



South India

Bengaluru to Thiruvananthapuram





South India

"There are three trips you take to India: the one you think you're going to have - that you plan for; the one you actually have; and the one you live through once you go back home."

- Erin Reese



As we ate breakfast a rainbow appeared so we hoped this was to be a good omen for our trip.

We caught the 10 o'clock Berry's bus and after arriving in Hammersmith we headed across to Heathrow, where we checked into the Premier inn for the evening.

Waking up rather early due to our phones messaging us at 3:30, we closed the cases down and then took a brisk walk to Hatton Cross Station and back. Once back to the hotel, we collected the luggage and walked across to the airport. A very quick bag drop and passage through security allowed us plenty of time for a leisurely breakfast before heading off for our flight



We had an excellent first flight to Abu Dhabi on a giant A380-800, followed by a bit of a long queue through transit security and heading to our second, shorter, flight down to Bengaluru (Bangalore). The second flight was a bit cramped as we had seats by the bulkhead, but it was fine. The food on both flights was very good. We had a nice chat with the guy next to us who was from Bengaluru, but was working Birmingham.

We finally arrived around 3 am, but it took over an hour to get through passport control and bag pick up. Our driver Kannan was waiting for us and took us to our hotel. After checking in around 5:30 we headed to bed.

Our hotel overlooked Bengaluru race course, which appeared to include stables and exercise rings within the course. On our second morning we were able to see horses exercising both around the track and in the lunging rings.



Bangalore Palace

After a lazy morning and a light lunch, Kannan picked us up for our scheduled trip to Bangalore Palace. This was slightly fraught as the road to the palace was jammed. We got there and were able to walk around the palace which looks for all the world from the outside as if it was dropped in from Scotland. Inside is more traditional, but unfortunately no photos allowed. They would not even allow our big cameras outside, although mobile phones were tolerated. To us this made little sense as many mobiles have exceptional cameras.

Just for the flavour of this surreal building I have included a few shots from Wikipedia.

Built in the late 1800s, Bangalore Palace was the residence of the royal Wodeyar family, rulers of Mysore. The design is a unique blend of Tudor and Scottish Gothic styles, inspired by Windsor Castle in England. The grand palace boasts exquisite wooden carvings, lavish interiors with paintings by Raja Ravi Varma, and a large collection of artefacts.







On the way back to the hotel we stopped to admire the the Vidhana Soudha.

It is the building where the Karnataka state legislature meets. It was built in the 1950s and is a grand structure. Designed in Neo-Dravidian style, it reflects a move away from colonial influences and towards celebrating Indian architecture. Its grand scale and imposing presence are designed to showcase India's strength and aspirations.



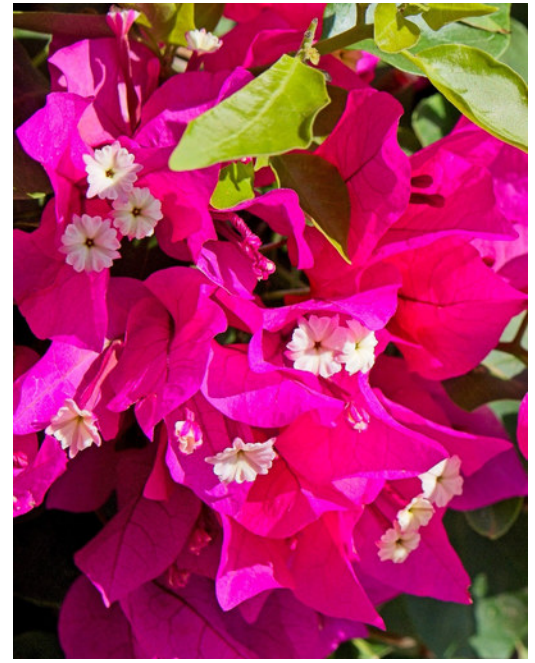


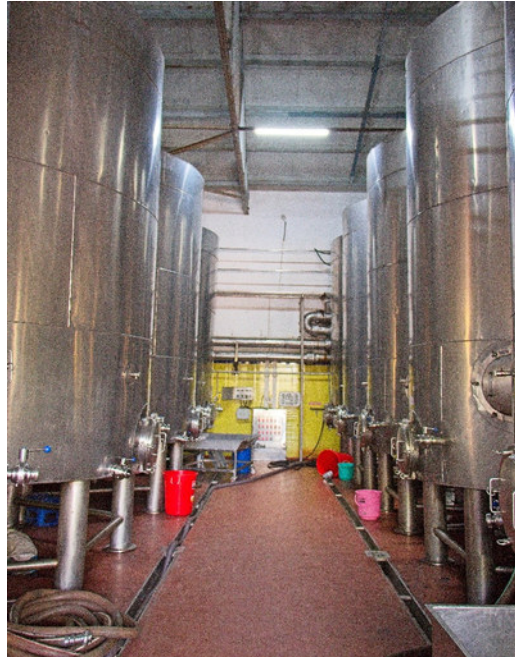
The following morning, Kannan picked us up at 8:45 to travel from Bengaluru to Mysuru (Mysore).

Along the way we stopped at the Sula vineyard for a tour and wine tasting and a local guide took the two of us around. We were able to see the pressing, along with the bottling plant and the oak barrel storage.

