

Back to Arunachal 2016

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Our group of Bretons, all members of the 'Société Bretonne du Rhododendron' has chosen for this new trek to go back to the western part of Arunachal Pradesh, the West Kameng District, near the Bhutanese border, an area we had already explored in 2007 and 2009. Leaving from Lubrang village this time, we hope we will be able to reach the Sela Pass, then botanize in the Chander/Quetum area as far as possible following the Poshing La trail. To avoid being stopped by the snow at the higher altitudes, we decide to start mid-May, quite aware that the blooming season of most species will be over but eager to discover these familiar places later in the season. Our group is more important this time: besides the former members (Gilles Rouau, Jacky Bronnec, Alain Bleogad, Béatrice et Gilles Stephan, Jacqueline and Jean-François Petton) two other friends have joined the usual party: Patrick Bellec a leader of previous travels in China and Hervé Le Bars, just retired.

Finally everybody is at Roissy on the evening of May 13th 2016, where, so as to be sure not to miss our plane the next day, we have decided to spend the night in a hotel, the government public security measures making things quite complicated.

The departure is scheduled at 11 o'clock and our arrival at Guwahati airport in the Assam plain is on May 15th at 7.30 am after two stop-overs in the middle of the night in Bombay and Calcutta.

In Guwahati somebody is waiting for us but it is not Anong, Oken's brother and right-hand man who led our three previous treks, but Siddhang Gurung, a smiling and relaxed young man who will accompany us during our stay. He tells us Anong is not with Abor Travels and Expeditions anymore: he organizes rafting expeditions in the Siang valley. Everything gets clearer; now we understand better Oken's evasive mails, for Anong was a pillar of the agency, a real leader during the expeditions; his replacement has not been something easy for sure....But Siddang (Sid) will be a perfect guide, calm, mindful and full of good humour which is all the best. And what's more he will be our cook as the person who was supposed to do the cooking had to stay in Sikkim because of the death of a member of his family. We haven't come to the Himalayas for the cooking, of course, but the high morale of the troops is also in the pot, really! There is only one thing left to hope: that Tashi the chief of Lubrang village who knows his mountains inside out and usually recruits our guides from surrounding villages, will be able to accompany us once more.

Well, here we are, so let's make the most of it! Three vehicles are going to take us to the Nameri Reserve where we are going to spend our first night in India; the motorway we had seen under construction in 2009 is now open and the time spent on the road is shorter even if the density of the traffic (cars, lorries, scooters, bicycles, pedestrians, animals) doesn't allow us to go much over 40km/h. Our three companions who discover India for the first time have cold sweats when they see the unreliable way of driving of the locals which seem no to follow any rule at all; on our way back we even came across an elephant going up the road against the flow of traffic !



At the beginning of the afternoon we arrive in Nameri where with shared pleasure we meet three of our former carriers; a shower and a nap are necessary (the change of planes during both stopovers the previous night have completely ruined our sleep!). The Eco-Camp has a few new cabins, smaller but of traditional style like the others, made of plated bamboo and a roof of rice straw. Nameri is a very popular nature reserve but as usual we will only take a walk along the Bhorelli River, hoping to catch sights of elephants; Bhorelli is the name that the Kameng River takes when it leaves Arunachal to enter the Assam plain. There are a great number of subtropical plants along the path: Buddhas lanterns (*Musaenda*), sweet potatoes, Arisaemas, orange-coloured arum lillies (*Amorphophallus bulbifer*), betel... As far as animals are concerned, no cobras or elephants (just their dung) but a great many singing birds. A group of young locals is celebrating in a cheerful way (a well washed down picnic, it seems) the Assamese festival.



Arisaema



Amorphophallus bulbifer

A long drive is awaiting us the next day as we have to go to the Pemaling hotel in Dirang; we hope that on the hillside along the road we will find a few plants of *dalhousiae rhabdotum*, a rhododendron which grows at quite a low altitude and which is in bloom at this time.



There is plenty of light at 4 am, so we leave early and we go through the Arunachalese border at Balukpong at 8 a.m. without any problem at all (no photos are allowed however). Just a stop to check our papers but not our tyres luckily!!! The petrol station is not open because of the lack of electricity but several brand new hotels are proof that the country welcomes more and more tourists: we enter the Kameng district and this road is the only one which leads to the Buddhist temple in Tawang in the extreme N.O of the country.

From Balukpong onwards we quickly gain altitude ; we should very quickly have a magnificent view of the Kameng river but this time the fog is too thick and we will get to the top of this steep-sided valley without being able to admire this beautiful river surrounded by a luxuriant vegetation(banana trees, tree-ferns, scheffleras...); there are a few strange plants to take notice of before we get to the other side which is much drier : small arum lilies (*Remusatia pumila*) with begonia leaves evoking a KKK meeting and of course, all kind of ferns.

A first stop at a road-side restaurant allows us to savour simple but nicely spicy food: noodles with onions and rice with an omelette.

We have to stop a second time (the first gear of one of the vehicles doesn't work any more) and we note that Bomdila is still as dirty as it was when we first went there in spite of all the signs encouraging people to keep the country clean!



In some places the road sides have been consolidated with concrete: there is not much to discover. However we will stop twice more for rhododendrons hanging from the hillside: a *R. edgeworthii* in bloom together with young *arboreum* and *sidereum* aff. And then two *dalhousiae rhabdotum* in bloom as well, but inaccessible; looking a bit higher some of us have the pleasure to find another beautiful *rhabdotum* and a *boothii*! The hunt has started at last...

When we arrive in **Dirang** at the Pemaling hotel which overhangs the town we will take photo after photo of this beautiful yellow and red bunch we have been looking for so long during the drive!



Another huge and colourful hotel has been built near the river since our last visit in 2009. It is supposed to be owned, like Pemaling by Oken's family. We will have the great honor of sleeping there on the way back from the first part of our trek.

While waiting for our supper we busy ourselves sorting our luggage so as to leave in the hotel what can be left there ; we don't want to laden the mules too much; a selection which needs a lot of concentration for we mustn't leave behind anything important...

Tuesday, May 17th: we leave for **Lubrang** (2900m); the road didn't exist in 2007 and has been recently tarmacked but a small mudslide forces us, given the state the tyres are in, to walk the last kms through a forest of *arboreum* which have been cut short and which are out of bloom and extremely small compared to the impressive ones which bordered the path before.



A *R. maddenii*, of an amazing height and remarkable scent makes us stop for a while then we reach the village, where, surprise surprise, a permanent tourist-house with a dining-room and toilets has been built; our five tents will be put up in the adjacent enclosure. Tashi, the chief of the village keeps going forward! He tells us that foreign tourists, mainly Japanese, are more and more numerous; they come to this area mainly in July, looking for orchids.



