

# Spring journey in Arunachal Pradesh in 2007

Naga GG trek (By Gilles Rouau) *Translation Catherine Canela*



End of summer 2006. We are running short of time. The trip we hoped to take in the Himalayas the following spring may become a dead letter unless we quickly find THE lead.

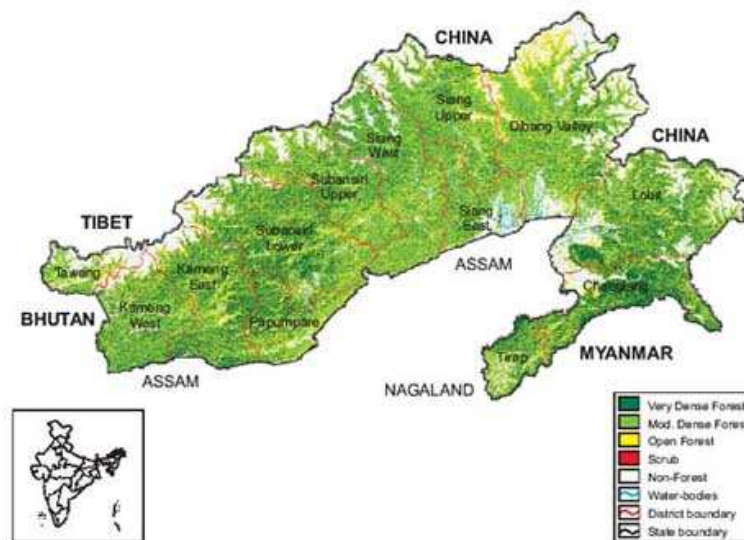
For more than a year now, this trip has been federating all the energies of our small club of rhododendron species fans and this since we came back from the Sichuan-Tibet journey in May 2005 we called 'Shangri-La'. On this occasion, Béatrice and Gilles Stephan from Brest, Gilles Rouau and his son Gabriel from Nantes together with a group of twenty French people, discovered a wild paradise alternating desertic plateaux and oases of vegetation where the stars were the rhododendrons of the large sub-section of Taliensia and Fortunea.

There was a feeling of incompleteness, however, for, due to the large number of people in the group and the rigid Chinese laws we had to botanize at low altitudes and had not been allowed to take samples, except for too few seeds. It was nothing new; the same thing happened during two other group trips to Yunnan (Central Yunnan in 1999 and the Burmese-Yunnanese border in 2002). Two more people took part in these trips: Jacqueline and Jean-François Petton from Finistère in Brittany and Henri Galibert from Aveyron in the south - west of France.

Good bye, then, for the time being, to China and its inhabitants but not to the Himalayas, this Garden of Eden, that, once discovered, cannot be forgotten. The next episode has to be a success with a large number of species plants in a small area and the freedom to collect seeds. To make this even better, with a small, friendly and experienced group of no more than eight people interested mainly (exclusively?) in rhododendrons and this, anywhere but.... in China.

As for the group, no problem, it has been tacitly formed: the same seven people I have already named, six among them in their fifties and quite fit and a junior with some experience already, Gabriel 15. As for the destination, the choice can seem quite large on the Himalayan chain from Nepal in the west to Burma on the border with Yunnan, through Sikkim, Bhutan and the province of India perched above Bangladesh, Arunachal Pradesh.

This will be it: Arunachal, a land of high mountains arching above the Assam plain will be our target. According to what we have read it is rich of more than 51 rhododendron species which is quite a lot more than the neighbouring countries (28 in Nepal, 34 in Sikkim, 40 in Bhutan ). This new Indian state has only recently been open to visitors and this makes us hope we may find some new plants. The area has a large range of climates and landscapes plus the magic of Indian civilization enriched by Tibetan contributions since the diaspora which was caused by the Chinese invasion. We have learnt quite a lot about Arunachal: Anglo-Saxon expeditions have taken place repeatedly since 2002 and their reviews can be read in the publications of the American Rhododendron Society under the names of famous plant-hunters such as: Steven Hootman, John Roy, Ken and Peter Cox, Alan Clark...Their writing is enlightening ; in the eastern area (the districts of Lohit, Siang, Subansiri, named after the tributaries of the Tibetan Tsang Po which becomes the Dibang at the border and then the Brahmaputra in Assam ) you have to fight against a very steep relief which prevents the use of any mechanical transport and this in an oppressive monsoon in a nearly impenetrable forest... It is too difficult for a first contact. The western part of the region seems much easier: hardly touched by the monsoon coming from the Sea of China, with tracks and a budding tourism infrastructure linked to emerging local activities (ornithology, rafting, fishing in the eponymous river of the district, the Kameng). That will be our choice: west Kameng.



