



The ingenious root bridges built by the War-Khasi tribe have replaced the conventional bamboo bridges that would easily rot or be washed away when streams swelled during a heavy monsoon downpour.

# LIVING Legacy

**Visions of a sublime life among the thick forests and mist-laden waterfalls of the Khasi Hills**

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY **NEELIMA VALLANGI**

**M**y first step on to one of Meghalaya's living root bridges felt surreal. The bridge represented the work of generations and was born of a clever marriage between nature and human foresight. Two strong ficus trees provided the foundation on either side of the stream. Over the years their roots had met halfway and grown into each other. Thick, strong roots formed the base and smaller vines grew into protective railings along the sides. Though I had heard a lot about living root bridges, I feared their allure might be dulled by hype. But when I was finally there I had to admit: This was by far the most interesting bridge I had ever crossed.

Earlier that day, my heart had skipped a beat when I looked at the vertigo-inducing, near-vertical stairs that lead down to Nongriat, a small village in the East Khasi Hills of central Meghalaya, accessible only on foot. From my vantage point in Tyrna village, where the two-hour hike starts, I could see the entire valley spread out in front, the densely forested slopes devoid of the trappings of civilisation. Gorgeous waterfalls lined the sheer rock faces at the tops of the mountains. Their loud roar reverberated through the valley. A yellow butterfly fluttered around me as I stood transfixed, soaking in the view and the cool breeze. The area appeared wild and pristine.

I took a deep breath and carefully began the trudge down the narrow stairs. I was excited about visiting Nongriat to see its famous double-decker root bridge, but the daunting task of coming back up this steep flight of steps never left my mind. Half an hour into the descent, my friends and I came across a village and a handwritten board pointing to the “long root bridge”. Curious, we followed the sign, which led to a living root bridge about 98 feet long. It was fairly new, rickety, and high above the stream. The base was uneven with wet trunks and stones stuck between the growing roots. It looked magical nonetheless, and we took turns crossing it, the bridge wobbling with our every step. Red flowers hung from the roots and lavender blooms adorned the sides. I felt a strange exhilaration as I walked over the bridge, touching the moss and the flowers, and feeling the fresh breeze coming from the mountains on my right. The stream below us sang its own tune.

The Khasi districts of Meghalaya receive an ungodly amount of rain every monsoon as moisture-laden clouds from the Indian Ocean sweep up over the Bay of Bengal and encounter their first obstruction in the Khasi Hills. The torrential downpour turns gentle streams into raging torrents that the bamboo bridges of early years could not survive. The War-Khasi tribe found an answer to the problem in their surroundings. They guided the roots of the ficus elastica tree through hollow betel nut trunks to form a basic structure that supports the roots as they grow over the years. Now, more than 100 years later, dozens of living root bridges peppered across the region provide safe crossings to successive generations. Unlike normal bridges, they grow stronger with time, never rotting or needing maintenance. If anything, the bridges only become more beautiful with the growth of dense moss and flowers.

After the unexpected encounter with the long living root bridge, we couldn't wait to see the double-decker. But first, there were two more adventurous crossings over large streams across suspended steel-wire rope bridges. We finally reached Nongriat, a small settlement of 30-40 households that seemed like the

perfect spot to spend a few days in nature's lap. Just beyond the village is the double-decker bridge. The lower level is about 180 years old while the upper is less than half that at 80 years. Keen on maintaining its unique status, the villagers are growing a third level above the existing two. We spent the night in a guesthouse by the marvellous bridge.

Next morning, we went on a tiring but beautiful hike to the huge Rainbow Waterfall, stopping at streams, tramping through bushy jungle trails, and finally getting drenched in the waterfall's mist as we waited to see the rainbow that forms at its base. The sun was in no mood to shine, but it didn't matter—pink flowers swayed with the wind as dark clouds created a dramatic canopy in the sky. Back in Nongriat, the boys chose the waterfall to the left of the guesthouse and I went to another one on the right for my own private bath amidst nature. As I soaked, sunlight streaked through the canopy, butterflies flitted around, and a huge red caterpillar munched on a leaf close by. The noise of all the discordant thoughts in my mind drowned in the ubiquitous sound of flowing water. There's an abundance of natural beauty and tranquillity in Nongriat. Being here feels right. Like this was how we were supposed to live, rejoicing in nature's company, in a place where childhood dreams of magical mountains, colourful butterflies, and enchanting forests can play out.



The residents of Nongriat (top left) spend their evenings on the porches of their wooden houses, built on raised platforms; Biron (top right) was a schoolteacher in Sohra, until he got married and moved to Nongriat, his wife's village, to live closer to nature; From Tyrna, a steep staircase (bottom left) leads down and across the valley to the village of Nongriat, which is inaccessible by road.

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The residents of Nongriat have started growing a third level to their famous double-decker bridge in an effort to retain the village's claim to fame.

I imagine it must be deeply fulfilling to live in such harmony with the natural world. This was confirmed by Biron, a former school teacher from Sohra (formerly Cherrapunji) who quit his job and moved to Nongriat because he found peace here that he couldn't find elsewhere.

Over the next two days, we crossed Mawsaw bridge, a 20-minute hike from Nongriat, and the double-decker bridge several times on our way to various little hikes. Walking over the latter for the last time, I marvelled at the resourcefulness of the Khasis. The ingenuity of the solution and the foresight of the elders filled me with awe as well as melancholy. I wished more of us could lead such thoughtful and harmonious lives in sync with the natural world.

