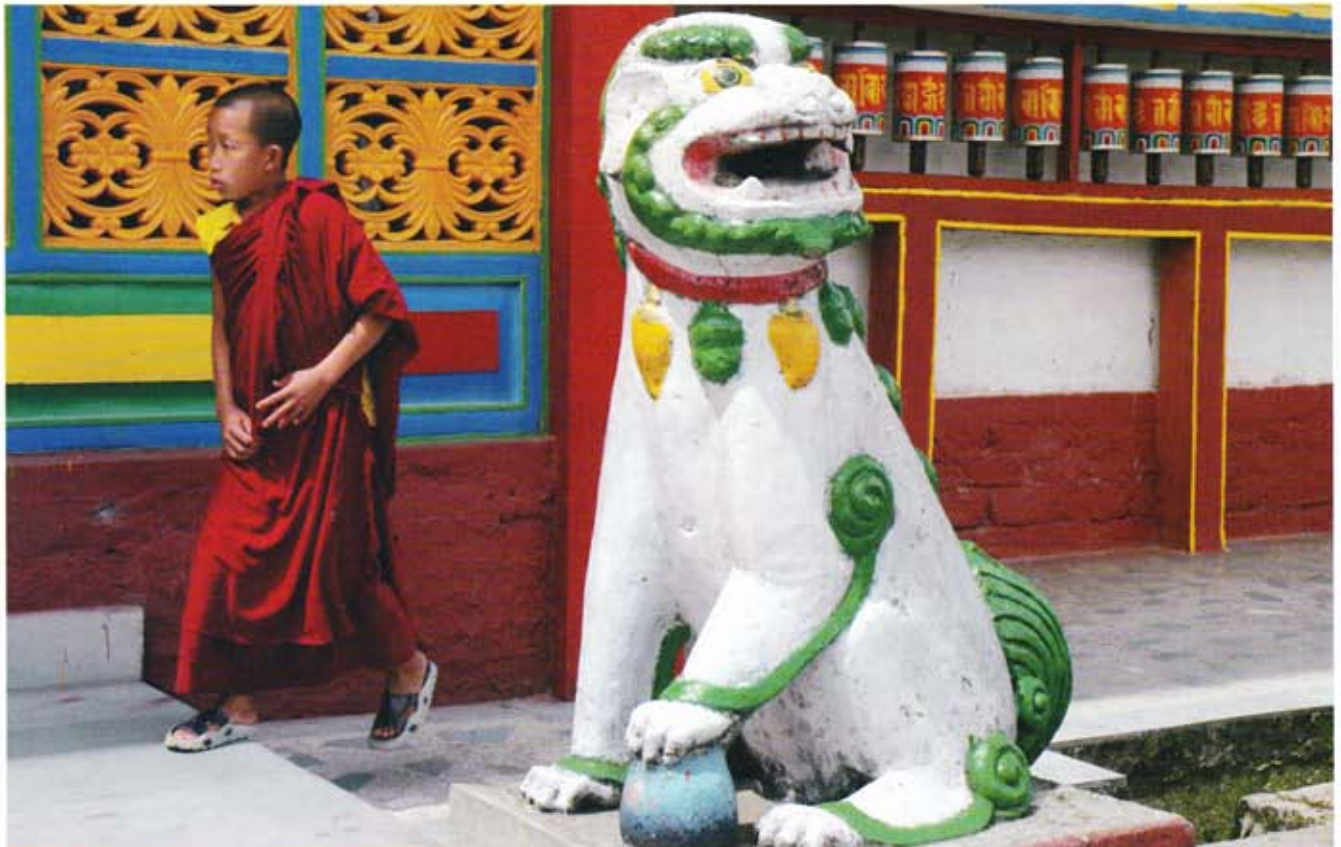
In the discovery of veiled monasteries strewn in the high plateaus of the North

We decide on an auspicious hour in the day to start our journey towards the North, the high altitude plateau of Yumtang opening on the valley of flowers and to the lake Guru Dongmar (5,430 meters), the enticing waters of which retain a brightness replete with a milky transparency in the memory of Guru Padmasambhava, who would have passed through here to reach Tibet.

Around 40 kilometres from Gangtok one comes upon the Phodong and Labrang monasteries. Phodong,







HOW TO REACH

Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim is well connected by road from Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Siliguri. Nearest railway stations are at Siliguri (114 km) and New Jalpaiguri (125 km). Nearest airport is Bagdogra (124 km). Scheduled flights operate from Kolkata, Delhi and Guwahati.

Helicopter Service: Bagdogra airport is connected to Gangtok by a daily helicopter service.

Visa & Permit: In addition to an Indian visa, foreigners must obtain Inner Line Permit (ILP) to visit Sikkim

Best time to visit: March to June and September to December

Where to stay: There are a number of hotels, resorts and guest houses in Gangtok and other destinations within the state, to suit every taste and budget.



Above: Built in the Tibetan tradition, the Sikkim monasteries are replete with traditional icons of the Buddhist faith
Right: An ornate detail of a door knob

which counts among the six most important monasteries of Sikkim, belongs to the Kagyupa order.

Phodong is a monastery full of charm and elegance. The entrance is adorned with fine red columns held

aloft by two snow-lions, protectors of harmony and friendship in Tibetan iconography. At dawn we visit the monastery of Lachung, which faces a huge waterfall that sculpts the façade of the mountain like a steel colour blade cutting across vertically.

We hit the road again towards Lachen, delicately located at a height atop of the village. Two giant prayer wheels welcome the visitor at the entrance to the prayer hall, the internal painting of which eludes a refinement and an immense iconographic wealth. One may see here the Tantric renderings of a Yab-Yum posture, representing the fusion of masculine and feminine energy that celebrate the beatitude of a perfect union, of God and his creation.