

Up ahead: train from Ghum to Tiger Hill

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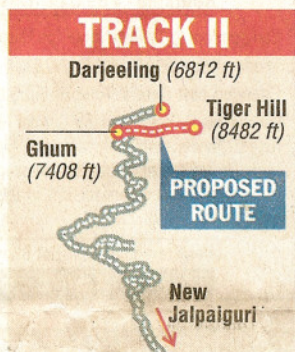
Darjeeling, June 20: If China is blacktopping an existing road to Everest, India is planning a new track to Tiger Hill.

The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council is working on a project to set up a rail link between Ghum — at 7408 feet, among the highest railway stations in the world — and Tiger Hill, from where the tip of Everest can be spied on a clear day.

“We are working on the project as it would be a major tourist attraction. We are also trying to process funds for the project through the large grants programme of the ministry of tourism,” chief principal secretary Anil Verma said.

The 8-km distance from Ghum to Tiger Hill (8,482 feet), where tourists flock to see the sunrise over Kanchenjunga, could take between 45 minutes and an hour to cover because of the steep climb, officials said. Driving is a lot faster — 20-25 minutes.

As with China's project to blacktop the road to the Everest Base Camp, environmentalists are worried about the impact of the proposed Tiger Hill rail link. The entire stretch falls within the Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary and the train will have to take



a long detour across the hill to make the climb.

But the hill council is dismissive of the concerns, insisting that if proper precautions are taken, the narrow gauge rail line would do no damage.

“This is why we want to work with the railways and to come up with the project,” said Verma, pointing out that the railways have the experience of laying tracks in forest areas.

The railways are expected to be formally told about the project during the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's standing committee meeting on June 29 in New Delhi.

The hill council is also looking at getting in touch with the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Society, the UK. Special help will be needed to take the steam engine further up to 8,482 feet from the 7408 feet at present.

“We might have to consider a funicular/cog railway,” Verma said.

Set up in 1881, the Himalayan railway is considered an engineering marvel — engineers of the Darjeeling Steam Tramway Company had to devise a unique Z loop in which the train first goes down and then reverses for the ascent.

Introduced to transport tea packets from Darjeeling to the rest of the country, the train service today is used mostly by tourists and the railways are incurring a loss of Rs 4-5 crore every year. Driving is the more popular option, even with tourists.

But Verma said “the railways have shown interest” in the Tiger Hill project. If the train service is extended to Tiger Hill, it will not be the first extension on the Himalayan railway that was granted world heritage status by Unesco in 1999.

In 1914-15, a branch had opened between Siliguri (Panchanai) and Kishanganj in Bihar. The same year, another rail link called the Teesta Valley line was opened between Siliguri and Gelle Khola (along the then Kalimpong Road) but this line had to be abandoned in 1950 after landslides completely washed away the tracks.

The railways are revamping the Teesta Valley line.