The Sula wine company was founded in 1999 and the brand is the biggest wine producer in India. It produces all of the five main types of wine, White, Red, Rose, Sparkling and Dessert. We were able to pick and taste some of the Shiraz grapes, which were thin skinned and full of juice. We were also able to see the dessert grapes being dried on racks in the sun, something similar to sultanas , before processing.











After our wine tour and as we headed back to the main road we found a farmer spreading dry stalks on to the road. Kannan explained it was a fodder crop and they laid it out on the road so passing traffic would winnow the stalks to get the grain out.



Srirangapatna

Daria Daulat Bagh

After the wine tasting we headed to Srirangapatna, made famous in the UK as being the home of Tipu Sultan, the 'Tiger of Mysore'. Our first stop was Tipu's summer palace Daria Daulat Bagh (literally 'Garden of the Sea of Wealth'). Still surrounded by elegant lawns and mature trees, it is a fairly modest wooden structure almost completely covered in green shading. The reason for the shades becomes clear as you climb up the stairs to the verandah to be greeted by stunning wall art covering every surface.







Tipu Sultan, also known as the "Tiger of Mysore," ruled the South Indian kingdom of Mysore from 1782 to 1799. He was a scholar, soldier, and innovator, credited with developing rockets for warfare and improving Mysore's administration and economy.

Tipu's reign was marked by conflict with the British East India Company vying for control of India. He fought four wars against the British, winning two. His military success and progressive policies threatened British dominance, leading to the final war in 1799.

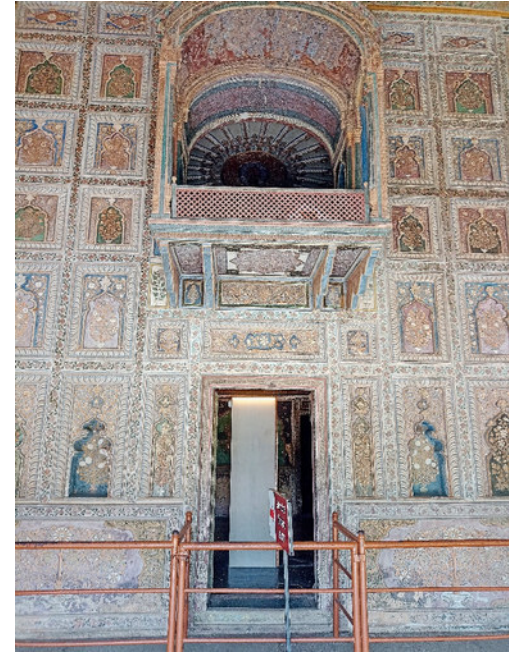
Tipu Sultan died a warrior's death. Defending his capital city Seringapatnam from a British siege, he was killed in battle on May 4, 1799. Though defeated, Tipu Sultan remains a controversial figure. Seen as a freedom fighter by some and a tyrant by others, his legacy reflects the complex history of colonial India.

