

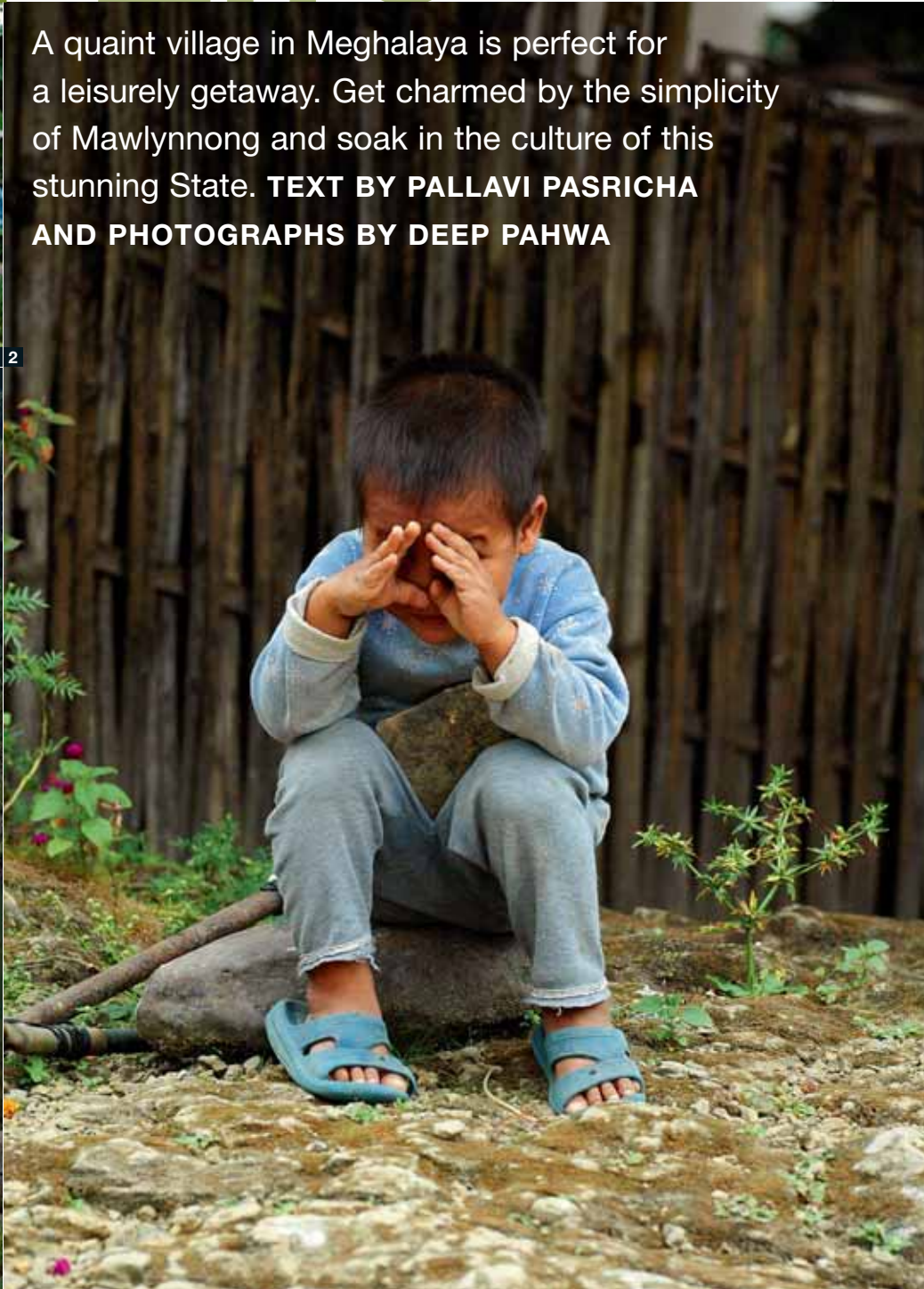


# Root of Life

A quaint village in Meghalaya is perfect for a leisurely getaway. Get charmed by the simplicity of Mawlynnong and soak in the culture of this stunning State. **TEXT BY PALLAVI PASRICHA AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEEP PAHWA**



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8. The lovely sit-out at Mawlynnong Guest House





“NUMBER 54, THE house with a bamboo door, a bamboo roof and bamboo walls, it even has a bamboo floor...” This famous number from the sixties immediately comes to my mind when I see the guest house at Mawlynnong village in Meghalaya. Barring the number, everything about that hut is the same. Made of cane and bamboo with a thatched roof, this quaint place is my home for one night. I know it is a far cry from chic five-star luxuries, yet there is something ever so soothing and charming about this place that I don't miss those indulgences a bit. Little do I realise that this is only the beginning of a long chain of surprises which I will encounter in this lovely State of the North-East.

