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Hill Stations of India

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British officials once built whole towns on Indian hilltops. They did it to escape the summer heat of the plains. These towns are called **hill stations**.

This article asks how they began, who built them, and what they left behind.



Longwood, Shimla. Photo: UnpetitproleX, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0. Source.

What is a hill station, and why did the British build them?

What is a hill station?

A hill station is a town built at high altitude. The British built them to escape the heat and disease of the plains.

The sites were not random. Officials picked them for cool air and workable land. They also wanted them near the towns they ruled below.

Nearly all the big hill stations date to the early or mid 19th century. They grew as the East India Company took more land.

Sources: hpshimla.nic.in; nilgiris.nic.in

How did Shimla become the summer capital?

The British first came to the Shimla hills after the Gorkha wars. In 1804 the Gorkhas of Nepal defeated the ruler of Kangra. They then moved south. They built forts in the region around Shimla.

The British later fought the Gorkhas and won the hills.

In 1819 Lt. Ross, the Assistant Political Agent, set up the first British residence. It was a simple wood cottage.

Charles Pratt Kennedy built the first pucca house in 1822. It was called Kennedy House. People call him its founder.

Shimla was declared the summer capital of British India in **1864**. From then, the government moved there each summer.

Sources: hpshimla.nic.in; livehistoryindia.com; victorianweb.org

> **Quick check 1.** The year 1864 is when Shimla became the British Indian summer capital. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What about Ooty?

Ooty is short for Ootacamund. The Governors of Madras first visited it for a few months each year, to escape the heat.

Later it became the virtual summer capital of the Madras Presidency. A local history dates this to 1 July 1870.

Nainital was the summer seat of the North Western Provinces from 1862.

The Governor stayed at Government House, now the Raj Bhavan. It stands on a ridge near Doddabetta. The Governor lived there for most of April, May and June.

Sources: nilgiris.nic.in; deccanchronicle.com

> **Quick check 2.** Ooty served as summer capital of British India, the same role Shimla played. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Shimla Summer capital of British India, 1864
Ooty Summer capital of the Madras Presidency, 1870

Was every hill station British?

Not quite. Kodaikanal, in Tamil Nadu, began in the mid 19th century. Its founding is dated to 1845.

British officials and Christian missionaries led the effort. They wanted a cool and healthy place.

So its story differs from Shimla, which was built around government.

Sources: tamilnadutourism.tn.gov.in

Why did the British pick the Shimla hills?

Shimla grew out of the Gurkha War. In 1804 the Gurkhas, beaten by the Sikhs at Kangra, moved south. They built many forts around Shimla.

One fort, Jagatgarh, gave rise to the Jutogh cantonment next to Shimla.

The road came later. Work on a cart road from Kalka began in 1850-51. Wheeled traffic could use it by 1860.

Sources: hpshimla.nic.in

How did the town become a seat of government?

First came a wood cottage in 1819. Then came Kennedy House in 1822. Then came the road, and the officials.

By 1864 the whole government moved up each summer. After Independence, Shimla became the capital of Punjab and later of Himachal Pradesh.

Sources: hpshimla.nic.in; victorianweb.org

How did Darjeeling and the mountain railways grow?

How did the British get Darjeeling?

Darjeeling was once part of Sikkim. The Raja of Sikkim handed it to the East India Company in 1835. A deed of grant was signed on 1 February 1835.

Some accounts call the deal a lease. Others call it a grant. The British wanted a sanatorium in a cool climate.

The hills also sat close to trade routes toward Tibet.

Today Darjeeling is known for its tea gardens and Himalayan views.

The Sikkim deal is a common exam point. Remember the year, 1835, and the word lease.

Sources: darjeeling.gov.in; incredibleindia.gov.in

Who first spotted Darjeeling, and what did Sikkim receive?

In 1828 Captain George Lloyd went to the Darjeeling spur. He had just settled a dispute between Nepal and Sikkim.

For years, British officials in Calcutta had wanted a cool place in the hills. They wanted a summer resort and a sanatorium. Lloyd saw that Darjeeling could be one.

The Raja of Sikkim gave the hill to the Company as a gesture of friendship. In return he received gifts. They were a double-barrelled gun, a rifle, red broadcloth and two shawls.

Sources: bacsa.org.uk; incredibleindia.gov.in

> **Quick check 3.** Darjeeling was leased from Sikkim in 1835. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Which three railways form the UNESCO listing?

Three hill railways form one UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is called the **Mountain Railways of India**.

They are the Darjeeling Himalayan, the Nilgiri, and the Kalka-Shimla railways.

Each was built separately for its own hill station.

The Nilgiri line took long to build. It was proposed in 1854. Work began only in 1891, and the line opened in 1908.

Sources: nationalgeographic.com; outlooktraveller.com

When did each one open, and when did UNESCO list it?

