



The hills are alive...

Running parallel to the coastline, the imposing Western Ghats come armed with ancient forests, extraordinary biodiversity and intriguing history. We present 10 enduring attractions from India's latest World Heritage Site.

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The UNESCO recently recognised the Western Ghats as a World Heritage Site owing to its great biological diversity and exceptional natural beauty. Stretching 1,600 km along the length of India's western coast, the Ghats are spread over 1,40,000 sq km in a long chain of mountains interrupted only by the Palghat Gap. A total of 39 sites across the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have been chosen for the honour in seven wildlife sub-clusters.

As the rain clouds sweep over its hilltops marking the best possible season—and reason—to

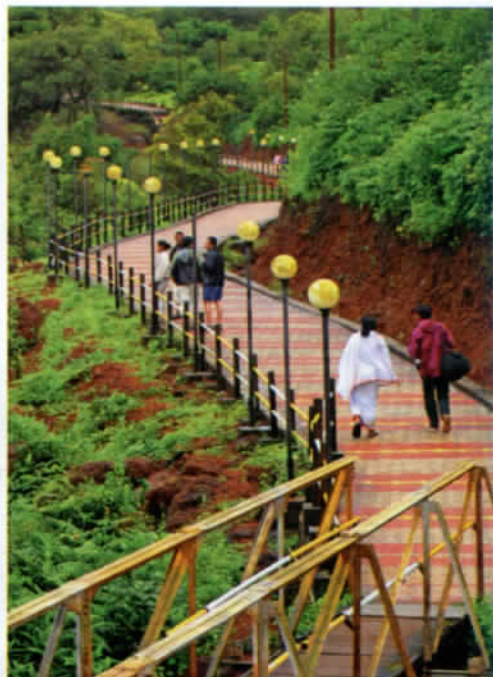
explore the region's wild beauty, here is a selection of waterfalls, national parks and exotic hill escapes that should feature in your Western Ghats odyssey.

DUDHSAGAR FALLS

The milky waters of River Khandepar, a tributary of the Mandovi, plummet 310m from a lofty ridge, bisected by a railway track and a fairy-tale bridge. The Dudhsagar, straddling the Goa-Karnataka border deep within the Bhagwan Mahaveer Sanctuary (Mollem National Park), is India's fifth highest waterfall. The Vasco-

Above: The Nilgiri mountains form the heart of plantation country in south India, with several tea estates spread across its verdant slopes.

Left: The Nilgiri Pipit, a distinctive and near-threatened bird species that is endemic to the Western Ghats.



Clockwise from above: Galikere, the shimmering mountain lake in Karnataka's Baba Budan Giri Hills; The bridge crossing towards Hiranyakeshi shrine in Amboli is known for its scenic viewpoints; Besides sheltering the rarely seen Indian Leopard, Nagarhole National Park, stretching between Coorg and Mysore, is also home to over 250 species of birds, reptiles and other creatures of the wild.

Madgaon-Londa railway line runs right near the falls, accessible from Castle Rock (near Tinai Ghat in Karnataka) or Collem (57 km from Panaji). The 12-km trek from Collem follows the railway track but the cross-country dirt track ride cuts across streams. Local bikes charge ₹300/head for a return trip in monsoon, while jeeps ply in November. If you're looking to stay a few days, consider the Dudhsagar Resort near Mollem checkpoint.

AMBOLI GHAT

In the dense mist, clear water gurgles from Shiva's ancient cave shrine Hiranyakeshi, one of the sources of River Krishna. Perched at 690m in the Sahyadris (the part of the Ghats running through Maharashtra) and off the Konkan coast, this eco hotspot turns magical in the monsoon, with several seasonal waterfalls vying for attention. Teeming

