

MEGHALAYA

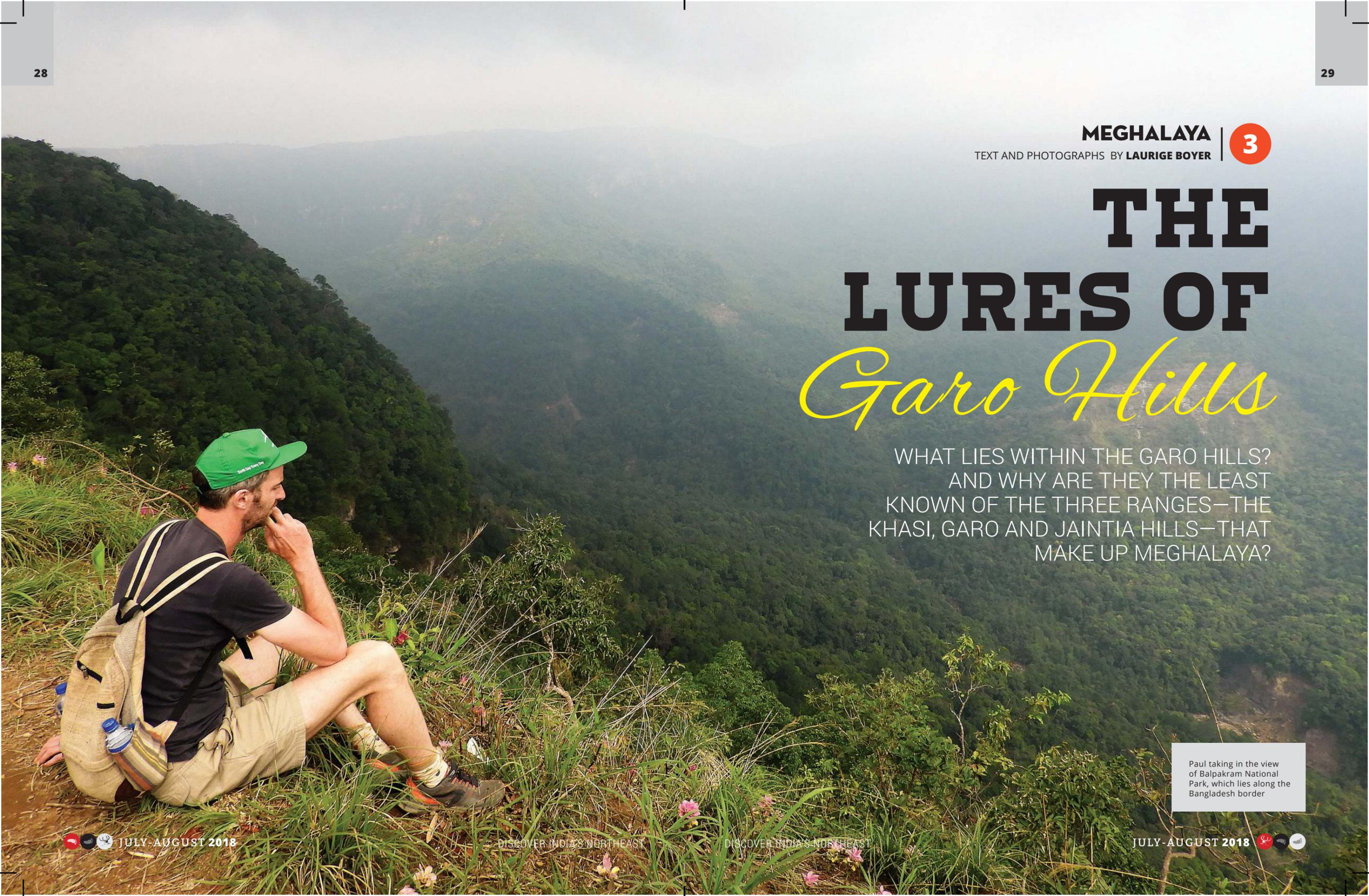
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TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURIGE BOYER

THE LURES OF *Garo Hills*

WHAT LIES WITHIN THE GARO HILLS? AND WHY ARE THEY THE LEAST KNOWN OF THE THREE RANGES—THE KHASI, GARO AND JAINTIA HILLS—THAT MAKE UP MEGHALAYA?