The Darjeeling line opened in 1881. The Kalka-Shimla line opened in 1903. The Nilgiri line was finished in 1908.

UNESCO listed the Darjeeling railway in **1999**. It added the Nilgiri line in 2005. It added Kalka-Shimla in 2008.

So the three were not listed in one year.

Sources: outlooktraveller.com; nationalgeographic.com

> **Quick check 4.** All three mountain railways were listed by UNESCO in the same year, 1999. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

1881 Darjeeling line opens
1903 Kalka-Shimla opens
1908 Nilgiri line finished
1999 Darjeeling listed
2005 Nilgiri added
2008 Kalka-Shimla added

What is special about the Darjeeling toy train?

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is nicknamed the “Toy Train”. It runs on a narrow gauge, so the carriages are small.

It runs from Siliguri to Darjeeling, over about 88 km. It is still in active use, not only a museum piece.

The line is the oldest of the three mountain railways.

Sources: nationalgeographic.com

Which other hill stations matter?

What do hill stations reveal about British rule?

Why does a railway to a summer retreat matter?

Building a whole railway to reach a retreat shows how seriously officials took heat and disease. They treated it as a governance issue.

Making Shimla the summer capital moved real power there for months each year.

India was thus governed from two very different landscapes.

Officials and files moved up the hill each summer. Then they came back down. This went on for decades.

So a hill station was more than a holiday town. It was a seat of power.

Sources: livehistoryindia.com; victorianweb.org

What outlasted the empire?

UNESCO listing three railways as one site shows how much heritage value they hold today.

Sources: outlooktraveller.com

What is new with the Darjeeling toy train in 2026?

Is the toy train growing?

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway earned **₹24.6 crore** in FY 2025-26. The year before it earned ₹21.2 crore.

Passenger footfall rose from 1.74 lakh to 2.08 lakh.

This is the same 1881 line, still growing nearly 150 years after it opened.

Sources: newsdrum.in

What should you remember for the exam?

What was the original purpose of colonial hill stations?

UPSC asked this in CAPF ACs 2021. The answer is to set up **sanatoria**.

Early hill stations were health resorts. They were places to recover from tropical disease and summer heat.

View this question on the full CAPF ACs 2021 paper.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; tamilnadutourism.tn.gov.in

Which war led to the founding of Shimla?

CDS-I 2019 asked this. The answer is the **Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16)**.

The British gained the hills around Shimla after that war.

View this question on the full CDS-I 2019 paper.

Sources: hpshimla.nic.in; livehistoryindia.com

Can you sum it up in short lines?

Shimla: summer capital in 1864. Ooty: Madras summer capital. Darjeeling: leased from Sikkim in 1835.

Railways: opened 1881, 1903 and 1908. UNESCO: 1999, 2005, 2008.

Health came first.

Sources: nationalgeographic.com; outlooktraveller.com; hpshimla.nic.in

Practice MCQs

1. In what year was Shimla declared the summer capital of British India?

A. 1877

B. 1901

C. 1857

D. 1864

See answer ↓

2. Which hill station served as the summer capital of the Madras Presidency?

A. Mussoorie

B. Coorg

C. Ooty

D. Munnar

See answer ↓

3. In 1835, the East India Company leased Darjeeling from the ruler of which kingdom?

A. Sikkim

B. Nepal

C. Tibet

D. Bhutan

See answer ↓

4. Which three railways together form the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Mountain Railways of India"?

A. Darjeeling Himalayan, Konkan, and Kangra Valley railways

B. Nilgiri, Kangra Valley, and Konkan railways

C. Konkan, Nilgiri, and Kalka-Shimla railways

D. Darjeeling Himalayan, Nilgiri, and Kalka-Shimla railways

See answer ↓

5. Consider these two statements about the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.

Statement 1: It opened in 1881.

Statement 2: It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999.

Which statement(s) is/are correct?

A. Only Statement 1 is correct

B. Only Statement 2 is correct

C. Both statements are correct

D. Neither statement is correct

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.**
   Shimla was declared the summer capital of British India in 1864.
   ↑ Q1
2. **C.**
   Ooty was the summer capital of the Madras Presidency.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   The East India Company got Darjeeling from the Chogyal of Sikkim in 1835.
   ↑ Q3
4. **D.**
   The Darjeeling Himalayan, Nilgiri and Kalka-Shimla railways form the UNESCO site.
   ↑ Q4
5. **C.**
   The Darjeeling line opened in 1881. UNESCO listed it in 1999.
   ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** Three separate histories of Shimla date the declaration to 1864. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Ooty served the Madras Presidency only. Shimla served the whole of British India. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The Company got the area from the Chogyal of Sikkim in 1835. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Only the Darjeeling line was listed in 1999. Nilgiri came in 2005 and Kalka-Shimla in 2008. ↑ 4

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