

# TOURISM UPDATE



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▲ **Green Ghats:** Land of rich biodiversity and cash crops, Wayanad is the proud owner of two patented rice varieties.

◉ **Majestic Mountains:** The second tallest peak in Wayanad, Banasura, standing at 2,073m, is one of the most adventurous and challenging treks.

▼ **Breathtaking:** Chembra Peak is the highest peak in Wayanad at 2,100m and offers trekkers an unhindered view of the unspoilt beauty of the Western Ghats.

## The Great Adventure

Wayanad is a fascinating getaway offering a multitude of activities with never a dull moment. **BY SANGITA THAKUR**

**T**he hills of Wayanad resonate with history. The salubrious air smells of spices—a whiff of coffee mixed with cardamom. You can follow your nose literally to the land of spicy hills. Nestled amid the lofty, majestic Western Ghats, Wayanad, besides being home to several of India's ancient indigenous tribes, has unique varieties of paddy, world-class spices, a stunning biodiversity, and thrills and adventures unlimited.

The etymological roots of Wayanad are derived from the words *Vayal* (paddy) and *Naad* (land), probably from the fact that the area is famous for paddy cultivation. But in the land of paddy fields, much more than



rice crops await for the travellers to explore. It is interesting to note that the 12th district of Kerala (Wayanad was added to the state in 1980) is the proud innovator of two patented varieties of rice—*Jeerakasala* and *Gandhakasala*—promising great export potential.

The adventure of Wayanad begins with the drive to the destination itself. Air travellers can opt to disembark at Kozhikode, 100 km from Wayanad, and do the last leg by road. For those travelling by train, Calicut, 110 km from Wayanad, is the nearest railhead. Reaching Wayanad



via road is a breeze, with wide roadways connecting it to neighbouring states. The largest hill station of Kerala sits atop the imposing Western Ghats running contiguous to Mudumala in Tamil Nadu and Bandhipur in Karnataka at a height of 700-2,100 metres above sea level. The journey up the winding, steep slopes of the Wayanad Ghat Road is not for the faint-hearted though. The rustling of thick foliage as your vehicle rushes past the seamless vast and lush wilderness, makes for an imaginative ride. The hairpin bends, the steep slopes, the deep yawning valleys, the peaks rising skywards and the indistinguishable sounds emanating from the rugged terrain with its deep and tangled forests—home to a variety of wildlife—have you wishing to reach your destination before dusk.

Wayanad offers such a wide variety of stay options that the visitor is spoilt for choice. Luxury resorts with all modern amenities, cottages, huts on stilts, tree houses or Ayurvedic centres providing the famed Kerala holistic treatment, yoga and meditation—all are available amid the coffee, pepper, cardamom and vanilla plantations. From multi cuisine to traditional Kerala food, the menu is as varied as the stay options. Those wanting complete seclusion can opt for cottages or huts with kitchenettes and do their own cooking. To commune with nature, and rejuvenate self and soul, all you need to do is go for long walks and smell the early morning air in Wayanad, laze under a tree or fish out your fishing rod and catch that mackerel to cook for dinner. It's so quiet and peaceful, you can hear yourself breathe. Remove that Bluetooth or that earphone, listen to nature's music as you hear the birds sing, the bees flap their wings, the ducks splash in the pond and the elephants trumpet, and just breathe in the fresh cardamom-scented air. A traditional Ayurvedic massage is the perfect therapy for those muscles stiffened spending long days hunched over your laptop.

For the venturesome, Wayanad offers exciting opportunities for camping, trekking and offsites—a great chance to bond over real life situations and trade sedentary boardroom gaming for a few days of real life adrenalin pumping adventure. Wayanad Tourism Organisation (WTO), a non-profit outfit which works for innovative tourism promotion of this exotic destination, offers four great trails that unravel

#### FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

##### 1. THE OUTDOORS BECKON ONE & ALL



Boating in the many natural lakes of Wayanad is a great way to spend family time.

##### 2. HERITAGE CALLS WITH MYSTIC RUINS



Ancient tribes with their little known rituals, historical ruins, mysterious caves and monuments dot the landscape.

##### 3. REJUVENATE & HEAL



The idyllic, peaceful surroundings are perfect for cycling, meditation, yoga, traditional ayurvedic massage, etc.

##### 4. CONQUER THE WILD IN GOD'S COUNTRY



Camp in the wilderness under the deep blue sky at night and go rafting down the rivers during the day.

##### 5. WHERE ELEPHANTS TRUMPET IN ABANDON

Visitors can spot animals roaming freely in their natural habitat, safe and secure.



