

PYRDA: The land behind the curtain



The elders of Pyrda say that their people came to reside in the village before the great earthquake of 1814. The story begins with the kidnapping of a girl from the Mawdon Market in East Khasi Hills. The kidnapper, who belonged to the Jala Clan, took the child away to Lyniong. The girl grew up under his care and was later married and had 10 children. The kidnapper, now old, would regularly mistreat her children. So when the children grew up, they decided to move away from him. Some of the daughters left for an unknown place far away from their mother's kidnapper. They named the place Pyrda, meaning curtain, as it gave them shelter from their abuser.

Today, the clan still inhabits Pyrda. The village has its own *Sirdarship*, or chief, with a village council for governance. The village quickly grew and today, 304 people live there among 50 families. While a small percentage of people still follow the traditional religion, *Ka Niam Khasi*, a monotheistic religion that teaches the supremacy of a single god, *U Blei*, most people are of the Catholic faith.





The majority of people are farmers and feel a strong connection to their land. Kong Spermon Shabong, an elder, traditional knowledge holder and storyteller of Pyrda, narrates how *Mei-Ramew*, or Mother Earth, is the giver of life and sustainer of all beings. “We all live on Mei-Ramew, and she gives us our life force. Khasis believe that when a person gets hurt or is dying, he or she should be fed a pinch of earth - an act that symbolizes feeding the person life.”



The road to Pyrda begins at the edge of a hill that runs parallel to the Wah Umiong River, which flows through the valley below. This road is part of the historic David Scott Trail, a horse-cart trail that was built in the 19th century by a British Administrator and political agent to the British Raj. The trail stretches from Cherrapunjee to Bangladesh and is quite popular with trekkers today. The hill gives way to a picturesque valley, which is reached through stairs that wind down between mammoth rocks. Steep rock faces, tall mountains and forests surround the valley. During rainy season, numerous waterfalls can be seen flowing from these rocks. In contrast, winter days are dry and warm, with grasses turning brown, rivers shrinking and the air becoming crisp. One can see the *Maw Hati*, or elephant rock, and nearby *Maw Nguid Briew*, a rock appearing to have a mouth that is said to swallow people whole.

After crossing the Wah Umiong via a narrow bridge, the climb to Pyrda begins. Stairs lead up a slope with a rocky face. This will take anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes depending on the hiker. Soon the houses begin appearing at the top of the hill – small and set at a distance from each other. Most houses have kitchen gardens with a plethora of plants, a cowshed and/or a pigsty and a front yard full of flowers.

The people of Pyrda farm and largely grow *sohphlang* (*Flemingia vestita*), a nitrogen-fixing tuber that is eaten raw with a local perilla paste known as *nei-leh*, a delicacy that must be sampled. Sweet potato, taro, local red potato and tapioca are also major crops here along with beans, peas, corn, chayote and mustard leaves. The people of Pyrda say that apart from their local red potato variety, they would definitely recommend sampling the local free-range chicken cooked in turmeric and pepper. The school in Pyrda has a small garden where the 95 students learn about the local foods they eat and how to grow them.



What to expect on a visit to Pyrda:

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

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

WHERE: Village Pyrda, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

DISTANCE: 50 km from Shillong by car, 13 km by foot

TRAVEL TIME: 2 hours each way in car

HIGHLIGHT: The walk from Mawbeh to Pyrda

BE PREPARED FOR: A strenuous hike. Not suitable for people with heart conditions or asthma.