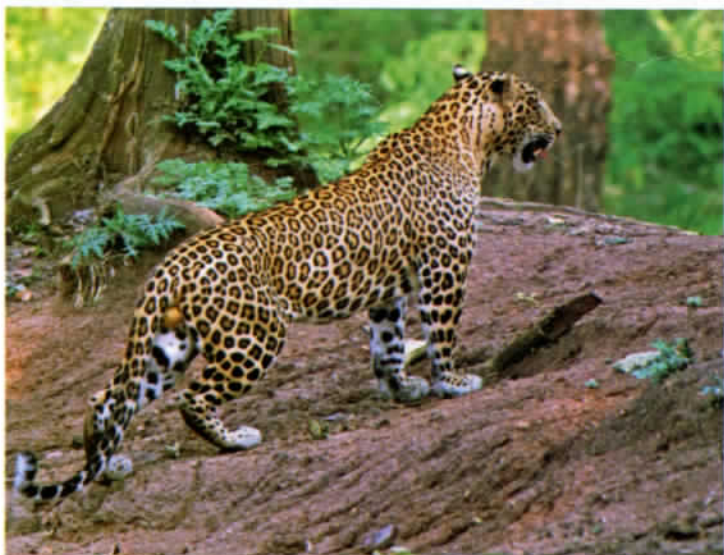
with over 300 species of rare plants, including the basket karvi or aakara, which flowers once in 11 years, Amboli was once a British outpost on the road from Vengurla port to Belgaum for garrisons in central and south India. It is believed that a *dhangar* (shepherd) who guided the British along the treacherous pass to help them construct the road was killed once his services were rendered. Today, he is worshipped as the village guardian at a small shrine on Amboli Road near Sawantwadi.

BABA BUDAN GIRI

The highest mountain range between the Himalayas and Nilgiris, Baba Budan Giri is the birthplace of coffee in India. Worshipped by Hindus as Chandradrona Parvatha, where Dattatreya, Sage Atri and Anusuyya performed penance in a cave, it is also revered by Muslims as the grave of a mystic and his disciples. In the 17th century, Baba Budan went on a pilgrimage to Mecca and was captivated by the tantalising aroma of coffee in Yemen. As the story goes, in 1670, he smuggled seven coffee seeds in his robes and planted them in this corner of Karnataka. From here, the coffee plant, a closely-guarded Arab secret, spread across India. Trace the journey from berry to cup at Chikmagalur's Coffee Museum, climb Karnataka's highest peak Mullayanagiri or trek from Baba Budan Giri to Kemmanagundi via Galikere. For an authentic local experience, live amidst nature in one of the many plantation homestays that dot the region.

COORG

With one of the country's best-maintained national parks at Nagarhole, the highest density of *devarakadus* (sacred groves) in the world and the source of south India's holiest river, Cauvery, Coorg, in Karnataka, is indeed special. It is the largest producer of coffee and honey in India,



Explore

besides farming spices like cardamom and pepper. Scenic plantations, charming estate bungalows, and riverside resorts coupled with irresistible Kodava hospitality and cuisine make it a favoured holiday spot. Trek through wild tracts in the Pushpagiri, Brahmagiri and Talacauvery wildlife sanctuaries, scale Coorg's tallest peak Thadiyendamol, visit the Irpu, Abbey, Chelavara and Mallali Falls or go white-water rafting on the Upper Barapole river.

WAYANAD

Tilt the 'Rainmaker' and its cascading seeds emit the sound of water. Swing the 'Binsi', a reed instrument, for a whistling note. These astonishing bamboo products from Uravu near Kalpetta capture the tribal legacy of Wayanad. Trek past the Stone Age engravings of the Edakkal Caves to the top of Ambukuthi Range, watch dholes chasing deer at Tholpetty Wildlife Sanctuary or search for the Blackchinned Wayanad Laughingthrush at Muthanga. Adventure lovers can scale Banasura Hill that overlooks India's largest earth dam. Spot gaur in the hikes around Fringe Ford, a wild 500-acre plantation near Mananthavady. You can also trek up Chembra Peak, and wake up to amazing views at Sunrise Valley and Meenmutty Heights near Vaduvanchal.

NILGIRIS

Home to ancient hill tribes, the Nilgiris (Blue Mountains) transformed into the summer retreat of the British in south India by 1827. The 46-km ride from Mettupalayam to Ooty in the heritage Nilgiri Mountain Railway presents stunning views. Studded with churches, lakes, botanical gardens, tea estates and viewpoints, Ooty's elite clubs were where the rules of snooker were laid down. Climb Dodda Betta; or drive from Ooty passing the stunning lakes of Emerald, Avalanche, Upper Bhavani, Parson's



Valley and Porthimund to the Mukurthi National Park. Explore the joys of farm life at Destiny Farm and Acres Wild, an organic cheese-making farm, or opt for one of its many colonial-style getaways. Wild honey, beeswax balms, Kurumba paintings, Toda shawls are some of the various things you can take away from this charming region.

ATHIRAPALLY AND VAZHACHAL

Famous as the locale where Aishwarya Rai cavorted under a 42m-high waterfall in *Guru and Ravana*, Vazhachal Forest adjoining Athirapally is the second most bio-diverse area in Kerala. As the only place in the Western Ghats where four endangered hornbill species can be seen, the International Bird Association declared it an Important Bird Area. The forest harbours the lion-tailed macaque, Malabar squirrel, Malabar

Above: Visitors at the entrance of the Edakkal caves in Wayanad district. The caves are known for their ancient carvings and pictorial wall inscriptions that have received tremendous archaeological attention around the world.