As I left, I wasn't sure what I would miss the most: the

pitter-patter of raindrops at night, the glistening waterfall I could see from my room, the sound of screeching insects, or the rising moon that slowly crept up on us. The climb back up to Tyrna wasn't as daunting as I had thought it would be. As we waited for the taxi to take us back to Sohra, clouds of butterflies hovered around as though saying farewell. My time in the place was fleeting but the memories I had made will last forever. As I got into the cab, I didn't bid the mountains of Meghalaya goodbye, knowing quite well that we would meet again in my dreams. ●

**NEELIMA VALLANGI** quit her corporate job to travel. The writer-photographer is on a mission to visit every state and union territory of India.

## THE GUIDE

### ORIENTATION

Nongriat is a tiny village close to Sohra (formerly Cherrapunji) in eastern Meghalaya, close to India's border with Bangladesh. The only way to reach the village is via a two-hour steep hike from the village of Tyrna, 15 km/30 mins south of Sohra.



### GETTING THERE

Meghalaya has no airport. The closest airport and railhead is Guwahati. The state capital Shillong is 100 km/3 hrs from Guwahati (*shared cabs charge ₹120 per head; available at station and airport*). From Shillong, Sohra is 50 km/1 hour southwest (*shared cabs ₹60 per head from Bara Bazaar*). Tyrna is 15 km/30 mins from Sohra (*₹350 by taxi*). Visitors can hire a cab from Guwahati to Sohra (*150 km/5-6 hrs; ₹3,000 by taxi*).

### SEASONS

The walk from Tyrna to Nongriat can be done throughout the year though the ideal time is Oct-Nov, just after the monsoon, when the greenery lingers. The monsoon is a magical time and highly recommended for those who appreciate the downpour. The trail becomes slippery, but waterfalls and streams are in full flow. On the flip side, the pools near the waterfalls aren't safe during the rains.

### STAY

The village is a popular destination in Oct-May so book in advance. **Nongriat Guesthouse** is a basic space run by the community close to the double-decker bridge. There are four simple rooms with attached restrooms but no running water. Alfred and Vernadyne look after the guest house and cook simple, delicious meals (*doubles ₹400; 80148 19274*). **Serene Homestay** is a new homestay under construction in Nongriat village. Some rooms are ready and available to rent (*doubles ₹200; Biron: 94364 39655*).

### EXPLORE

**Living Root Bridges** The double-decker bridge is right next to the Nongriat guest house. A 30-minute walk from there is Mawsaw bridge, which is a hybrid with a steel-rope bridge meeting a living root bridge halfway across the stream. There is a nice waterfall beside it.

### Hikes

**Tyrna to Nongriat** The hike to Nongriat begins at Tyrna, where a steep flight of stairs leads to a village near the long living root bridge. From here, the trail narrows down to a gently climbing jungle path. After two river crossings over steel-rope bridges and one over a small root bridge, a final steep climb leads to Nongriat. It takes about two hours to hike down, and about three hours for the return journey. A round trip is possible in a day but it is better to stay overnight and explore the area.

**Other hikes** There are a number of hikes in the forests and mountains around Nongriat. **Rainbow Waterfall**, named for the rainbow that forms at its base on a sunny day, is a four-hour return hike through dense forest. The falls are high and surrounded by smaller waterfalls trickling down the rock face. The trail is not well marked so it is advisable to hire a local guide (₹500). Other steep paths lead to scenic spots such as the **Nohkalikai Waterfall Viewpoint** and **Mawpait Viewpoint** from where the valley and the plains of Bangladesh are visible.

### Fishing

The pools of Tyrnong, a two-hour hike from the village, are full of large fish. Angling is popular, and Biron from Serene Homestay arranges a guide and permission from the village headman. Visitors must carry their own fishing equipment.

## TRAVEL COMPANIES

Travellers can hike on their own, but some travel companies also organise walks through the area.

**Greener Pastures** specialises in organising ecotourism, adventure, and cultural tours in the northeast. They run a special monsoon tour to Meghalaya that includes Nongriat village in the itinerary. The tour includes pick-up and drop to airport, stay, transport, meals, and a guide (*₹63,000 per head for a minimum of two people*). They also arrange customised three-day visits to Nongriat (*94357 47471; info@thegreenerpastures.com; www.thegreenerpastures.com/monsoon-travel-india-meghalaya-tour; ₹31,000 per head for a minimum of two people*).

**Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort** is a family-run enterprise in Laitkynsew village close to Tyrna that has actively been promoting the double-decker root bridge. They organise the trek as a day trip, and can even arrange for a longer stay at Nongriat (*94361 15925; cherrapunjee@hotmail.com; www.cherrapunjee.com; ₹2,230 for doubles*).

**Barefoot Treks and Hikes** is one of the few exclusive trekking and hiking tour operators in Sohra. They conduct many single and multi-day treks across the valley, including a day trip to the double-decker bridge (*96150 93898; bkupar@yahoo.com; sites.google.com/site/barefootsohra; ₹2,000 per person*).

### TIP

Nongriat's highest house belongs to Slinda, a frail old woman who lives with her husband and loves interacting with guests. The view from her house is unforgettable.