

NATHU-LA, SANDAKPHU CLAD IN WHITE; TOURIST NUMBERS TO SWELL

'Snowstoppers' in May: Darjeeling and Sikkim

BIRESWAR BANERJEE

Siliguri: Summer snowfall in the upper ridges of Darjeeling and Sikkim in early May brought cheer to stakeholders in the tourism industry, who noted that tourist activity was picking up after the Bengal polls.

Tourism stakeholders are positive that the number of tourists will go up.

On Wednesday, heavy snowfall was reported at Nathu-la in East Sikkim and at Sandakphu in Bengal's Darjeeling district.

Nathu-la, near Gangtok on the India-China border, sits at an altitude of around 14,000 feet. The Indian

army cleared the roads to ensure access to the pass, sources said.

Sandakphu, the highest point in Bengal at over 11,000 feet, also saw early morning snowfall that blanketed the area in white.

Chandan Pradhan, president of the Singalila Land Rover Owners Welfare Association, said the snowfall began around 6am and lasted briefly.

"We have been witnessing snowfall in these areas from March through May over the past couple of years. Last year, too, snowfall was recorded on May 1. Despite the chill, the weather is now clear,



Snow blankets Sandakphu, the highest point in Bengal, on Wednesday

and we expect tourists to increase," Pradhan told The Telegraph.

Samrat Sanyal, the general secretary of the Himalayan Hospitality and Tour-

ism Development Network (HHTDN), said the current tourist flow signalled a promising season ahead.

"A good number of tourists have already started visiting Darjeeling and Sikkim. If this trend continues, we expect more tourists next week. If the weather is conducive, the tourist season may extend till June 15," Sanyal said.

Weather forecast

According to the Indian Meteorological Department, the skies are expected to be clear from Thursday in Darjeeling and Sikkim, with no forecast of heavy rainfall in the coming days.

"Frequent downpours recorded since March prevented temperatures from rising due to persistent cyclonic circulation and low-pressure systems.

A cyclonic circulation over Uttar Pradesh and a north-south trough, combined with westerly winds, influenced rain and strong winds in the region over the past few days," said Gopinath Raha, a meteorologist at the regional Met office in Gangtok.

"Weather conditions are set to improve from Thursday, with no heavy rain likely. Higher altitudes in Sikkim may experience some more snowfall," he added.