In the afternoon, during a short walk we can see that Lubrang still makes handcrafted paper; it is made of daphne bark; we also find the rhododendrons expected at this altitude: scented *edgeworthii*, a great number of very floriferous *keysii*, *neriiflorum* *phaedropum* and *triflorum* both nearly out of bloom.



R. thomsonii



R. keysii

In the gullies, which are always full of rhododendrons, our first *falconeri*, *argipeplum*, *hookeri*, *kendrickii*, *glaucophyllum*, and *thomsonii* with their young bluish shoots : it is a festival of leaves for there are no blooms ; they are over for most of them. There are big leaves too which may be natural hybrids of *kesangiae* by *falconeri*.

Finally, it only rained in the morning while we were in the car. Tashi told us he would accompany us during the second trek but it is his brother who will be our local guide up to the Sela Pass.



The next day, May 18th, serious things start. At the beginning there are the same rhododendrons as the day before up to the first flat area where the *kesangiae* are (out of bloom this time). A few big leaf hybrids can be seen again before the *hodgsonii*, with their superb trunks, become predominant.

The climbing gets harder and harder among numerous *argioplum* which are out of bloom as well; we can see their young tender shoots and their reddish peeling bark. Most of the specimens of this species have got green bristles on their stems but some plants have red ones. Such a sight is as beautiful as flowers!



Trunks and young shoots of *R. argioplum*

On the side of the track we can admire *glaucophyllum*, *cinnabarinum*, *hodgsonii* and a few beautiful *campylocarpum*; but then the rain and storm ruin our pleasure. Here, the forest has been devastated: the trunks of an incredible number of very big conifers (*Abies* and *Tsuga*) are scattered on the ground. We find the track again before Naga GG near a new military camp barded with barbed wire and then we walk through a single street village of Nepalese woodcutters.



On arriving at **Naga GG** (3700m) a few bright yellow spots of *campylocarpum* and purple ones of *wallichii* give some colour to this extremely grey and wet meadow; some small blue primroses (*P. bhutanica*, *P. glabra*) and tiny purple ones (*P. kingii*) still quite rare at the end of May, are the only perennials which, their feet in water, dare show their first flowers.



Primula kingii

We are soaking wet waiting for the arrival of the ponies carrying our camping equipment and we start exploring the surrounding area so as not to get cold while Tashi's brother hurries to light a fire.



R. fulgens



R. wallichii



R. campylocarpum

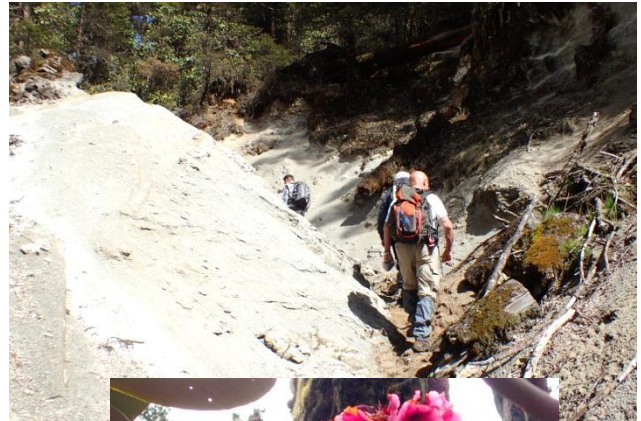
To please Jacky who dreams of seeing yellow *flinckii*, I go looking for the one we had found above the camp in 2007; there are two of them, their flowers withered, together with a few *fulgens* and *thomsonii*. Below, the *wallichii* are numerous and their colour vary but they have little indumentum. Obviously, here, *fulgens* and *campylocarpum* have given birth to some beautiful natural salmon pink hybrids.



The ponies arrive around 4.30 p.m. (here it gets dark early) with Sid who tells us he had problems on the way with the animals' harnesses. As a result, we are freezing and our shoes wet, on the first day of the trek. We have to wait for dinner until 8 pm; Beatrice, Patrick and myself finally give in and we get into our sleeping bags to warm ourselves up after the substantial sausage-chocolate appetizer which will comfort us every night.

As often, the next day starts under the sun; the way up is very steep and Gilles Rouau, although hardened to this, is not well: he has height sickness.

Argipeplum and *hookeri* soon give way to *hodgsonii* which still have quite a lot of flowers; their pinkish-white bark is very attractive. Some have obviously hybridized with *kesangiae*.



R. cinnabarinum



R. hodgsonii

Some *cameliiflorum* with their scaly young shoots and *megeratum*, both epiphytes, squat the mossy trunks; the *campylocarpum* in full bloom are gorgeous just like the *cinnabarinum* which are very variable (different shades of orange, their corollas more or less narrow). The *wightii* appear as well, first without a blotch or spots, then, higher up on the way, they have a little red blotch.



R. flinckii

Yellow *flinckii* are everywhere, their mass punctuated by a few bright coloured *fulgens*, then as we go higher, there are more and more *bhutanense* which show as well very variable forms.



R. hodgsonii

A first *anthopogon* shows that we are getting higher; at the sandy ledge level just before the *hodgsonii* forest (we had marvelled at their trunks covered in snow in 2007), the show is different: the big conifers have been devastated by fires and their charred skeletons stand against the sky; the rhododendrons are already reconquering the territory, in close ranks, immediately taking advantage of the light now available.



Sid

We stop for a while at exactly the same place where we waited for our lunch in icy wind and snow in 2007; this allows us to take advantage of the sun and the view, entrancing this time; the mixture of yellow flowers of the *flinckii* and *wightii* light up the slope on our left reminding us of the *lacteum* in Cangshan in China! What a thrill! Only a few dark red spots of the *thomsonii lopsangianum* punctuate this yellow area. We notice a salmon colored *flinckii* on the side (a natural hybrid on an evolution towards the pink form which grows at the Se La Pass much higher?) Does the altitude have an influence on this species colour? In the end we will realize this is not the case.



R. wightii





Lloydia flavonutans

One more steep slope and we are at the top where we will have a short break for a snack under praying flags slapping in the ice-cold wind. A tiny delicate liliacea with yellow flowers (*Lloydia flavonutans*) grows up there bravely, alone among rhodos with very small leaves, *R. lepidotum* and *fragariflorum*.



At this point our path comes across the stony road still under construction which one day will link Naga GG to the Se La Pass; we are going to follow it for some time, regretting the paths for it is not very nice to walk for hours on ballast! Our guide, having noticed that some of us are exhausted and have problems to keep walking, encourages the group, saying that higher up the roadworks will permit, if necessary, some vehicles to come and pick up the most tired walkers who would rather go back

to the hotel. Patrick has problems and can only go very slowly, catching his breath every 30 m, as advised by Jean-François who knows what he is talking about, as he had the same problem during former treks. That evening, three of us recognized having been tempted to put an end to the trip.