It all begins on a Wednesday morning when I step into Ri Kynjai, the sprawling property at Umiam Lake, 20 km before Shillong. I walk into the all-wood cottage built on stilts to resemble typical Khasi huts, and gaze at the lake, better known as Bada Pani, nestled amid the gentle Khasi hills. It certainly lives up to its name and is among the largest and most sparkling I have seen in the country. It almost want to tiptoe around the cottage, so not to make a noise. The day is spent soaking in the sights and sounds of Shillong.

The next morning, photographer Deep and I are off to Mawlynnong village close to the Bangladesh border. The 90-km drive, dotted with picturesque vistas, is a journey to savour. The trees are in their best dress, some donned

with pink flowers, others covered with orange leaves. After passing through spectacular terraced rice and potato fields, the road meanders through high mountains and snakes its way through several quaint villages where school children wave every time a car passes by, where buffaloes block the road, and cars patiently wait for them to clear out of the way without even honking, and where nobody is in a rush. Even in the afternoon, I can hear insects buzzing loudly. And then, finally, I reach the village, which has earned the status of being the cleanest village in Asia. I can't contain my excitement at the thought of seeing one of the legendary Living Root Bridges.

Walking past huts with beautiful gardens full of red, orange, yellow, and pink blossoms in a mind boggling variety, I reach the guest house. Raised on stilts, it has tiny rooms and resembles a typical Khasi hut. On the verandah outside the rooms there is a small cane table with plastic chairs, which seem slightly out of step with this green environment. But what catches my attention is a raised bamboo platform at the back, which resembles a *machan*. It is connected to our balcony via an elevated passage made with long bamboo poles, on which we step gingerly, wondering if it will take our weight. It holds up, and as I unwind in the midst of the lush greenery and the small waterfall at the back, I'm transported to another world, where there is no place for mobile phones or fancy decor.

After a quick lunch we head to the Living Root Bridge

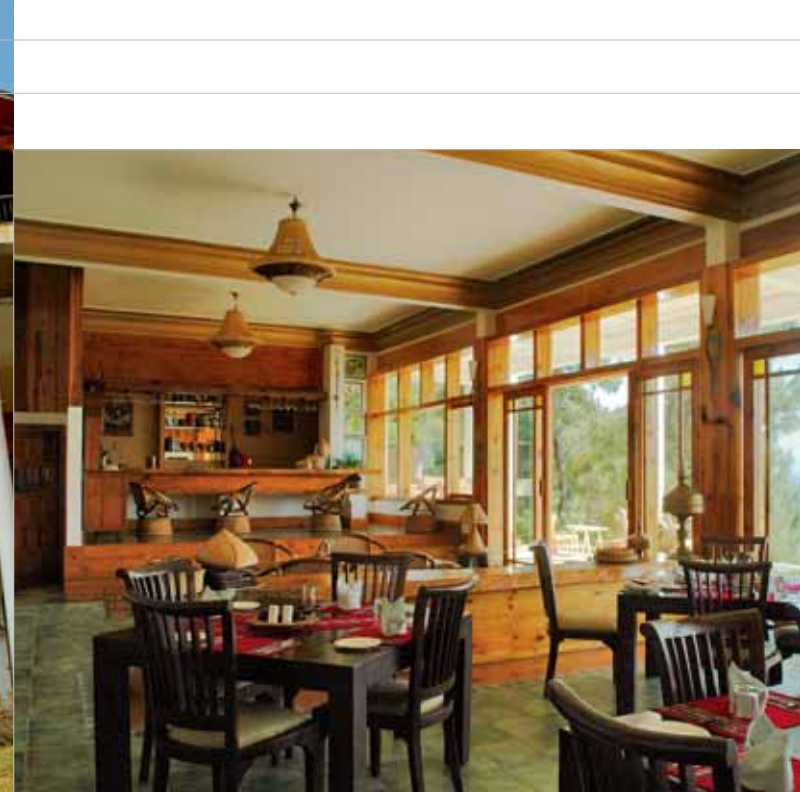
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CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW A pretty volunteer at the Autumn Festival; the Living Root Bridge near Mawlynnong; the crowd relaxes with performances at the festival; a tribal dance from Meghalaya; boating competition at Umiam Lake







The sprawling Ri Kynjai RIGHT The restaurant at Ri Kynjai serves Khasi cuisine FACING PAGE The crowd watches as a State from the North-East performs a traditional dance

close by. Coming from a world dominated by massive, concrete bridges, I am entranced by this one. These bridges are perhaps the only ones which are literally grown—they are formed with the roots of gigantic rubber trees, that have been trained to make a pathway across a stream. The biggest one in Meghalaya is a double-decker bridge, but the tough trek to reach that one is only for those who are in good physical shape. I am quite happy at the easy ten minute trek to see a smaller one. As I stand and watch the gushing stream below, with water so clear that I can even see my reflection in it, the locals fill us in with some legends about these bridges, and transport me to a time when even crossing a stream was nothing short of a challenge.

