

Wild escapades

WAYFARER AN EPIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE NILGIRI BIOSPHERE RESERVE TOOK SUDIPTA BHATTACHARJEE TO THREE STATES AND FOUR WILDLIFE HAVENS



(From top) Royal Bengal tigers, leopards (Pic by Yathin Krishnappa) and elephants can be sighted throughout the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve; The rope bridge across a stream at Vythiri Resort in Wayanad,

It was an ambitious journey we were setting out on. In just about two weeks, we aimed to criss-cross three states and traverse almost the entire region known as the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Starting out in Coonoor in the Nilgiris, we headed to Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu and thence to Bandipur, which is next door in Karnataka. From there we were taking a big hop across to Nagarhole, also in Karnataka, and ending finally in the forest of Wayanad in Kerala.

Traversing through this large swathe of forests in the Western Ghats and the Nilgiri range offered the opportunity of communing with nature at its most pristine, and also the chance of sighting a fabulous range of wildlife.

But we started out sedately on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway to Coonoor. The delightful journey through verdant teak-forested hills on a century-old heritage train cost us a princely sum of Rs 3. Getting off at Coonoor station, we wended our way down to Kurumbadi on the Ooty-Mettupalayam Road, where the dense forests on the slopes of the Bakasura mountains provided our first base.

The 11-acre Kurumba Village Resort is almost invisible from the road, so well is it blended with the forest cover. It has rich vegetation all around including plants like nutmeg, pepper and clove and this provides cover for all kinds of wildlife like monkeys, bears and elephants. An array of butterflies and birds, including the Malabar whistling thrush, magpie robin, Oriental white-eye and scarlet minivet can also be easily spotted.

The accommodation and cuisine were the best on offer in all of our forest halts in the Biosphere. With seasonal fruits and juices to start the day, there was Continental and South Indian fare on a live counter. One local delicacy on offer was *kolaputtu*, where bamboo seeds and rice powder were steamed with grated coconut on a bamboo base, as well as tribal cuisine like *mochakotta kolambu* (made of beans) and *attinkalu kolambu* (mutton marinated in coconut milk, with locally grown yam or tender jackfruit). The regional flavours included *thalapakettu biryani*, *pallipalayam* chicken roast and mutton *chukka* while the dessert spread would have gladdened the heart of the most fastidious foodie. Nature walks are a rejuvenating option every afternoon. The area is inhabited primarily by

five tribes: the Kurumbas, Irulas, Kotas, Todas and Badagas, who scurry around, lending an ethnic touch to the hospitality.

It's about a half-hour ride to Coonoor where we dropped in at Kurumba's new facility, Tea Nest and Acres Wild, the picturesque farm run by filmmaker-turned-cheesemaker Mansur Ali. The Tea Factory is another destination and the Dolphin's Nose viewpoint offers a panoramic view of the surrounding valley.

From Coonoor we ascended 17 hairpin bends and down 36 more to reach the stretch of forests, beginning with Mudumalai, nearly 70km away. Our base here was Masinagudi. We stayed at the Jungle Hut, which offered a pastoral and comfortable setting. Early mornings were particularly lovely, with herds of spotted deer grazing right outside the huts. At night, we were advised not to venture out, as sloth bears and leopards snarled at the doorstep. With seasonal fruit dropping from the trees, both bears and elephants were common intruders in the foothills. Mudumalai has an elephant camp, where visitors are allowed to bathe and feed the pachyderms. Around the reserve, one can sight herds of wild elephants, bison, deer and sambar and with oodles of luck, one of the 55 tigers in the reserve.

Just next door to Mudumalai is Bandipur in Karnataka, 29km away, possibly the best bet of all in the region for wildlife enthusiasts. The government-run Safari Lodge is conveniently located at the edge of the forest and also offers the most thrilling safaris at dawn and in the evening, wholesome cuisine, cottages themed after animals and wildlife documentaries as well.

Sightings are very frequent here. We began by watching a young tusker tear down a bamboo grove. On another trail, a pack of wild dogs was trying to hunt a fawn, which was submerged in a water body with only its head showing. It had somehow got separated from the rest of the herd. And even as that bit of action was carrying on, we noticed a leopard atop a tree and another after a kill, thanks to our astute jeep driver Ramesh.

We saw a crested hawk eagle devouring jungle fowl. Besides that there's the white-bellied drongo, the Malabar trogon, the rare Indian pitta and a host of others. But the icing on this dawn safari came in the form of a young sleeping tiger. He was probably a male cub and about two years old. We watched him uninterrupted for 25 minutes from barely 10m away as he slept, sniffed the intrusion, raised his head in a lazy yawn, and, much to our delight, went back into snooze mode.

It was only after we'd gazed at him to our heart's content, that the sound of rolling cameras and the revving jeep woke him up fully. He raised a lazy paw to scratch his neck, stood up, walked to a tree, scent-marked it with scant regard for spectators and strolled off regally into a bush.

It's a long ride to the giant 640sq km Nagarhole National Park. This was a 94km journey via Gundlupet and Mananthavadi. After our long tiger sighting there was little more we could have asked for. But Kabini has its quota of thrills, which is why it's so popular despite the deplorable condition of the access roads.

Here, too, the government-run Kabini River Lodge runs jeep and boat safaris, as well as river rafting in saucer-shaped coracles. Cormorants, crocodiles and otters aside, the river safari gives an additional glimpse of elephants, monkeys, wild boar, bison and deer as they come to river edge to quench their thirst.

Vythiri Resort (about 5km from a town by the same name), our final base in Wayanad, Kerala, did not disappoint. Like Kurumba, it's a self-contained forest resort, complete with tree houses and a hanging rope bridge. Eco-friendly accommodation, a world-class spa and Ayurveda centre, games facilities and excellent cuisine make it a great draw for tourists.

Here too there were magical moments. The Malabar whistling thrush wakes one up unfailingly at 6.20 in the morning, the gurgling stream sounds like incessant rainfall all night long and the world's largest squirrel, the giant Malabar species, trapezes on trees canopying the cottages with disarming devilry. So do the simian inhabitants, mimicking human moves with practised ease. Vythiri, with its planter's retreat, havens, cottages and tree houses, complete with a Jacuzzi, comes as a fitting finale to a fortnight's forest sojourn.

TRAVEL TRIVIA

The Nagarhole National Park derives its name from the words naga (meaning snake) and hole (streams). It was the favourite and an exclusive hunting zone for the kings of the Wodeyar dynasty who ruled Mysore from 1399 to 1947. It was turned into a wildlife sanctuary in 1955 and was upgraded to a national park in 1988.

MY FAVOURITE HOLIDAY- RABBI SHERGILL, MUSICIAN



Recently I was in Miami for the launch of my latest album, Rabbi III. Miami is a lively city that's all about the good life, great food and great partying. Then, a couple of my school friends came over there and needless to say, we had a superb time. We were all meeting up after a long time and all we could think of was to let our hair down and enjoy ourselves. We hired a car and drove all over the place, taking in the sites and soaking up the sea air. We had a great time rolling around the Boulevard, visiting some of the popular spots and went partying later on.

READY RECKONER

Map not to scale

■ **Getting there:** Coonoor can be accessed from Coimbatore, Mysore or Bangalore by flights, train or road. Kozhikode is the nearest airport to Wayanad.

■ **Staying there:** Kurumba Village Resort - 0423223 7222; Jungle Hut, Masinagudi - 04232526463; Safari Lodge, Bandipur - 08229236051; Kabini River Lodge, Nagarhole - 08228264402; Vythiri Resort, Wayanad: 09388555250

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