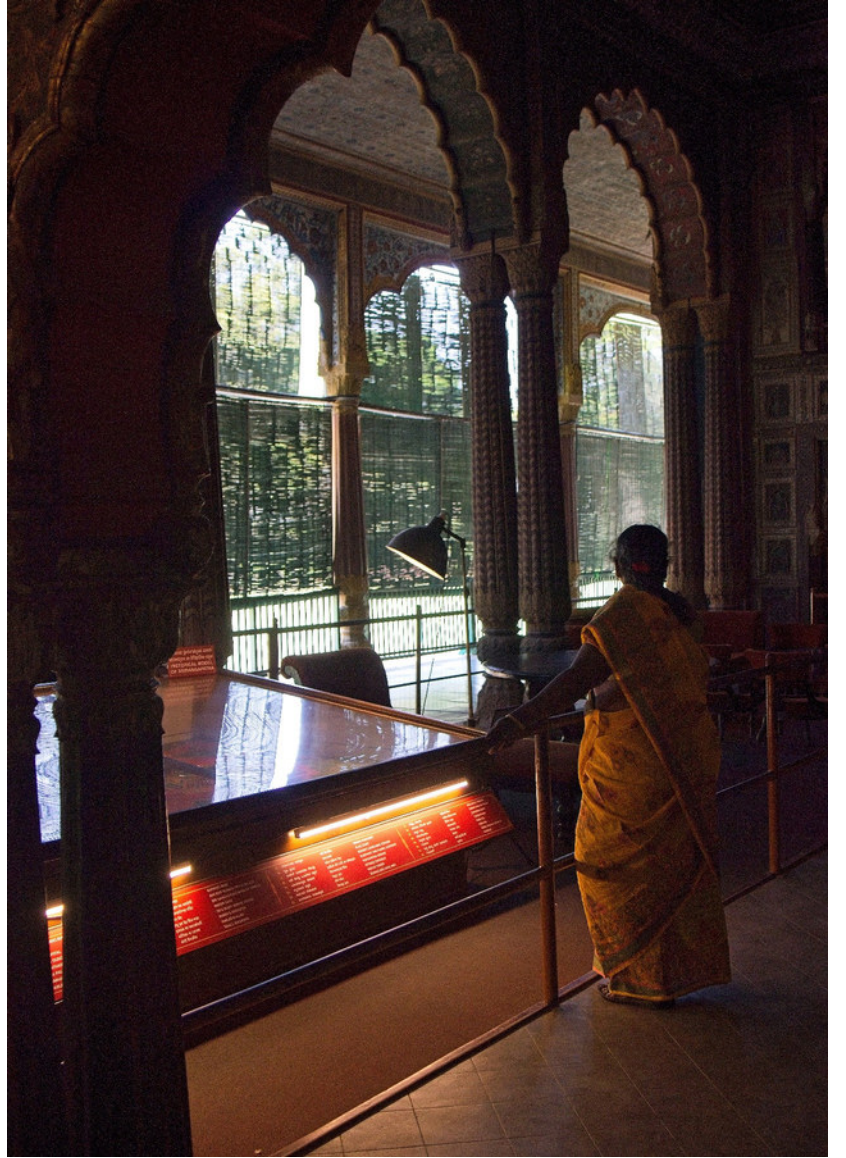














This underground prison was built by Tipu Sultan to keep war prisoners. One British officer died in this prison during his sentence so it is named after him Colonel Bailey's Dungeon.



The Water Gate leads down to the river allowing easy escape if needed.



Outside the cell, which could be flooded from the river.



Tipu's Mosque



The Ranganathaswamy Temple

The Rajagopuram, stands at a staggering 236 feet, a true titan among its companions. Estimates suggest the temple's origins could date back to as early as the 1st century BCE. Over the centuries, dynasties that ruled the region added their own flourishes.



Mysuru





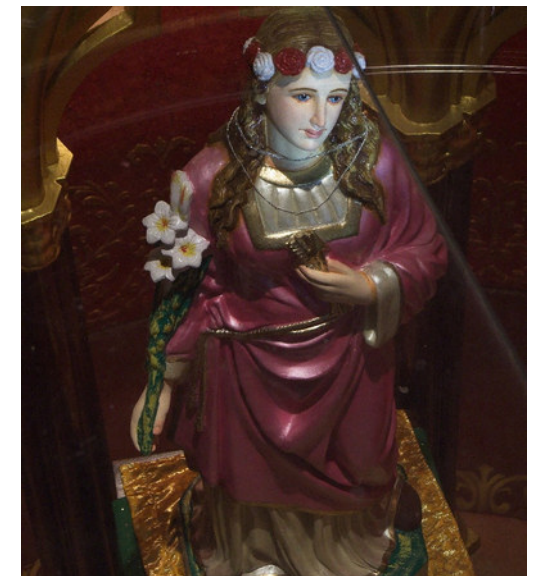
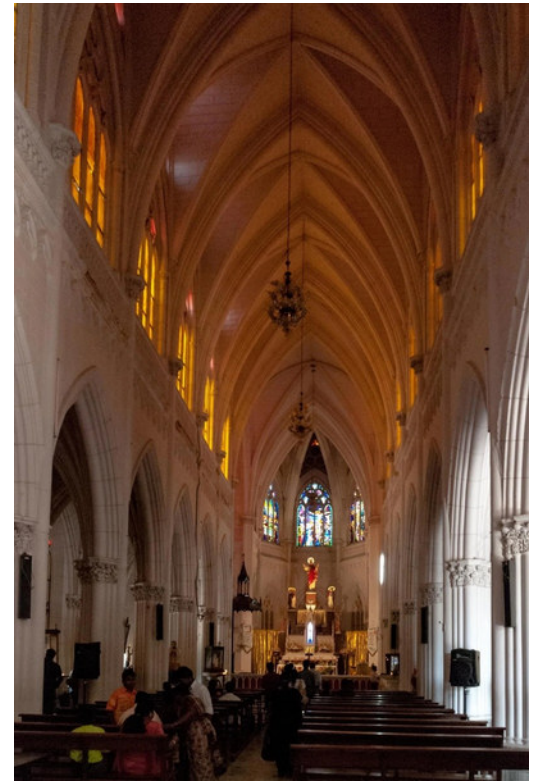
Mysuru, or Mysore, is the third largest city in Karnataka. The city was ruled by the Wodeyar dynasty and it is well known for the rich architectural history, palaces, and beautiful gardens. It is located at the bottom of the Chamundi Hills and is about 150 kms from Bengaluru.

Our tour of Mysuru started with a visit to St. Philomena's Cathedral. It is one of the largest cathedrals in India and is one of the tallest churches in Asia. It is a remarkable



example of Gothic architecture. The church was built to honour the memory of Saint Philomena, a Roman Catholic saint, and draws inspiration from the beautiful Cologne Cathedral of Germany. Remains of St Philomena are preserved in the cathedrals crypt.

St Philomena's Cathedral was built by Maharaja of Mysuru Mummudi Krishnaraja Wadiyar in 1843 as a gift to the growing European population residing in Mysuru in the 19th century.



