

DEWLIH:

The Land of Archers



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The village of Dewlieh is a little over 150 years old, and its name means “white soil”, although the origin of this appellation has been lost to time. Most residents belong to the Christian faith, but still hold on to traditional practices. The village is relatively small in size, and the community is made up of 27 families and 130 people. Mr. Shaiphar Dohling, the 29 year-old, soft spoken *Sirdarship* (chief) of Dewlieh, said that to his knowledge, only three generations have lived here. Practically all villagers practice *jhum* (shifting cultivation), a tradition that dictates their way of life. Mr. Shaiphar is also the headmaster of the village schools - the Lower Primary School, with about 26 students and the Upper Primary School, with eight.



The road to Dewlieh greets you after an hour's ride from Shillong through the picturesque Dympep Valley; an inconspicuous path up a grassy hill marks the start of the hike to the village. The hike seems deceptively easy but is actually quite challenging. After the initial ascent, hikers begin a gentle descent along a plateau that quickly drops down the hillside. One will notice young elder trees that were recently planted by the Meghalaya Department of Agriculture, and resting stones - huge 5- to 8-foot monoliths placed there by villagers long ago. The edge of the plateau offers a breathtaking view of the valley and the green hills running along it.



Bamboo garbage baskets placed (and used) strategically beside the path remind you that you are entering an area prone to the same pollution that the outside world is suffering from, but villagers are taking efforts to maintain its pristine state.

Dewlieh clings to a steep slope of the plateau, as do many villages in that region, midway between the summit and the valley. A few quaint houses are peppered along the route, always with a child on the porch and a kitchen garden growing beans, maize, local fruits and other delicacies. As hikers stop to rest their tired legs at the halfway point, they are greeted with an incomparable vista to motivate them onwards. After walking the 1,250 steps down to the village, one finds a community ground used for a weekly archery tournament.





The current archery tournament has been going on for over 10 years between Dewlieh and the neighboring community of Sohrarim. The sport itself has been a part of life for the people here for many years. It involves shooting at a small bamboo woven target set on a 4-foot pole from a distance of about 30 meters. Each team takes turns shooting at the target, and the team that shoots the most arrows into the target wins. Mr. Blim Diengdoh, an avid archer, recounts a legend related to the sport. A long time ago, four siblings decided to hold a competition. The competition led to a dispute because none of the archers could tell who was the actual winner. To solve the dispute, their parents advised them to mark each of their arrows differently. Ever since archers belonging to the Sohrarim and Dewlieh teams have been marking their arrows with red and black, respectively. The sport carries a spiritual meaning as well, from the traditional belief that whether an arrow hits a target or not is the command of God. So an archer can be seen talking to his arrow to make his will known, which is believed to come from God within him.

Most houses have a great view of the valley below, the snaking Wah Sohra River and the mountains. The people of Dewlieh boast of their red potato, sweet potato, tapioca and taro. They are especially proud of their Job's Tears plants, from which they grind a flour to make a boiled bread in lieu of rice. Rice is, in fact, a more recent addition to their diet, introduced by trade. The elders speak of a time when the people of Dewlieh ate mostly millet along with various tubers and wild vegetables.



What to expect on a trip to Dewlieh:

- Local songs and tales (*Phawar*) accompanied by traditional instruments
- Visit to jhum fields and the school garden
- Walk to a community forest reserve
- Archery demonstration
- Display of agricultural tools
- Traditional dance
- Local food

For those planning to visit Dewlieh, evenings in November become very chilly (around 17° C), and warm clothes are advised.

WHERE: Village Dewlieh, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

DISTANCE: 40 km from Shillong by car, and 2,500 steps

TRAVEL TIME: 1 hour each way by car, 30 minutes walking in, 45 minutes walking out

HIGHLIGHT: The unparalleled view

BE PREPARED FOR: A strenuous walk including steep ascents and descents. Not suitable for people with heart conditions or asthma.

