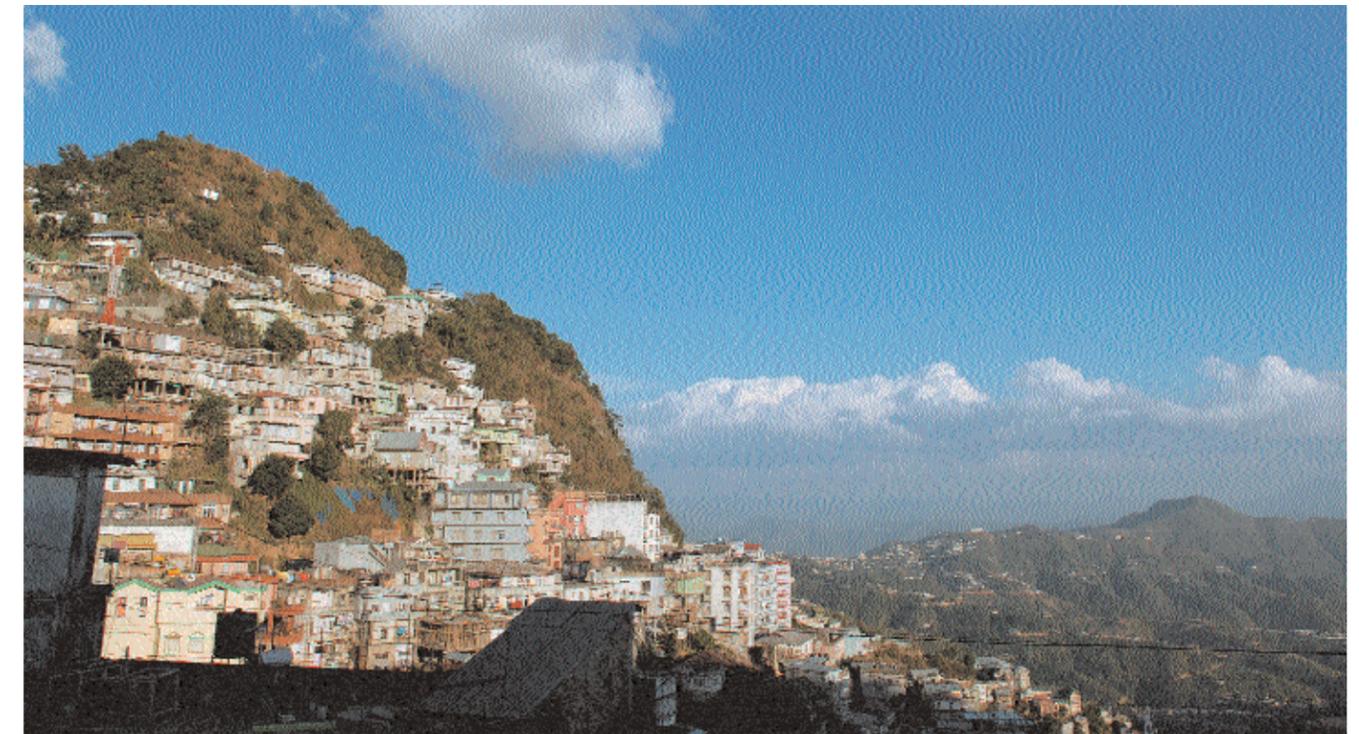


FAR CORNER

Aizawl is distant, cool and utterly different from any other hill station in the country. Text and photographs by **Ian Lockwood**

professionals, civil servants, families and a pool of trend-conscious students decked out in Levi's, knee-high boots and leather jackets. My Mizo wife has bumped into old friends and there is an electric charge in the air as old connections are renewed. We are joining a diminutive migration of Mizos making the flight eastwards for the holidays. I'm a bit of an oddity on the flight as a *makpa* (son-in-law) with American roots and eclectic South Asian upbringing.