Some Nepalese, men and women, are busy breaking and sorting stones. On each side of the road there are masses of yellow *R. flinckii* and bright pink *bhutanense*.



R. bhutanense



We reach the pass (Dongching Pola Pass) under the sun; this time some sun-cream is necessary in this open environment where, nine years earlier, on April 26th, we braved an awful blizzard.

It is May 19th and we are delighted to have chosen a later date for this visit!!!

After walking past the traditional praying flags which can be seen at the summit of each pass, we go down towards a high altitude meadow, called Sangya, where the tents have already been set.



This mountain pasture, covered with blue primroses (*P. kongboensis*), perennials and not very big rhododendrons (*R. anthopogon*, *nivale*, *fragarifolium*) is mainly bordered by *bhutanense* but there are also some *wightii* and *flinckii* ; all are high altitude species ; they mix with one another in this area at 4000m and on the border of the meadow at least we are astonished to see a large number of natural hybrids(*bhutanense x flinckii*) and (*bhutanense x wightii*).

We have dinner at around 5h30 and after that we all retire to our lodgings for a long night's rest we have well deserved. We haven't had any rain all day but when we wake up, Sangya is all frozen.

No time to loose! A whole day of walking is awaiting us. Breakfast is more than frugal (salted popcorn and hot water). Luckily we always have some coffee powder with us... The guides are obviously in a hurry to leave. When we start, around 8, the weather is clear and we can see, far away the snowy summits.

Bushes of *wallichii* and their natural hybrids, their colour going from purple to pink or even white, give way to *fulgens* with their exfoliating bark and then to expanses of *lepidotum* still not in flower.





Some scarlet spots, which are *thomsonii lopsangianum*, emerge in this ocean of brown which evokes our heather covered moors in winter in Brittany. *R. anthopogon* become more and more numerous with plenty of seeds which we had scarcely seen before. The first we came across were hardly aromatic at all... Here the stars are dwarf rhododendrons; yet a few *flinckii*, *bhutanense* and even *hodgsonii* are still holding the ground.



The ponies overtake us in a very rocky gorge leading to a crest rich in perennials : white androsaces, gentians, some with yellow spotted leaves (*Swertia hookeri*) ready to open their greenish-yellow flowers, blue primroses (*P. gambleana*) or yellow ones (*P. calderiana*, *P. elongate*) or purple with plum colored leaves, hairy rosettes of yellow meconopsis (*M. paniculata*) and the first mandragores ! This area also has some very beautiful and floriferous *R. wallichii*.



The fog and drizzle are back and we guess more than see the masses of yellow *flinckii* (some are salmon coloured) and *whightii*, yellow as well. There are rare bright pink spots of *R. bhutanense* or purple ones of *wallichii*.

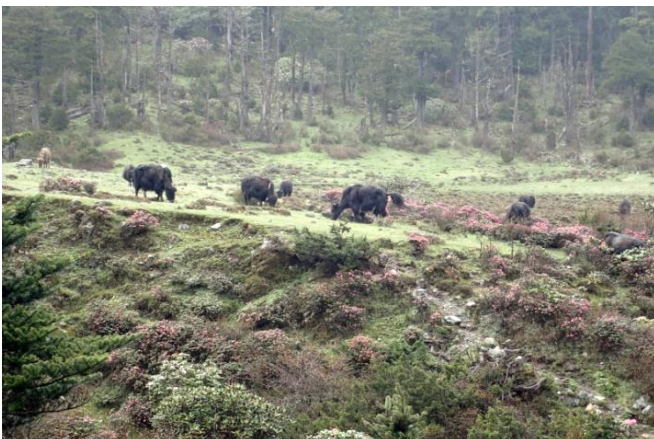
The border with Bhutan is simply marked with two round stones painted white.



The landscapes are grandiose. We will only meet two shepherds dressed in goat skins and wearing the inevitable rubber boots. Our trek in the rain is really endless with, in our line of sight, Tashi's brother and his rainbow coloured umbrella showing us the way.



R. wallichii



We follow a small brook which flows across a very wet meadow where yaks are grazing and we splash with them for quite a long time. On the banks, very beautiful willows with bright yellow catkins compete with the beauty of the numerous *anthopogon* in full bloom and the *bhutanense*.

We are supposed to camp near a lake which is still not visible...

We go up another steep stony and slippery path before taking a break together with a shepherd who gladly accepts to sit for some photos. How lonely he must feel in this desert, wet, cold but so grandiose place! Chomjuk lake is in sight and Patrick's ordeal, he still has breathing problems, ends after an eight hours' uninterrupted walk, instead of the five hours which had been announced in the morning! The night is going to fall and the lake disappears at times in the fog, the cloud cover being so low; a pink and grey symphony...



When we wake up the next day the lake is still drowned in the fog; we follow its bank for some time taking a path made of big slabs between which nestle white dwarf androsaces. When we reach the crest above the lake, Sid tells us that the praying flags which are planted there are in memory of a missing person (the flags are white) even though the corpse or the ashes of the deceased lie in the valley. The number of stakes (54 to 108 or even more) is related to the importance of the deceased.



We are worried about Patrick who has more and more difficulty going on. The fog turns to a drizzle and we put on our capes again. As for Sid, he has an original equipment which is very protective: his biker suit with a hood! We can't see much; the lakes follow one another, the rhodos are the same as the previous day... The alpine plants are somewhat different according to the side of the hill: androsaces, sedums, poppies with prune sheens on their leaves, all kind of primroses (*P. elongata*, *minutissima*...).



Between two fog patches we catch sight of a green valley where a river flows. Some snow appears for the first time on the side of the path. We have just enough time to swallow a hard-boiled egg and a bowl of cold rice on the side of the umpteenth lake before we start again for the temperature is rather low. There aren't any steep paths but we progress slowly and are very cold.

To everybody's surprise we arrive at the camp at 12h30. We were supposed to reach Sugang, (3900m), our destination, much later! But Sid and the guides, having noticed the weather is changing for the worse, take the decision not to go any further that day and to pitch the tents as fast as possible before the downpour; a wise decision in spite of our bitter disappointment, for the rest of that day's itinerary was difficult and the bad weather which was settling, would be unforgettable:



We had to take refuge in the tents at 1p.m. and couldn't get out before the next morning at 6!!! We had to sit and wait until the storm finally calmed down as the violent winds made our tents stick to our sleeping bags. Rain and wind only stopped around midnight.

In spite of all this, our courageous guides managed to bring us some hot soup and rice in our tents. The cereal bars we take with us during each trek are also very precious in such circumstances.

In the morning the tents were surrounded by water and mud; although they were new at the start, some have suffered more than others. But it is not raining any more. Luckily, for the troops are not very fresh: Patrick has a bad back, Jacky has a headache and a bellyache, Alain is not very well, one of the guides is ill and Jean-François plays the doctor again three years after retiring. This improvised camp is called **Langkarg** (4000m).

