The Blue Mountain Trail

Ooty leaves an indelible impression when one walks down the lanes that tell tales of its historical past.

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I am often asked why I love my hometown Ooty so much. Is it because I am a person attuned to nature? Or because I am a mountain person? Or is it because I love the cold? All of these assumptions are actually correct, and perhaps so is my fascination with history, which endears this hill station to me. I now live far away in a crowded metropolis where all I see are roof and concrete in all seasons, sometimes obscuring even the sky. Not the azure blue of the winter sky or the roiling clouds of the monsoons.

While growing up in a place, however exquisite and beautiful it may be to the outside world, it is not unusual to take our surroundings for granted. During our many playful adventures on the railway tracks while in school, I did not know that the Ooty Lake was an artificial one or the train we tried to outrun was vintage. Getting to know the legacy of my hometown was a discovery over the years.

SULLIVAN’S OOTY
Ooty was discovered accidentally in 1818 by two assistants to the then Collector of Coimbatore, Mr John Sullivan who is credited with its discovery. The original place he reached, however, was a village in Kotagiri called Dimhatti. Mr Sullivan is also credited with the construction of the first house in Ooty - The Stonehouse, which incidentally is the name-lender to the town itself.

Before Stonehouse was purchased by Mr Sullivan, it was occupied by a Toda hut known as ‘whotte-mund’ (the single Toda House), which the Europeans corrupted into Ootacamund. The huge oak tree called the Sullivan’s Oak, planted by Sullivan 150 years ago, stands to this day in its tangled glory. The Stonehouse now houses the Government Arts College.

THE NILGIRI MOUNTAIN RAILWAY
The Nilgiri Mountain Railway, fondly called the ‘toy’ train is where one can come closer to history than anywhere else in Ooty. Built in 1908, it took an astonishing 45 years to construct the railway. The ride—on a train that looks right out of a museum attached with a UNESCO heritage tag and moves at a pace little above that of an average cycler—gives itself to those who want to slow down. For a distance of 46 km, it takes about five hours to make the arduous climb as it takes you from 1,069 ft at Mettupalayam to 7,228 ft at Ooty! Yet, it is a ride that is dreamier than a dream transporting the traveller to times of the colonial era.
Docked at the Mettupalayam station in the early morning, shrouded mysteriously in smoke, the train brings to mind the ‘Hogwarts Express’ in the magical world portrayed in the Harry Potter series. As the train chugs lazily up the steep slopes, at a gradient of 1:12.5 (the steepest gradient in Asia) at some places, sense of time is lost on the traveller.

During the entire duration of the ride, one is either gaping at the huge rocky terrains or staring dreamily into the mist-enveloped fields and shola forests. Add to this the possibility of elephants crossing and you have the thrill factor too. The stations en route are delightful with an old-world-charm and will leave you excited like a child. As the train gets close to Coonoor, tall alpine plantations, tea plantations and inviting cottages vie for the traveller’s attention. Getting off the train is like waking up from a beautiful dream.

Although the landscape is mesmerising, it is the engineering marvel of its creators that made possible this journey into the secret folds of the mountains.

ON A HERITAGE TRAIL
No. There is no map of heritage places in Ooty. Simply walk around the town and you cannot miss history. Let us put the centre point at Adam’s statue in Charing Cross, with five roads leading out of it. Walk any way and you will bump into historic sites dotted over the town. One road takes you up to the St Stephen’s Church, dating back to the 19th century, passing through Breeks Memorial School established in 1874 in memory of the then Collector Mr J W Breeks; Take another road from Adam’s statue and land at the Botanical Gardens past the Assembly Rooms, a ballroom converted into a theatre; yet another road leads up to the Stonehouse.

During school days, my friends and I revelled in walking around the town, often deliberately missing the school bus to walk home. It would not be an exaggeration to say that our walking forays cemented the bond between us and our hometown. Walking is a natural part of being in Ooty. To know the town and experience the rich tapestry of history woven in, one needs to walk the town. Or you would never experience the sense of history that envelops a structure retaining its antiquity in the busiest junctions. One such personally cherished building is the Nilgiri Library, which largely remains unnoticed.

THE NILGIRI LIBRARY
Constructed in 1869, this tall Victorian structure is a library that speaks history not by its books alone. Stately reading halls fitted out with charming reclining chairs and the light streaming in from the huge French windows, the ambience is one that any bibliophile...
would die for. Climb a few stairs to the Wardrop room and look at books in leather-bound volumes on an array of topics ranging from local flora to the world war in handsome shelves, complete with the ladder right out of Victorian movies.

In my school days, the membership to the library was guarded and prestigious. I remember vividly the day the library board approved my membership and how exalted I felt to walk the halls of this bibliotheca. Far removed, I still keep my membership alive holding on to my childhood memories and in some way to the legacy of a bygone era.

**PEOPLE OF OOTY**

Being close to Kerala and Karnataka, the populace here is an eclectic mix of migrants from both the States, the Tamils and the original tribes and communities settled in Ooty. The tribes before European insurgency had a clear demarcation of trade and profession—Kota tribe, the artisans; Todas, dairymen and weavers and Kurumbas, the honey collectors. The Badagas are a community of migrant settlers who fled the Tipu Sultan rule and took the role of cultivators.

**NATURAL HERITAGE**

The term natural heritage is superfluous to Ooty but is explicitly important, for the march towards development has tread many irreplaceable ecosystems in its wake. The landscape one sees here is the result of the European settlers’ introduction of native species from Britain. The native, original ecoscape of Ooty can be seen when one travels towards Avalanche or Mukurthi where grasslands are interspersed with the shola forests. Rivers originate in these grasslands. Home to the Nilgiri Thar, Langurs, Sambar, Gaur, Tiger, leopards and other innumerable mammals, birds and reptiles, the biodiversity of these ecosystems is rich and unique, forming a part of the Western Ghats hotspot.

Whether you are in Ooty on a heritage trail or a do-nothing holiday, the distinctive architectural style stands out amidst the tourist hustle it has recently morphed into. The modern amenities springing up to cater to the commercial tourist are becoming despoilers and the need of the hour is responsible tourism. Despite this, Ooty continues to beckon the discerning traveller with its signature architecture and unique natural heritage.