**Family Reunion:** Wayanad is a great place for vacationing with family, friends or colleagues. It offers something for everyone.

the enthralling adventures of Wayanad.

Wayanad is a treasure trove of local legends, historical ruins, mysterious mountains, deep caves, aborigines, pristine nature, wildlife and botanical wonders. "The ambit of outdoor activities in Wayanad includes trekking, hiking, cycling, kayaking, bamboo rafting and camping," says K Ravindran, General Secretary of Wayanad Tourism Organisation. He adds, "With a core staff possessing very deep knowledge of the wilderness areas of Wayanad, we have opened up a collection of entirely new hiking and cycling trails covering wildlife, forest, plantation and culture experiences." One of these out of the world experiences is a stay at the campsite among the "rainforest camp at a cloud-wreathed valley of Wayanad," he informs.

Wayanad Outdoor Trail beckons mountaineering amateurs and enthusiasts alike. The district spreads across 2,132 sq km, hiding in its great ranges a depth of biodiversity. The majestic Chembra peaks rise 2,100 metres from its depths like green colonnades holding the blue sky canopy above. The thrill of exploring the unknown outback trails that run into the mountains and forests is to be experienced to be believed. Scaling the peak is a day-long task for an experienced mountaineer; at the end of the challenge lies bountiful Nature. Camping out under the deep blue of the night sky melts away the tiredness of the climb and is a memory to be cherished.

Trek up to the summit of the Neelimala hills next for an awesome view of the Meenmutty Falls—the most beautiful sight to behold, with the view of the valley in the foreground. A closer look at the Falls can be had by undertaking a two kilometre jungle trek off the main Ooty



▲ **Training Young:** Wayanad offers several adventure packages for youngsters to enjoy the

◀ **Behold Paradise:** After a hard trek up the many trails of Wayanad, the sight that greets one is a dream.

▼ **Jungle Track:** The thick foliage, birds, bees and butterflies in their myriad hues are captivating.



Road. For those with a penchant for bird watching, Chethalayam Falls is the perfect destination. Pakshipathalam, which is an arduous seven kilometre trek deep into the recesses of the jungle at an altitude of 1,700 metres in the Brahmagiri Hills, is ideal for the more hardy, seasoned trekkers. At the end of this trek lie rock formations, some as high as double storeyed buildings, and deep caves—home to some of the most exotic and rare plants, birds and animals. Large tracts of Wayanad are still unexplored and waiting to be discovered, offering the thrill of the unknown. Banasura Sagar Dam (the largest earth dam in India) is another perfect point for starting treks that take the inquisitive traveller to the Banasura Peak and the islands formed when the reservoir submerged the land around.

Wayanad is blessed to have 26 per cent of its area under forest cover. Home to two major wildlife reserves—Muthanga and Tholpetty—it is the sanctuary of rare plant and animal species endemic to the Western Ghats. They together form the last surviving treasures that the great swathe of Western Ghats shelters from extinction. As such, Wayanad is a must visit for that one glimpse of India's cherished natural treasures. Sighting of elephant herds with their little ones at the many watering holes of Muthanga, or spotting a rare leopard is a blessing. There are sambhars, cheetals, barking deer, langur and slender loris—not behind cages but roaming in their natural habitats. The myriad colours of butterflies are bewildering as is the variety of birds and insects.

For history and culture buffs, Wayanad has prehistoric engravings at the foothills of Edakkal and around Ambukuthimala that take you back in time to a culture dating back to the Mesolithic Age. The mountain ridges of the Western Ghats acted as barriers and kept the indigenous tribes insulated from the influences of the changing world. As a result, the aborigines in Wayanad still retain much of their culture though increasing commerce with the outside world is winding its way into their lives. Dis-

cover these oldest inhabitants of the earth and their quaint ethos and take back some of their ancient wisdom. Also, you can trace each historic period in the area through the relics and ruins—from Jain influence to Pazhassi Raja, to Tipu Sultan to East India Company.

Family recreation is aplenty with parks, falls and valleys offering immense scope for picnics and group outings. Families can take a boat ride in the serene and scenic Pookote lake, splash around in the gushing waters of Sentinel Rock Falls or pack a picnic lunch and head for Kanthapara Falls or Karapuzha Dam. The unforgettable sunrise and sunset at Sunrise Valley make the perfect romantic setting. Go to Phantom Rock for the photo ops and let it be babies' day out at Pazhassi Park with boating for children. The options at Leisure Trek Trail are as inexhaustible as on the other trails.

The trouble is that by the end of a vacation in Wayanad, the visitor is left wanting more, as a lot remains unexplored. For the great adventure of Wayanad has only just begun... ■

