

# Blue Mountain

The colonial influence in Kotagiri in the Nilgiri hills, with flowing plantations, horseback riding over misty hills, and steaming cups of tea, is like the memory in a faded photograph from another time—beautiful, alluring and calling you to come visit.

Words and Photography GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI

Kodanad viewpoint offers a spectacular vista of thick green forests, lush tea estates, misty hills and the Moyar and Bhavani rivers flowing below

In January 1819, John Sullivan, the Collector of Coimbatore, had trekked up the Nilgiris with a band of soldiers, elephants and ponies, navigating deep forests and precipitous cliffs, some say in search of outlaws. What he found were not fearsome bandits but a mist-laden sylvan valley that reminded him of a soft Swiss landscape in spring.

Over two centuries later, the resemblance is less obvious as the vale is smothered in the iridescent green of tea plantations and vegetable gardens, which Sullivan subsequently introduced during his stay in this peaked and folded land of green glades. And Kotagiri in the softly moulded Nilgiris or Blue Mountains as the Brits called them, unfurled a green carpet welcome as we drove into Teanest Nightingale, a boutique guesthouse.

Over a stay of three days in this four-room, 120-year-old cottage, with a pitched tiled roof and an earthy-red façade matched by vintage interiors, we perfected the art of escaping from the world. We had the intimate little guesthouse, with its cosy rooms named after local birds, all to ourselves as there was just one other family there at the time.

Indeed, Kotagiri is a quiet getaway with a certain lack of pretension. It is the oldest and smallest of the three Nilgiri hill stations, which include Ooty and Coonoor. This is not a place for butler-drawn bubble baths and white glove service but a haven where one can plug into nature and an inner reservoir of peace. From our private sit-out, we watched each newly minted dawn, the sun tiptoe across the sky even as the tinkling of bells from a nearby temple and sonorous chanting would often wake us up to days full of promise. Suddenly, birdsong would overlay the soft chanting and flood our senses like an invading army.

We would breakfast on the verandah of the cottage where an antique hat stand, decked with hats, reminded us of the hill resort's colonial past and of a slower, more spacious age. While a timorous sun gilded the flower-embroidered lawns, we would down cups of fragrant Nilgiri tea which jolted us out of our Lotus Island languor. We would thank the universe for bringing us to this engaging corner of the country where we were conscious of our beautiful but increasingly fragile world.

On our first morning, we decided to go horse riding at the nearby Western Hoofs Equestrian Centre. It had been a while since we had swung onto a horse for a ride but once on, we realised that nothing quite matches the sense of freedom that comes with horse riding; seeing the horse's mane flying in the wind; flanks a-ripple, ears twitching... We, however, clip-clopped sedately for three hours and were lulled into an unquestioning serenity. We rode across the mud paths of a 50-acre terraced tea plantation, partly smothered in veils of mist, feeling enveloped in the all-encompassing green. At a vantage point, we stopped for a cup of tea that we had carried along in a flask and exulted, "This is the kind of place where you can be alone or with someone you love!"

Tea pluckers moved slowly across the higher reaches of the plantation, seemingly unaware of the beauty of their environs while we, trespassers in their domain, were beguiled by the

utter simplicity and loveliness of their world. In the distance, a couple of shadowy gaurs or Indian bison strolled through the plantations, munching on the unwanted undergrowth, leaving behind only the trembling leaves of tea bushes as testimony to their presence.

After the exhilarating ride, we returned to the Centre and befriended a few of the nine horses stabled there including a Shetland pony, Kathiawari and Marwari horses, and two thoroughbreds whose "lineage goes back to the times of Mohenjo Daro," related Santosh Kumar, the earnest young owner of the one-year-old Centre. The Centre also offers shorter half-hour rides as well as two-day riding-cum-trekking programmes.

On our way back, the innocent pleasures of country life unspooled around us on traffic-free roads—fluffy white egrets on bare trees; terraced tea plantations seeming to unroll to the heavens; pilgrims at a wayside shrine, heads bent in prayer; locals buying vegetables and provisions mingling with Kota tribals whose portraits, hunting tools and typical chunky silver jewellery were on display at the memorial to Sullivan.