Paul taking in the view of Balpakram National Park, which lies along the Bangladesh border



IHAD HEARD many stories of this area—tales of the Mande Burung, the local yeti, of the mysterious caves that wind their way through the hills, and of the wildlife sanctuaries dotting the area. I could feel the hills beckoning me to explore them—and then one day, a friend of mine, Paul, called to ask if I'd be interested in a week-long bike trip through the Northeast. This was my golden chance, and so I suggested that our journey begin in Assam, continue through the Garo hills, and finally enter the Khasi hills at the south west border.

This was literally an adventure that was planned by joining dots on a map—made all the more complex by the fact that the maps of the area are not necessarily accurate geographical representations of this constantly changing landscape, where nature and political unrest alter the borders and topography quite frequently. Since I was determined to explore the unknown parts of this land, I used all my research and contacts to plan the trip in such a way that we would be riding through untouched emerald expanses along the way.

And so, on the 8th of April this year, Paul and I met in Guwahati, Assam, our starting point for the trip.

DAY 1: GUWAHATI TO SIJU

It has been rightly said that when one is in this region during the monsoons, “You don't plan the day; the rain does it for you”. On the first day of our trip, we woke up to a loud boom from the sky as the rain began to pour. Though we had planned to set off early to avoid traffic, the rain had decided otherwise. Delayed by an hour of torrential downpour, we had to re-work our route to avoid as much city traffic as possible if we were to enjoy our ride.

This made us take the bypass road along Deepor Beel, a longer route but an assuredly picturesque landscape with minimum traffic. Riding on a straight road through the Assam plains, we stopped for chai and samosas in Kukumara before continuing our way to Dudhnoi, where we turned south to enter the Garo Hills. And so, we escaped the heat that had engulfed the entire Brahmaputra plain.

From that point onward, except for a few (possibly illegal) coal trucks and local shared taxis, we were the lone riders on a deserted road. Sometime later, we stopped for a much deserved lunch break at a roadside bamboo-thatched restaurant, and then continued our journey to Siju, snaking through fields and gardens and roads that were little more than dirt tracks. The last 20 km of the 180 km ride was the roughest part, and we were relieved when we finally arrived at Siju marketplace, where we were to meet up with our guide,

Plinder. He would be my pillion rider and our guide for the next five days, showing us places we would not have discovered on our own. (Even though I am a tour leader and guide myself, I cannot imagine exploring a new part of the Northeast without a local guide alongside for the first journey. Armed with extensive knowledge of the place and a local identity, a local guide plays a major role in the discovery of a place, and also acts as an essential link to the local people.)

At Siju, Plinder checked us into a rest house overlooking the Simsang River. After a long day on the bike, Paul and I were ready to dive in for a cooling swim—but just in time, Plinder warned us against the idea, telling us that the river had been polluted by the extensive mining taking place in these areas. We were saddened to learn that the reckless activity of some unscrupulous people had destroyed the river to such an extent that almost no aquatic life could survive its waters any longer. We also learned that with no alternate means of

AS WE CONTINUED WALKING, BESIDES THE BIRDS WE COULD SEE, **WE SPOTTED 3 YELLOW-THROATED MARTENS A BARE 20 FEET FROM US, PASSING BY NONCHALANTLY**

