

ARUNACHAL PRADESH  
HIDDEN HIMALAYA  
TRIP REPORT  
2025

*Meconopsis paniculata*

### Day 1 14 June To India

Flight timings were unkind, but at least I was in Delhi, smoothly through immigration, the bag turned up and a large cappuccino follow to ease the lack of sleep. A second flight took me right across the country to Guwahati in Assam where I met up with Alister and the driver to begin our slow drive through the lush vegetation of the tropical countryside. I dozed most of the way it must be said. Bad traffic around Guwahati had delayed us a bit and we arrived after nightfall into a pleasant tourist complex at Bhalukpong on the border with Arunachal Pradesh.

### Day 2 To Dirang

I was awake early, but there again since India is on one time zone, Assam wakes up two hours before Delhi! The flowery gardens were full of bird song, but breakfast was still some way off so I feasted on last night's leftover onion pakoras and coffee until it was time. The sun was out by the time we left, and things were warming fast. Almost immediately we started to climb, stopping briefly for a population of tall *Arundina graminifolia*, a wild orchid, but one that is now cultivated in just about every tropical garden in the world. The vegetation was lush and sub-tropical for much of the way, and on one bend there was a tree festooned with *Coelogyne corymbosa*, with lovely cascades of white flowers. Our route entered a drier valley with lots of *Pinus roxburghii* and even flowering naturalised *Opuntia* cacti.

After lunch the road began to climb steadily reaching over 2500 metres when we started to see *Rhododendron maddenii* in flower with *Cautleya gracilis* below it. The rhodos continued the other side of a pass with some decent plants, but more striking were the spikes of *Cardiocrinum giganteum* that burst from the vegetation. On the rocky banks we also found a few creamy *Vanda undulata*. It is monsoon season and by mid-afternoon the rain had arrived, and we completed the journey to Dirang without stopping, the town nestled on a bend in the river with a large monastery perched above.

The remoteness of Arunachal Pradesh means just getting into the area takes some time, but tomorrow we were going higher where there would be many more flowers to see.



*Cardiocrinum giganteum*

### Day 3 Mandala

An interesting plant day with some beautiful flora. We began in the foothills climbing up into areas of woods and farms. We stopped first for a colony of *Arisaema concinnum* with striped spathes and many-rayed leaves together with *A. tortuosum* with its peculiar, upturned spadix. Next, as we rounded a bend we were confronted with one of the loveliest orchids I've ever seen. There dangling over the rocks were the gorgeous flowers of *Dendrobium falconeri* a blend of pinks with a big splash of golden yellow and deepest purple on the lip. More were found a bit further on including one absolute stunner dangling from the mosses. Close to this were big patches of *Coelogyne corymbosa* encrusting the rocks and there was the bonus of several still in fresh condition with crisp white flowers marked with gold. A third lovely orchid followed with a low growing specimens of orange *Dendrobium fimbriatum* with its finely divided lip. The more typical habitat for this species is in the trees and sure enough we saw some huge plants nestled in the branches bursting with flower. A glamorous start continued with two superb ivory spikes of *Cardiocrinum giganteum* in a perfect woodland setting.

Continuing to gain height we found *Pyrola rotundifolia*, *Cautleya gracilis*, lots of architectural *Claytosmundia* (*Osmunda*) *claytonia*, the pretty airy bells of *Streptopus simplex* and the exotic, purple-striped white flowers of *Roscoea megalantha*. A good fresh specimen of the parasite *Taxillus flexilobus*(?) was found at a convenient height too, the curved red flowers tipped with green. There were various rhododendrons in leaf, and these were followed by the first bush of *Rhododendron keysii* with fiery tubular flowers. The character of the forest change as more and more silver fir and big-leaved rhododendrons appeared and soon we were at 3000 metres with these as the main plants. The rhodos included *Rhododendron hodgsonii*, *R. falconeri* subsp. *eximium* (both not in flower) as well as more fine bushes of *R. keysii* covered in flowers and sometimes draped in the abundant *Clematis montana* that was in full flower too. The mists swirled through the firs and gave the whole area a mysterious twist. The road continued through the forest for a time, eventually descending a little way on a bad section to where we decided to turn around. As we did so I noticed a few (of the



*Dendrobium falconeri*

newly described) *Arisaema xxx* on the tuft under the trees. Rain had arrived but was intermittent, allowing us to stop for another delightful plant of *Streptopus simplex* growing near fruiting *Bryocarpum himalaicum*.

