

# TOURISM UPDATE

NILGIRIS



PHOTOS BY SUPRIYA SEHGAL

▲ **Silent Sentinel:** The 19th century St Stephen's church of Ooty is the oldest in the Nilgiris and is an architectural masterpiece.

◀ **Beckoning Green:** Coonoor with its tea plantations delights the eyes, while its peaceful ambience is restful.

▼ **Tea Time:** Local women take a well-deserved break from tea-picking duties with mugs of the famous fragrant and mellow Nilgiri tea.

## Decoding the Nilgiris

The Blue Mountains are a fascinating place to discover intriguing India. **BY RAVI SAGAR**

The 'Fragrant One' from the land of the Blue Mountains lingers on the tastebuds. The colour is a brisk orange and the taste a distinct honey-sweet, not sharp and tangy but sweet and mellow. Just the right kind of tea, yes, it is the Fragrant One, a tea to sip through the day to beat the slight chill of the mountain air! But there's certainly more to the Nilgiris than its tea. It's a destination that is simply exquisite in its beauty. The Nilgiri Hills are a part of the rich biodiversity of the Western Ghats, located bordering the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Nilgiri District, part of Tamil Nadu, is situated within these hills. The English name of the Nilgiri Hills is Blue Mountains—their



literal translation. No one knows exactly why the mountains earned the nomenclature. This historically rich land, bestowed with abundant flora and fauna, is covered by a blue sheath every 12 years, when the mauve-blue Neelakurunji flowers bloom and impart a bluish tinge to the mountain slopes—the reason, perhaps, behind the name. The indigenous people of the Nilgiris used the blossoming cycle of the shrubs to calculate their age.

The region has reasons galore to celebrate the Nilgiris. The world-renowned travel destination is blessed with not one but several hill stations, each at a different altitude. It is a retreat that packs the thrill of high mountains, deep valleys, sparkling water bodies, dense forests and steep slopes, rich biodiversity, the peace of tea gardens, and the adventure of trekking and mountain cycling, et al. It is home to Ketti, the world's widest valley, as well as the famous Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary.

If this has whetted your appetite, block your dates for an early winter vacation in the Blue Mountains—winter is the best season to enjoy the many-splendoured beauty of the area, and to beat the tourist crowd. November marks the beginning of the winter season in the Nilgiris with moderate temperatures making for a comfortable stay. By January the holiday season is over. Summers are also a good time to plan a vacation. But this will push your visit to March–June 2014!

Coimbatore, 100 km away, is the nearest point to the Nilgiris, and the nearest airport. From here you can either take a train or journey by road to Mettupalayam. The road journey will take you directly to Ooty (anglicised name of Udhagamandalam), or the Queen of Hills, but if you take the train, you are in for a joy ride from Mettupalayam to Ooty—hold your breath—on a toy train!

When you sit hanging out of the window (yes you can, it averages 10.5 km per hour) as the train chugs up 2,600m to Ooty, do remember this bit of history, but not before you get your first real glimpse of the picturesque Nilgiris.

The quaint toy train made its first journey up from Mettupalayam at the foothills of the Nilgiris to Ooty 114 years ago, in 1899. It took Swiss Locomotive Works 45 years to lay the tracks through the rough terrain, the work for which began in 1854. The fact that the toy train still runs up and down the track hauled by its steam engine is a testimony to the locomotive and engineering prowess of the times. The train winds its way through four halts. The first of these is Kellar. Enjoy the easy ride and the sight of the paddy fields till you reach this point. The next leg is not for the chicken-hearted as the train chugs up the rough, rocky terrain and 13 blinding tunnels and viaducts all the while clinging to the mountain-side to reach Coonoor. Come back to Coonoor to visit the tea gardens later. But for now, move on to fern hills and enjoy the train journey of a lifetime going uphill to reach the highest altitude of this railroad journey at 2,218m.

#### FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

##### 1. THE BEST LAID GARDEN INDEED!



Laid by Marquess of Tweeddale in 1847, Ooty's Botanical Garden continues to delight.

##### 2. TRANQUIL CHARM



The famous manmade Ooty lake created by its founder John Sullivan offers a host of fun-filled activities to visitors.

##### 3. SACRED SITES



A trek through the forests in Kotagiri can lead to one of these Dolmens or ancient burial sites.

##### 4. ONE OF A KIND



Thread Garden in Ooty is the only entirely manmade garden in the world that closely mimics Nature.

##### 5. LOOKING BACK

A member of the Kotagiri tribe, one of the indigenous people of the Nilgiris.



▲ *The Originals:* The original inhabitants of the Nilgiris, the pastoral Todas are the most picturesque tribe; their hutment.