Mysore Palace



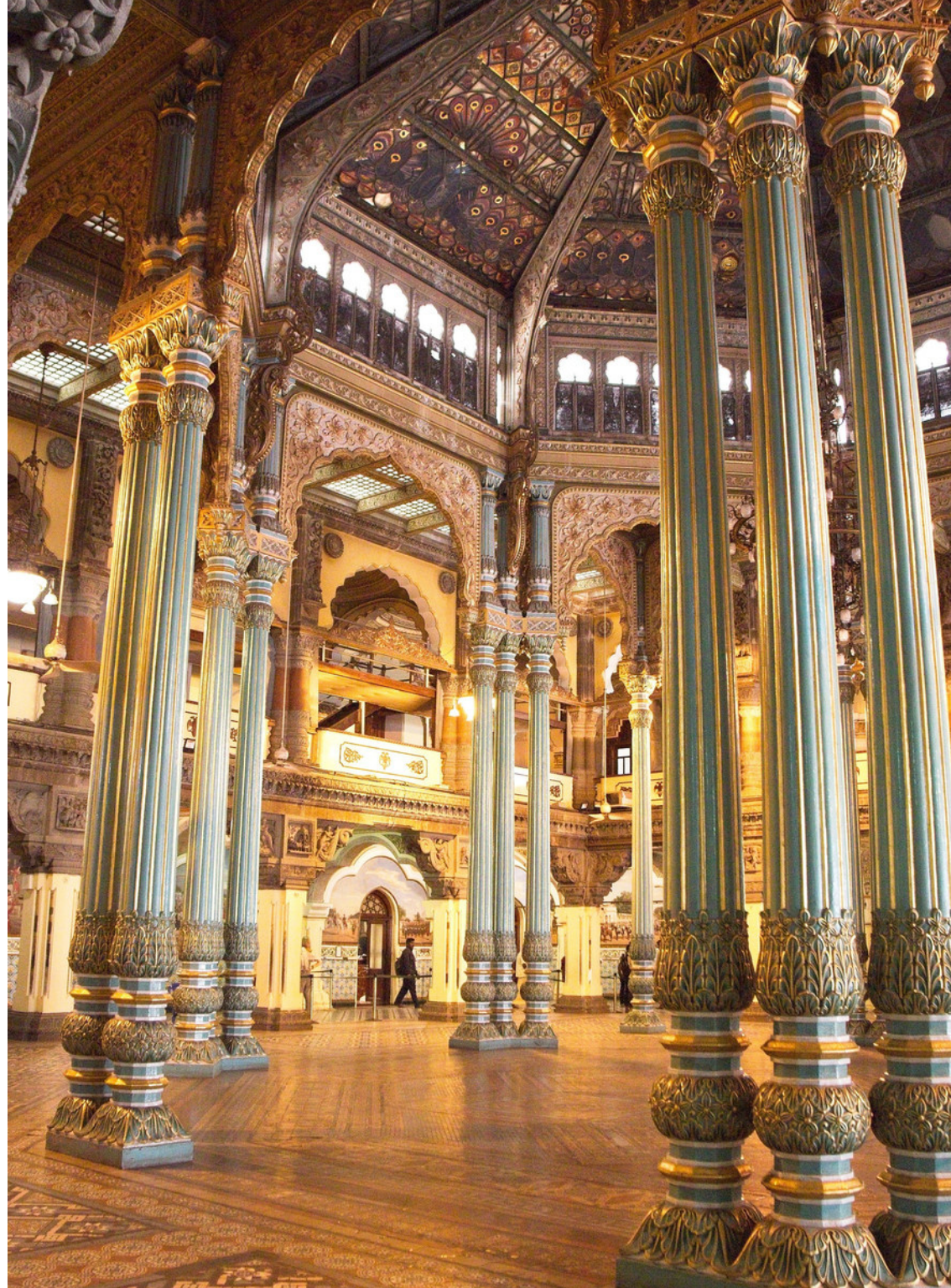


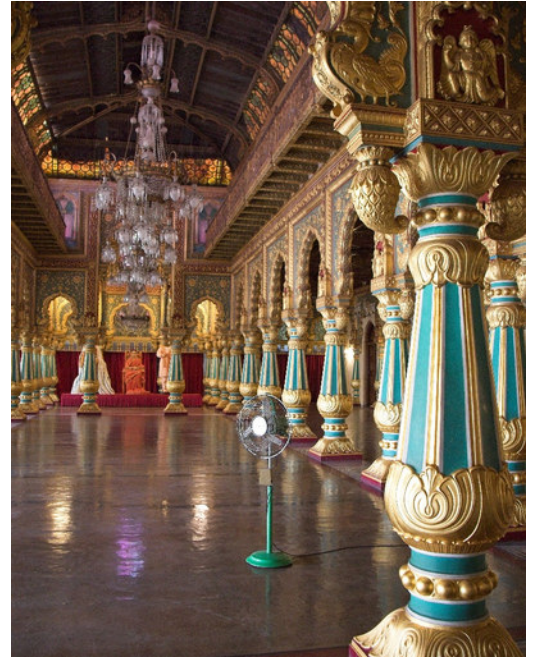
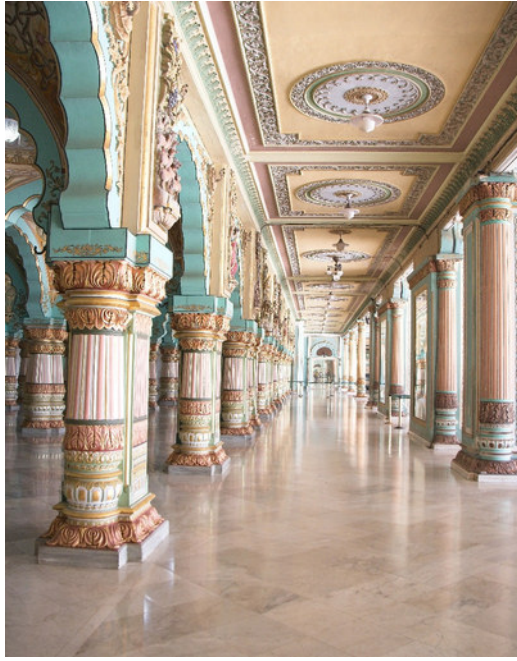
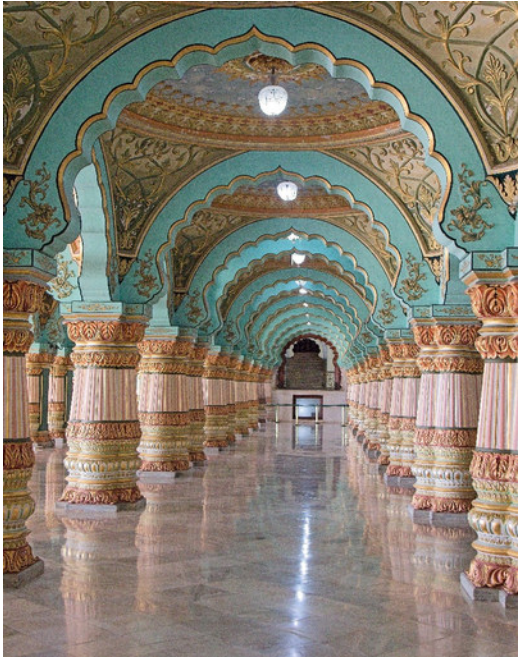
Mysore Palace, also known as Amba Vilas Palace, is a historical palace and a royal residence. It used to be the official residence of the Wadiyar dynasty and the seat of the Kingdom of Mysore. The palace is in the centre of Mysore, and faces the Chamundi Hills eastward.