We drove along vertiginous roads, misty valleys, tea factories and red-tiled homes and stopped short at the terracotta red memorial located in Kannerimukku, two km north of the heart of Kotagiri. The memorial is located in Pethakal Bungalow where Sullivan lived till 1823. In this five-acre property, he grew English vegetables like potatoes, beetroots and cabbage. The memorial brims with photographs of tribals (Kotas, Badagas and so on) who once inhabited this land and lived their lives in consonance with nature. This is history in a nutshell—of the various tribes, the Sullivan family and the role of the Brits in the region. The Nilgiri Documentation Centre is located within the memorial and organises a two-day trek on June 15, Sullivan's birthday, to retrace the Sullivan trail.

Some Kota villages still exist where the elderly pursue a simple lifestyle but requests to meet a villager or two were politely turned down. We could not blame them as we were intruders in their domain. It was something that Sullivan understood intuitively... that the beautiful mountains and forests belonged to the Kotas and not the East India Company.

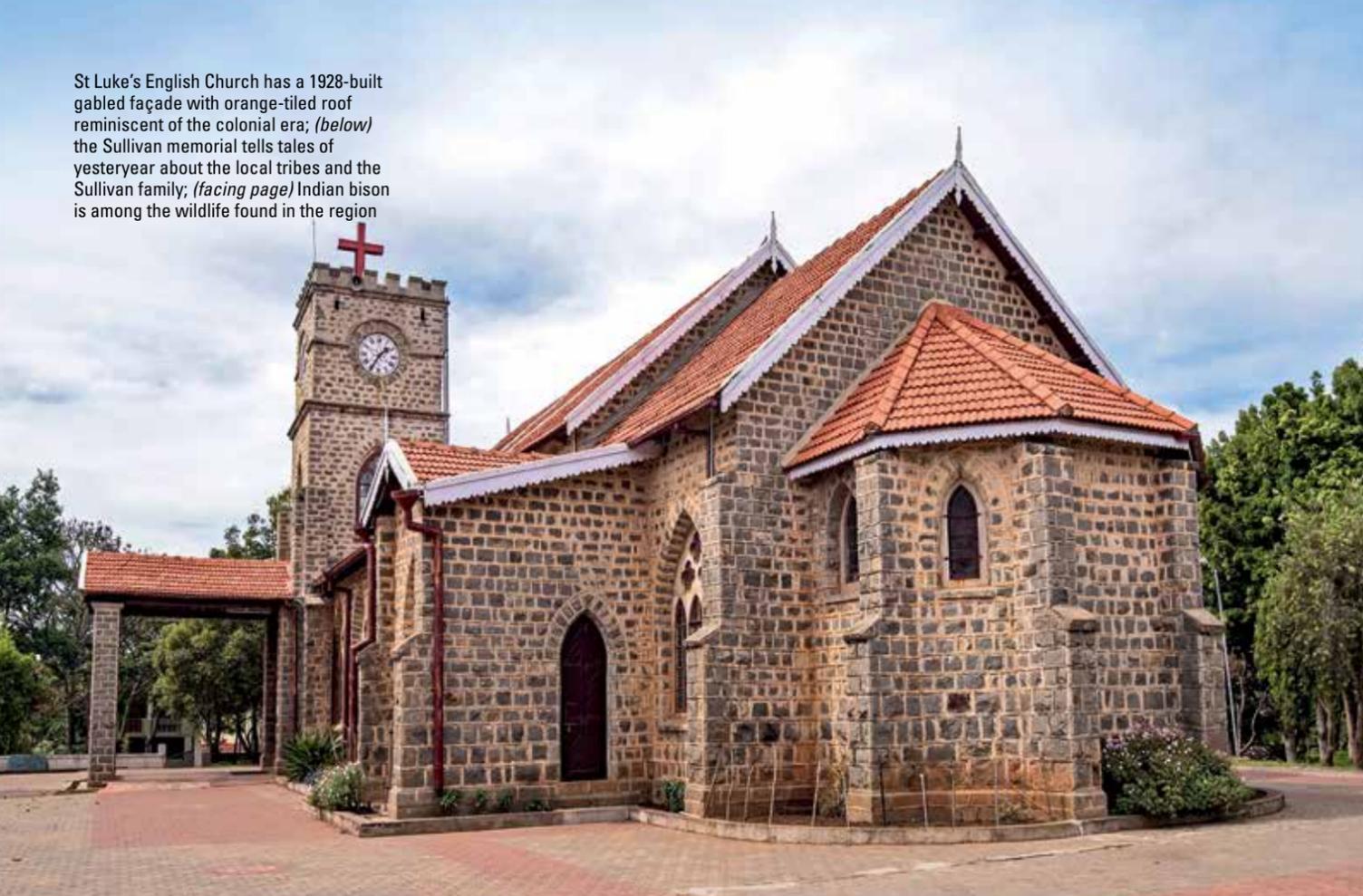
The days blended seamlessly into each other, discovering sights like the charming 1928 stone St Luke's English Church, with its gabled façade and sloping orange-tiled roof, which even sports a turret with a clock. The spacious interior is simple with a polished wooden altar and pews and stained glass that filtered the afternoon sun in a multi-hued spray of light. Designed by architect Angus McEwan, the empty church reminded us of a past that had been discarded. Another colonial relic, St Mary's Church, dating back to 1867 now sports a modern, sunlit visage.