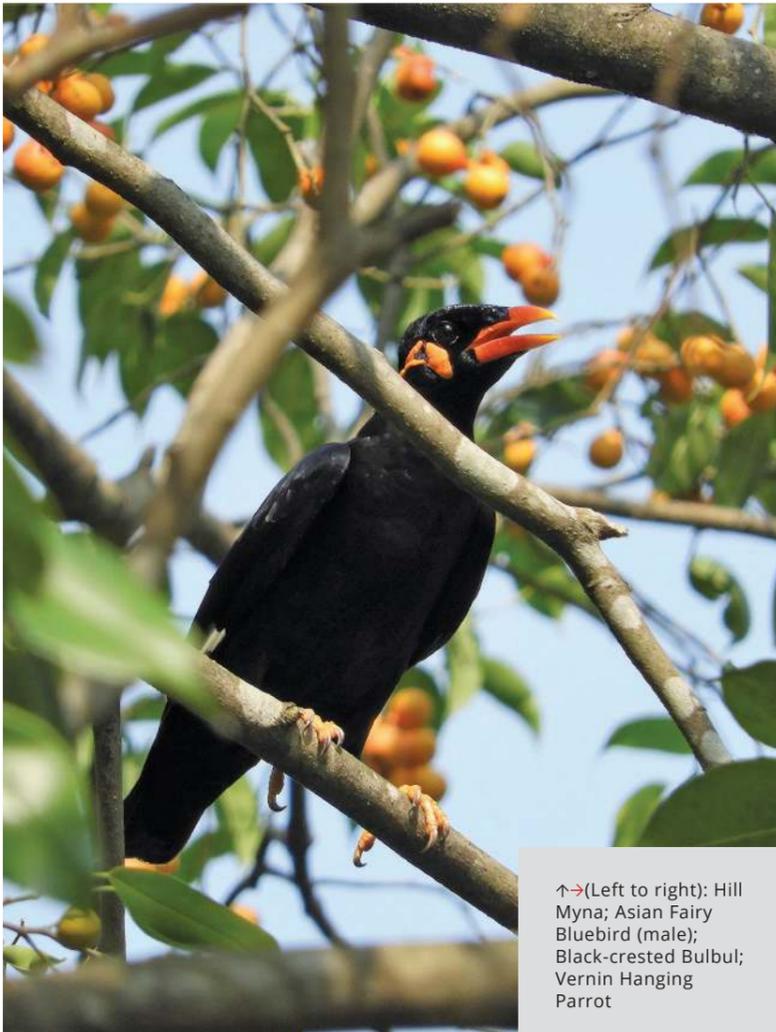
income to sustain their lives, the people of these rural areas are on the brink of losing most of their natural resources to imprudent trade practices—but as visitors, we were in no position to comment on it. Having understood this, we retired to our balcony to relax, becoming silent spectators of the local traders carrying towering piles of betel nuts on bikes to sell in the nearby market.

By dusk, the activity in the town begins to slow down, coming to a complete halt by sunset. Then, the silence of the night takes over, interrupted only by the sounds of nature. We too surrendered to the rural life, and went to bed by the local clock to continue our exploration of Siju early the next day.



↑↓(Clockwise) Laurige and Paul on the Balpakram Plateau; carnivorous Pitcher Plant of Karwani forest; a stump covered with sacs of frog eggs at Gorla Pathal lake, Siju





↑→(Left to right): Hill Myna; Asian Fairy Bluebird (male); Black-crested Bulbul; Vernin Hanging Parrot



DAY 2: SIJU

Our day began early, with an active agenda to explore the Siju Bird Sanctuary, its caves and the nearby areas.

The Siju Bird Sanctuary is mainly known for being home to the Grey Peacock Pheasant and the Olive Bulbul. After quite a walk from our guest house, we crossed a bridge and a few areca nut plantations, entering the sanctuary across the river banks. From that point on, we climbed up a small, steep path through a thick forest. We were surprised to see that even a path as remote as this one was covered with plastic trash. Plinder explained that the trash was the remains of a student picnic that had taken place here not too long before our visit. (We can only hope that the increasingly unpleasant signs of pollution in our environment will

make future generations behave more responsibly.)

As we trudged on, from out of the thickets appeared what looked like a fortress wall, a spectacular limestone formation that beckoned us to travel deeper into the forest. Such was its natural shape that the limestone walls could even have passed as a man-made fortress constructed by some ancient, long gone civilisation. The residue of aquatic fossils in the limestone suggested that this area had once been under water—a fact that becomes evidently true when one realizes that the entire Himalayan belt was formed by tectonic pressures pushing the land up, out of the ocean and into the air.

As we continued walking, besides the birds we could see, we spotted three Yellow-Throated Martins a bare 20 feet from us, passing by nonchalantly and completely unperturbed by our presence.