(Late) lunch was in the shelter of simple restaurant, timed well as another shower swept in. this had stopped by the time we left, and we descended stopping a few times for a fine tree of *Cornus capitata*, more *Roscoea megalantha* and then could not resist looking at the *Dendrobium falconeri* one more time, even finding a huge specimen dangling from the roadside bank that we had somehow missed before.

#### Day 4 To Jang via the Sela Pass

Another good plant day started with a rock completely encrusted in hundreds of flowering *Corallodiscus lanuginosus*. Growing with them in their huge boulder and in the surrounding humid habitats was a bewildering array of ferns with at least a dozen species in a wide variety of forms and the diversity of ferns was something of a feature of the day and I must have seen twenty-five or more species. There were plenty growing around a fine colony of *Roscoea megalantha* too with a selection of colour forms on show from near white to near purple and everything in between. Another rock covered in *Corallodiscus* was seen and then *Rhododendron maddenii* started to appear and we found a good plant of this on a cliff above the road. This was followed by a superb *R. dalhousiae* var. *rhabdotum* with its huge creamy lily-like trumpet flowers, striped with red on the outside. The road climbed into the silver fir zone, and we took an early lunch since there was nowhere else to eat on the road.

Beginning our climb onto the Sela Pass, we hadn't gone far when we saw the first flowering plants of *Meconopsis paniculata*, an impressive, golden haired species with yellow flowers. There were a succession stops after this with many good plants, starting with two diminutive and lovely *Lilium nanum*, followed by more sombre *Oreorchis foliosa* and bushes of *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* still with flowers in shades from peach to rusty orange. The turf higher up had the pretty dwarf orchid *Galearis spathulata* in abundance, the big woolly heads of *Cirsium eriophoroides* looked wonderful even when no quite in flowers and there were more *Lilium nanum*. Shortly after the arching flower spikes of *Bistorta griffithii*



*Lilium nanum*

started to appear near where we saw our first bristly *Meconopsis merakensis* on a gravelly slope. The slopes and turf got better and better as we went. We stopped for *Cassiope fastigiata* growing with *C. selaginoides* and thought we had found an impressive mound of the latter only to round a bend and be confronted with slopes carpeted in countless white bells, smothering huge mounds and peppering the tuft along with both *Rhododendron setosum* and *R. anthopogon*. It was a remarkable display of *Cassiope*. Not much further on and we found more *Meconopsis merakensis* growing on a boulder strewn bank below a colony of *Rhododendron bhutanensis*, some with decent flowers. The rhododendron shrubberies were quite extensive either side of the road and then mists were parting to reveal a wild landscape of sheer cliffs and slopes filled with the distinctive architectural forms of old silver firs.

Although we would be returning to the Sela Pass on another day it was impossible to resist a quite look around and we could see patches and drifts of *Primula dickieana* ahead as well as some *Spongiocarpella purpurea* on the rocks next to us. Climbing up to these we followed a route across the rocky turf still dominated by *Cassiope* and dwarf rhodos, before reaching a wetter slope with a good number of the remarkable *Swertia grandiflora* in flower, with red-striped, pale yellow flowers in robust spikes. A herd of dzos was grazing nearby but paid no attention to these or the many yellow *Primula dickieana*. We would return and now it was time to descend with good views of forested valleys, winding our way down past many towering *Meconopsis paniculata*, down and down to areas filled with the handsome fern, *Clayosmunda claytonia* as heavy rain swept in, staying with us until we reached Jang.

