

LAITSOHPLIAH: Beyond the Clouds

A photograph of a mountain range with green, forested slopes. The foreground shows a steep, grassy hillside. In the distance, a valley is filled with thick, white mist or low clouds, partially obscuring the mountain peaks. The sky is overcast and grey.

Text and Photographs:
Raisa Daimary/NESFAS

Miles and miles of tabletop blue mountains shrouded with ghostly clouds greet you as you make the drive through the Dympep Valley to the village of Laitsopliah. The clouds part only after you cross an iconic bridge, where a discreet path is revealed that takes you into the village.

The village gets its name from Lait and Pliah, two close friends from a village called Nongbah. Though the men of Nongbah were mostly occupied with farming, they would find time for recreation in the form of archery, a traditional sport of the Khasi people. Lait and Pliah were no exception, and they would always compete in archery events against neighboring villages and often brought triumph to Nongbah. To reward their honorable victories, the people of the village decided to change the name of Nongbah to Laitsopliah, the combination of the two men's names.



Further in, one is greeted by the derelict remains of a lime kiln factory, hardly the ideal welcoming sight but beautiful in its own right – and more so because of the story behind it. The building was erected in 2004 – a decision the community would come to regret. The factory owner, who came from another village, promised the leaders of Laitsopliah that he would take certain precautionary measures to minimize health hazards from pollution. He sadly did not keep his word and smoke began to fill the air, making the people sick and covering the landscape with grey soot. Following repeated complaints from the villagers, the owner finally abandoned the factory in 2007. Today the kiln is a testament to the solidarity of the villagers to resist the destruction of their environment.

The kiln stands at the entrance of an open area used by the people of Laitsopliah as a recreational space. Wildflowers dot the edge of the field, beyond which is a striking vista of the Dympep Valley. The students of the Roman Catholic Lower Primary School and SSA School Laitsohpliah maintain two school gardens where they grow wild edibles and local vegetables. For their hard work, they occasionally enjoy meals with food grown by their own hands. What an idyllic place for a school to be!





The people of Laitsopliah are mostly farmers, like their ancestors who first inhabited the village. They grow *shriew* (yam), *sohkhia* (cucumber), *neilieh* (sesame), *phankaro* (sweet potato), *jaing* (leafy vegetable), *sohphlang* (tuber), *phan saw* (red potato), *riewhadem* (maize) and other local plants in their *jhum*, or shifting cultivation, fields. They take pride in preparing *phan saw* served with fermented dry fish and local chicken cooked with pepper – both dishes visitors must try.

Laitsopliah is a pristine village and one can see that the community takes pride in its upkeep, making it feel like it has been left untouched by the outside world, despite being easily accessible by road.

Laitsopliah has its own tourist attractions that draw people from the city. A pond named Tyngam Masi, meaning “swallow cow” because of the many cows that were supposedly lost in its depths, is located just outside the village. As it is close to the highway, it becomes a hive of activity during fishing season from April to October. The people of Meghalaya enjoy their fish, but they enjoy fishing even more. Beyond being a source of food, fishing is a fun activity that attracts and engages men young and old. What’s more, most villages own community ponds where fishing competitions are held, and the person with the largest catch takes home the grand prize.



The people of Laitsopliah are blessed to live in a land rich in natural beauty, and they strive to maintain it. The villagers manage for community use a *law adong*, or forest reserve – a feature common to environmentally-conscious communities all over the state. The forest contains ancient trees and a wide variety of flora and fauna. Hidden within it are beautiful sights that visitors to Laitsopliah can only find here, including fresh water springs, pristine pools and waterfalls. The rainy season especially turns the area into a wonderland of water features created by the rocky landscape.

One waterfall of Laitsohpiah, Thwei U Ren, has a particularly beautiful legend attached to it. Locals believe that a fairy known as U Ren often visits it to relax, sometimes in the form of an animal, and other times in the form of a beautiful woman. Another legend connected with Thwei U Ren is that the pool that the waterfall leaps into has no bottom and leads to Wah Sohra, the river that flows through the Dympep Valley below.

Within the village itself, monoliths erected by ancestors stand tall. There are varying theories on their meaning; some say that they were placed there to commemorate an event, to mark the death of a person or for weary travelers to rest. Others say that they were placed there to serve as milestones. In the past, the location of the stones would help a person differentiate one place from another at a time when there were only trails and people travelled by foot.



Be prepared for cool temperatures if you visit Laitsohpliah, as the village sits nearly on top of a plateau and can be windy. But with colder weather comes improved views, since the rain clouds are receding by this time of year. Since rainy season has passed, the waterfalls will be mostly dry during this season. The sun is bright and strong, but only stays out till 1:00 pm, after which the cold sets in and the temperature dips to 16 or 17° Celsius.

What to expect on a trip to Laitsohpliah:

- Local songs and tales (*Phawar*) accompanied by traditional instruments
- Visit to farms and school gardens
- Walk to a community forest reserve
- Traditional dance
- Local food

WHERE: Village Laitsohpliah, Laitkroh Block, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

DISTANCE: 35 km from Shillong

TRAVEL TIME: 1 ¼ hours each way

HIGHLIGHT: The view of Dympep Valley

BE PREPARED FOR: Cold temperatures accompanied by chilly breezes