We have now to fix the time which must take into account two things: if we are too early there will be too much snow, too late the monsoon will have started. So, it must be between the end of March and mid-May. The date will also have an influence on the show; if we are early, it means the big leaf rhododendrons like *R. arboreum* and the magnolias will be at their best, if we start later, it will be the turn of the lepidote rhododendrons, various bushes and perennials to illuminate the landscape. What a dilemma! But this, during the summer of 2006 is only a dream. No known travel agency in France offers that kind of destination. The 'Maison de l'Inde' in Paris has not even heard of that region. Our letters to local agencies do not receive any answers. The internet? Of course, but where to start? Luckily the

superb web site of the English nurseryman David Ketley ([www.dungevalley.co.uk](http://www.dungevalley.co.uk)) will give us the solution. Using many photos he describes his Himalayan treks among which two were in Arunachal. He gives the address of the Californian agency which organized them, we send them an e-mail but get no answer. So we write to Mr Ketley who answers us immediately: yes, Arunachal is a magic place and the best travel agency is the one which Kenneth Cox, the famous Scottish plant-hunter and nurseryman uses. So we get in touch with Mr Cox at once; he answers us that the providential man is Indian and he is called Oken Tayeng, not only a guide and tour operator but also a politician and a musician; he is easy to contact as he is always connected to the web...



As a matter of fact, from now on, everything seems so easy; as Oken Tayeng has already organized several botanical expeditions, he knows the best itineraries and can supply guides, vehicles, porters, food and sleeping arrangements. After contacting the head of villages in the area we want to explore, he advises us not to come in March as it is too cold and snowy but at the end of April. Special permits are needed even for Indian citizens to enter Arunachal Pradesh which is a protected tribal zone; Oken will get them for us. These permits allow you to stay for ten days but they can be renewed once. He will take the group in charge (and at a very acceptable cost) in Guwahati, a town in Assam near the Brahmaputra River which has an important airport. What we have to do now is find the flight which will get us there; it is not difficult thanks to the internet. You must keep in mind that booking early is essential and that prices get higher from Thursday morning till the end of the week. The last thing we have to do is to book a hotel in Delhi which has a bad reputation as far as this is concerned.

Now that the backup has been organized, let us have a close look at the itinerary. There are some constraints; since the Sino-Indian war of 1962 when the Chinese army invaded Arunachal without meeting any resistance and before retreating under international pressure, the area is militarized. There are numerous barracks and the Indian government has even displaced entire populations from Assam towards the town of Tawang to 'Indianise' the country. The northern border between India and Tibet which is now Chinese is inaccessible. The western border with Bhutan can be reached however and one can even cross it. And it is a good thing for it is exactly there that is situated THE mythical place: Naga GG. It is a code name given by the Indian army and it has been popularized since 2002 by a few dazzled westerners through their writings and photos: it is a large flowered meadow overshadowed by wooded slopes where it is said 30 different species of rhododendrons live! The main part of our trip will be the 'Naga GG trek' leaving from Dirang at 2000m, going up the Sela, a pass at 4300m and back. During the second week we will make shorter outings, some of them by car at a moderate altitude depending on the weather and the state of fatigue of the group.

Here we go! On Saturday April 21<sup>st</sup> everything is in order, except that there will only be six of us: our friend Henri, with a wounded knee has to give up. We will miss his knowledge and constant good mood.

The first contact we have with India in Delhi is quite interesting. Everything is there: the heat, the crowd, the smells, the dust, high-tech and poverty all mixed up, overexcited businessmen full of scorn for the nearly naked sâdhus, untouchable women working hard on road works. We finally meet briefly with Oken who is on his way to Parliament where he has been elected. He tells us our leader will be his young brother Anong who is already quite experienced.



