

HOME » TRAVEL » DESTINATIONS » ASIA » INDIA

India's Western Ghats: a wealth of wildlife and the world's best pharmacy

Far from the chaos of the city, Peter Robinson finds sanctuary in the biodiverse beauty of India's Coorg region



"Nothing can stand in the way of elephants migrating 100km [62 miles] across the biosphere," said Abishek Jain, a local naturalist, as we set out into the rainforest. "Are we likely to run into any today?" I asked nervously Photo: ALAMY

By Peter Robinson
11:26AM GMT 27 Jan 2014

Comments

They say you either love India or hate it. The colour, the chaos and the sheer press of people constantly overstimulate the mind and the senses, clamouring for an instant revision of your perspective. Even those, like me, for whom it's love at first sight will at times be overwhelmed. So it's vital to find a sanctuary where you can get away from it all.

Whether you're a dedicated hiker or simply seeking a refuge, walking in the wild is a great antidote to India overload, and the country has an astonishing amount of wilderness, despite its billion-plus people.

We chose the Coorg (Kodagu) region in Karnataka in the southern part of the Western Ghats range. Among coffee and spice plantations is a great mix of hill and rainforest hiking, with a cooler climate and unexpectedly green vegetation.

Marketed as the "Scotland of India", the region has an increasingly sophisticated infrastructure with various levels of accommodation aimed at the growing tourist market, opening the area up to serious walkers as well as families. Daily flights into Bangalore and the new Mandakali



India
Travel » Asia »
Safari and wildlife
holidays »

Related Partners

Telegraph Travel Hand-
picked: Exclusive
holiday offers

In India

Call our cruise specialists FREE

0800 048 4304

To plan or book a cruise today



Book Hotels Cruises Cottages

Where (hotel, city, address, landmark or map)

Check in:

Check out:

Rooms:

Guests:

Search

Why book with **T TRAVEL**

- ✓ Trusted, expert reviews
- ✓ ABTA and ATOL bonded
- ✓ Best price guarantee
- ✓ No booking fees

More From The Web »

Travel Most Viewed

TODAY PAST WEEK PAST MONTH

1. Croatia: readers' tips
2. The best quiet ski resorts

Airport at Mysore now make it easily accessible from Britain.

Related Articles

-  [Twenty destinations for 2014: The Ganges, India](#) 02 Jan 2014
-  [Twenty destinations for 2014: Kashmir, India](#) 02 Jan 2014
-  [An Indian 'sexploration'](#) 05 Nov 2013
-  [Trip of a Lifetime: The Taj Mahal](#) 26 Feb 2013
-  [Indian houseboat hotels](#) 24 Jan 2014
-  [India by Steve McCurry](#) 14 Jan 2013

The Western Ghats is a 1,000-mile ribbon of mountains running all the way down the western side of the subcontinent, from Gujarat in the north to Kerala in the south. The range is known as one of the world's 10 "hottest hot spots" for biodiversity, and is home to more than 5,000 species of flowering plants, including many unique orchids, and hundreds of different mammals, birds and amphibians.



Marketed as the "Scotland of India", the region is opening up to serious walkers

A hike in the Brahmagiri took us through shola forests, where stunted evergreens nestled in high-altitude valleys. The forests are known as the world's greatest pharmacy, and our guide pointed out tobacco plants, used locally as a pesticide, and vanilla, an Ayurvedic toothache cure. He showed us kachampuli, the dried fruits of which give Coorg's cuisine its pungency.

This kind of ecosystem supports large herds of wild buffalo and elephants in the Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, one of three in Coorg. Tigers and their tracks, so-called "pug marks", have also been spotted. Trekking in Pushpagiri includes the 5,617ft Kumara Parvatha peak, the highest in the sanctuary – a six-mile hike through thick rainforest crowded with animals.

Coorg's greatest wildlife attraction is the Nagarhole National Park, one of India's largest wildlife areas, a great place to watch tigers, buffalo and elephants. There are minibus tours into the forest, as well as many days of hiking in the ring of mountains between Nagarhole and Madikeri, 75 miles to the north.

