



# Sikkim

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## Best Places to Stay

- » Camping on the Goecha La trek (p548)
- » Elgin Mount Pandim (p544)
- » Mt Narsing Resort (p542)

## Best Monasteries

- » Tashiding Gompa (p549)
- » Pemayangtse Gompa (p544)
- » Labrang Gompa (p538)

## Why Go?

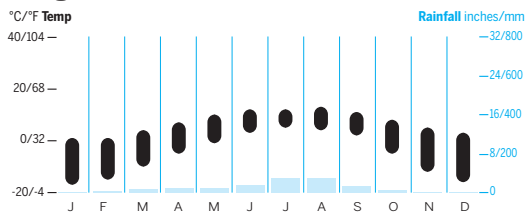
If you're suffering from too much heat, dust or crowds, then the tiny, former Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim is the perfect antidote. Fresh mountain air sweeps the lush green state; there's room to move but the people are among India's friendliest, with a charming manner that's unobtrusive and slightly shy.

Plunging mountain valleys are lushly forested, interspersed with rice terraces and flowering rhododendrons. Tibetan-style Buddhist monasteries (gompas) add splashes of white, gold and vermilion to the green ridges and are approached through avenues of fluttering prayer flags.

Sikkim's big-ticket item is the majesty of Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga; 8598m), the world's third-highest mountain, straddling the border between Sikkim and Nepal. Khangchendzonga's guardian spirit is worshipped in a series of spectacular autumn festivals and its magnificent white peaks and ridges create the backdrop to a dozen wonderful walks and viewpoints.

## When to Go

### Gangtok



### Late Sep–mid-Nov

Clearlest weather for views, but high-season crowds and prices.

### Apr–May

Spring blooms and warmth make up for cloudier skies.

### Mid-Jun–Sep

Good for northern Sikkim but monsoon rains hide mountain views elsewhere.

## Food & Drink

Sikkim's one 'don't-miss' beverage is tongba, an alcoholic millet beer that is enjoyed across the entire eastern Himalaya. The beer (also known as chhang) is sipped through a bamboo straw and the wooden container (the tongba) is topped up periodically with boiling water to let the brew gain strength. You can find tongba anywhere in northern and western Sikkim.

Traditional Sikkimese foods include *sisnoo/sochhya* (nettle soup), *ningro* (fried fiddlehead ferns), Tibetan-style *churpi* (dried yak cheese) and the Nepali speciality *gundruk ko jhol* (fermented mustard-leaf soup).

### DON'T MISS

Sikkim's monastic **chaam masked dances** are the Himalaya at their most colourful. Part morality play, part country fair and part exorcism, the dances feature masked monks acting out Buddhist parables, stories from the life of Guru Rinpoche and dances representing the victory of good over evil, with a supporting crew of clowns, demons and dancing snowlions, all entertaining a crowd of spellbound locals dressed in their Sunday best. It's worth arranging your itinerary around.

## Top State Festivals

- » Losar (Feb/Mar, Pemayangtse, p545, Rumtek, p536, Enchey, p530) Sikkim's biggest *chaam* (monastic masked dances) take place just before Tibetan New Year.
- » Bumchu (Feb/Mar, Tashiding Gompa, p549) *Bum* means pot or vase and *chu* means water. The lamas open a pot of holy water to foretell the year's fortunes.
- » Saga Dawa (May/Jun, all monastery towns) Religious ceremonies and parades commemorate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death.
- » Pang Lhabso (Aug, Ravangla, p542) Prayers and religious dances are performed in honour of Sikkim's guardian deity Khangchendzonga.
- » Losoong (Dec/Jan, Old Rumtek, p536) Sikkimese New Year, preceded by *chaam* dances in many locations including Lingdum, Phodong, Phensang and Ralang.
- » Detor Chaam (Dec/Jan, Enchey Gompa, p530) *Chaam* dances.

## MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

If entering Sikkim via Rangpo, permits are available at the border. For entry via Jorethang permits must be arranged in advance.

## Fast Facts

- » Population: 607,700
- » Area: 7096 sq km
- » Capital: Gangtok
- » Main language: Nepali
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹700, \$\$ ₹700 to ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

## Top Tip

Shared jeeps are the best way to get around the hills. To avoid getting landed with a cramped sideways-facing back seat, book a seat in advance; and if you really value your personal space, book all the front seats for yourself.

## Resources

- » Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department ([www.sikkim-culture.gov.in](http://www.sikkim-culture.gov.in)) offers cultural background.
- » Government of Sikkim Tourism ([www.sikkimtourism.travel](http://www.sikkimtourism.travel)) lists sights, homestays and entry formalities.
- » Sikkiminfo ([www.sikkiminfo.net](http://www.sikkiminfo.net)) provides an excellent introduction.