



Lesley J Saunders

Magical Darjeeling

The Town of Many Smiles!

So many people had suggested that I visit Darjeeling to experience the delights of the British influence that has remained in this town. Not having travelled to the North East of India I decided that it was time to make a trip, and try to catch a glimpse of Mt Kangchenjunga and experience the famous 'Toy Train'.



▲ **Beaming!** What a smile! I stopped for a moment to re-live my trip to Darjeeling. If only more people displayed such amazing warmth, the world would certainly be a better place.

I was awestruck even before the plane touched down. It was a photographers dream, rolling hills swathed in fluffy clouds, buildings nestled within the mountains and tea plantations creating carpets of green. And the British influence indeed shone from everywhere: buildings, trains and even the traditional tea rooms.

Once I landed I found the streets alive with the banter of the local people as the

tourists watched with amusement. I quickly found my way out of the hustle and tourist areas to the quieter locations where I could interact with the locals. As I say time and time again I am just amazed at the warmth of the diverse cultures in this incredible country. My challenge soon started when I wanted to get shots that were not posed but as soon as they saw the camera everyone started obliging, so I clicked away sharing the results with the posed subjects but still managing to get those candid shots that I always look for.

As I travelled around the area I was fascinated with the assorted activity that was taking place. The merriment of the women working in the tea plantations was quite contagious and before long I found myself in the middle of the fields amongst the workers. As they busily picked the tea filling their baskets that sat on their backs, I enthusiastically captured them through my lens.

The lush green plants in such an amazing landscape was the best backdrop that any artist or photographer could wish for. Busy capturing moments I was am used to turn round and find that a group of tourists had followed me and were actively photographing me as I was clicking away....then I realised who the culprit was, my driver was happily showing the group my September article in *Asian Photography*.

The next morning at 3.15 am I drove to Tiger Hill hoping to get shots of the sunrise over the Him alayas. I stopped at a place where I could capture sun rays peeking through the



◀ **Tea Break!** This lady found it amusing that I was clambering into the field to get a closer picture. She took the opportunity to break for a few moments from her mundane task. I'm sure we all do that when the opportunity arises!

▶ **Mirror of Life**
This woman smiled through her eyes, most certainly the mirrors to her life.



trees and as the clouds drifted away to let the sun in, for a fleeting moment there standing proud was Mt Kangchenjunga.

Driving along the narrow roads of Darjeeling we came to a halt due to traffic, now I was truly reminded of home and the traffic jams we have to muddle through! As I continued on my journey I was intrigued yet again by the strength of the women, laden with foliage, walking spritely along the road. The 'tell tale' lines in their faces showing a glimpse of the hard life they had so far endured.

My next stop was to visit the Batasia Loop and Ghoom Monastery, the scenic drive to my destination was not disappointing and as we climbed higher into the clouds it felt like an October foggy day back in the UK. The peace and quiet of the Monastery was well worth the journey. The children taking lessons were distracted by the visitors and their concentration was certainly no longer on their subject. The feeling of tranquillity even ran through the children as they played, there was a calmness enveloping them.

As I started my journey back to my accommodation, my last night in Darjeeling, I was struck by the motherly smile that a tribal woman gave me and the kindness that shone in her eyes. Was she going to be my last portrait in Darjeeling? Yes, she was! And what a final photograph to remind me of such a wonderful trip.

Happy Clicking!

— Lesley J Saunders