Wayanad is another great hiking area with, if anything, more extensive trails suited to intrepid hikers. Like Nagarhole, it's part of the Nilgiri Biosphere, a cluster of parks and sanctuaries covering 2,100 square miles.

"Nothing can stand in the way of elephants migrating 100km [62 miles] across the biosphere," said Abishek Jain, a local naturalist, as we set out into the rainforest. "Are we likely to run into any today?" I asked nervously.

"Oh no," he said, smiling. "Today I'm expecting spiders and frogs. Listen." He raised his hand and cocked his head. I could hear a sound like a car alarm. "That's a frog," he said.



World's tallest statues



Rail travel in India



The Maha Kumbh Mela



Pushkar Camel Fair



Karthik Purnima festival

3. Suffolk in winter
4. Providence: New England's coolest city
5. Where to see the Northern Lights

TRAVEL EDITOR'S CHOICE



Sign Language

Win a £300 camera

The world's largest superyachts

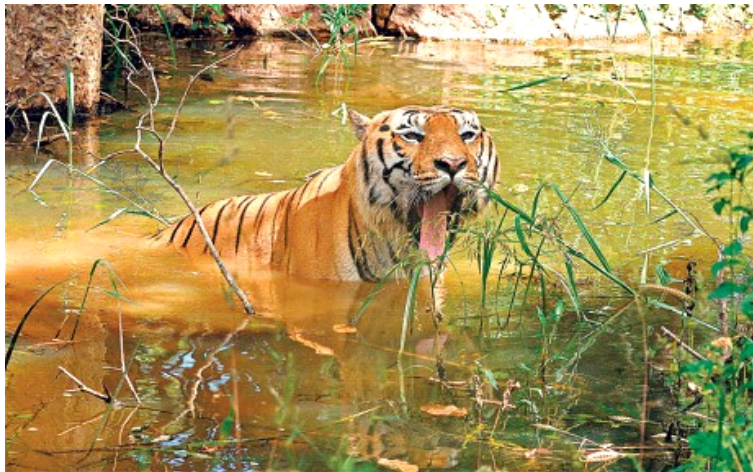
Where in the world?

Propaganda battle at Bannockburn

I was inclined to believe him. Abishek is a legend around Madikeri. He's the in-house naturalist at a local hotel as well as a worldwide authority on orchids. There are some great stories about him. We heard he took on an angry 18ft king cobra with a stick to protect a documentary cameraman too intent on filming it to realise the danger he was in. He aced his job interview – a test walk through the forest – by identifying a random forest noise as a frog being eaten by a snake, and then leading his sceptical interviewer to the scene.

In our search for a sanctuary, the hotel where Abishek works, the Vivanta by Taj, Madikeri, played an important role. It's an extraordinary place worth a visit in itself. Built on a hillside in the rainforest without disturbing a single tree, its individual bungalows have been placed in eccentric locations, so getting around the site is a challenge (although you can always call for a golf cart if you don't feel like the hike). All the rooms have great views, as does the spectacular, open reception area at the top of the hill.

The hotel is like a village, with a forest adventure centre and its own pottery studio complete with potter and lessons for guests, as well as the usual amenities and a large spa. At the on-site museum, a retired colonel from the Indian army explained how Coorg's people (Kodavas) were said to be descended from Greek mercenaries who arrived with Alexander the Great, and he described unique local marriage traditions and the strong role of Kodava women in society.



The Nagarhole National Park is a great place to watch tigers, buffalo and elephants

As well as walks both inside and outside the vast hotel site, there is plenty of wildlife. A female leopard with two new cubs had been discovered the week before we visited, and a family of jungle cats is known to live nearby. Thanks to Abishek, many local bird species have been documented, as well, of course, as frogs, 25 new species of which he says he discovered in a single year. "In this part of the world, the most interesting hotels are starting to behave like nature reserves," he mused.

On the last day of our trip, we hiked a couple of hours away from the hotel to one of Coorg's 242 sacred groves, set up to help conserve these unique ecosystems. We stopped to enjoy the stillness around the temple at the edge of the grove. We realised we were about as far away from India's wonderful madness as you would ever need to be.