We leave Langkarg for Langethang (4200m) at 7 a.m. on Sunday, May 22nd. There is a succession of lakes, stone paths going up and down. We go past Sugang where we were supposed to camp the day before but we don't stop. Not many people here either, just a hut inhabited by a 'lonesome yakboy'; nobody else and still the same rhododendrons we saw before since we keep at roughly the same altitude. However we see some very beautiful *R. wightii* with a well-marked red spot.



R. wightii

The good surprise is that Patrick is fine again, nearly from one day to the other; the altitude is quite the same but he can walk much better. And it will stay like that!

What a relief! For himself first, of course. Getting used to altitude is really something unpredictable from one person to another...



We arrive very early at **Langethang** (4200m) disappointed for the second time not to go any further for it seems there are not any new plants in the area; Gilles Rouau and myself try to convince Sid to go a bit further but we understand that the guides are happy to stop there : they have at their disposition an uninhabited hut where they will be able to cook out of the rain ; we must say that after the preceding night it is not a luxury, for they all sleep packed in the same tent!



Gentianella



Meconopsis paniculata



Mandragora caulescens

Our disappointment being obvious, Tashi's brother suggests taking those who feel like it to explore the area after a snack (popcorn and biscuits); we are losing weight every day. During this short outing we will find beautiful perennials: pink, purple, blue primroses, gentians and gentianellas, meconopsis and a few mandragores hidden among the rocks. As for the rhododendrons, *fragariflorum*, *nivale* and surprise, when we arrive at the top, an ocean of *bhutanense* covering the opposite side, the promise of a wonderful view in a few weeks' time when they are in bloom.



A festive meal in the evening at 5pm in the hut around a fire: rice (once more and as always), vegetables and French fries! The following night is quite windy and stormy; not to forget the rain.

As we wake up, the sun shines brightly and bathes the mountains. We must go to Bangajang (4000m) the last stopping place before the Sela Pass. This time, everybody is fine, the bearded men impatient to shave, ready to seduce the local girls, that's for sure. The fine weather will last half a day for once; this is great as we are going to go across impressive and very different landscapes: lakes, hill sides covered quite exclusively with rhododendrons, masses of fallen rocks, magnificent views on the summits covered in snow.



Little by little the landscape becomes more barren as we join the Lancaster road, a stony path which leads to the Sela Pass; although the altitude is high and there are snow patches on the side of the track, it is hot at midday. We follow the road for kilometres; it takes us to an empty military camp; the soldiers who will turn out to be very friendly, have gone to get a mountain bike race ready; a race which will start from the pass. They tell us that the Sela pass which we can see on the other side isn't as near as it looks: 25 more km to go!



We all take photos (they are very proud of their bikes) before going away quickly for a new thunderstorm is approaching. When we get to **Bangajang**, the tents are already pitched near a stone shepherd's hut falling into ruin with its typical central fire place.

Another hut, much bigger, half wood, half stone and covered with metal sheets maintained in place by stones, will serve as a kitchen and a dormitory for our guides. From the camp, we can see tree covered hills, the snowy crests of the Gorichen and the Jang valley at the bottom (the last stop of our Mago trek in 2009).



We had planned to spend two nights in Bangajang to botanize in the area but as the vegetation is scarce -only very beautiful clumps of primroses (*P. calderiana*) in blue and yellow shades, *R. anthopogon* and *fragariflorum*- we insist with Sid to change the programme: we will leave the next day, first on foot to the Sela pass: a three hours walk, Sid says, and we will be met by Tashi and two other drivers to take us with our bags to the Pass. The ponies and the camping stuff will go down to Lubrang on the road. We will follow by car after stopping at the Sela.

Agreed! For once we will have a day's advance on the initial programme.

We leave Bangajang early the next day to get to the road under construction; the hot pancakes Sid has made for breakfast are very much appreciated by all of us for popcorn in the morning is absolutely no proper food for Breton people! There is ice on the tents but the weather promises to be sunny and everybody is in a good mood thinking we are about to reach our goal. The landscapes are once again wonderful. Near another military camp on the side of another lake we stop to admire a dense population of gorgeous *wightii*; some of them have a beautiful blotch.





R. wightii



Natural hybrid



R. bhutanense

Some *R. bhutanense* keep them company; both species hybridizing easily, the result is a happy collection of not very homogenous but really attractive plants, the respective characters of the parents being more or less obvious. The vegetation slowly gives way to mineral as we go up towards the pass. A bit further on, the hillsides along the road are mined and stuffed with green fuses waiting to be lit. A few construction site machines are parked on the road side; as we pass a lorry going down, we fear that the workers who come out of it at this precise place have come to dynamite the rocks. What's more our guides and ponies who are catching up with us are totally unaware of the possible danger.



Luckily the lorry starts again without any explosion happening. Our guides who had left after us, once they had taken down the tents, meet us in this desolate place where the snow has not yet completely melted; some of them who had always lived in the valley had never seen any of it before!



We will walk a few more kilometers before getting in the cars which have come to meet us with Tashi. The rain starts falling and apart from the rocks we can't see anything. Everybody is pleased not to have to walk for the last 8 km left before we reach our goal... The **Sela Pass** (4200m) where Jean-François still hopes to have a few surprises with rhododendrons.

The arrival at the pass is bleak and very disappointing. The rain at such an altitude is rather freezing, the lake is surrounded by barricades which weren't there in 2009. There are soldiers everywhere and quite a lot of tourists who want to visit the famous temple of Tawang (which is just about 100 km from the Sela Pass); it is a favourite destination for Indian people. In a few years' time the tour operators offering this trip have become more and more numerous.



The Sela Pass lake



In spite of the weather forecast which is not tempting, we venture to explore the area as we wait for a dish of noodles and a beer to be served in a 'restaurant' or rather a wooden hut at the lake side. Nothing interesting! In the end hail puts us off completely; the wood stove where the cooking is done doesn't warm us as the window is open.



In a hurry to leave, we go past the coloured frame which signals the pass without even stopping. At the sixth bend of this impressive twisting road which takes us back to Dirang, a first stop allows us to see that the station of pink *flinckii* is still intact in spite of the frequent landslides that happen on the steep mountain side above the road; a few specimens of *fulgens* have also survived but just a few *wightii* plants are still there.



Pink *R. flinckii*

We will pose a second time a bit lower down next to some *thomsonii* with dark red flowers and *cinnabarinum* with their hardly flared corollas in orange or nearly yellow shades depending on the plants. On this strategic military road you are not allowed to get out of the vehicles for kilometres; we will then have to wait some time before being able to botanize and loosen our legs again.