The next stop in Assam is Guwahati and it is where we meet our guides: three Tayeng men under the leadership of Anong who is cool and has class and, as we will soon discover, is a real leader, imposing his authority on older 'brothers' as well as on drivers and other staff . Three Tata cars, rustic and sturdy in a more or less good state of repairs as all local vehicles, will take us around on tracks difficult of access.



We follow the impressive Brahmaputra River before entering the tribal zone through the only access, the very busy little town of Bhalukpong; now it is raining; heavy rain, the tropical kind .The forest is waterlogged and the track overlooking the Kameng River has been swept away by a rock and mud slide. It takes six hours to clear the way and the drive to Dirang ends in the middle of the night. Luckily we are booked in a good hotel where we enjoy a comfortable bed, something we are not going to have for a long time.



From now on we will have to prove we are fit. The next day it is still raining. We meet Teshi Duku, the tribal chief of the Abor people. He selects a group of porters among the young villagers who seem to fight for the pleasure and honor of being members of the team: it is both a holiday and a way of earning their living. Twenty-four people for the six of us! Very nice, smiling, good hikers even with very heavy loads on their back and a very basic equipment. They will make us extremely comfortable at each stop and sometimes this will make us think we are playing the part of officers in the Indian Imperial



Army: when we arrive at the camp the tents have already been pitched, the tea is hot, we are then given a snack while waiting for an excellent dinner of rice and fresh vegetables to be served and this even in the most awful weather! They will even move the camp several times, away from the wind into sheds, some kind of mountain shacks, in a blizzard and all this in an imperturbable good mood in deep contrast with the growing feeling of distress of the tourists ... None of them speaks English but we do not need an interpreter to understand one another! A few singing sessions after a drink or two and this after braving together adverse conditions will bring a feeling of complicity among us.

From Dirang, a steep, wet and slippery trek will take us to Lubrang (2900 m) a village of yak breeders, lost in the fog and we will pitch our tents in the school playground. As they have visitors, the villagers set up a small party. There is plenty of homemade alcohol going around; Jacqueline and Gabriel have a go at dancing.



After a short night, we leave early towards Naga GG (3700 m) on a magnificent track; we do not know where to set our eyes as there are so many rhododendrons in bloom everywhere around .



Finally we get on a military track under repair. We are somewhat disappointed as we arrive at dusk at Naga GG. There is a bitter wind and it is only a melancholy peat bog at this time of the year.

Luckily, the next day under the sun, all the expected rhododendrons are there, coloring the undergrowth up to the névés. The next stop is called Sangya (4000m). The day starts quite well under the sun but around midday, it changes for the worse and snowflakes appear.



In a few minutes, the snowstorm transforms us into frozen zombies, bracing ourselves against the blizzard on bare crests up to disjointed wooden shacks. A big fire, a good meal and we feel much better. As for the tents they will finally be pitched inside the shacks! We sleep soundly whereas the storm is howling outside.



In the morning we have a problem: the summits further up than Sangya are covered with a thick coat of snow. The sky is overcast and the next camp is planned at 4100m. We have to make a difficult choice. Shall we go further up, hoping for a very hypothetical bright spell or change our plans? Among decides we must go back to Lubrang.



He suggests we go through another valley which is very different and everyone agrees. It is a very good choice. On the way back to Naga GG we first find the military track which is very unstable under the melting snow.

After hesitating for a whole day, the sun is back for good and it will stay with us until the end. A wonderful path leads us towards Naga Jembu (3600m) for a camp to be remembered.



It is a meadow at the bottom of a cirque lit by bright-coloured blossom below a sacred lake. Our porters take us down there and we witness a ceremony both buddhist and animist. In a huge natural amphitheatre, partly flooded and dotted with prayer banners, they walk in large circles with bare feet in shallow water chanting mantras. Fascinating and moving in such surroundings...



A wonderful memory which stays with us all the way down to Lubrang where our porters leave us. Then, forward to Dirang and a real hotel!



But what about our favourite plants in this first trek? This is the reason why we are there and let us say it loud and clear we were not disappointed!

As soon as we left Dirang on the way up to Lubrang and even further the star is *R. arboreum* (SS Arborea).