#### Day 5 Jang west valley

There was plenty of blue sky at dawn and there was still brightness when we set off with warm light on the distant villages and fields that clung to the slopes, surrounded by tracts of forest and tall cliffs. Our route followed a narrow road through lush woodland vegetation and rocky banks. A few richly coloured *Roscoea auriculata* were found and then a shrubbery with plenty of *Hydrangea aspera* beginning to flower. Its relatives featured a few bends on when we stopped first for *Deutzia corymbosa* and then some fragrant



*Cassiope selaginoides* with *Polygonatum hookeri*

flowered *Philadelphus tomentosum*. A large specimen of *Taxillus flexilobus* grew nearby too. A vine of *Aristolochia griffithii* was found with several large Dutchman's pipe flowers suspended beneath which I managed to find a way down to photograph. Woody plants continued to provide interest with the graceful arching stems of *Buddleja colvelia* bearing long racemes of cerise bells, followed by *Rhododendron camelliflorum*, pale yellow *R. leptocarpum* and some fine flowery bushes of *R. keysii*. A rain shower rather dampened looking at a patch of lovely *Pleione hookeriana*, but hopefully it would be drier on the return for this little gem of an orchid.

We negotiated some roadworks and continued higher into the silver fir forests, the rhododendrons changing as we went (though none were in flower now). Huge plants of *Meconopsis paniculata* grew on the turf, bearing several flowers at once. Then there was a good mauve-blue flower of *Meconopsis gakyidiana* in a clearing near the first of many *Arisaema elephas*. Despite the rain the landscape was wonderful with big waterfalls, misty forests and soaring rock faces. The precipitation began to ease and by the time we reached the end of our route with the ridge the separated India from Bhutan in sight at the end of the valley it had stopped. We took the chance to eat lunch and then explored a little nearby finding many *Arisaema elephas*, a small purple *Anemone* sp. whilst below in the wet areas were drifts of *Primula dickieana*. On the return leg I stopped to enjoy the superb misty landscapes, architectural old firs framing the pounding waterfalls, banks covered in dainty *Streptopus simplex*, a few *Pinguicula alpina* and the towering candelabras of *Meconopsis paniculata* growing on a wet slope. Below the monster poppies grew delicate yellow *Primula prenantha*.

More *Pleione hookeriana* were found lower down including some very fresh ones, but then the rain kicked in again and we continued down stopping only for a golden-orange spathe of *Calocasia* xxx.

#### Day 6 Jang side valley walk

Some great plants seen in some lousy weather! Rain is always to be expected on some days at this time of year in the Himalayas. It began dry and we found some more pretty *Pleione hookeriana* on exposed mossy boulders,



Silver firs in the mist

a habitat also favoured by the small *Arisaema jacquemontii*. Our walk took us under some prayer flags and then alongside a rushing river, climbing into the silver firs, a bit steep at first but then levelling off. Many early season primulas could be seen in seed, but flowers did start to appear, beginning with a solitary but perfect *Pleione hookeriana*, then more impressive *Meconopsis paniculata*, a few late flowering *Primula gambleana* growing as epiphytes and then the marbled leaves and pink cups of *Podophyllum hexandrum*. Flowery strands of *Clematis tongolensis* were strung across the shrubs and trees too and smaller rhododendrons such as *Rhododendron lepidotum* and *R. setosum* and purple *R. baileyi* were seen as we progressed, the latter quite common and floriferous in clearings. And it was in the larger clearings with mists swirling through the extensive stands of *Abies spectabilis* and waterfalls tumbling down at the head of the valley that we found the best plants. But, at first there was no chance of enjoy as the rain picked up. Fortunately, we were already sheltering in an empty yak herder's hut and had an early lunch to see if it would abate. It didn't much, but we set off to see what was further ahead anyway passing through swathes of *Primula dickieana* and find some lovely clumps of ivory *P. alpicola* by the riverside. The most impressive plant of the day though was *Meconopsis gakyidiana*, with many of these tall plants topped with gorgeous purple-blue flowers. They looked wonderful with the moody forests beyond, and the rain held off just about long enough for us to get some photographs.