Mizoram sits on the geographic and cul-



If you ever doubt India's varied ethnic diversity, the departure lounge at Kolkata's Subhash Chandra Bose airport is a good place to set aside illusions of a monolithic nation. During major holidays, the kaleidoscope of Northeasterner Indians preparing to fly over Bangladesh to the hilly states that make up the country's seven sisters is remarkable. Nagas, Manipuris, Assamese, Garos, Mizos, Khasis and other less-obvious tribal groups gather to make the transition from plains India back to their homes in the hills of the Northeast. The passengers are composed of

Dense forests along the Koldoyne river (left); and (above) the urban sprawl of Aizawl

tural frontier of the South Asian subcontinent. It is physically isolated among some of the most rugged terrain in India south of the Himalaya. This is revealed to me soon after our flight has traversed the great deltas of Bangladesh and the low Chittagong Hill Tracts on our journey eastwards. Just as the visibility improves, the aircraft banks steeply and then drops into a vegetation-shrouded valley on the descent to Aizawl's airport in Lengpui. For a moment we are eye-level with dense bamboo forest cloaking a steep ridge. Patches of jhum (slash and burn) clearings stand out amid the greenery.

AIZAWL

Formerly known as the Lushai Hills, Mizoram is characterised by dozens of north-south-aligned ridges separated by deep gorges. To the north, the ranges extend into Manipur and Nagaland, while in the south they run through Burma and then into the Bay of Bengal. These hills are thought to be a geological reverberation of the great collision of the Indian and Asian plates 50 million years ago. Driving along road cuts on the way up to Aizawl, the evidence of their violent formation is startlingly clear. Layers of shale and sediments have been cut through as if a mountain of cheese has been neatly sliced open, revealing a history of oceanic deposits.

Our drive up the winding BRO-maintained road to Aizawl is a combination of joyous reunion mixed with a rapid sequence of mental snapshots of a land very different from the smoke, chaos and crowds that we left behind in Kolkata. I search for interesting light as the sun drops behind the hills. It is barely after 4pm and nearly dark—an unavoidable consequence of following Indian Standard Time so far to the east. Two jeep-loads of my wife's extended

family have come down to greet and escort us back to the city. Our two children have 24 cousins of varying ages and they are lavished with love and attention. They are packed in with their cousins, sans seatbelts and sucking on mouthfuls of candy (clearly breaking many of our normally stringent rules). We stop at small market stalls to buy oranges, mustard leaves, river fish and *kuhva* (paan). No social interaction in Mizoram is complete without the sharing of *kuhva* and preferably a good smoke. The highway snakes up the mountainside, with occasional hamlets and more modern buildings built precipitously along its edge and overlooking a deep valley. The houses here are constructed of bamboo with tin roofs and interesting apparatuses to catch and store water. Pigs in cages deal with wet household waste and provide the most-loved source of protein in Mizoram. We pass a string of illicit *zu* (rice wine) shacks, heavy with the pungent aroma of their moonshine (Mizoram enforces a state of total prohibition). Aizawl's skyline of concrete looms ahead.