Our destination of the moment was Goria Pathal lake, a small water body covered with sacs of frog eggs, said to be a perfect place for spotting water birds when weather conditions are good—which was not the case we found ourselves in, as black cloud began to envelop the blue sky. Alarmed by the approaching storm (and already caught in it), we scurried our way back, using our torches to keep us on track, trekking through brambles in a torrential downpour that hit us like gigantic wave. We made it to our shelter soaking wet but were well rewarded with a hot meal of rice and curry.

That afternoon, we decided to explore the famous Siju Cave, the longest limestone cave in Garo Hills (extending up to 4 km). A visit to this cave is not for the faint hearted; besides the endurance, one also needs to come equipped with a flashlight

and waterproof shoes. The cave is home to an underworld that is alive with nocturnal creatures and wildlife. (Owing to the large number of bats that have made this cave their home, it is also locally known as the Bat Cave.) The stunning formations of stalactites and stalagmites that we saw inside filled me with wonder at nature's artistry.

Back from our visit, I retired for a nap while Paul continued on to visit Rongdong Waterfall and to scout the surrounding villages for local rice beer, known as 'Gobu'. (When he returned from his escapade that evening, I could see from his gait that he had been entirely successful in his search.)

DAY 3: SIJU TO KARWANI

Our journey the next day took us southwards to Baghmara town, which lies on the Meghalaya-



↻(Clockwise from above): Thick-billed Green Pigeon; Yellow Wagtail; Large Woodshrike



↻(Clockwise from above): Great Barbet, Asian Fairy Bluebird (female), Green-billed Malkoha, Blue-throated barbet





Selfie on Balpakram Plateau with Bangladesh in the background

Bangladesh border. Here we halted for a quick bite, and also, on Plinder's instructions, to stock up on some provisions for our meals at the homestay we would be staying at in Karwani for the next two days.

By midday, we had arrived at Karwani village leaving us plenty of time to relax and explore the local butterfly sanctuary. Besides its avian reserve, Karwani forest is also home to many rare species of butterfly, as well as Meghalaya's native carnivorous Pitcher Plant and Sundews. We were fortunate that our visit to the area coincided with their blooming season—we had an excellent opportunity to peep into these plants and marvel at their unique natural construction.

Our homestay was located within the Baghmara Reserve Forest, about 3 km away from Baghmara town. It was a modest, rather basic homestay, with friendly caretakers and exceptionally good home-made food. We were happy to bring our provisions to a family that honoured us with a lovely meal. Well-fed, we then retired to our cabin to sleep off our long and wonderful day.

But as it goes, sound sleep in the abode of the clouds comes only to those who are well habituated to its sound and light (or to those who are too intoxicated to hear anything). A midnight storm woke me up, with the wind stomping at my door and lashing rain all over our shelter. While struggling to go back to sleep, I realised how much we



Dinner at Karwani homestay; (Above): India on the left, Bangladesh on the right — on the way to Umpung

take for granted the home comforts of city life, comforts that are rarely felt by those who live in basic shelters. It felt as though I was powerlessly floating on a tiny boat in the middle of a stormy sea. On the other hand, my friend Paul, possibly still enjoying the last of his 'Gobu high' from the previous day, slept right through it without hearing a sound.

DAY 4: KARWANI TO BALPAKRAM NATIONAL PARK

After a hearty breakfast the next morning, we bid farewell to our hosts and continued our journey. We were heading to Balpakram National Park, which lies along the Bangladesh border. Since we

were to spend two days there, living in a remote Inspection Bungalow belonging to the National Park, we had once again been advised to stock up on food and provisions like we had at the homestay. And so, we stopped on the way at Rongara Village to buy rice, dal, vegetables and chicken and few other things on our check-list.

When we arrived at the Inspection Bungalow, we found it to be atop a low hill overlooking the forest, with a wonderful view of the surroundings. However, the day's ride had been a hard one through humid conditions—and so, low on energy, we decided to scrap our plans for the day, and leave off exploring the National Park until the next morning.



