

# TEAHOUSE

*It's the planter's life for ABHIJIT GUPTA at the Mancotta Chang Bungalow. Photographs by SWAPAN NAYAK*

**O**ut at sea for long periods, sailors sometimes hallucinate that they are surrounded not by blue waters but rippling green fields. This condition is known as calentura and crazed mariners have been known to step off the deck and slip silently into the bottomless blue. But sometimes, it is possible to be marooned in a real sea of green, to look out at endless vistas of vegetation stretching as far as eye can see.

My vantage was the verandah of a stately bungalow, over 150 years old, seemingly floating without any visible means of support over a gently unrolling prospect of tea bushes. It is only when you got near that you saw the dozen-odd wooden stilts on which the bungalow stood. All over Assam, such bungalows are known as chang bungalows and I was looking out from probably the finest of them all, the Mancotta Chang,

Riding through tea gardens; a cosy sit-out; the bungalow compound

situated on the outskirts of Dibrugarh town in Upper Assam.

The Mancotta bungalow is owned by the Jalans, one of the oldest tea-growing families in Assam, their business dating back to the middle of the 19th century and still going strong. In recent years, they have converted two of their 'manager's bungalows' into guesthouses, but not of the usual touristy kind. They are not widely advertised and are not bursting at the seams with visitors either—I was the only occupant the night I stayed at the Mancotta Chang. But a couple of days later, a whole party would be arriving on a riding holiday. The Jalans have a stable of over a dozen superb thoroughbreds and in collaboration with an international riding agency, In the Saddle, offer riding holidays with Mancotta as base.





## THE INFORMATION



## GETTING THERE

**By air:** Air Deccan flies to Dibrugarh from Kolkata (via Guwahati). Fares from Rs 500 (see [www.airdeccan.net](http://www.airdeccan.net)). **Indian** flies from Delhi to Dibrugarh (via Kolkata) for Rs 16,205 (see [www.indian-airlines.nic.in](http://www.indian-airlines.nic.in)). **By rail:** The **Dibrugarh Rajdhani** links the city to Delhi (Rs 3,240 on 2A). It is also connected with other Indian cities by express trains. **By road:** NH37 links Dibrugarh and other important towns of Assam, from where AC and non-AC deluxe coaches are available daily. The town is 443km from Guwahati. The Mancotta Chang Bungalow

is set in the Mancotta Tea Estate, just outside Dibrugarh, 14km/25min from the airport, 10km/20min from the train station.

## THE BUNGALOW

There are **six rooms** on offer at Mancotta Chang. Tariffs range from Rs 1,000 for the single non-AC to Rs 3,600 for the AC double (service tax and meals extra). Transfers and a tea tour are provided at an extra charge. A smaller bungalow, called the **Chang Bungalow**, in Jalan Nagar South, is also open to visitors.

## ACTIVITIES

Purvi Discovery, which runs Mancotta Chang, offers a range of themed holidays in the environs of the bungalow. These include trekking, tribal tours, **riding holidays**, golfing and birdwatching.

**Clockwise from right: tea pickers head to work; one of the many serene spots around Mancotta Chang; breakfast at the bungalow**

Little prepares you for the sylvan grace of Mancotta when you get into Dibrugarh. In most respects, the town is indistinguishable from maybe a thousand other such small towns in India. But there is one difference—the Brahmaputra. The river is never very far from anywhere in Dibrugarh and it looks deceptively harmless in the dry and dusty heat of March. But come the monsoons and it will turn into a rampaging, belching torrent overflowing its banks and changing its course. Not for nothing is the Brahmaputra regarded as the only male river in India (it is a *nad*, not a *nadi*), and one who is still to attain the full maturity of manhood. In the meantime, the people of Dibrugarh live in constant fear of being inundated by the river: a low dyke all along the riverside attests to this.