Below: A ride on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway offers splendid views of tea plantations, forests and life in the Blue Mountains.



The Cochin Forest Tramway Trek at Parambikulam showcases relics of the British timber trade.



giant turtle and Cochin forest cane turtle, among other endangered species, while River Chalakudy supports an enviable count of 104 species of fish. Besides enjoying the Charpa and Vazhachal Falls, drop by at the Forest Information Centre, museum and showcase of rare medicinal plants. Stay at Rainforest Athirapally where each room offers a clear view of the 220m-wide cascade, and visit a tribal settlement at Pokalappara for wildlife sighting and tapioca-fish meals smoked in bamboo.

SILENT VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

One of the best-preserved tropical evergreen rainforests in the world, the 90-sq km park forms the core of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Named so due to the absence of cicadas in the forest, Silent Valley's geographic isolation allowed it to evolve into an ecological island. Topping the list of extensive flora is the giant tree fern *Dinosaur pulpan* dubbed the '50



million-year-old living fossil'. The park's flagship species, the lion-tailed macaque lives in the towering *Culinea* trees. After a long crusade against a hydroelectric project, the fragile zone was declared a National Park in 1985. Mukkali, the park's entrance, is unique as all three species of Crow butterflies can be found here—Common Crow, Double-branded Crow and Brown King Crow. A short jeep ride takes visitors up to Sairandhri where a 30m-high tower offers panoramic views. For accommodation options, consider the Mukkali Forest Rest House or Malleshwaram Jungle Lodge, named after the peak that dominates the park.

NELLIYAMPATHY

The majesty of Nelliampathy Hills in Kerala slowly unfolds along the mountain road from Nemmara, winding past 10 hairpin bends towards Kaikatty. It was the Maharaja of Cochin who leased vast tracts of dense

Clockwise from below: The tribal themed rustic huts at Malleshwaram Jungle Lodge near Silent Valley National Park; Virtually a botanist's treasure-trove, Silent Valley teems with orchids and rare endemic species; The beauty of Athirapally Falls have made an appearance in many Indian films.



Scenic plantations, charming estates and riverside resorts coupled with irresistible Kodava hospitality make Coorg a favoured holiday spot.

Clockwise from above: Monsoon clouds loom over the Pothundy Reservoir en route to Nelliampathy; Kannimara Teak at Parambikulam, the largest of its kind in Asia; Forest Rest House overlooking Thunakadavu Reservoir at Parambikulam.

jungle to the British for tea cultivation. Soon Nelliampathy oranges were being exported to Buckingham Palace. Today, the derelict Victoria Church stands on a lonely cliff surrounded by forests and tea estates. A short walk from AV Thomas' tea factory is Kesavanpara, a rocky escarpment overlooking Pothundy Dam. But the ultimate adventure is the 18-km jeep ride from Pulayampara to Manpara (Deer Rock). If you survive the bone-breaking drive over boulders, visit Suicide Point near Seetharkundu, Katla Para waterfalls and Karassuri viewpoint. Stay at Ciscilia Heritage and Whistling Thrush Bungalow while chasing butterflies and endemic birds like the Nilgiri Flycatcher, Broad-tailed Grassbird and Nilgiri Pipit.

PARAMBIKULAM

The 450-year-old Kannimara Teak, believed to be the largest in Asia, rises up 48.5m. With a girth of 6.57m, it takes five men to encircle the giant. But not all of the park's treasures are easy to see; from the tiny Parambikulam frog and the endemic fish *Garra surendranathanii* to the saprophytic plant *Haplothismia exanulata*. Wrapped around three dams that create a 20.6-sq km reservoir with Karimala Peak as the park's highest point, Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary across Kerala and Tamil Nadu is picturesque indeed. Eco-tourism packages range from jeep safaris, bamboo rafting, birdwatching and guided walks to overnight camping in the forest. Trekkers will enjoy the Kariyanshola trail while the Cochin Forest Tramway walk showcases relics of the British timber trade. Stay in treetop huts overlooking the reservoir, Swiss-style tents or a bamboo hut on Veettikunnu Island, accessible only by boat. ■



QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

If you wish to trail the Ghats from north to south, Pune, Mumbai and Panjim are good starting points. Jet Airways has daily flights to these cities from all major airports across the country.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.thewesternghats.in