Snorkelling in the incredibly clear Umngi river



Boating in the translucent Umngi river

DAY 5: BALPAKRAM NATIONAL PARK

The next morning, we rode to the top of the Balpakram Plateau. The landscape we could see from there reminded me of the Khasi Hills. The literal meaning of Balpakram is 'the land of perpetual winds'. The constantly blowing winds in these areas carve out structures from stone and earth, forming gorges that have been compared to the Grand Canyon in the United States. The locals of this area believe that the spirits of the recently departed come to this place to dwell temporarily before embarking on their final journey.

The route to the top of the plateau is a tough, 12 km long road only accessible by jeep or by bike. We decided to give our bodies a break for the last

kilometer, ditching the bikes taking the last stretch on foot.

At the top, we found a large crowd already filling the plateau. By the sheer number of people there, it was obvious that many people choose to visit the park on weekends, with many local families having come together for sight-seeing and picnics. This was not an ideal situation for nature and bird watching—the noisy crowd repelled all birds and the peaceful experience I had in mind for myself, so I decided to head back to the guest house to do some birdwatching.

Back at the Inspection Bungalow, I sat in my balcony in a still, meditative state, adjacent to a fruiting fig tree. I could see all the birds that I would have had no chance of spotting inside the crowded

park... Hill Mynas, Tick-billed Green Pigeons, Black crested Bulbuls, Oriental White Eyes and many more. And after two hours of patience, I managed to get a perfect shot of a pair of Asian Fairy Bluebirds. Then, I enjoyed the remaining hours of silence in the empty guesthouse which was soon to be filled with the weekend crowd.

That night the guest house was packed with friendly locals (even the Baghmara Superintendent of Police), all of whom were there for a break from their daily lives. It was a fun evening spent with the locals, getting to know more about their tribe and the political unrest that had gripped their homeland. The Superintendent assured us that the situation has been getting better lately, as many rebels who had been taking refuge in the Balpa-

kram Forest areas had been captured.

DAY 6 & 7: BALPAKRAM NATIONAL PARK TO UMPUNG

Our trip around the Garo Hills had ended, and it was time to bid goodbye to our guide Plinder and ride back home to the Khasi Hills, which lie beyond Balpakram. We were to follow the directions offered by Google Maps (often unreliable in these parts), which told us that it was a leisurely 180 km drive to Shnongpdeng, our final destination for the day. And since none of the locals we met had ventured further than 20 km from Balpakram, we couldn't verify the directions we had either.

Not knowing what lay ahead of us, we decided to leave early, under a threatening sky (which we



The Umngi river is a sweet spot for anglers

were by now growing accustomed to). But the condition of the roads was worse than anything we had experienced so far.

En route, we arrived at Nekor village where the Rongdi river separates the South Garo Hills district from the South West Khasi Hills district. On these less travelled roads, the forest has slowly started reclaiming the land, growing back over the paths that people had made through this region—at some points, even giving us the feeling that we were riding on a pathless road. And beside a few solitary trucks, we saw no signs of human civilisation on that road, not even small settlements. (We were relieved to not have any serious mechanical prob-

lems with our bikes.)

And then, a few kilometers outside Balat, Paul hit a stone and broke the right footrest of his bike. With no signs of a mechanic or a repair shop anywhere in sight, we decided to proceed on to Ranikor—a bigger town than Balat, where we hoped we would find someone who could repair the damage. Unfortunately, it was a Sunday, and as we rode into town we could see that almost everyone was resplendent in their Sunday attire, heading to church.

We had almost given up hope when, from beyond a curve in the road, we saw a rider coming toward us. I hailed him and flagged him down,



The catch from Umngi being roasted for a fine meal; (Above) Saviba Angling Eco Resort on the banks of Umngi river

explaining our misadventure and asking if he could help. Luckily, he—a local named Robert—was also heading to a mechanic to fix a puncture. We followed him to a workshop, where the mechanic agreed to take a look at our bikes. In conversation with Robert, we realised we had not only found help, but also a local who knew and was willing to share information on the route we planned to take.