It is first scattered among oaks (*Quercus dentata* and higher up, *Quercus lamellosa*) and it soon becomes dominant, showing numerous forms surprisingly mixed together: long leaves, dark and veined, their undersides a fawn or glossy rust shade reminding us of the variant *delavayi* we saw in China. They are in deep contrast with other leaves which are smooth, more oblong with a silvery white underside. Variants you would be tempted to call *arboreum arboreum* and *arboreum cinnamomeum* grow together and this, between 1500 and 3500 m. However the colour changes in both cases and follow the same pattern: all flowers are blood-red at the bottom of the slope and become more and more mixed with pink as we go up. Some of them are faintly spotted and we will find some in the same deep bright red colour even at the highest altitude; this is not what we have read on the subject: red hardy *arboreum* rhododendrons do exist, then! And they are not small either: we will see many specimens over 15 metres high, often isolated like obelisks, dotted with ruby, in the mist, surrounded by big stumps with vigourous shoots, traces of dead companions which have become firewood!



Lubrang, on the edge of the plateau is among large mountain pastures situated on the shelves. The fractures on the slopes are the refuge of either deciduous bushes or incredibly varied rhododendrons or even an inextricable mix of both. Bamboos are nearly completely absent. The most beautiful deciduous plant is a *Clethra*, or so we suppose, five metres high, with a smooth trunk, its new leaves round, acuminate, of a colour between a velvety bronze and brown chocolate shade. There are also many acers with very different foliage; the colours of young leaves which are quite translucent go from an anise green to a bright orange! We are amazed by arborescent Hydrangeas with contorted trunks as thick as a human thigh.



Large Daphnes with white flowers diffuse a faint scent. There are also beautiful *Cornus capitata*, numerous Sorbus, Berberis, Gaultheria, Vaccinium, Arisaema. The sides of the track which are grazed by yaks, are lit by young ochre coloured shoots with bronze stripes: small spindly rhododendrons already out of bloom. There are some *R. Kendrickii* (SS Irrorata) which are rare in cultivation because they are not very hardy; they have narrow pointed leaves, very thin and glabrous, slightly frilly on the margin and scarlet flowers with a darker blotch marked by five nectar pouches.



In their immediate vicinity, superb stocky bushes with bright red inflorescence, reddish trunks, smooth, peeling, can only be members of the sub-section Barbata: *R. barbatum* for the glabrous form and more likely *R. argipeplum* for those with a fawn indumentum, both growing next to one another.



To go on with this festival of reds, the most ' perfect ' plant we saw, is standing erect on the side of the path: two metres high, with a regular shape, its many bronze coloured trunks peeling to reveal a shiny green tissue underneath; it has very thin oblong leaves with curving sides, scarlet flowers flushed with orange which are very bright but not very numerous, I must admit. It is *R. neriiflorum phaedropum* (SS Neriiflora) which is rarely seen in cultivation and has the reputation of not being very hardy; this will have to be checked, for it is worth much more!



Another red coloured flower, much darker this time is *R. thomsonii* (SS Thomsonia) which grows in dense colonies on some slopes; it is impressive because of its height which can reach 10m, its smooth grey and rose tinted trunks and it is also as floriferous as the best hybrids.



Then we see more red Thomsonia with *R. hookeri*, their pink trunks and their peeling bark revealing white spots which is their best quality.

In the same area, we notice some likely natural hybrids; their aspect making us imagine an adultery *arboreum-thomsonii*: (it is a frequent natural hybrid known as *R. sikkimensis*). There are a few *R. wallichii* (SS Campanulata) exceptions among so much red with their white and deep purple corollas.



As we go past the last multicolored chortens which mark the upper limits of Lubrang, the rain has stopped and our attention is drawn to huge trees with spreading branches covered with large white flowers. They look like *Magnolia globosa* thriving in faults parallel to the slope together with *Cedrus deodora*.

These faults turn out to be oases where we see dense populations of large leaf rhododendrons. Their blooming period is already over for *R. grande* and just about to start for *R. sidereum* (SS Grandia) which are very similar to one another; their only difference being their colour (ivory white for the first and yellow for the latter) and their blooming season.