R. dalhousiae rhabdotum

At a much lower altitude, at about 2600m, we catch sight of blooming bunches of *R. dalhousiae rhabdotum* hanging from the mountain side along the road, their large yellow flowers with red stripes can be seen from far away but most of the time they are out of reach. The *boothii* we are also looking for at these altitudes are much more difficult to catch sight of, the size of their corollas, yellow as well, being much smaller and what's more, they may be out of flower by now. A last nice trio, *edgeworthii*, *rhabdotum*, and *arboreum* and we are back on the road to **Dirang**. We arrive quite late at the luxury hotel 'Norphel Retreat'; it looks brand new from outside and half-finished inside. It is four stories high but only the ground floor and the first floor are habitable for now. The basement is full of water and the lift is being built.



Our gang of dishevelled tramps, out of the mountains after a week of wet camping and very hasty washing, is welcomed by elegant, obliging and smiling staff; as we are the only (and probably the first customers) they are all at our service. The showers more or less hot according to the rooms are very much appreciated.

Our guide Sid has to spend the next day, Wednesday, May 26th, preparing the second part of our trek which is going to take place in the Chandler area (the itinerary is to be discussed with Tashi, there is food to buy and carriers to hire as we won't have any ponies this time.

An outing has been organized for us on that day: Sid accepts to drive us back towards Tomel at the same place where the day before we had seen an *arboreum*(?) with red flowers next to *edgeworthii* and a *dalhousiae*. This *arboreum* (?) still in bloom at the end of May rouses the curiosity of Gilles Rouau who regrets we didn't try and learn a bit more about it. The *arboreum* blooming season has been over for a long time, their young leaves are already well developed; is it really an *arboreum*? At only about 20km from Dirang, the place shouldn't be too difficult to find again and we will take advantage of this to stop near a bridge where the day before we had caught sight of very attractive blooming *Maddenia*.

The drivers who were supposed to come and pick us up at 10 am at the hotel, keeps us waiting until 11.15. Having a walk around the hotel area, we discover large kiwi orchards; here, they make wine and juice with it. There are also walnut and apple trees. In fact, Sid has forgotten to wake up and all the preparations for the trek have still to be done; he decides however to come with us for the outing.

The *arboreum* with red flowers is really strange: the back of its leaves show rather ugly pustules or swellings which to my mind are only the sign of an insect attack but the others don't agree with me. On the way back we stop for a meal at the same place where we had a cup of tea the previous day (delicious tofu, noodles, ketchup and coca-cola) Surprise! On the slope opposite, there is another rhodo with red flowers ; one of our guides, Obang, in spite of our protests, for the slope is steep, climbs up and proudly brings back a branch with red flowers ; similar to the first one but without the pustules. The corolla is without spots. The thought that it could be an *arboreum nilagiricum* will germinate in Gilles's mind on the way back. The Pocket Guide is searched that night and Gilles's idea is not contradicted.

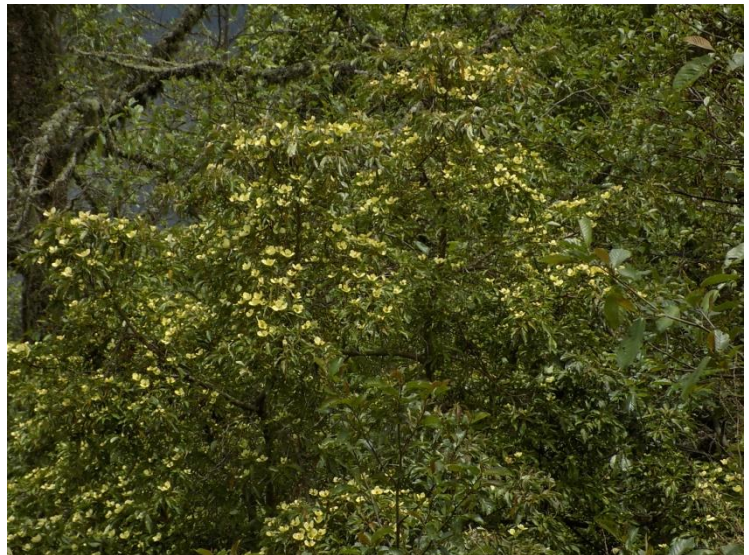


Parochetus communis

The area where we stop near the bridge is very rich in all kind of plants: blue clover of the Himalyas, arisaemas, agapaetes, indigo plants, ferns, white or light pink *Maddenia*, or even, maybe, *dalhousiae dalhousiae*.

Back at the hotel, as Sid spends the rest of the afternoon shopping, we prepare our bags, sorting the things we won't need for this second trek. We were supposed to leave Dirang (1800m) for Thungri (3100m) early on Thursday, May 26th but Tashi and his pick-up van loaded with food and all the stuff we need, arrive at the hotel at only 10 o'clock ; he is followed by two other cars in which we pack eagerly.

On the way we recognize *Cornus capitata*, huge yellow spots, very visible on the slopes but as the van has problems we must try not to stop as each time we must push to start again.



The village of **Chander** (2700m) which was so full of life in 2007 is quite deserted today and disfigured by the construction of a military road which will go up to Quetum; every year military drills take place in the area. We get there around 1pm. The magnolia-pollards which we had loved on our previous trips are under threat of disappearing pretty soon.

Just after Chander during a short lunch break in a Breton drizzle, Gilles catches sight of a snake having a nap next to an impressive *sidereum aff!* The track keeps at just about the same altitude for kilometres, so we are allowed another very short stop near the spot of *virgatum* (out of bloom). At this level, the vegetation is rather thick and rich; the speed at which we move allows us to identify old acquaintances: *falconeri*, *kesangiae*, big leaf hybrids, *keysii*, *neriiflorum phaedropum*, *Barbata*.



The fog has replaced the drizzle as we reach Thungri (3100m) around 2 pm. While the guides get busy pitching the tents in the mud we walk back on the track to explore the surrounding area.