As we chatted over lunch at a nearby rice and tea stall, we learned that our ambitious plan to ride to Shnonpdeng was unlikely to be possible, and that we needed to find a camp for the night. That was when our second stroke of luck arrived—Robert told us that he ran an eco-camp, with his sister

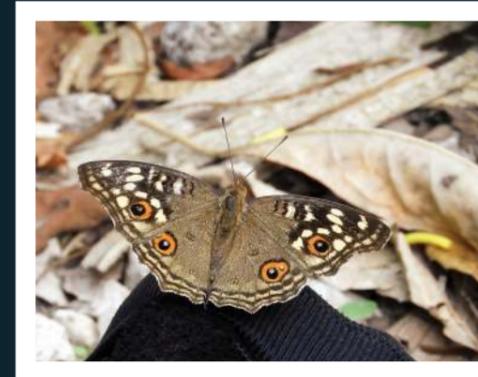
Sara, around 20 km away from Ranikor. And so, without much ado, we followed him into the green.

The ride up to Umpung was unreal—we were riding on narrow countryside roads that flirted with the Bangladesh border, with the no man's land that separates India and Bangladesh right next to us. Here, it is possible to see the different cultures mixing, and the hilly landscapes stretching into infinite plains that vanished in the horizon.

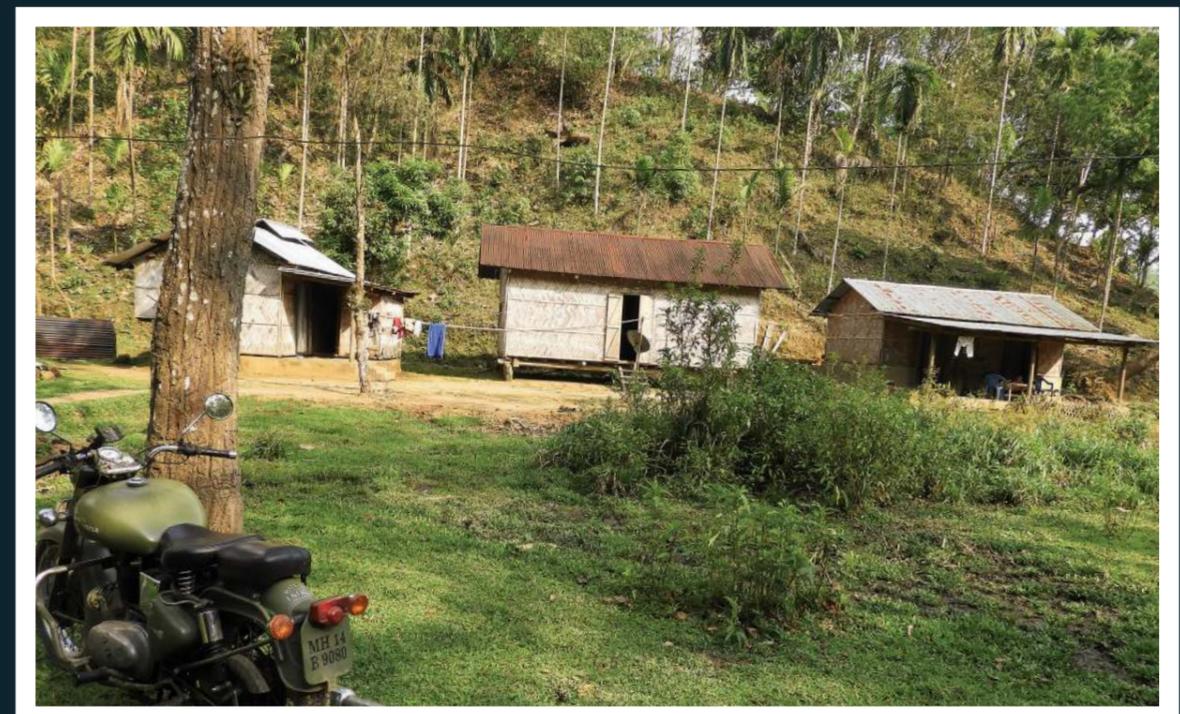
Hidden on the banks of the Umngi river, the Saviba (the word means 'Holy Hills') Angling Eco Resort was an unexpected paradise that became the highlight of our trip. In my opinion, the crystal-clear Umngot river of Shnonpdeng can



