

The Blue Blush

On a tea trail across fragrant Nilgiris

The sight of the undulating Blue Mountains, endless tea plantations and winding roads that fork up the hill make the Nilgiri biosphere a place like no other

words // Bindu Gopal Rao

Home to Ooty, Coonoor and Kotagiri, Nilgiri hills have a charm that is hard to miss. And the elevation here also means that the best teas in the South of India are grown here. The English and Indians have always had one thing in common - their undying love for tea. And both communities came together in the 1830s in these mountainous, idyllic and serene hill stations to grow the perfect tea.

EXPLORING A TEA ESTATE

Most of the Nilgiris hill side is

covered with tea plants and this is really the best place to get an insight into all things tea. The tea plants are harvested by women and it is a common sight to see them with sacks tied around them. The topmost part of the plant has a bud encased within two leaves and this is the part that gives tea its body and flavour. The workers use nimble finger movements to swiftly pick this leaves-plus-bud chunk and catapult it in their sacks. Years of practice has given them an admirable speed and dexterity to achieve this task. In fact, they often, good naturedly,

invite visitors to join them during the leaf plucking but it's a lot trickier than it looks. Like with any farming, it is the time of harvest and plucking that makes all the difference. For instance, the famed silver tips tea must be picked before sunrise.

One of the largest tea estates in this region that also provides a guided tea tour is the Tea Factory in Doddabetta, also called the Tea Museum. Doddabetta is the largest peak in Nilgiris at 2,637m and this elevation gives the tea factory, surrounded by acres and acres of



Image credit: Mike Johnsingh

lush plantation, a special advantage. Here visitors can see the complete end-to-end tea production process, colloquially called CTC, i.e., Cut, Twist and Curl-ing of the leaves. At the end of the tour, you can sample a freshly brewed cup of special aromatic Nilgiri tea. Another cosier and more intimate tea garden is the 50-year-old Highfield Tea Factory in Coonoor which offers a stunning view of the Nilgiri range. Smaller than the one in Ooty, this specialises in exotic and herbal tea varieties. Apart from tea, you can also learn how Eucalyptus Oil is extracted from trees here and how

chocolates are made from scratch. You can also order some freshly brewed chocolate tea for yourself. The Nilgiri teas are known for their delicate fragrance so don't be surprised if at the end of the day you come back home smelling like a tea perfumery, a happy experience for any tea addict.

GOURMET TEA

If you head towards Coonoor, about 25 km away from Ooty, you can sample different teas at organised tea tasting sessions that can be booked in advance. Tranquillitea, one such gourmet tea

tasting session, gives an insight into the exquisite world of fine teas. "Our highly acclaimed experience takes you on a journey through the myriad colours, aromas and flavours of some of the finest teas in the world. The tea tasting session takes a little over an hour during which you are guided through the art of making fine tea and also tasting some of the finest Nilgiri teas," says owner Sandeep Subramani, whose passion for tea is unmistakable.

DRINK YOUR TEA AND EAT IT TOO!

The other good place to go for a tea tasting session as well as have a tea

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pitstop

There are two reasons why the Nilgiris is called so; first being the smoky blue haze which covers the hills when viewed from the plains and the other is the flowering of the Neelakurinji (*Strobilanthes*) once in twelve years which carpets the hills with purplish blue flowers.

Coonoor is where the Nilgiri tea story started. The earliest recorded visit by a European visitor to the Nilgiris was in 1603. Between 1804 and 1818, a number of Englishmen ventured up the hills to look for 'European climate'. They found Ketti Valley as the perfect place for tea plantation.

The prime tea varieties of Nilgiri plantations are Black Tea and Oolong, the aromas and flavours of which are highly distinct from the ones available in the rest of India. This is majorly due to the high altitudes of Nilgiri tea plantations.



HOW TO GET THERE

Vistara has daily non-stop flights to Bengaluru from Delhi and Ahmedabad, along with convenient connections from other cities.

inspired meal is Tea Nest. With prior appointment, you can taste up to six varieties of tea including Chamomile Tea, Green Tea, Golden Tips, Organic Black Tea, and White Tea, among others. Interestingly you can also come in for a special tea inspired menu to sample some dishes like tea smoked paneer, a salad made with garden fresh vegetables with organic pickled tea leaves served with a mayonnaise and honey dip and even an orange pekoe tea kettle broth soup. The tea braised homemade cottage cheese marinated with garden fresh herbs, grilled and served in a tea skewer is a great starter that teams perfectly with the signature organic rosemary tea. Even the spaghetti is cooked with tea and is served with a special tea tomato sauce topped with mozzarella parsley. And yes, there is a dessert too - a tea flavoured custard with Nilgiri chamomile tea compote.

IN THE LAP OF NATURE

In between all the tea sessions, squeeze in some time to experience the magic of the landscape that gives us all the tea. The Nilgiris are a trekker's wonderland. With vegetation and climate similar to tropical rainforests, this part of the country hosts many exotic species making it invaluable for naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts. The Nilgiri Wildlife and Environment Association hosts many mountain treks and walks that take you through open grassy pastures, sapphire blue lakes, picturesque waterfalls and green forests with giant eucalyptus trees.

The Nilgiris are also home to a few ancient hill tribes, primarily the Irula, Badaga, Toda, Kota and Kurumba Tribes. A few jungle retreats and home stays here have chefs and managers who belong to these

tribes and conversations with them reveal much about their culture. For instance: the Badagas can be easily identified due to their traditional head gear known as *mandaray* and the Todas are famous for their spectacularly beautiful hand woven

shawls and silver jewellery. As with most ancient places, the best way to appreciate the purity of Nilgiris is to see it through the eyes of its oldest inhabitants.

Devala, in Gudalur Valley, is a

hidden hill station perfect for the off-beat soul. One of the wettest places in India, when it rains here it only pours. This makes it an ornithologist's paradise. Most birders who are able to brave the torrential rain to see this slice of heaven keep coming back for more. Ecoscape, an initiative started by the tribal community of Gudalur valley, also organises visits and workshops for both locals and tourists to help them integrate better with the ecosystem.

Ecoscape is an initiative started by the tribal community of Gudalur valley to help tourists integrate better with the ecosystem



THE MOVIE CONNECTION

It was in 1998 when movie actors Shah Rukh Khan and Malaika Arora danced up a storm on top of a train in the misty beautiful valleys of the Nilgiris with their dance number *Chaiyya Chaiyya*. The train was the Ooty-Coonoor toy train that belonged to the Nilgiri Mountain Railway, a 46 km long metre gauge single-track railway. It has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list and chugs along slowly up through glorious mountains and tea plantations. The line was built between 1891 and 1908, with the section below Coonoor being one of the oldest and steepest rack-and-pinion systems in the world. If you have an hour or two to spare, this is a fun toy train round trip to take with your family.

With so many experiences, are you ready to take the Nilgiri tour? Well, let's raise a tea toast to that! ☺

Not to MISS



CATHERINE FALLS

Nestled amongst acres of dense tea gardens lies the famous double cascading milky white Catherine Falls in Ooty. Measuring 250 ft in height, the falls are surrounded by many popular picnic spots.



FISHING

Go angling and fishing for trout in the beautiful Mukurthi Lake which has areas specially reserved for fishing. Both the forest and fishery departments here issue special fishing licence for tourists. Mukurthi Peak is also a popular trekking spot.