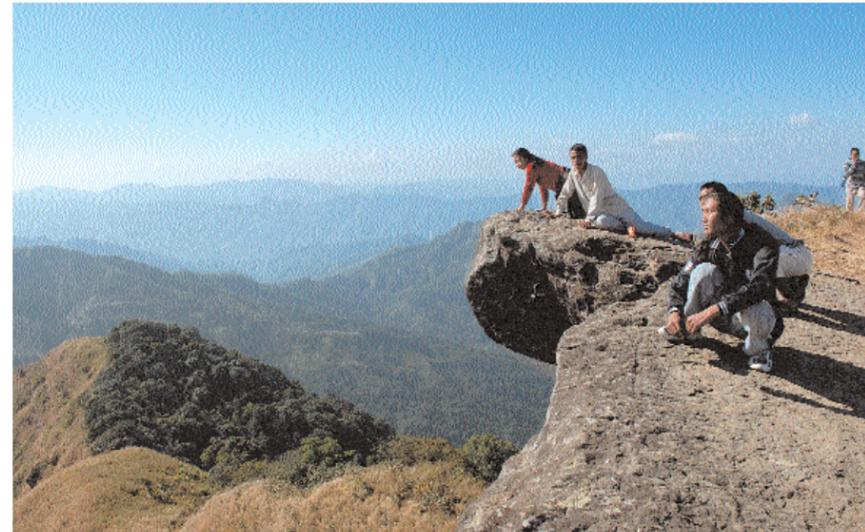
Aizawl is, without exception, the epi-

centre of most people's visits to Mizoram. The city has grown up along a steep north-south ridge and is now home to most of the state's population. The prime real estate is on the crest while less worthy properties crowd the lower slopes. The inter-linkages of steep roads and multi-storeyed houses built on dizzying slopes is the first thing that strikes new visitors. I see shades of Darjeeling and try not to think about the plate boundaries that run underneath the mountains. There are churches everywhere with concrete steeples and bright lights. It is a über-youthful city: there are young people riding scooters, gathering on corners and frequenting the cafés and upmarket Nike, Reebok and other brand name shops that have appeared in recent years. They dress in western clothes, such that the rare sari of an army wife looks distinctly foreign.

At my in-laws' house, a stunning panorama of the city spreads out below a line of laundry and bent rebar. We settle in, share gifts and spend time visiting with relatives and friends. In the morning I wake early to watch the sun rise over a sea of clouds known as *romei*.

Facing: sunset over the Chanmari Presbyterian Church. **This page, left to right:** woman selling chillies, limes and other vegetables at a streetside market; ladies' boots on sale on a Aizawl street; a pig being prepared for a community feast in Chanmari





Clockwise from left: exploring forests and the *bak puk* (bat cave) on the walk to *Rei-ek tlang* (peak); on the *Rei-ek tlang*; an overhang; rural scenery south of Aizawl

It is as if the city has been transported to a distant archipelago in the deepest, far-off ocean.

The challenge about visiting Aizawl on a family trip is trying to balance obligations and my itchy restlessness to explore the peaks, forests and protected areas in the state. Luckily, I have a brother-in-law who enjoys getting out and away from urban amenities. He is a self-confessed hunter who has been reading Jim Corbett and attempting to wean himself off the idea of using a gun as an excuse to get outdoors. He's a reflection of many Mizo men, who traditionally hunted and are only vaguely aware of the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act. Hunting, of course, has been practised since the first people settled the hills, and a man's worth was traditionally measured by the number of animals that he had killed in his lifetime. Better guns and improved road access have contributed to a significant decline of populations of wildlife in recent decades. Ironically, while this has happened, many young people in Aizawl have grown accustomed to urban life and are indifferent to the natural wonders that the state is blessed with. A crowded and growing metropolis has now eaten up the trees and space that my wife's generation enjoyed. As a result, my nephews and nieces spend their free time playing violent computer games, surfing the net and watching TV.

With a little prodding, my brother-in-law organises an expedition into the hills south of Aizawl. We pack supplies, warm clothes, food, a smuggled bottle of Scotch and a mini arsenal into a Maruti Gypsy (the vehicle of choice in the state). My five-year-old son Lenny Zomuana and three of his older cousins pile into the back seat. I've brought along bird guides, binoculars, Whitaker and Captain's *Snakes of India* and a camera kit. My brother-in-law has a camouflage jacket, rapper cap, boots and a cigarette dangling out of his mouth most of the time. The boys are intrigued with the combat knife that we brought him from an Army & Navy store in downtown Boston.

It takes nearly an hour to pass through Aizawl's neighbourhoods before we are



THE INFORMATION

TANMOY



GETTING THERE Air India and Kingfisher Airlines have flights to Aizawl from Kolkata and Guwahati.

GETTING AROUND Aizawl is a crowded and vertical small city with steep narrow roads. Large commercial vehicles are banned during the day and many people move around on motorcycles (Aizawl is

famous for its Enfield gangs, in fact). If you aren't trying to go far it is easy to walk places. The **Maruti taxis** that zip around are an excellent way to do longer distances. They are clearly labelled and the drivers are impeccably honest. You can also arrange to have them take you greater distances (places like Rei-ek, Durtlang and the airport and Lengpui).