The weather had rather cut things short, and we abandoned our plan to hike further, instead turning around and walking back through the woods seeing snow pheasants on the way. It was time to dry out back at base.

#### Day 7 Sela Top

We again drove up to the Sela Pass area and at first the weather seemed on our side. Walking to an area of rocky turf we found patches of *Primula dickieana* mixed with the robust *Swertia grandiflora* and with a bit of searching also a few *Meconopsis simplicifolius* with mauve-blue flowers on long stems poking up from among the rocks. Sprinkled among the same mossy boulders were tiny *Primula glabra* and purple *P. gambleana* (looking quite different to yesterday's examples that were much larger). We reached a large cliff face and followed along a wide track with misty views down into a deep valley. Rivulets and waterfalls raced



*Meconopsis gakyidiana*

off the cliff and by a larger stream we found the delightful curved blue flowers of *Corydalis cristata* growing with *Chrysoplenium forrestii* and on the turf on the cliffs (and the steep slopes below) were many lovely clumps of *Anemonastrum polyanthes*. Clumps of *Meconopsis bella* also grew on the wet rocks, but alas they were still in bud only. Its cousin *M. merakensis* was common in many places and on the rocks grew yellow *Oreosolen wattii*. The track carried on around to a south facing area where we found quite a few *Lilium nanum* and reached a good colony of *Anemonastrum polyanthes* that didn't require abseiling. However, not long after the rain arrived and we walked back to yak herders hut for lunch and waited a while to see if it would pass.

The rain eased a bit, and we made our way back towards the road. Reaching a large shrubbery of *Rhododendron bhutanensis* in flower with a carpet of *Primula dickieana* the rain finally stopped and there were good views across the landscape. After a quick coffee we started back, stopping for superb population of *Swertia grandiflora* with many impressive plants growing among abundant *Rhododendron setosum*, with each little mound smothered in pink flowers. Next was a good patch of *Primula alpicola* and as we neared Jang, there were clear views along the deep and picturesque valley.

#### Day 8 To Nuranang Valley

A fine start to the day with plenty of blue sky and there was even a view of the snowy peaks at the end of the valley, though you do not travel to the Himalayas in monsoon summer to see the views. That said, the landscape leading up to the Sela Pass was also clear with views up the forested valleys to the rocky tops. We took a narrow side road that hugged the contours passing below the extensive rhododendron shrubberies and soon saw the first lovely deep pink *Primula jonardunii* nestled in the moss under the shrubs. Time was spent looking around areas of alpine turf, the first bringing some fine *Primula gambleana*. Our second location was a wonderful place, with sweeping scenery down to curvaceous lake flanked by mist wreathed craggy tops. On one side we found some very fresh *Meconopsis*



*Swertia grandiflora*

*merakensis*, but on the other was a little botanical paradise with plenty more *Primula jonardunii* in large patches, whilst on the rocks grew cushions of shell pink *Diapensia himalaica*. Reaching the moist turf there were mats of *Potentilla microphylla* and wonderful swathes of fragrant *Primula dickieana* (with their scent filling the air) and although we had seen the latter many times this location was the best with wonderful unspoiled upland views in all directions. The best view of all though was looking down from the escarpment to the silvered lake with a superb flowering *Rhododendron bhutanensis* hanging out from the cliff below us, the perfect foreground. It would have been easy to spend a lot longer here and there was clearly a lot of potential for exploration. However, we had planned to look at another area today and so drove the bumpy road down to another larger lake from where we set off on a walk.