It is pitch dark by 4.30 p.m. and I'm clueless about how to occupy myself. For starters, I need my evening dose of tea so Deep and I head to the tea stall at the village and get talking to Richard, the 16-year-old Khasi boy assisting his father. He tells us about his interest in music and how well he plays the guitar. The next few hours are spent listening to wonderful songs that I haven't heard in a long, long time—*Summer of 69, Words*. Soon his sister, father and uncle join us and all of us have a gala time. They even sing a few Khasi songs for us. Thanks to their friendly nature and warm hospitality the long evening vanishes in minutes.

The morning light creeps into my room from the thatched roof and wakes me up and I begin the day on

a wonderful note—with breakfast at the bamboo platform. Nothing can beat sipping piping hot tea and eating Maggie noodles, the perfect hill staple, in the midst of trees with the sound of gurgling water in the background.

The charm of this village lies in its sheer simplicity. It has 82 families and keeping its reputation intact as Asia's cleanest village, there are cone shaped cane dustbins outside every home. The children are a bit shy, and turn their faces away whenever I take out the camera. But their faces break into infectious smiles when we talk to them. Every person here is friendly and warm and they open their hearts and homes to make us feel comfortable. That's when I realise that this is something that can't be replicated in a city.

Leaving this pretty village behind, I head back to Shillong. There is a huge buzz about the week-long Shillong Autumn Festival that has been going on, and the excitement in the city is palpable. No wonder... After all, tomorrow is the grand finale. I cannot wait to see what the fuss is all about.

Held at the stunning Umiam Lake, it has all the perfect ingredients for a festival—dancing, boating, fishing, music, archery competitions, fashion shows and of course plenty of local food—but the cherry (or two) on the cake is the rock band performances and the hot air balloon ride.

Pork is the staple diet in Garo and Mizo food and there is hardly any dish that is made without it. Not being in a mood to experiment, I stick to chicken. I browse around and spot

**F.Y.I**

**CAVING OPTIONS**

If you are interested in caving then Meghalaya is full of options. The State is home to a number of natural caves including the longest one in the country. Krem Liat Prah cave, which is 25 km long, is located in the Jaintia Hills district. Mawsmat Cave, near Cherrapunjee, is popular with tourists and it is the only cave that is fully lit up.

a stall selling a drink called 'Bitchi'. If the name is so intriguing I can't imagine how the drink would be. As I take a sip of the Garo rice beer I instantly wince. True to its name, it's sharp, strong and has a weird aftertaste. I quickly move on to sample some of the mind boggling variety of local fruit wines like banana, apple, pear, cherry, date, ginger, which people are buying like hot cakes. Even I'm tempted, and pick up a bottle for my folks back home.

The day, or rather the afternoon, is taken by harvest dances by various states of North-East as well as Tibet, Bhutan and Bengal. It's a rather interesting way of getting a glimpse into their culture. One of the tribes performs the Garo Wangla dance, which is a dance of thanksgiving. A traditional Khasi dance of Garo hills and Shat Shukra dance follow soon after. The archery competition held after that is a real crowd puller.

How could India's rock music capital stay away from its forte? By evening the crowds thicken and girls turn out in their best attire—boots and short skirts—to hear their favourite bands churn out some real headbanging numbers. There is a band called POLITKS who perform for the first time, and an entranced crowd happily sways to the gut-wrenching rock numbers they belt out. An all-girls band gives the city a reason to groove late into the night. I return back to Ri Kynjai with the thumping music still playing in my head.

My last morning in Meghalaya is something I'm not going to forget for a lifetime. Accidentally I fall asleep with

the curtains open, and when I open my eyes in the morning, I see the sun come alive and bathe the lake in an orange and golden glow. I have a spectacular view of this from my bed, without even stepping into the balcony. It can't get better than this. I close my eyes to capture this moment in my memory, realising that it is just one of the many wonderful memories that I'm taking back from the magical state of Meghalaya. ●

**FACTFILE**

**GETTING THERE**

Most domestic airlines operate flights via Delhi and Kolkata to Guwahati; from here Shillong is three hours away by road.

**WHEN TO GO**

It is best to visit Meghalaya during the monsoon season when it's the prettiest.

**PLUS SAYS**

**STAY**

- **Ri Kynjai:** Umniuh Khwan, UCC Road, Ri Bhoi, Shillong; tel: (0) 98624 20300; www.rikynjai.com
- **Mawlynnong Guest House:** Mawlynnong village; tel: (0) 98631 14302

**EAT**

Jadoh, red rice cooked with pork, a typical Khasi dish.

**SHOP**

Orange honey, and bamboo and cane artefacts.

**SEE**

Umshiang double-decker root bridge near Cherrapunjee.