WHERE TO STAY There are few hotels in Aizawl. The Mizoram Tourism Department runs a **tourist lodge** (Rs 200-1,000; 0389-2341083) in Chaltlang. The area has a commanding view looking north to Lengpui. **Hotel Chief** (Rs 480-540; 2346418) is centrally located in the downtown neighbourhood of Zarkawt. Nearby is the **Chawlhna Hotel** (Rs 100-600; 2342292).

WHAT TO DO

> Mizos are famous for their **music** but there aren't many places to sample the rich variety of music that is aired on the Zonet channel. The best place for choral music is one of the numerous churches that dot the Aizawl skyline. There are daily services and, of course, a wide variety on Sundays.

> The **Mizoram State Museum**, located on several floors of a tall multi-storeyed building in Zarkawt,

hosts collections on the ethnography and history of the state (Monday-Friday; 11am-3.30pm).

> Near Zarkawt in downtown Aizawl, **Bara Bazaar** offers an opportunity to experience a colourful market with traditional vegetable- and meat-sellers, mixed in with shops selling Burmese imports. Zohandco in Chaltlang sells traditional *puans* (wraps), shawls and other Mizo handicrafts. Similar items can be found at several small shops under the Chanmari Presbyterian church.

> The Aizawl **zoological park** is quite impressive, even if you are not big on zoos. It is relatively spacious and has a biodiversity information centre. The zoo is home to Hoolock gibbons, clouded leopards, Mrs Hume's Pheasant, sun bears and other rarely seen species. The zoo is located between Aizawl and the airport at Lengpui.

PERMITS You need to apply for **inner-line permits** at the Office of the Resident Commissioner at New Delhi and Liaison Officers based at Kolkata, Guwahati, Shillong and Silchar. Foreigners are required to get restricted area permits from the Ministry of Home Affairs (011-26145360). Omega Travels (0389-2323548) in Aizawl can help arrange permits for you.

Portraits from Mizoram (left); and (above) dawn views looking northeast towards Burma's Chin Hills

cruising along a new World Bank-assisted road. Like most roads in the state it follows the high contour of the ridgeline.

Outside of the city we pass through bamboo- and scrub-covered hillsides. There are thick forest patches mixed in with jhum plots in the valleys. We pass through occasional villages where we buy just-plucked oranges and kuhva. I gaze at an impressive pair of mithun (*Bos frontalis*) horns that have been hung outside a household many years ago. Later, as we're driving, I'm startled out of my seat by the silhouette of a wreathed hornbill (*Aceros undulatus*) flying parallel to us. By the time we've stopped and I've steadied my lens, it is a distant blip.

That evening, as we approach our destination a leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) darts across the road. My brother-in-law screeches on the brakes and gropes for his guns. I am transfixed by the exquisite cat in the glare of the headlight and

am relieved when it slips into the undergrowth long before the boys can pass up the .22. Both the incidents helped illustrate to me the precarious abundance of wildlife populations in Mizoram.

We spend the next several days exploring forest patches and staying with distant cousins near the small mountain-top hamlet of Hmuifang. It has a large area of evergreen montane forest, with vague similarities to the sholas that I grew up with in South India's hills. An escarpment provides a dramatic view that is marred by extensive road-widening work. I take the boys bird-watching while my brother-in-law wanders in a different direction with his guns. We spot several interesting Himalayan species and I get a chance to appreciate and photograph the landscapes. In the evenings we gather around a fire and observe the dazzling array of constellations unmarred by city lights.

When we return to Aizawl we are busy

with family gatherings and commitments before we leave for Kolkata and the other India. My wife's eight siblings and their families insist on throwing a feast where one of the family pigs is slaughtered. A butcher who is a family friend leads the exercise but the whole clan gets involved with the day-long preparation. Several of the men and boys help handle the pig, setting aside portions of meat for neighbours and cousins. A collection of adults gathers around the kitchen table to cut and peel vegetables over tea and gossip. I appreciate the binding strengths of the project, while stirring a pot of pork and later sharing in the feast. At our departure my brother-in-law reveals uncertain plans of giving up his guns for a camera when we next visit. As I did when I paid the bride price for my wife before we were married, I promise to return with her and our children as soon as circumstances in the turbulent economy allow. ●