The land on which the palace now stands was originally known as mysuru (literally, "citadel"). The first palace inside the Old Fort was built in the 14th century, which was set ablaze and reconstructed multiple times. The Old Fort was built of wood and thus easily caught fire, while the current fort was built of stone, bricks and wood.

The last palace, now known as the Old Palace or the Wooden Palace, burned to ashes during the wedding of Jayalakshammani, the eldest daughter of Chamaraja Wodeyar in 1896. Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV and his mother Maharani Kempananjammanni Devi commissioned the British architect Henry Irwin to build a new palace. E.W. Fritchley worked as a consulting Engineer. Meanwhile, the royal family stayed in the nearby Jaganmohan Palace. Construction was overseen by an executive engineer in the Mysore Palace division. He conducted elaborate architectural studies during his visits to Delhi, Madras, and Calcutta, and these were used to plan the new palace. The construction cost was placed at Rs 41,47,913 , (around \$30 million adjusted for inflation), and the palace was completed in 1912.

The palace was further expanded around 1930, (including the addition of the present Public Durbar Hall wing), during the reign of Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar.









Dodda Nandi

The Chamundi temple has always been patronised by the rulers of Mysore. In 1659 Dodda Devaraja Wodeyar built 1,000 steps and the huge Nandi, (Lord Shiva's Bull), is located around step 700. This colossal Nandi is one of the largest in India, and is 16 ft. (4.8 meters) tall at the front and 25 ft. (7.5 meters) in length.

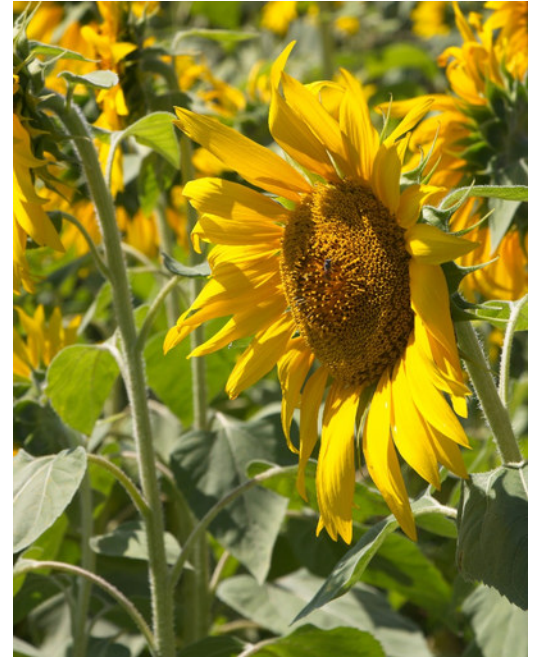
Women often pray for a wish at the temple at the top of the hill. If their wish is granted, the “payment” is to climb the steps and paint an orange mark on every step to the top as they go. We were lucky enough to see a couple performing this ritual and after we had reached the top, (by car), we saw them arriving at the temple level.