↻(Clockwise from below): Inspection Bungalow, Balpakram National Park; Double-branded Blue Crow (*Euploea sylvester*) male; Common five-ring (*Ypthima baldus*)



↻(Clockwise from below): Karwani Homestay at Baghmara; Magpie Crow (*Euploea radamanthus*); Lemon pansy (*Junonia lemonias*); Large oakblue (*Arhopala amantes*)





Plinder Dote Marak at a spectacular limestone formation, Siju Wildlife Sanctuary

hardly compete with the translucent Umngi river. And since we had ridden out of the hills and almost back to sea level, the weather had changed—we were missing the misty forests. And so, as soon as we had settled into camp, we dived in the cool waters of the river to get energised and refreshed.

Later, we met up with Robert over tea, to get to know more about the man who had changed the course of our trip. We learnt that he was a nuclear engineer who switched careers toward becoming a naturalist, specialising in river fish. Tired of the city life, he took an early retirement and founded this resort (which, along with angling, also offered many other activities like trekking, kayaking, birdwatching and cave exploring). He turned out to be a fount of knowledge about the jungle that surrounded the camp, which is one of the best preserved forest areas near a village that I have seen anywhere in Meghalaya. A green warrior, Robert also visits villages to teach the locals modern techniques of living a sustainable life alongside nature. His sister Sara was a hospitable and chatty host, making them a great team. And feeling utterly

at home with this Khasi family, Paul and I decided to stay an extra day.

DAY 8: UMPUNG TO MAWPHLANG

It was hard to leave our haven in Umpung, but the heat pushed us to get back on the road. At first, Robert led us out through a labyrinth of narrow countryside roads up to Balat bazaar where we chatted over a last cup of chai while Paul did some shopping (he picked up a pack of local pepper). Then, it was time to part ways, but I knew that my relationship with Robert had just started and I would meet him again. Trying to follow his directions, we then continued along the border up to Shella looking for a spot to cross the river. Unfortunately, the water level was too high for our bikes and a pedestrian bridge that we came across was too weak to support our load.

After a couple of ventures on unknown roads (and getting a bit lost while looking for safe passage across), we finally gave up and changed our route, heading north instead toward Mawphlang. And this turned out to be a good decision—we



Paul exploring the Bat Cave (which extends up to 4 km) at Siju Wildlife Sanctuary

were rewarded by breathtaking scenery of the Khasi hills. In less than an hour, we went from sea level to 2,000 m above. With the sun setting and the thermometer dropping, we raced with the sun on those beautiful curves in a quest to reach a homestay in Mawphlang before darkness. We did it just in time, arriving at sundown in time for a quick shower before a relaxing dinner of local delicacies. This was to be our last night in the wilderness before we head back to Nongpoh, my home in the Khasi lowlands bordering Assam.

DAY 9: MAWPHLANG TO NONGPOH

The next morning, with our legs stiff from our long bike adventures, we felt the need to stretch our muscles—and so, we decided to take a walk in a sacred grove nearby—Law Kyntang, a thousand-year-old forest. One of the reasons the forest still stands despite its great age is because cutting even a branch from this forest is taboo, leave alone trees. Covering almost 80 hectares, Mawphlang Sacred Grove is a treasure trove of rare medicinal

trees and plants, including the English yew, the Chinese sumac, chinquapin, etc. It is also home to several species of trees that work as climate indicators, such as the Japanese blue oak. In total, there are about 450 species of trees and plants in this forest as well as rare species of animals and birds. The biodiversity of this community-protected forest is impressive.

The walk through the grove brought us back with a large appetite for breakfast and a surge of energy to continue homewards. From that point on, we rode back in good weather, making a stop for lunch at Shillong. There, we also met up with Paul's friend, Keith, in a small but busy restaurant near Iew Duh (Bara Bazaar, as the locals call it or the great market where you can find everything but your way). We had endless small plates of jadoh and local meat balls while catching up with each other. Then, once out of Shillong's busiest market, we kicked our bikes into high gear one last time to zip through Barapani and its hordes of selfie tourists, heading for Nongpoh where I would arrive home to my wife and daughter. 📸