

SECRET IN THE HILLS

Hill station and wildlife destination rolled into one, Pollachi is perfect for a quick weekend break from Kochi. **By Bindu Gopal Rao**

LET ME START WITH A confession. When I first heard of Pollachi I neither had a clue where it was nor what it was known for. I am glad I went with no expectations, as this gem of a getaway offers the charms of a hill station as well as a wildlife destination – and much more. Located about 160 km from Kochi, Pollachi is a scenic three-hour drive through NH 47, SH 21 and SH 19. The

roads are decent and there is greenery all around.

Pollachi is a small town nestled in the Western Ghats and is just 40 km from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu's well-known industrial hub. The terrain is dominated with coconut trees. Coconuts from Pollachi are sent to various locations all over India. It is also a popular movie shooting location. In fact, for Shah Rukh Khan's latest blockbuster *Chennai Express* the initial part of the song

'*Kashmir Main Tu Kanyakumari*' was shot in Pollachi.

The town has some old temples, and special mention must be made of the Maasani Amman Thirukoil where it is believed that Lord Rama meditated. Of course, if you have a spiritual bent of mind there are several old temples that dot the area and will enthrall you with both their architecture and history. Also recommended is a visit to the Arivu Thirukoil or Temple of Consciousness, an ashram established by Yogiraj Vethathiri Maharishi. This place is serene and has a large meditation hall.

I decided to explore the places around Pollachi as well. My first stop was Valparai, about 65 km away. Standing 3,500 feet above sea level, the drive is scenic with lush green forests

A farmer tends to his sunflowers near Pollachi

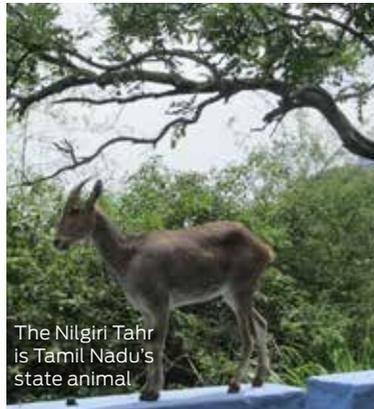


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on either side and will take you through 40 hairpin bends, which means you are safe only in the hands of a local driver used to the rugged terrain here. The best part of the drive was that we spotted a couple of the endangered Nilgiri Tahr. A kind of stocky goat, it is the state animal of Tamil Nadu and is found only in these parts.

Stop by at the Anamalai Nature Information Centre that displays habitats, biodiversity and conservation issues through some stunning paintings by Maya Ramaswamy, a reputed wildlife artist. This was the place where I picked up a very informative book on the hornbill. Absolutely breathtaking are the tea gardens that seem to stretch endlessly on both sides of the road. Several sprawling private tea estates own most of the land here. While here, step into the Koolangal river. It is quite shallow but rather cold, and flows between the tea estates. It is a beautiful sight to behold.

The next day I decided to head to TopSlip located at an altitude of 800 ft in the Anamalai mountain range. Here you can actually look around the



Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary on an elephant's back. Or else you can take the safari buses. My guide recommended that we head to the contiguous Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary in the Kerala side of the jungle. The forest is essentially the same, but the safari is less expensive and offers more interesting sights. If you are wondering how different a safari can be, think again. This thick forest has bamboo, sandalwood, rosewood and teak trees and is home to the famous Kannimari teak tree, said to be the largest in Asia.

The safari starts with a brief halt at the orientation centre where a short film on what to expect is screened. An adjoining store offers souvenirs. As we head into the jungle, we spot the usual suspects - peacocks, deer, sambhar and a bison. We saw a pair of wild elephants, and hordes of wild pigs and even a family of baby piglets that were having a ball of a time.

The first stop was at Thunacadavu Dam, a beautiful spot in the midst of the jungle. There are two viewpoints - valley view and dam view that offer a panoramic 360 degree view of the verdant valley. The safari takes almost two hours and is worth every minute with its natural beauty set amidst virgin valleys and towering mountains.

Pollachi may not be popular on the recommended list of travel agents, but it is a destination worth visiting. The best time to head there is between September and March. The climate is pleasant throughout the year except in April-May when it can get quite hot. Monsoons can be severe as well.

(GoAir flies to Kochi daily. Please check the schedule at the end of the magazine for details)