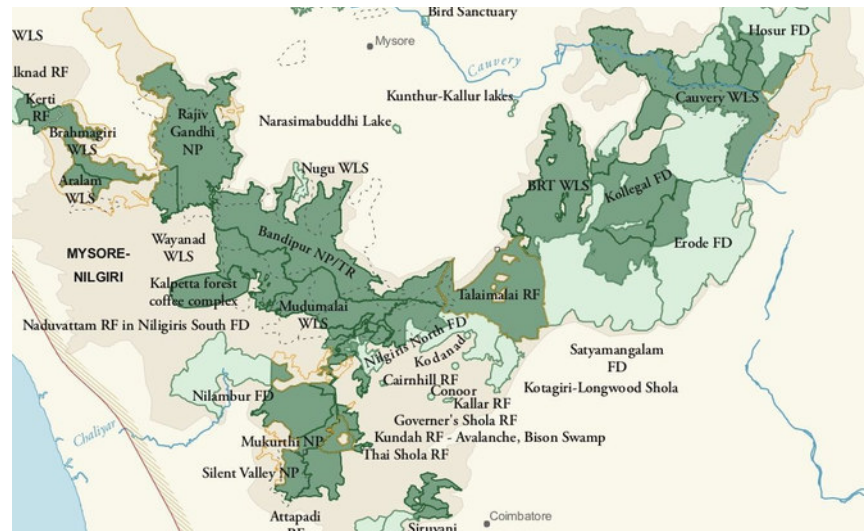


Bandhipur National Park and Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary

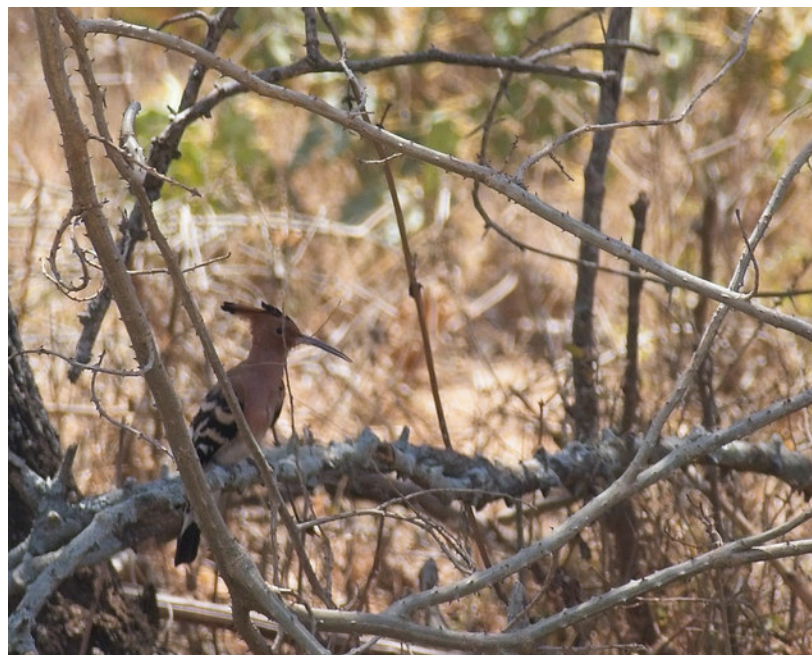
Heading from Mysuru should have started out with visits to the Ranganthittu Bird sanctuary and the Lalith Mahal Palace Hotel. Unfortunately both were closed and not available to visit. This was extremely disappointing especially as the fact we were not going to the bird sanctuary only became apparent when we set out from the hotel and were heading in the wrong direction.

Our other visits for the day were to the Bandhipur National Park and Mudumalai wildlife sanctuary both of which are part of the huge Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve which covers 2,130 square miles. It is the largest protected forest area in India, spreading across three states, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.

Driving through Bandhipur we saw many spotted deer and some birds, with Kannan stopping each time he saw something interesting. Once we reached Mudumalai, we transferred to a rather rickety Mahindra Jeep, with a local driver. Kannan also came along for the ride. After two hours of looking we did not find any of the more exotic creatures we were hoping to see, such as wild elephants, leopards or tigers. We did see quite a few bird species and lots more deer, though. There were also 3 or 4 species of Monkeys.

