



(Top) A breathtaking view at Valparai; (Bottom) Tea pickers with their daily pluck

Valparai

Rendezvous with the Recluse

Beauty is sometimes rationed, and Mother Nature has her way of cataloguing her offerings. Nestled in nature's pristine best, away from the bustles of the tourist-only bazaars and housing a magnificent wildlife, here is South India's hidden treasure.

Text & Photos: Rathina Sankari

“**T**he earth has its music for those who will listen,” said the 20th century philosopher, George Santayana. How very true were his words in the verdant surroundings of Valparai. I peered through the frost covered window of Briar wooden chalet at Stanmore Tea Estate, to drink in the sights of dawn. The clouds hung low and a thick layer of fog covered the hills. Dew drops had settled on the tea leaves and the birds had started on their daily chores. Filling my lungs with the fresh morning air, I walked around the tea gardens.

This beautiful hill station about 3,500 feet above sea level, in the Anaimalai ranges is part of the Western Ghats of India. The drive had taken me through forty hair pin bends to reach the small town of Valparai. On any other day, I would have got nauseated but with abundant waterfalls and endless green mosaics of tea estates covering the entire landscape, I was lost in the beauty of this region. Breaking the monotony of the greenery were the vibrant red African Tulips in full bloom and the branches hanging low with its weight. The oak trees stood tall like stalwarts of the expanse. I took a brief halt at one of the hair pin bends to enjoy the company of the highly endangered and endemic Nilgiri Tahr or Ibex grazing by the roadside with its family. Unlike its more glorified cousin, Ooty, Valparai is untouched and hidden from the commercial effects of tourism. It dates back to the colonial

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period and carries ahead the same legacy in its tea estate bungalows peppered around the region.

Rumble and tumble

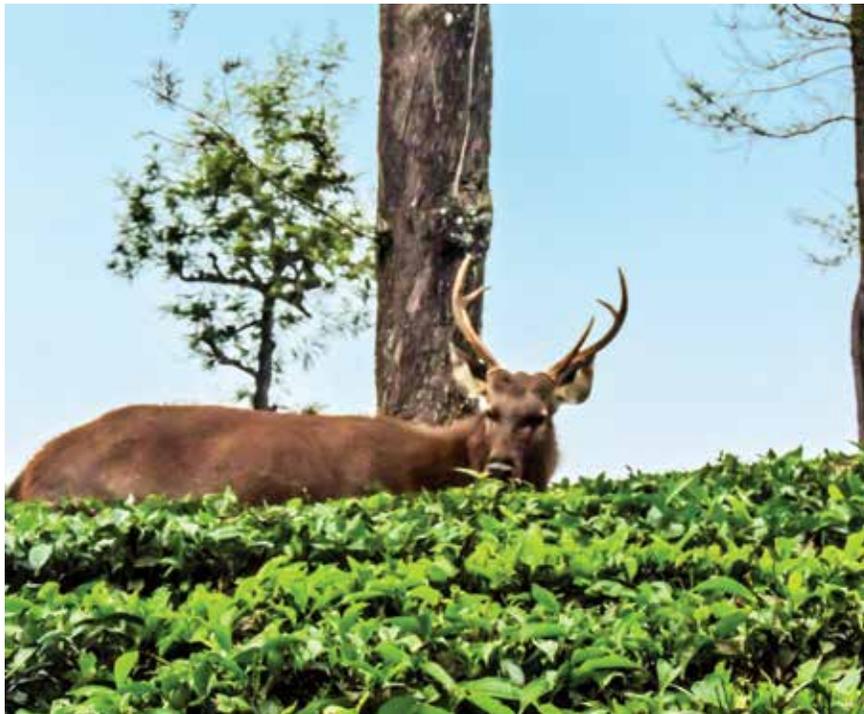
Daison, who worked for the Briar group, accompanied me as my guide to explore this heaven on earth. We headed towards Chinnakallar Falls about 20 km from Valparai. A short distance later, I noticed that the tea gardens had vanished behind us and we were in the midst of a thick forest as the car moved uphill. Suddenly, a barking deer darted and vanished into a thicket. We left the car and walked through a dirt path that crossed a tiny hamlet. In the distance, I could hear the rumble and tumble of a fall. A hanging bridge made of wooden planks over a stream took us to the misty falls that is said to roar like a lion. Chinnakallar is called the Cherapunji of South as it receives the second highest rainfall in India. It is the wettest place in southern India and receives wildlife footfall like the wild dog, Indian gaur, sambar, elephants, leopards and the tigers in its vicinity.

Endless vistas

As I sat on one of the boulders, immersed in the beauty of the surroundings, Daison voiced that it was time to move. We hit the road snaking through the undulating terrain blanketed with tea gardens. A group of tea-pickers were busy with their shears and the day's gossip. A lone sambar with its majestic antlers was seen grazing in the tea gardens heedless of its audience. It made me wonder if Rudyard Kipling had visited this region even before he was mesmerised by the beauty of Pench, would the settings of Jungle Book been Valparai. So much for beauty!