Getting there

British Airways (0844 493 0787; britishairways.com) has direct flights to Bengaluru from £647 return. SpiceJet (0091 987 180 3333) offers three flights each week from Bangalore to Mysore, from where a two-hour taxi ride to Madikeri will cost about £32. Alternatively, a metered cab from Bengaluru (karnatakaholidays.net; 804 900 7777) will take five hours and cost about £50.

Packages

Greaves (020 7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk) offers tailor-made tours to India. A 10-day walking tour covering Coorg and Wayanad costs from £2,000 per person, including return flight, hotels (a night in Mysore, three in Coorg and three in Wayanad), bed and breakfast (half board in Wayanad), road and internal air transfers, plus excursions.

Where to stay

Rainforest Retreat £

Eco guesthouse in the rainforest north-west of Madikeri; power is from solar panels but there's no 220V current in the rooms (0091 827 226 5638; rainforestours.com; doubles from £30, including breakfast and half-day trek, double tents from £20).

The Jade £

Heritage homestay in the valley of the Brahmagiri, a stepping-off point for both Nagarhole National Park and the Wayanad Sanctuary (827 424 4396; thejadecoorg.com; doubles £27 including breakfast and dinner).

Tranquil ££

Stylish hideaway on a 400-acre coffee plantation in the remote rainforest of Wayanad, north Kerala (493 622 0244; tranquilresort.com; doubles from £85, full board).

Vivanta by Taj, Madikeri £££

Spectacular luxury resort complex on a hillside in the rainforest outside Madikeri; in-house naturalist, pottery studio, museum and large spa plus extensive activities (827 266 5800; vivantabytaj.com; doubles from £115 including breakfast).

Where to eat

Athithi £

Vegetarian thali served on banana leaves (Main Road, Madikeri, near police station; 827 232 9596).

Capitol Hotel £

Slightly shabby, but great food, including local specialities (School Road, Madikeri, opposite post office).

Raintree £

A wide variety of Indian veg and non-veg food (Pension Lane, behind Madikeri Town Hall; 827 222 0301).

Nellaki ££

A sophisticated take on Coorg's delicious cuisine, including dishes incorporating the local kachampuli flavouring, located in the Vivanta by Taj hotel (1st Monnangeri, Galibeedu; 827 266 5800).

The inside track

About 90 per cent of Coorg hikes are on protected land with public access, so there are plenty of trails to choose from, including Tadiandamol, Honnamana Kere, Pushpagiri and Brahmagiri.

Muddy Boots (07826 728707 or 0091 954 420 1249; muddyboots.in) offers guided hikes and hiking/adventure trips in both Coorg and Wayanad. One-day trails, including guide, entrance fees and equipment (including cycles where appropriate) cost from £25. Three-day trips with full-board accommodation, activities and local transport start at £180 per person for a minimum of two people.

Book well ahead for the government-run Kabini River Lodge (020 3301 4600; kabiniriverlodge.com), a great base for exploring the Nagarhole National Park. Its proximity to the park and luxury, eco-friendly accommodation mean it is regularly rated one of the world's best wildlife destinations. Doubles, including full board, Jeep safari and entry fees, from £90.

Bylakuppe has Buddhist temples and monasteries, 7,000 monks and vast, golden statues. Visits from tour operators and hotels cost about £45 per person, including transport, guide and lunch.





More on India

- Twenty destinations for 2014: Kashmir, India
- Twenty destinations for 2014: The Ganges, India
- India and 'The Kama Sutra Diaries'
- The Taj Mahal: Trip of a Lifetime
- Steve McCurry's India

[Our new look](#) | [How we moderate](#)

Please enable JavaScript to view the comments powered by Disqus. blog comments powered by Disqus

MORE FROM TELEGRAPH.CO.UK

<p>TELEGRAPH JOBS</p>  <p>Search for a new job and get help with your career with Telegraph Jobs</p> <p>View</p>	<p>TELEGRAPH COURSES</p>  <p>Impact & Influence: How to get the results you want from others</p> <p>View</p>	<p>FIND A JOB</p>  <p>Find your next role in Technology with Telegraph Jobs</p> <p>View</p>	<p>MBA COURSES</p>  <p>Enrolling now: distance learning MBA programmes at the University of Essex</p> <p>View</p>
--	---	---	--

[Back to top](#)