Pleione hookeriana



R. leptocarpum



R. keysii

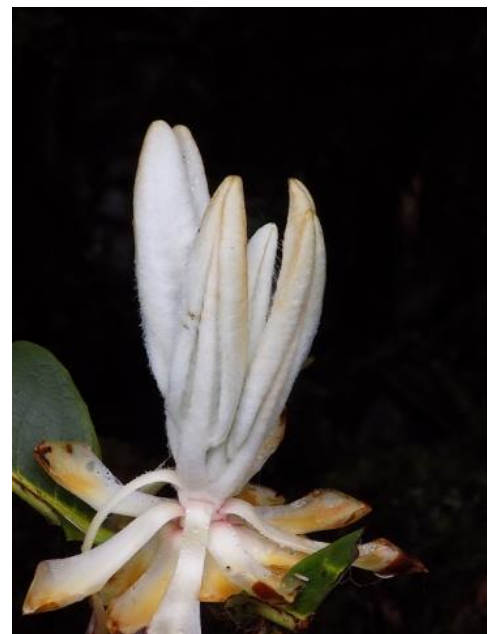
We are impressed not only by the majestic osmond ferns which colonize the pastures but also by the great number of epiphytes plants hanging from the trunks of big trees- vacciniums, schisandras, orchids(*coelogyne flaccida*, *Pleione hookerii*), cream colored *megeratum* with gorgeous reddish shoots, *leptocarpum*; we had never noticed this last plant here, neither in 2007 or in 2009 but we had found it in 2011 in High Dibang(East Arunachal) ; it is ready to open its strange flower buds and we will finally see a plant in full bloom at the end of the trek at Mandala. In the area there are also plenty of *Enkianthus deflexus*, clethras, scheffleras, huge arisaemas and the delicate *Primula lacerata* etc...



The rain starts falling again and the only thing to do is go back to the camp where a good surprise is awaiting us. A multicolored mess-tent has been put up, large enough for all of us to sit there and discuss around a cup of tea, a meal or a drink whatever the weather. What's more, our porters will be able to sleep there if not in comfort, at least without getting wet. Tashi and Sid have decided it was better to have porters rather than ponies for this second trek.

On the menu of this first evening: hot tea and biscuits. The mud is everywhere and as usual, the leeches are coming as fast as they can ; for once they will be able to change their usual menu, yak blood, for the one that runs in our tender occidental calves . Welcome to Chander!

We don't have to think twice the next day before fleeing as fast as possible (7 o'clock). We have to get to Quetum (3700m). The vegetation is luxuriant but most flowers are dead. Only *keysii* (a bright orange) and *megeratum* are blooming. *Lindleyi* and *edgeworthii* still show a few faded corollas. The big leaves (*falconeri*, *kesangiae*) are out of bloom and are now showing their gorgeous golden or silver candles.





The *argioplum* also have a beautiful look with their green or red hairy stems with scarlet scales, their delicate green young leaves pointing towards the light! To say nothing of the *hookeri* with their yellow calyx and red heart gathered in bunches which are worth any existing flower. And what about the barks, all of them fascinating: rough or smooth, exfoliating in strips or in rosettes, they vie in beauty with one another: golden brown shades for *falconeri* and *sidereum aff.*, purplish pink for *argioplum* and *barbatum*, green and orange for *neriiflorum phaedropum*; the most variable being without a doubt *hookeri* (*Thomsonia*) its trunk can be either bluish grey or orangy pink.



Lost in this forest of rhododendrons are some small shrubs with a beautiful foliage: sorb trees or maple trees... and of course conifers (most of them *Abies densa*; a fallen branch allows us to admire their bright red wood, more spectacular even than a *Prunus serrula*).



Perennials as well: *Podophyllum aurantiocaulum* with hanging flowers hidden under the leaves, arisaemas of an impressive size...

Climbing plants: *Schisandra rubrifolia* with scarlet flowers, *Clematis* sp.

We reach Manboula, a pasture where, for the first time, we had seen the pale yellow flowers of a large *sidereum* aff. They are, as we were expecting it, nearly all faded. Our porters overtake us, loaded but happy. The path we follow when not metalled is extremely muddy; some rhodo trunks used as cross-pieces allow us to walk over the muddiest places.



On arriving at **Quetum**, the splendid *hookeri* we had marvelled at in 2009 because of its majesty and floribundity is still there but it is out of bloom; another fellow plant is in the limelight this time showing superb and unusual red calyces; they are usually of a greenish-yellow shade and last long enough to make you believe it is a second blooming.

Contrary to its neighbour its wood buds are green, not green and red and its wood is smooth and bluish. Nature allows itself some fancy variations that man would so much love to be able to classify!



Green calyxes or red ones on different plants of *R. hookeri* which are out of bloom.

For the porters who have set up the camp for two consecutive nights, the following day is a day's rest. In spite of a whole day of trekking they feel like singing! As for us, a cup of tea, a nap, a drink and a hot meal, it would feel like the club Med if it weren't for our friends the leeches which desperately try to join us in the tents!



Next day's walk promises to be long and difficult as we hope to reach or even go further than **Changla** (3900m), before going back to our camp in Quetum and all this in one day. We would like to find the *succothii* spot seen in 2009, a spot the previous expeditions didn't notice.



In spite of an unexpected bright sun, the climbing is difficult right from the start and will stay so; luckily Patrick is in excellent shape again.

The harvest is very rich on that day; at the top of the first slope, the *sherriffii* seen in 2009 is still there. We will find others on the way but much less typical and with a much lighter indumentum.



R. sherriffii

There is a multitude of *falconeri* in the area: they all have a superb orange indumentum. On the way we will find: *megeratum*, *cinnabarinum*, some yellow, some orange coloured, *glaucophyllum tubiforme*, *fulgens*, *keysii*, *argipeplum* (concerning this plant we will see an astonishing specimen with young cream coloured and hairy shoots), *hodgsonii* still in full bloom (dark red). The red flowers of a tiny and discreet ericacea (*Gaultheria trichophylla*) which grows here as a ground cover.



R. hodgsonii (on the left) with *R. argipeplum*





R. cinnabarinum



Gaultheria trichophylla

The pollard which is the support of the first pink *flinckii* we came across seven years ago is still there; the round shaped leaves and their small size make me wonder: the Mago trek made us realize that *R. flinckii* can be very variable (the leaves, flowers, indumentum) but the hypothesis of being in front of a *tsariense* is plausible.

When we arrive at Changla, a zone of pastures, the woods are not so dense and they leave room for groves of *campylocarpum*, *flinckii* and *sherriffii*. Gilles Rouau and Jacky decide to go a bit further than Changla to try and find the *succothii*, but without any luck. After much exertion, they will see however a group of beautiful *campylocarpum* with a very healthy foliage and in full bloom.



R. campylocarpum

We will go back on the same track; the rain starts before we reach Quetum. The camp stands on top of a rocky mound surrounded by a very wet area where big leaf rhododendrons (*kesangiae*) grow as epiphytes in gigantic viburnums. However, the river where our porters try and fill a few cans of water is nearly dry. The leeches are waiting for us of course.

Apart from our bright-coloured tents, the only spots of colour which appear through the fog that night are some *kesangiae* in different shades of pale pink, white cassiopes and a second *hookeri* with red calyces.



R. kesangiae



Cassiope

The next day, Sunday, May 29th, to go back to **Thungri** we have to follow the same itinerary as two days before; the track is bordered with big-leaf rhododendrons: *falconeri*, *sidereum aff.*, *magnificum*. It is one of the richest region in the world for big-leaf rhododendrons but they are too young or too big, we can't reach the seeds. We notice some imposing *magnificum* with leaves which have a margin that is clearly browner and also a mysterious little conifer with blue cones.