\*The route followed the lake edge passing now familiar shrubs and huge quantities of *Bistorta griffithii*, emerging *Rheum* sp., with occasional *Meconopsis simplicifolius*. Further on there were a couple of strong colonies of *Lilium nanum*, a flowering *Megacodon stylophorum* and increasing numbers of the lovely creamy (and sweet scented) *Primula alpicola*, in places mingling with other plants such as sky blue *Hackelia uncinata* and the arching spikes of *Bistorta griffithii*. It was a very pleasant walk, and the rain stayed away most of the time. Reaching the edge of lake plateau, the river from the lake picked up speed and plunged downhill and we followed the path down through lush forests of *Sorbus*, rhododendrons and then silver fir reaching the vehicle just in time to avoid a heavy shower.

\*Two tricky river crossings mean we will not undertake this walk on the tour. Good though it was the were no plants that we will not see elsewhere.

#### Day 9 To Tawang

Tawang is only forty kilometres from Jang, but we took until mid-afternoon to reach it, choosing to drive the sinuous, scenic and interesting back road. Just below Jang we found two superb *Rhododendron dalhousiae* var. *rhabdotum* in flower right next to the road, each big creamy trumpet striped with red. Stands of *Euphorbia sikkimensis* were common and we also found *Cautleya gracilis* var. *robusta*, a large plant of *Therapogon pallidus* on a cliff followed by the first of many *Iris decora*. There were stunning views out across the valley with big waterfalls pouring from



*Primula jonardunii*

the thickly forested slopes or in the other direction towards the rugged outline of the Sela Pass. There was view of a stunning intensely coloured scarlet finch too. Walking one section of road with bare rock beside us we found plenty of big-leaved *Bergenia ciliata* wedged in the rock crevices along with dainty xxx and various ferns, whilst a bit further up by a seep were a few *Drosera peltata* in good flower. The steep rock-strewn grassy slopes above had a smattering of *Notholirion macrophyllum*, but nothing in reach and same has to be said for the two lovely *Lilium nepalense* var. *concolor* that hung out from the rocks above (I'll bring a longer lens next time). Throughout the morning there had been a succession of attractive Tibetan-style waterwheels and chortens beside the road, usually with accompanying prayer flags.

Moving on *Rhododendron neriflorum* was flowering near *Roscoea* xxx and on the rockier parts there was a handsome tall *Pedicularis* xxx and plenty of pretty *Rhododendron lepidotum*. A brief shower delayed photographing a vine of *Aristolochia griffithii* with some conveniently placed and accessible big reddish-brown flowers. All the precipitation no doubt encourages the richness of ferns I had seen throughout the trip and along this road some of the oaks were heavily festooned with lush bracket ferns that made for great photos. As did two close roadside plants of *Notholirion macrophyllum*. Pushing on towards Tawang we began to see *Primula prolifera* and a couple of hefty *Cardiocrinum giganteum* in prime condition but decided against stopping as it was already late for lunch and there would be plenty more around the town. And so there were as we drove up for a quick look at the large Tawang Monastery with its museum and colourful prayer room.

Then it was down to my very pleasant and colourfully decorated homestay nestled among tall oaks and rhododendrons.

#### Day 10 Tawang

Blue skies promised a good day weather wise, but you never can tell in the Himalayas in summer. Driving above the town we stopped first for a few *Carthcartia villosa* growing near seeps, rather elegant plants with yellow flowers. Another yellow flower grew increasingly common as we progressed the aptly named *Primula prolifera* and there were drifts and stands in many places.