But THE discovery is another big leaf rhododendron which does not look like anything we know: a spreading tree 10 metres high at least with a rough trunk, huge oblanceolate leaves 70cm long with a fawn indumentum on their lower surface. Its flowering is over: it is testified by gigantic



claws, some of them still bearing a few yellowish corollas with a purple blotch. What a climb to get some seeds! As we do not know better it is christened, for the time being, *R. rex affine...* (SS Falconera).



In this area extremely rich and populated by noisy and colourful pheasants we will discover, on the way back, a magic vale scented by countless *R. lindleyi* (SS Maddenia) with funnel-shaped flowers flushed yellow and semi-dwarf *R. edgeworthii* (SS Edgeworthia), with a spicier fragrance and white flowers with pink and yellow spots. We also notice other lepidote rhododendrons: *R. crassum* (SS Maddenia) which are scented as well, *R. cinnabarinum* (SS Cinnabarina) with

bright orange pendulous tubular campanulate flowers and its cousin which is more frequent in this area, *R. keysii*, with tubular nearly closed tangerine flowers.



As we look at our feet, we discover small bushes covered with dull pink flowers: *R. glaucophyllum tubiforme* (SS Glauca) and the underside of its leaves is indeed glaucous. A bit further up, we find another lepidote, not very showy and nearly always epiphytic. It looked poorly and was not about to bloom just like the rare *R. megeratum* (SS Boothia) nesting in sheltered hollows like *R. vaccinioides* (SS Pseudovireya) which looks so much like a *Vaccinium* it could be mistaken with it .



At about 3200 m, the surroundings change completely: the deciduous plants disappear. Gigantic *Tsuga dumosa* and *Abies densa*, many of them dead, mark the slopes with their masts nearly 50 m high. The numerous wounds on the trunks do not leave any doubt about the human origins of many of these deaths. Yaks need pastures which can only be created by slash and burn techniques. At the feet of these giants, big leaf rhododendrons are the masters; up to 3500m, *R. kesangiae* (SS Grandia), its flowers bright pink when they are young, fading later to white,

with a rough trunk, is dominant. Strangely, two variant forms grow next to one another: one has dark maroon buds, the other, greenish-yellow ones, something we had already noticed in plants in cultivation. *R. kesangiae* ( named after the Queen mother of Bhutan, Kesang) leaves a small place to *R. falconeri* (SS Falconera) with yellow flowers, a smooth pinkish trunk, flaking in small strips,



the leaves upper surface have a brown indumentum which gives a velvety aspect which is usually the case of the *eximium* variant with pink flowers .

From time to time, we come across a few *R. arizelum* (SS Falconera): easily recognizable thanks to their obovate leaves with a thick woolly indumentum and flaking bark. An exceptional specimen, a three metres sphere, next to a marsh, with bright cherry-pink trusses, will make us think of the sub-species *rubicosum*. Wrongly, for, after checking, we will realize that it only grows on the Sino-Burmese border. It is true that *arizelum* has the reputation of being very variable ....

Higher and up to 4000m, in a dense forest of *R. hodgsonii* (SS Falconera) it is a fabulous show: dark leaves with a metallic grey underside, lit by crimson flowers, pinkish smooth trunks emerging from a mossy carpet ; they are flaking, revealing new bark of a shiny pale pink shade . Each tree is beautiful in itself but on such a large



scale it is a shock! Curiously, in the small area where they flower together, there is no mark of hybridization. When you know the legendary promiscuity of big leaf rhododendrons in our gardens, it seems very strange. Among these, *R. campylocarpum* (SS Campylocarpa) are few and



discreet with their small oval foliage, white underneath and their flower buds opening on a very promising orange colour to finally give a disappointing pale yellow flower.

Above 4000m the trees are dwarf and the vegetation takes refuge in hollows. More rhododendrons, and not the least, form compact thickets protecting each other against the harsh weather conditions. We already know that these high altitude plants need a lot of dampness and a perfect drainage, plenty of sun but coolness, which is the reason why they do not get easily acclimatized in our gardens. Two yellow plants: *R. flinckii* (SS Lanata), compact, of an average height with a wonderful oval foliage and a woolly underside and *R. wightii* (SS Taliensia), taller, with larger light green leaves with a typical shiny and coppery indumentum.