Most importantly, you have had the privilege of being a passenger on a World Heritage Site. Do preserve the ticket for posterity, for Nilgiri Mountain Railway (NMR) has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Just before Ooty, the ride suddenly dips downhill, twisting and turning all the way to Adderly, giving you a gut-wrenching feeling much like when on a thrilling high-speed ride in an amusement park. All the while the old train chugs on rhythmically, billowing smoke at intervals. After the hair-raising ride on the ratchet and pinion track in the vintage cog train (only 30 such trains are left in the world) up and down the slopes, sharp bends, curves, ravines and viaducts, you disembark at Ooty. You won't have a quibble with anyone in the world for bowing to the natural beauty of this queen. Situated at a height of 2,240m, Ooty is a piece of paradise on earth. You will feel refreshed in its summer climate which never crosses 25°C in summer. In the winter months, the mercury rarely dips below 5°C and the maximum is a pleasant 21°C.

The beauty of the Nilgiri Hills lay undiscovered till the 1800s, when the British found its "European" climate much more suitable for Englishmen than the hot tropical weather elsewhere in India. The credit for discovering it actually goes to John Sullivan, then Collector of Coimbatore, who built a house here up in the mountains. Soon enough, many other Europeans followed suit, attracted by the salubrious ambience of the Blue Mountains, and it became the summer resort of the English gentry. Later, the practice of moving the government to the Nilgiris evolved and it became the summer capital of the Madras Government. Though the original inhabitants of the Nilgiris are the indigenous Toda tribe, not even the dynastic rulers—the Cheras, the Cholas, the



▼ **Beauty Unbound:** J D Sims and Major Murray developed this botanical garden and park in 1874.



▶ **Panoramic Beauty:** A bird's eye view of Ooty unveils well-laid English bungalows and allées.



▶ **Top View:** Dolphin's Nose provides the best vantage point to enjoy the scenic beauty of Coonoor.



Pandiyas, the Rashtrakutas, the Ganges, the Pallavas, the Kadambas and the Hoysalas—can be credited with discovering this jewel in their crown which remained uncelebrated till the British developed and modernised it, connecting the hill stations with a railroad.

Make yourself at home in Ooty and then plan short sojourns to explore the coffee and tea plantations here and in Coonoor, famous for its tea plantations, just 19 km away, and Kothagiri, which is at a distance of 31 km.

Arm yourselves with a good camera and set out to explore the exotic flora and fauna in the mountains and forests around you. You are in one of the world's 14 'hotspots'. The Nilgiris have achieved this distinction because of their uniquely rich biodiversity. This is India's first biosphere offering a range of stirring experiences and visual delights.

Blessed with a maritime climate, Coonoor, a smaller cousin of Ooty, is basically a tea-garden town. A pair of binoculars will come in handy here as it is home to a variety of birds, making it the ardent bird-watchers' destination. Visit Sim's Park, the botanical garden, to get a manicured feel of the vast natural treasure trove that the Nilgiris hide in their boundless terrain. But the best part of visiting Coonoor is a visit to the Dolphin's Nose Point. This spectacular rock formation, 10 km from Coonoor, is situated 1,000m above sea level. Shaped naturally like a dolphin's nose, it offers the most panoramic view of Coonoor. The route to the point has hairpin bends that are great vantage points for a view of enthralling nature and the tea gardens. But Dolphin's Nose itself is unbeatable with deep ravines on both sides and a view of continuous sheets of water cascading down the Catherine Falls. It brings out the untamed beauty of nature in all its glory.

If you are a history buff or nurse an anthropological interest, head out to Kotagiri. Here again, the carefully cultivated tea gardens are a beautiful sight but if you venture beyond them towards the interiors, you will chance upon the original owners of this piece of paradise—the Kota tribes. Kotagiri, in fact,

means 'mountain of the Kotas'. The Kotas, a very private people, are on the verge of extinction. They generally do not mix with outsiders. Learn more about them and do visit their place of worship, the temple of Kamataraya.

The adventurous can undertake a number of treks from Kotagiri to discover the many surrounding beauty spots like Doddabetta Range, Catherine Falls, Elk Falls and Rangaswami Pillar. For a spectacular view of the verdant green and slopes, head out to Kodanad View Point. The most popular treks are: Kotagiri–Kodanad, Kotagiri–St Catherine Falls and Kotagiri–Longwood Shola. Gudalur, at the tri-point of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, is 52 km from Ooty. The famous Muthumalai Wildlife Sanctuary is situated here, offering a slice of the rich biodiverse universe of the Nilgiris. Pandalur is another stop-over for decoding the history of the Nilgiris.

The Nilgiris can best be described as a mountain destination with a mine of infotainment waiting to be discovered. From a resort life in touristy Ooty to the more close-to-the-elements experience in the secluded Pandalur, treks for the adventurous, to just breathing in the beauty of the place for the more sedentary, history and anthropology, wildlife and biodiversity, the Blue Mountains have it all. The sheer beauty of the Nilgiris acts like a balm on the soul of the world weary traveller. ■