The rain starts falling again after our snack-break in the clearing of Mamboula and the way back on the path gorged with water seems endless... Our clothes are wet in spite of the ponchos supposed to protect us. On arriving at 1.30pm a nice hot soup is served in our tents. Dry clothes and a nap are very welcome as well. The place where the camp has been set up is the same as on our outward journey: we drabble in spite of the trenches supposed to canalize the water around the tents. The porters are still smiling in spite of the difficulties encountered.

The next day, Monday May 30th, the awakening in the rain is rather sinister. It has been decided that the vehicles will come and pick us up early to take us down to the valley in **Muna**; we will start from there to explore the slope of a mountain facing Chander. This area near **Mandala** (3000m), unknown to us, seems rather tempting. At first we wait patiently for the drivers and, as the weather gets better, we decide to start walking...The time they will take to drive up from the valley on this untarmacked bumpy path, that they pack the equipment and the luggage, we will be free to botanize.

In the end, it is a beautiful harvest of rhododendrons: *megeratum*, *neriiflorum*, *phaedropum*, *falconeri*, *triflorum*, *edgeworthii*, *lepidotum*, *kesangiae*, *magnificum*, *arboreum*, *cinnamomeum*... not to forget the scheffleras, *enkianthus*... We also hoped to find some *griffithianum* (seen here in 2007 and 2009).



Scheffleras



R. triflorum



Little by little the sky gets clearer and lets appear the still snowy slopes of the nearby mountains.

We finally get in the vehicles around 10.30pm and we arrive in the valley near the bridge in Muna without seeing any *griffithianum*! We are quite disappointed as this species is rather rare in the wild. On the way up we had noticed some wonderful *Cornus*; a few stops to take photos enable us to confirm that these huge trees covered in yellow flowers that we could see from far away were really *C. capitata*.

At a roadside restaurant near Muna we have some food and a beer while Sid's team goes shopping and fills up the petrol tanks before having a snack in Dirang. The river is beautiful but the people who live on its banks use it as a dump (our beer cans will be thrown away in the water under our eyes). We admire beautiful red birds. It is hot and dry, the vegetation is Mediterranean (albizzias, pines...). We wait a long time for our guides.



The road up to Mandala is quite narrow but recently asphalted.

We arrive rather early, in the middle of the afternoon, luckily, for the heat is unbearable as there are eight of us in Oken's car; he got it back at the end of a trek which took place a week before in Mechuka: a Dutch and two New-Zealanders were looking for *arisaemas* but the trek was interrupted because of snow, rain and disagreement. We have to sit on the arm-rests to fit in the car! I catch a glimpse of some bright yellow orchids in the trees, Gilles Rouau sees *dalhousiae rabdotum* and possibly *griffithianum* but we can't stop: the camp has to be set up before nightfall which is around 4.30pm here.



On arriving at Mandala (3000m) the sky is still dazzling; the landscape is grandiose and apocalyptic at the same time: a fire has devastated the primary forest of gigantic *Tsuga dumosa*, leaving the burnt down trunks of these giants pointing towards the sky their shortened silhouette. Planks strewn on the ground give evidence that the remnants are now cut up by woodcutters directly on the spot, under the supervision of forest officers whose lodge can be seen nearby. Sid tells us this is a preserved area.

Vigorous thickets of *R. arboreum* and *kendrickii* are taking over the space, taking profit of the light the black *Tsuga* phantoms can no longer confiscate. A few maples displaying their bright scarlet samaras have taken advantage of the forest fire to grow faster and higher than their neighbours. Some perennials (possible liliiums and polygonatums) are just getting out of earth.

Tashi and Sid drive back to Mandala (about 3km away) and Mechopso to have a look round for tomorrow's outing.

We don't start early the following morning as planned because of the rain; we prefer to wait until it stops. To make up for lost time, instead of following the road, Tashi makes us cut through the hairpin bends of the road and climb the very steep slope. We notice, far away from the camp, a *keysii* of a colour which is out of the ordinary: more of a yellow shade than orange, as usual.

Those of us who go for it will immediately be attacked by leeches. A bit higher, an arborescent *barbatum* exhibits its remarkable trunk.

Tashi had promised a rich area and we won't be disappointed : the *Abies densa* with big blue cones we had come across a few days earlier is here as well ; *schisandra* with pale yellow flowers, *clematis*, very floriferous *berberis* and as far as rhododendrons are concerned, small wonders : *lepidotum*, some with small pale yellow flowers, some with purple flowers, probable hybrids of the two we had seen previously with pink flowers. A little before the village of Mandala, some epiphytes *Maddenias* are too far away so that we can't identify them , *keysii*, and mostly, an impressive population of *kesangiae* showing their young shoots , with an underside a golden fawn shade which is superb. Exceptional, these *kesangiae*! They reseed themselves as fast as they can: good proof of their floribundity as the plants we have seen are still quite young.



R. lepidotum



R. kesangiae

Stout non epiphytic *camelliiflorum* raise their surprising young foliage with purplish pink scales whereas the *megeratum* have superb red brick leaves.



R. camelliiflorum



R. megeratum

Another surprise: the diversity of the indument at the back of the *falconeri* leaves, noticed by Jacky: classical bright orange for most, milk chocolate for some; it is a possible hybridization but with what other species? There are only two big-leaf rhododendrons which can grow here: *falconeri* and *kesangiae* and none has a chocolate coloured indumentum. The few natural hybrids they have produced are easily recognizable; the mystery isn't cleared until we get back: according to K. Rusforth, the hybrids of *falconeri* x *kesangiae* show a chocolate indumentum.

As for the perennials: a *Podophyllum (aurantiocaule)* with short bronze green leaves, their back ribbed and shiny is noticed by Gilles Stephan in a ditch after the whole group has gone past it without seeing anything. *Disporum*, an elegant liliacea, *Lepisorus*, a strange thread-like fern, *Smilacina*, some kind of Solomon's seal....





The old village of **Mandala** is hanging on a hill; it's a traditional village of stock-breeders and shepherds, made of wood huts and plaited bamboos with piles on the declivity. The roofs are made of planks on which they pile large stones. The road which is being built and which passes under the village has given birth to a one street village which shelters the workers and woodcutters who are building it.

They are temporary houses for obviously their inhabitants will follow the progress of the construction site. They are made of boards as well but they have metal-sheet roofs and their surroundings are strewn with cans, plastic and scrap metal...

We come across a smiling shepherd in a traditional costume, wearing goat skins on his back and thorax and a boiled-wool hood with horns.



