

TALES OF THE RAJ

Shimla's Ballyhack Cottage is a trip back in time | Text & Photographs by RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



Shimla's municipal corporation has affixed a plaque on Ballyhack Cottage's gatepost, noting that it was one of the first houses to be built there, dating back to the 1820s. If you need additional proof of its antiquity, all you need to do is inspect lithographs of the town from the 1850s. Looking out over the ridge, they all show the house tucked in by the side of Christ Church.

The house has changed names and owners many times over the last two centuries and is now called Ballyhack Cottage. It has been restored so that its exterior looks very nearly the way it used to when it was built. It is now a charming old-world bed and breakfast situated in the heart of Shimla, overlooking the Mall. The house has antique furniture, some of which are family heirlooms while others are pieces that the owners Navaz and

Karandip Sandhu have collected over the years. There are the original Persian rugs, Burma teak bookcases, and queen-sized beds with a low stool at the foot to help you clamber into the covers. The owners were once rally drivers who found love at 160 kph. They have a passion for travel and the outdoors and often stay at charming Bed & Breakfasts on their trips abroad and the best ideas from these are reflected in Ballyhack Cottage. At meals you'll find a pleasant throwback to the Raj in the table setting, the china, the cutlery and also the way the food is served.

On a clear day, the view from the terrace is of snow-capped Himalayan peaks. The Mall, a three-minute walk away, is always milling with people.

A 20-minute trail from Ballyhack Cottage leads to the Jakhu Temple. Avoid the path that devotees take and walk past Holly

Lodge (the private residence of the Raja of Bushehr), colonial bungalows, Rothney Castle, and a secluded deodhar forest. The walk from Ballyhack Cottage down the Mall past Cecil Hotel to the Viceregal Lodge (once the home of the Viceroy, and today the Indian Institute of Advanced Study) takes around an hour and gives a good taste of the hustle and bustle of Shimla.

For a longish walk of about three hours, go along Shimla's northwestern spur towards Bharari. En route the well-forested trail passes bits of colonial heritage such as Stirling Castle, now an orphanage. Ballyhack will supply you with a delicious picnic hamper (₹650 per person).

For heritage walks with interesting titbits about Shimla interspersed with salacious tales of colonial society take a stroll with Rajaa Bhasin, an author who is an authority on Shimla (9816328014; ₹800 per person for 2 hours).

ACCOMMODATION

Ballyhack Cottage has all of six rooms. Room rates range from ₹7,500 to ₹12,000 (for a cottage with 6 rooms) and include an Indian or Continental breakfast. Rooms 5 and 6 together make up the family suite (with two bathrooms) that can sleep six and has a private sit-out overlooking the church. During winter, which is low season, visitors can expect a substantial discount (30-40%). Every room has tea- and coffee-making facilities. Home-cooked meals are available for ₹400 for dinner and ₹350 for lunch. Visitors can stroll down to Spars Lodge, a 20-minute walk away, which serves excellent trout. Combermere and Baljees on Mall Road serve Continental and Indian food respectively. ■

THE VITALS

Shimla's Mall is a car-free zone so you have to halt at the lot at Combermere Bridge and take the lift up to the Mall. Ballyhack (9815005678, 9815600076) is a 10-minute walk from the lift. The cottage can send staff to help with luggage.