The next morning, we drove past dense green forests with vast tea estates and misty hills rising on the horizon to Kodanad viewpoint, east of Kotagiri. We climbed to the upper level of a viewing tower built by the Forest Department where a Grand Canyon-like landscape filled the viewfinders of our cameras. Way below, the Moyar and Bhavani rivers wound gently by and

Teanest Nightingale, nestled amidst the terraced tea estates of Kotagiri and bathed in the golden rays of the sun, offers a comfortable stay; (below) horse riding at the Western Hoofs Equestrian Centre is a must-do activity in Kotagiri



St Luke's English Church has a 1928-built gabled façade with orange-tiled roof reminiscent of the colonial era; (below) the Sullivan memorial tells tales of yesteryear about the local tribes and the Sullivan family; (facing page) Indian bison is among the wildlife found in the region



### DISCOVER THIS

If you have the time, trekking is a great way to plunge into the sun-dappled depths of nature in Kotagiri. Popular trekking trails in and around this area are—Kotagiri – Kodanadu; Kotagiri – St Catherine Falls and Kotagiri – Longwood Shola. Indeed, Longwood Shola is a wooded area of natural forest of about 115 hectares and an integral part of the fragile Nilgiri eco-system. A picturesque trekking trail winds around it. On a more mundane level, a guided tour of the MacWood Tea Factory is interesting while Catherine's Waterfalls, eight km south of Kotagiri, is best viewed in the monsoon months.

the Rangaswamy Pillar, a monolithic rock carved and hewn by Mother Nature, rose needle-sharp from amidst the desolate but beautiful expanse. Keen winds rose and whipped us on the upper level of the tower and so we rushed to the ground level cafeteria where hot ginger tea and chilli *bhajias* warmed us up. In an adjoining shop, Kota women hawked local handicrafts—embroidered table runners, hand bags *et al*. We bought some and as we caressed the fabric, we felt the thrum of the ancient spirit of the land—vibrant yet unyielding to the crass pressures of commercialisation.

Back at Teanest, late afternoon sunlight spilt soft and gentle on the green lawns while butterflies flitted and fluttered around. A languid siesta in the high-ceilinged room with its warm parquet flooring and teak rafters was called for, and insidiously the beauty of our green haven crept into our dreams.

On our last evening, we sat in the verandah, watching the sun set in a blaze of colour, tinging wayward clouds with pastel hues. The soft chanting from a nearby shrine wafted on the cool evening air and we thanked God for another perfect day. ♦

### NAVIGATOR

#### GETTING THERE

**Air** The closest airport is at Coimbatore, 105 km away.

**Rail** The nearest railway station is Coonoor, 19 km away.

**Road** Kotagiri is located 30 km east of Ooty, and 19 km northeast of Coonoor. Rental cars, buses and taxis are available for travel from the airport.

#### STAY

Kotagiri has a handful of guesthouses and budget hotels in the town centre and homestays in the surrounding countryside, but the recently opened Teanest Nightingale is by far the best.

#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

Kotagiri is a year-round destination but the weather is most pleasant from November to May.

#### EAT

Most travellers opt to dine at their hotels/homestays.

#### CONTACT

For more information, visit the official website of Tamil Nadu Tourism ([www.tamilnadutourism.org](http://www.tamilnadutourism.org)); and [www.natureresorts.in](http://www.natureresorts.in))