We passed by the statue of Carver Marsh towering over the expanse at Kavarakal, which is always covered in mist. In the 19th century, an English planter, Marsh and officer CRT Congreve set out on expedition to Anaimalai, in search of land for growing tea. The British government was keen to explore the Western Ghats for plantation. So, they surveyed the area and deemed it fit for cultivation. The land was auctioned, coolies were brought to clear the forest and convert it into a tea growing region. Congreve has beautifully chronicled his years in the wild expanse in his book 'The Anamallais', which was published in the 1940s. Thankfully, the entire area couldn't be cleared and the tea estates are bordered today by rainforest fragments. But, tar roads have been laid, rivers diverted and reservoirs built, taking over the animal habitat.

When I reached one such manmade



(Clockwise from left to right): Malabar giant squirrel; A sambar with its antlers; Lion Tailed Macaque

construction, the Sholayar Dam, the sky was clear and the sun had decided to bask the land with its warmth. But, the balminess was short-lived. Within minutes of arriving at the large reservoir, the clear sky was covered with a curtain of mist that sailed through the waters to cover Asia's second deepest dam. One can get a never-ending view of this basin through its entire length while driving towards Kerala.

Royally wild

Next morning, after an early cup of tea, we started for the Puduthotam Tea estate, which is well known for its wildlife sightings. Indian gaur, the largest wild cattle, is commonly found grazing by in the wee hours of the day. I soon lost count of time as I walked through the tea plantation enjoying the wide variety of fauna. A Malabar giant squirrel raced through the branches of a nearby tree. The loud call of a hornbill was heard in the distant. I continued with my solo exploration and soon reached the periphery of the tea estate.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, walked a glossy black majestic figure with its tail held erect. I froze for those few moments, intimidated by its imposing presence. It was just 30 metres ahead of me. Those daunting deep set eyes were offset with its silver white mane dropping from its cheeks and chin. Its tell-tale features were enough to recognise the primate that had visited me. It was the Lion-Tailed Macaque or the Wanderoo. Thankfully, it soon lost interest and ran out of sight. Today, the

lifestyle of these highly endangered upper canopy dwelling monkeys has drastically changed and they are seen visiting human settlements.

After the close encounter, a shaken I returned to the resort. A heavy lunch followed by a short nap was the perfect antidote to calm my frayed nerves. I trekked to the Injipara River flowing through tea plantations and boulders across pristine Valparai. This region is a part of the elephant corridor and one can spot herds of pachyderms in its vicinity. The Anaimalai (Elephant Hill) range gets its name due to the presence of large number of elephants in its terrains. Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) is working towards reducing human and elephant conflicts in Valparai. The movement of the pachyderms in the area is conveyed to the locals through SMS and sensor lights that have been set up by the NCF.

Valparai continued to bewilder me with its arresting beauty. The following morning, with no specific itinerary in hand, we reached Akka Malai, which is close to the rich fauna of Shola Forest – The Grass Hills. I had heard a lot about the beauty of the montane grassland and was keen to explore its peaks and plateaus, which border the Eravikulam national park. At the check post, I was denied entry without the forest department's permission. A lot has been told about this abode, but it refuses to lift its veil of enigma. As for me, I shall return some other day to explore its beauty; for today, I am happy Valparai stays wrapped in a cloak away from the exploits of tourism. ■



How to reach

The hill station of Valparai is located in Kongu Nadu and is part of the Coimbatore district. It is 595 km/10 hours from Chennai and 100 km/2.5 hours from Coimbatore by road. The closest airport is Kochi, which is around 114 km. Trains operate from Chennai to Coimbatore on a daily basis. One can take state-run buses or hire a cab from Coimbatore or Pollachi (65 km) to reach Valparai. State-run buses are available to commute around Valparai, but, the best way to scout is by hiring a cab. Staff at Briar group does arrange cabs for local sightseeing.

Where to stay

Briar group has five bungalows with numerous rooms that were built during the British era around Valparai. Stanmore, Monica, Sirukundra and Puthuthottam Annexe bungalows nestled in between tea gardens are a haven for wild life sightings. This slice of heaven is about getting pampered to the core and living life king size. Food at Briar's is an amalgamation of South Indian and North Indian cuisine. The wide variety of European desserts like soufflé, pies and the mouth-watering puddings would definitely leave you satiated. (www.teabungalows.com)

Tea Tasting

The folks at Briar could arrange a visit to Monica Tea factory if you are interested to know the process of how tea leaves are processed for your early morning cuppa.

Need to know

It would be good to carry some salt while trekking through Valparai for respite from leeches. Valparai is best explored from November to May.