Two red ones too: *R. fulgens* (SS Fulgensia) has dark cordate leaves with a fawn indumentum and small cherry-red flowers and *R. bhutanense* (SS Taliensia) with dark oval acuminate leaves with a short petiole and a very typical dark brown-orange underside; we did not see any flower but they are said to be reddish.

What about the high altitude lepidotes, then? They are not in bloom yet, but for a sharp eye they are there. *R. lepidotum* (SS Lepidota), nearly deciduous and spindly, makes a sharp contrast with the dense low bushes of *R. anthopogon* (S. Pogonanthum) which has lovely small dark leaves, round and aromatic. A tangle of *R. nivale* (SS Lapponica) which deserves its name, emerges from the snowdrifts and forms a carpet under our walking shoes. *R. fragariflorum* (SS. Fragariflora) ends the display of these small companions which will not be at their best before at least a month!



For the time being, we go down, back to Lubrang under the sun which is back. It is in this gorgeous village that we will say good-bye to our porters, drinking innumerable cups of tea with rancid butter which makes you think you are drinking boiling greasy seawater!

After a seven day trek, the results are exceptional: everybody is fine, we have seen and named 32 species of rhododendrons and the seed packets are full! We are surprised to note that the *R. kesangiae* and *R. bhutanense*, which are supposed to be endemic and even 'national treasures' of Bhutan are very common in Arunachal Pradesh! The only unknown species (at least from us!) belongs logically to the SS. Falconera of which several unknown plants have been spotted in this region before, or so it is said.

Back in Dirang at the hotel, we get at last the marvellous hot shower we have been so much looking forward to. It is high time we drew new plans for the next days. Our staff has been reduced to six people: drivers, cooks and guides. Four outings are scheduled: one day for a return trip to the Sela pass and three two-day excursions to Chander, Shergaon and Eagle Nest.

The Sela pass which is the second highest road pass in the world, is only a few hours' drive away from Dirang. The road is constantly under repair and it is also an important military axis along which troupes are stationed. Right from the start we will have a good surprise: we come across a large *R. griffithianum* (SS.Fortunea) with a shiny bronze trunk, covered in huge white campanulate flowers, which is bent over the road. We can't reach it, alas! At the top of the pass there are dark lakes completely surrounded by dense groves of *R. wightii* and *R. bhutanense* all tangled up, towering over a carpet of *R. anthopogon* and *nivale*.



At the foot of the prayer flags and road signs of the pass, bracing itself on the slope on a few poles, there is a wooden-shed, painted green, which is both a refuge and a bar (just like at home...). Kenneth Cox says this is where he saw, in 2002, in a can used as a vase, some flowers of an unusual pink shade which were later identified as being a variant of *R. flinckii*. Thanks to the owner of the bar, he had been able to find the place where it grew (which was quite near) and to collect some seeds. The problem is that as far as we can see there are only breathtaking screes without any vegetation. Then, we remember one of John Roy's mails mentioning the sixth curve.... A few minutes' walk and at the sixth bend exactly, in a fold of the land, there they are, the *flinckii*, covered in bright pink flowers, very close to one another, hooked on a 45° slope. It is the only known site in the world for this plant and it is not even one hundred square metres! What an emotion ...



On that same evening, we leave for Chander, a place east of Dirang at a moderate altitude, dominated by the white silhouette of the Gorichen peak (6500 m). This village can be reached by taking a long potholed track. A pick-up truck for the backup joins our Tata vans. The area is drier and the slopes are dotted with sparkling trees, which, we will find out later, are Albizzias (lophanta?) with huge white flowers.



At the top we find a dream camp near a splendid village located between blue skies and undulating mountain pastures where superb horses, yaks and a hybrid between a yak and a cow, a speciality of the local cooperative, are grazing. There is a festival in Chander, today. A young boy who is entering the lamasery is being shaved; notables have arrived from far away and, before drinking tchang, the local alcohol, everybody is having tea with rancid butter. As we are the guests of honour, there is no hope we can avoid it! It is a real torture even if Anong (let him be thanked for it!) discreetly drinks some of our cups as soon as the village headman is not looking!



The hike is easy on the path which goes on towards Thungri, under the sun which will stay with us until the end. It is the country of *R. grande* which deserve their name, for they are huge, often growing isolated with a dense rounded shape, 10 metres high, out of bloom and looking as if they were covered in metal with the innumerable silver candelabras of the young shoots; what is more, they provide shelter to colonies of epiphytic *lindleyi*, their white trumpets emerging from the foliage.



