

PEAKS OF GREEN

Drenched in greenery, replete with natural beauty and rich in tradition, there is no better escape for the intrepid traveller than a trekking trip to the challenging mountains of southern India.

By Simon Harrington

Arriving at Kerala's Kochi Airport fresh from the stifling, chaotic melee of the Indian capital, I feel a little apprehensive about what the next week has in store. Weighed down by a heavy backpack and suffering from more than a touch of Delhi belly, seven days trekking in the highlands of southwest India couldn't feel further from the remedy to my woes. "Welcome to Kerala, my friend!" exclaims my local guide, Raj, extending a warm handshake at the arrival gate. "Is this your first time in India?" With feigned enthusiasm and a meagre nod, I indicate that it is.

India is a country that has always fascinated me. Its unique blend of cultures, religions, customs and cuisines makes it one of the most intriguing and challenging places on earth; undeniably sensational, yet all-consuming. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than New Delhi. From its jittering makeshift rickshaws and aggressive street sellers to its oppressive summer heat and sheer density, the north Indian city has a riotous energy that can be found nowhere else on the planet. A visit will leave the honk of horns ringing in your ears and the assorted smells lingering in your nostrils. Indeed, within the urban sprawl there is no escape; but, thankfully, it is a world away from the relative peace of rural Kerala.

After clumsily loading my bag into the car, I take a second to appreciate the clean, crisp air and stretch my shoulders. Raj explains it is a four-hour drive from the airport to the homestay in Munnar, a small town in the Western Ghats Mountains. As night falls, our driver finds his way out of Kochi city and begins to meander relentlessly into the wilderness. The route takes us through tiny municipalities and mountainous trading towns like Muvattupuzha and Kothamangalam, each of which boasts its own distinct character.

We snake past these settlements and the unmistakable sounds of cascading waterfalls, rolling rivers and chirping animals stream through the open windows. The darkness makes sightseeing difficult; come morning, however, I am exposed to a world of undeniable beauty. Slowly opening the double doors to my no-frills chalet unveils a mountain landscape like no other. A thick, dark fog hangs low – threatening another of the region's famous downpours – concealing the jutting peaks of the surrounding range, which is carpeted in vibrant greenery. In the distance, tiny villages dot the lower slopes of the valley, sitting alongside flowing tributaries and surging waterfalls. Located almost 1,600m above sea level in the Western Ghats, an area known as the Great Escarpment of India and designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is little surprise that Munnar attracts intrepid local and international trekkers and travellers in their droves year-round.

Pulling on my battered walking boots, I'm eager to get out and explore. Luckily, my itinerary has been streamlined to make the most of my time in the Idukki District. Opting to trek with small boutique company Moonstone Expeditions, everything from where I stay to the areas I visit are entirely flexible and optional. There's also a notable level of personal service that is often lacking in bigger companies; stretching all the way from the seamless pre-trip organisation to the experienced local guide on the ground – who offers an insider perspective rarely enjoyed by other visitors.

After packing up a light day bag, I hop into the waiting four-by-four and we begin a bumpy one-hour climb to the Kolukkumalai Tea Estate, the world's highest organic tea garden, sitting at more than 2,170m above. Ascending into the clouds, the coarse tea shrubs stretch as far as the eye can see, swarmed in part by local villagers picking leaves and buds for the adjoining plantation. At this altitude, the tea takes on a more intense flavour, heightened scent and, subsequently, an increased value. After a whistle-stop tour of the factory and a quick taste, we continue our journey to the famous viewpoint at Top Station, sitting in the nearby Kannan Devan hills of Tamil Nadu. Overlooking some of Munnar's highest peaks and most beautiful natural scenery, it's a photo opportunity not to be missed.

The next two days see me trekking through the many coffee fields, cardamom farms and pepper plantations that populate the region, learning about the production of fresh ingredients and the simple lives of the farmers who produce them. From laughing and dining with locals to breathing the



delicate mountain air, it is a taste of Indian culture beyond the big city, and an experience that can't be found in the likes of Delhi, Mumbai or Jaipur. Soon, though, it's time to say farewell to Munnar and embark on the next leg of my south Indian adventure, beginning 40km north in the quaint, traditional village of Marayoor. "This is the house of the wealthiest family in the town," says Raj, who uses his local knowledge to point out an ornate, gated building with a double garage on the fringes of the village. "They do a lot of business abroad." The property stands in stark contrast to its humble neighbours, many of which lay amidst modest plots of sugarcane and fruit orchards.

Although not rich in a material sense, the native people of Marayoor generally live a simple life, working the land, running small shops or peddling groceries. Social and curious, we are approached by hords of excited local children eager to practice their English as we trek through some of the more remote parts of the village, before heading into one of Kerala's only natural sandalwood forests. We are making our way to a riverside camp for the night, nestled in a sprawling tropical jungle at the confluence of two hard-flowing tributaries. Passing through a labyrinthine forest of palm trees, Raj ushers us to a clearing for a first view of camp. In the distance, imposing mountains are crowned with dark clouds and claps of thunder provide a chorus to the river's rumble. We enjoy a cup of sugary black tea and a slice of locally produced Kerala carrot cake while resting our weary feet. As darkness descends, the sky comes alight with the rhythmic glowing of fireflies, fluttering around the water's edge. It's a fitting end to our day's trek.

The next morning, we wake early to prepare for a winding five-hour drive to Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary. One of 12 safeguarded wildlife parks in Kerala, the sanctuary forms part of a 1,200-square-metre protected area, which employs local tribespeople as guides and animal spotters. Home to more than 30 species of mammals, including black panthers, Indian elephants and threatened nilgiri tahr (a goat-like antelope), the park welcomes a limited number of tourists each month to camp amid its montane rainforests and plentiful waterfalls.

After meeting our tribal guide – who is adorned in little more than a pair of weathered sandals and a lightweight khaki shorts-shirt combo – we soon begin our own demanding journey into the dense foliage. Despite his flimsy footwear, our guide sets a blistering pace and we quickly scale a flat rock formation that rises high above the surrounding trees. From here, we see a family of thickset bison scavenging for food; a tribe of mischievous gray langur monkeys play fighting; and discover a path of flattened trees where a herd of elephants has recently passed. Before reaching our log cabin, our trek is stalled once again by a herd of startled sambar deer, which quickly prance across our path. Seeing it first hand, it is easy to understand why India is so keen to conserve and protect this area. A true testament to the country's breath-taking beauty, Chinnar represents an untouched heritage, while its tribespeople caretakers embody a tradition that the country is working hard to maintain amid rapid economic development.

Soon, it is time to leave the serene beauty of the national park and begin the long journey back to the airport. There is just enough time, however, for an unscheduled pit stop in Marayoor. Meeting up with Raj for a final time, he tells me that he would like to show me his favourite spot in the village. Strolling leisurely across well-worn dirt tracks and criss-crossing through sugar cane fields, Raj delights in showing me the school attended by his children and introducing me to his cousin and aunt before arriving at our destination. It begins to rain as we scale a steep, slick slope, eventually reaching a set of ancient stone burial chambers. "These graves date back to 10,000 BC," he proclaims proudly, tapping one of the stones with his cane. "Many of our ancestors are buried here, and I wanted you to be part of it." He guides me to pick up a rock and place it gently on the roof of the chamber. In the near-distance a rainbow breaks through the cloud, colourfully framing an epic horizon. In that moment I have a realisation. You may visit Kerala for its unrivalled natural beauty, but you will return for an entirely different reason: its people.