The Jalan tea gardens are spread all over Dibrugarh town, and we drive through them on our way to the main office. The shrubs are about two feet high now and I am told that the peak tea-picking season is from April to October. Unlike their Darjeeling counterparts, the Assam tea gardens are situated on the plains and receive the direct glare of the sun all through the day. Since this is not good for the plants, acacia or black pepper trees have been planted at regular intervals so that they can filter the sunlight and provide necessary shade. Citronella borders along the perimeter of the gardens keep away insects. By the time the guided tour of the gardens draws to a close I am awed into silence by the sheer complexity and technicalities of tea growing and its trade.

After a brief stop at the office, we head off towards the bungal-



low, which is not very far from Paltanbazar, one of the busier crossings in Dibrugarh town. A narrow dirt track slips off the main road and leads to the main gate of the manager's compound. Behind it rises Mancotta Chang, like a galleon becalmed in a sea of green. The lawn and the gravelled paths are impeccably neat and the gardener is hard at work over several flowerbeds. As I approach the bungalow I notice that the ground floor is no longer all stilts—new rooms and offices have been added but there is still a sense of light and airiness. I am told that the original reason for the stilts was to keep water out and ward off attacks from wild animals—even now, occasional forays by leopards into the tea gardens are not unheard of.

My bedroom is on the first floor and I have to climb a semi-covered staircase with a charming umbrella- and hat-stand at one corner. Once upstairs, I cross what seems like acres and acres of floor-space to get to my room. The planters obviously did not believe in doing anything in half measure. My bedroom seems large enough to sleep an army, with huge box-windows overlooking the lawn. There is a writing-table at the wall opposite the bed, an easy-chair, a shoe-rack, a mirror and a dresser. The bedroom leads to a small dressing room, which in turn communicates with the bathroom. As if these were not enough, there is a huge sitting room outside which my





bedroom shares with the one next to it.

I spend most of my time lazing on the right-angled verandah that runs all along the front and side of the bungalow. Most of it is covered by the ubiquitous mosquito wire so beloved of the Raj. There are maps on the walls and fading group photographs of the garden staff. In the somnolent afternoon haze, I feel I have been time-warped back to over a century ago. I half-expect to see screaming children explode out of the rooms, pursued by an admonitory ayah or an elder sibling, or a red-faced, loud-voiced army colonel demand his afternoon cuppa.

Daily life in the bungalow is ceremonial, like a slow pavane danced to an invisible orchestra. Breakfast is laid out on the sunny verandah in all its English splendour—there is honey and marmalade and scrambled eggs and chops and fried tomatoes to go with the toast and tea. Dinner had been equally solemn and elaborate, beginning with an excellent tomato soup and ending with trifle. I am overwhelmed by the attentions of the kitchen staff who flit to and fro noiselessly between courses. And, of course, there is that most English institution of them all—bed-tea—delivered with Jeevesian precision and discretion at the desired hour.

If you think that all this soft living is bad for the moral fibre, there are more energetic things to do in and around

Dibrugarh. Purvi Discovery (which is the name of the tourism company run by the Jalans) conducts trips to nearby Kaziranga and Dibru-Saikhowa national parks, Majuli (the biggest river island in the world) and Rukmini island, where you can go kayaking, parasailing or water skiing. Those of a more historical bent can see the Ahom monuments at Sibsagar or the World War II cemetery at Digboi. Other activities on offer are heritage tea tours, golfing holidays and tribal tours. All these are managed by Purvi Discovery, with the Jalans—Vineeta and Manoj—actively involved in its day-to-day running.

Lulled into an almost lotus-like trance by the charms of Mancotta, it is sometimes easy to forget that one is in the middle of a working tea-estate. Mancotta is not your average heritage property marooned in its own splendid isolation, forever cut off from its past. Life goes on as usual amidst the orderly and rectilinear neatness of the tea hedges. Children go to crèches or schools while their mothers pick tea leaves and the factories hum with the business of rolling, firing and sorting. The tea is then packed and labelled and sent to the auction houses in Guwahati from where they find their way to all corners of the world. Over all these activities, the Mancotta Chang has stood sentinel for over a century and a half, a fixed point in a world of change. ●