Gorgeous *R. griffthianum*, their flowers wider than my hand, with a sugary scent and a shiny trunk will force us to perform acrobatics like monkeys to get some of their seeds.

We came across three new finds in this area:

- A large leaf rhododendron with a smooth flaking trunk of the Falconera type, 10m tall, slender, with light yellow flowers and rather small lanceolate leaves with a woolly fawn indumentum, *R. sidereum*? No, for we have never seen any specimen as sturdy as that and it usually has a rough bark and a silvery indumentum. We called it, for the time being, *R. rex arizelum* Affine, the *arizelum* sub-species being extremely variable. Jean-François, after a difficult climb, succeeded in bringing down lots of seeds, so we will eventually see what we will get from that.



- A small lepidote rhododendron with light pink axillary flowers in a dense colony on the edge of a ravine which could well be *R. virgatum* (SS.Virgata) or *R. tephropeplum* (SS.Tephropepla). We must wait and see what the descendants will look like...
- A graceful Lapponica, with yellow flowers probably, which nobody could name (maybe the seedlings will enable us to do it ...)







After this high camp we will go to a subtropical valley alongside a torrent, near the village of Shergaon, not far from Bhutan. It really feels as if we were on a summer holiday with a lawn facing the water, herds of horses roaming free and the burning sun. The zone we are going to explore is a high cirque covered by a primary forest haunted by wild elephants. It is a steep climb and it is really hot. *R. griffthianum*, *R. crassum*, *R. arboreum* can be seen everywhere on the edge of the forest. On the contrary, as soon as we get into it, at around 3000m, there are only giants 50m high and more, on steep slopes. Their trunks disappearing in a jungle of lianas and lichens are lit by numerous orchids.



There are lots of rhododendrons at the summit, or so they say... But quickly things change for the worse. No summit, no path at all... We are lost in the forest ... and believe me, it is not funny at all. At the beginning, all is fine, everybody is in good shape, there is the GPS, so there is nothing to worry about ... But after a few falls and slips our bodies are aching, we are exhausted. The GPS says we must go down; OK; so we follow a stream... which suddenly becomes a cascade 40m high. Once it can be funny, forty times everyone is worried, then desperate, especially as the night is falling and we do not have anymore water to drink.

Ah! These tourists who want to play the part of explorers! But luckily the forty-first time is the right one: we find a way downwards.



What a relief! And what a good night's sleep.



The last excursion will take us on a disused military track, called the 'Eagle Nest Trail', winding along the Bhutanese boundaries, in a large primary forest haunted by numerous wild pachyderms with a solid reputation for chronic bad mood. A ribbon of trodden earth in a green ocean whose giant waves are rugged hills. There is not a human being on the horizon but traces of elephants and their dung everywhere ... It does not prevent us from enjoying an easy and sunny hike at an altitude of 3000 m. It is a fireworks of burgeoning acers, a profusion of sweetly scented rhododendrons (*R. lindleyi*, *R. edgeworthii*); it is our reward! And we make two more finds: a *R. triflorum* (SSTriflora) with vivid



yellow flowers and a magnificent dark foliage and a strange *Maddenia* very different from those we saw earlier on, with spindly branches, small oval leaves and flowers. To end this beautiful day, a singing competition takes place between the French and the Indians! The latter won by KO ...

The next day, we have to go back to civilization, sadly, but at the same time with the secret pleasure due to all the treasures we have amassed: all these seeds which are asleep in their little packets and which have been carefully labelled...



This trip was a great success; we came across forty species, all of them bearing seeds; we only have good memories, which does not mean we did not encounter some difficult moments. Arunachal has been worthy of its reputation : it offers the rhododendron enthousiast a great and unique diversity of species on a few dozens square kilometres ; plants which, for a long time, were believed to be only Nepalese for some, Bhutanese for others, without talking about some new finds, that for some of us, very candid, were thought to be new . Dreaming is not forbidden.



One thing is for sure: we will go back, for the magic places we visited, for the wonderful people who live there... and for the flowers too...If you feel like it, you know what you can do...