*Rhododendron dalhousiae* var. *rhabdotum*

Reaching a stream, we took a walk upstream where there was quite a few *Primula waltonii* mixed with *P. sikkimensis* (though there is some debate as to whether they are not all colour forms of the latter). There were some majestic *Meconopsis paniculata* too and the sky blue of a *Trigonotis* sp. together with plenty of bright yellow *Caltha scaposa*. More big stands of *Meconopsis paniculata* followed and we also started to see the impressive purple-blue flowers of *M. gakyidiana*. Once again, this iconic genus was to become centre of attention. Reaching the furthest extent we could travel (without involving the army) at around 4050 metres we took a walk back in the direction we had come seeing good mounds of *Gypsophila cerastoides*, *Anemonastrum polyanthes*, the nodding pale green bells of *Geum macrosepalum*, lilac xxx, some wonderful swathes of emerging ferns and the odd *Fritillaria cirrhosa*. Taking a side track, we climbed up through thickets of *Berberis angulosus* with pale yellow hanging flowers. Then on a mossy bank was the first blue *Meconopsis ludlowii*, a delicate little gem. A few more were found and then glancing up at the cliff above we could see *M. bella* in flower too. This was a real bonus and a few more plants of both were found as we continued the walk with the stream to our left cutting through shrubberies of flowering *Rhododendron bhutanensis*. Several pretty *Primula wattii* appeared, the interiors with thick meal and tricky to photograph. The mists had been ebbing and flowing across the cliffs and ridges ahead and the land opened into bowl with drifts of *Primula dickieana*. It was a superb alpine setting, and I decided to push on a bit further finding two more tiny species of primula growing on big mossy boulders; *Primula sapphirina* and *P. jigmedihana*. There was a great view across the landscape over the multitude of unfurling ferns as the clouds continued to play across the peaks. I even had the bonus of flushing a pair of Himalyan monal pheasants.

There had been no rain and rather than tempt fate we descended and then had a tasty (late) lunch of samosas. Either side of we had parked were superb fresh *Meconopsis gakyidiana* too. The rain did arrive just as we finished, but no matter we made our way down stopping to photograph big drifts of *Primula sikkimensis* and *P. prolifera* in between showers.

#### Day 11 Tawang

A final foray into the hills above Tawang was short but it did allow us to see some fine stands of *Carthcartia villosa* and even greater swathes of *Primula prolifera* in the way up. Searching the rhododendron scrub and turf in the mist we located



*Primula waltonii*

a few good *Primula obliqua* with elegant white flowers and then found *Salvia campanulata* and the first red flower on a *Swertia hookeri*. Looking around another area of lakeside rhodos there was an even better plant with several flowers out. In the marshy areas were plenty of *Pegaephyton scapiflorum* and *Primula monroi*. A second more extensive lakeside area had *Lilium nanum*, *Androsace*, masses of *Potentilla* and *Anemone* in the short turf and a few *Primula sapphirina*. However, after lunch in the Gunpowder Café we started back down and soon found a much better colony of *Primula sapphirina* with dozens of flowers sprinkled across the turf, a sweet little plant and again it was close to its cousin *P. jigmediana*, which was just across the road. As is the way with these the rain of the morning then dispersed, and the afternoon was clear and dry. It's just impossible to know which way the weather will blow – always carry a brolly.

#### Day 12 To Tezpur

Part of the appeal of Arunachal Pradesh is its remoteness, but I had to get to China! Limited time meant rather than a leisurely two day exit with more botanising I had to drive straight through to the hot Assam lowlands and overnight there. So leaving after breakfast we said farewell to the beautiful, forested landscapes, the misty ridge tops with silhouettes of silver firs, towering meconopsis, stupas and prayer flags and took the quickest way, using the tunnel under the Sela Pass and continuing to Dirang\*. Then it was more or less downhill all the way before reaching the bustle of the plains.

\*Any tour would return to the Sela Pass and take another nice walk for more flowers and landscapes, before overnighing in Dirang.

#### Day 13 Flights to China

The return journey to Guwahati meant the end of the Indian Himalayas this time, but I was only halfway on an epic Asian flower trip. From Guwahati I flew to Kolkata and then onto Chengdu, China via Bangkok. India, Thailand and China, what a food combination that is!



*Cathcartia villosa*



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*Rhododendron bhutanensis*