We take a break for a meal before taking the road down towards Mechopso and this will allow us, before the group separates, to take some photos as a souvenir. Most of the group turns back towards the camp staying on the road; Jacky, Hervé, Gilles Rouau and myself decide to keep going towards Mechopso for some time. We may discover some *Maddenia* at this altitude, who knows? The landscape we discover is really worth some more walking: a very green slope showing, like a patchwork, the remnants of a primary forest (majestic *Tsuga dumosa*) lost among a dense population of *arboreum*, *kendrickii*, *keysii* and *clethras* which look as if they are going to conquer the territory which is left available. We are rewarded with the discovery of a *leptocarpum* which is beginning to open its flowers. A first, as far as I am concerned. Another new plant: a large white anemone with mauve petal undersides.



R. keysii



R. leptocarpum

On the way back we follow the road, scrutinizing in vain the ditches, looking for *podophyllum* at the beginning and then for mauve *R. lepidotum* which are not easy to find as the plants in flower are rare. What's more, they grow isolated, hanging over the rocks which are above the road in well drained places. We come across an obvious hybrid of *kendrickii x barbatum* as wide as it is high, and a beautiful *Enkianthus deflexus*.



Enkianthus deflexus

We discover a very small plant in the vertical face of the mountain which is made of clayey earth and lichens, a *R. lepidotum* perhaps, with tiny leaves. We are back at the camp a little after 5pm. It hasn't rained since we left!

Wednesday, June 1st: it is the end of our trek; we must go down to the valley and be at our hotel around 12.



After breakfast we take another group photo, this time for the Abor Country Agency

Then we walk back for a few kilometres on the road to Dirang while our equipment is being packed and embarked into the vehicles.

We notice a few *lepidotum*, two of them with mauve flowers, a young specimen with its foliage showing similarities with both *R. thomsonii* and *R. sherriffii*, some *grande* and a bit lower down a *dalhousiae rhabdotum*, some *edgeworthii*. In the area, there are quite a lot of scheffleras, young magnolias and numerous species of perennials (arisaemas, pyrolas). Later on, a short stop allows us to get out of the vehicles to admire some dendrobium with yellow flowers which grow as epiphytes on the trees along the road.



Different species of Arisaemas



Dendrobium



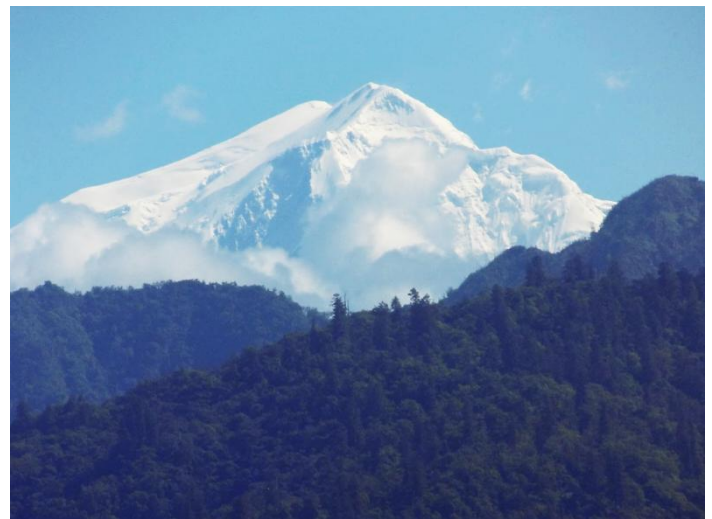
R. edgeworthii

We are in Dirang-which is very busy- before midday but Tashi insists on inviting us to his place on the other side of the town to eat momos (bought in a shop) with beer and tea. The road is being tarmacked, so on the way there we waste 45mn and on the way back, 1h30mn..... We feel ill at ease when we are witnesses of an altercation between Sid and one of our porters; finally we reach the Pemaling Hotel, but at 4.30pm only. We have to shower, sort our things and tidy them up; we haven't got much time left and the nap we had been looking forward to has to be forgotten!

In the evening around 6pm we meet Tashi, his brother, one of the drivers and Sid in the restaurant of the hotel to say goodbye. A cake 'Trek 2016' has been made by the hotel staff.

On the day after, June 2nd, a long drive down to Dirang in the valley and the **Mahseer Balipara Reserve** is awaiting us.

We leave at 7 am in a beautiful weather. Hardly 15mn later an unexpected traffic jam stops us in Dirang-Bosti: yes! Even far away from everywhere, the only North/South Road of the Kameng can be overloaded... We will have to push once more the pick-up truck; it still has a starter problem. The next stops will be first for a quick photo of the snowy Mount Gorichen and then, another one 3km before Bomdila when we catch sight of a *dalhousiae rhabdotum*, hanging as always from the mountain side; one of our drivers hurries and after some acrobatics, he gets us a superb branch covered in flowers.



We take advantage of this to loosen our legs a bit, walking for some time along the road looking for some *boothii* which grow at these heights and that we haven't found yet this year. In vain. However, Gilles Rouau discovers at last a few specimens of *griffthianum* and as for Beatrice, she finds a tiny orchid with mauve flowers (*Doritis taenialis*). The last stop will take place at the level of a spot of cardiocrinums in full bloom which grow in great number on each side of the road on steep slopes.



Doritis taenialis



Cardiocrinum

Two and a half hours have been necessary to cover the 27kms which separate Dirang from Bomdila. From then on we will go without stopping towards **Mahseer** (200m) and we will reach it at 2.30pm.



Mahseer Balipara

Oken arrives at just about the same time as we do, his arm in a sling because he broke his collarbone in a motorbike accident. We are received in this tea plantation by a couple: Leslie, a British woman born in India and her husband who is of Indian origin. Four of our porters leave immediately towards Itanagar. As for us, after a nice lunch and a refreshing bath (since reaching the Assam plain, the temperature is about 34°), we will fill the rest of the afternoon in a very nice way, walking across the park of this natural reserve, planted with old tropical trees and full of animals more or less noisy : monkeys, birds, colourful butterflies, huge snails, dragonflies, fireflies...)



We discover that this haven of peace is protected by barbed wire and that soldiers firing in bursts, very close, trouble this heavenly atmosphere.

The next day, June 3rd, we must go to Guwahati airport (a 4 hours' drive); we wait for the cars for more than 2 hours and in spite of the motorway being finished, we get there just in time to have our luggage checked in; we have just a few bananas and apples as a meal. Oken honoured us with his company down to the very last minute.

Finally we won't regret this choice of a later date to botanize in these places we had partly explored previously: we have been able to go everywhere without being blocked by the snow; we have admired blooms in late flowering species such as *R. anthopogon*, *bhutanense*, *campylocarpum*. The beauty of the young foliage in earlier species has largely compensated the fact that their flowers were over and the perennials, usually hardly out of the ground, have shown us their first corollas, a promise of wonderful pastures covered in flowers in June and July. One could stay in these mountains for a whole year without ever getting bored.