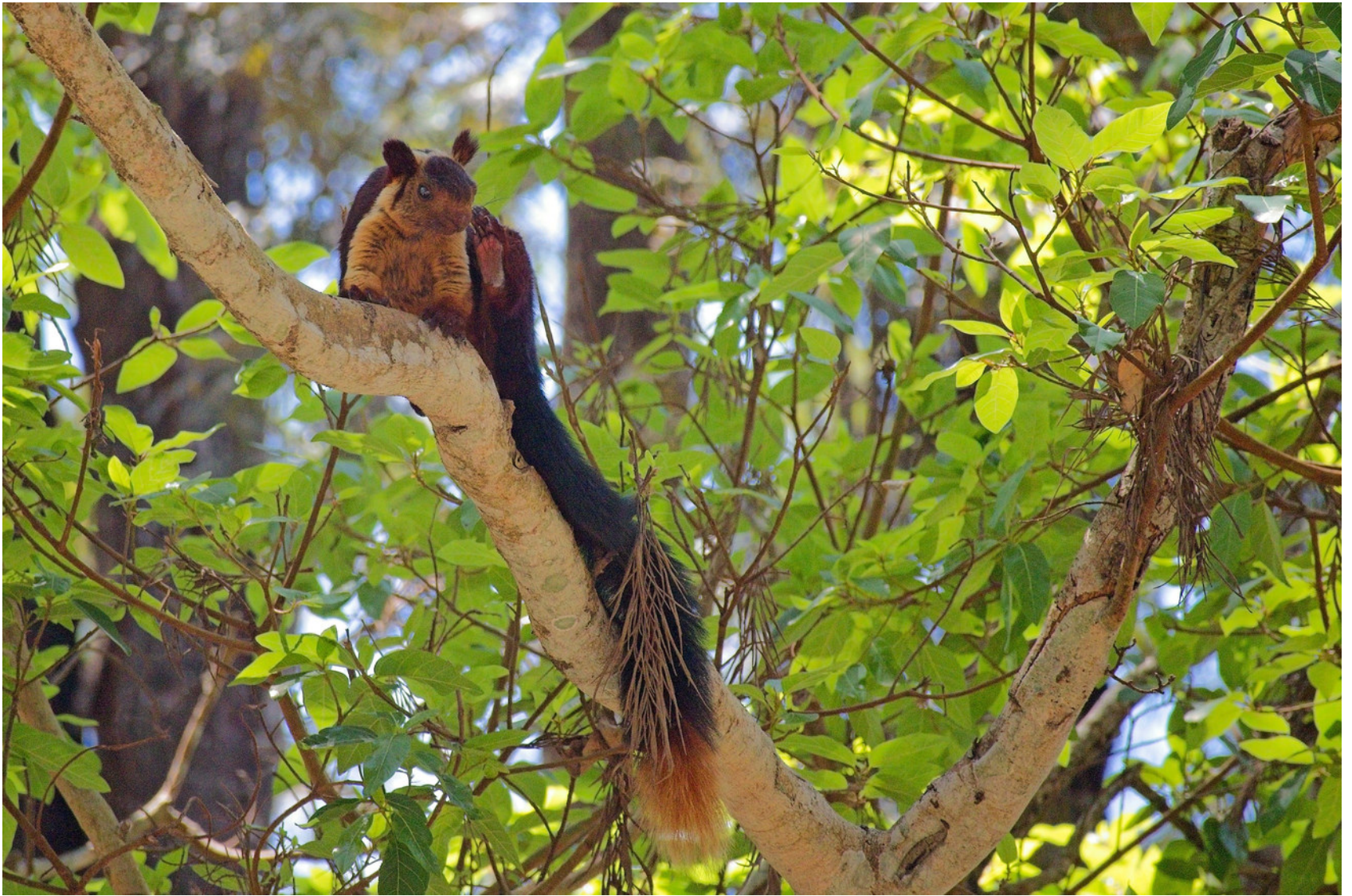






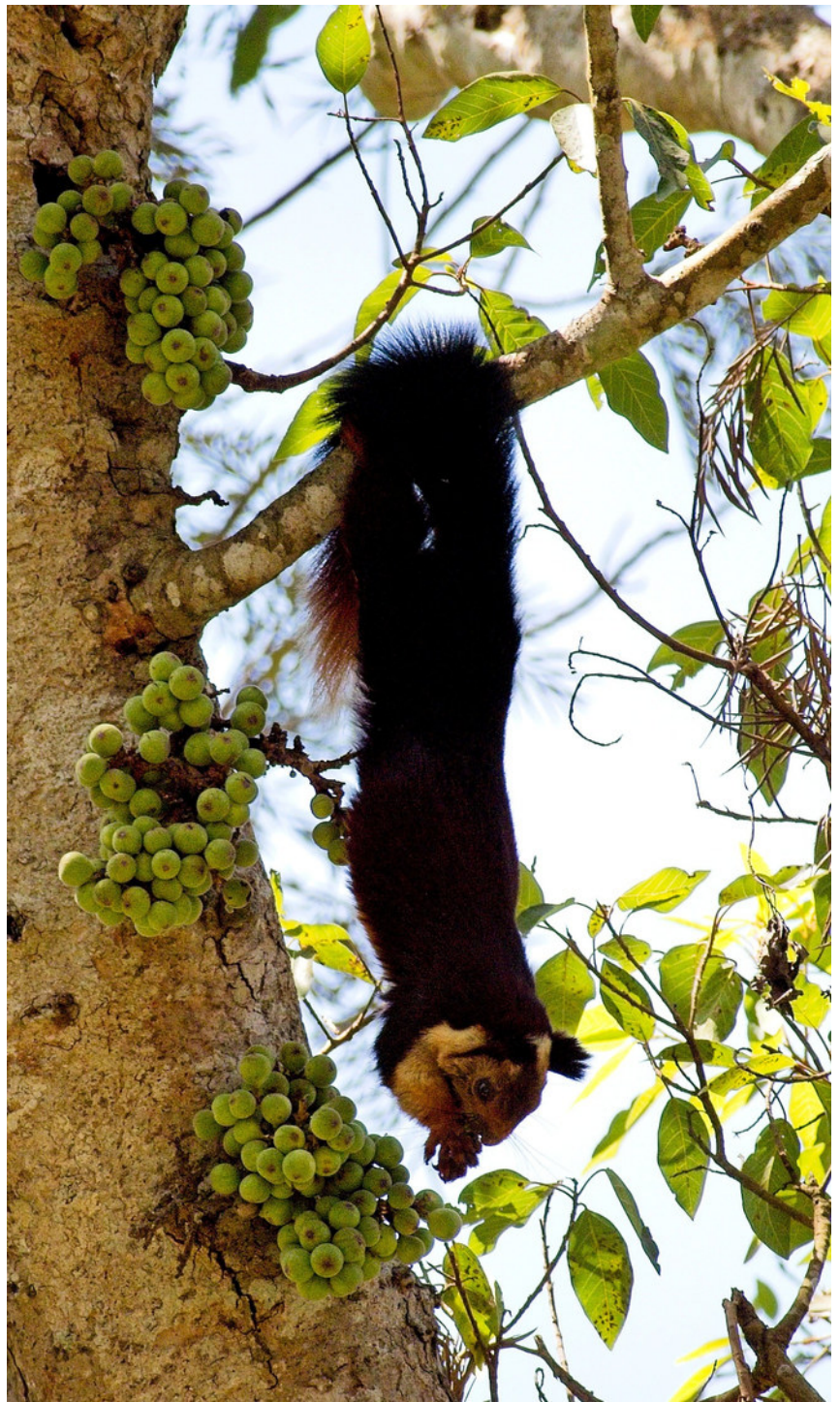
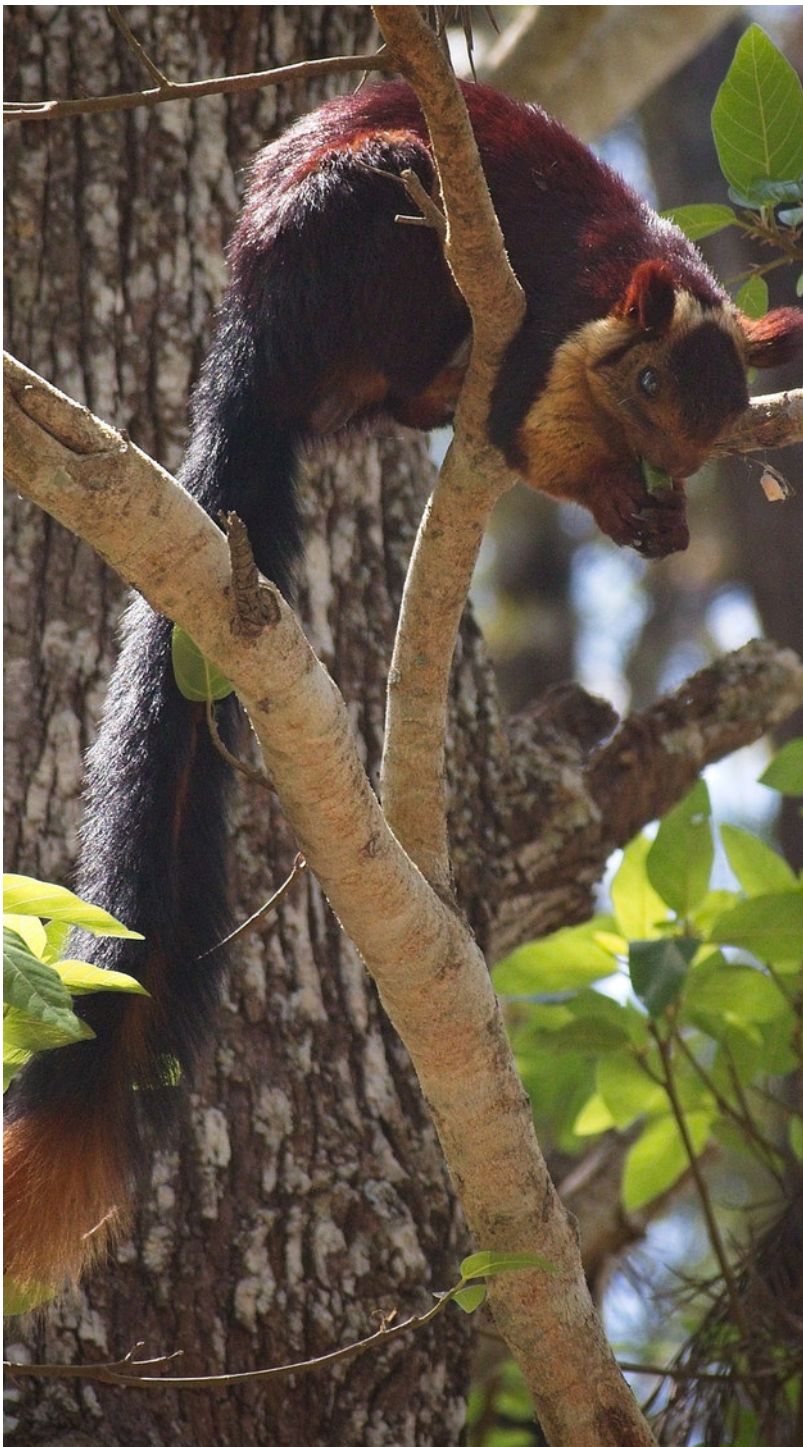






The Indian giant squirrel or Malabar giant squirrel, (*Ratufa indica*), is a large squirrel species endemic to forests and woodlands in India. It is a diurnal, arboreal, and mainly herbivorous squirrel.

It is one of the largest squirrels, with a head and body length of 25–50 cm, a tail that is about the same or somewhat longer, and a weight of 1.5–2 kg, although rarely up to 3 kg. In comparison, a European Red Squirrel is around 300g and about 19 cm in the head and body with a tail of 15 cm.







When we got back to our car, Kannan stopped to get us some bananas to eat. He brought some amazing pink ones which were delicious and some tiny and extremely sweet ones as well. He said there are over 50 varieties of bananas commonly available. Just as we were wondering what to do with the skins, Kannan spotted a Water buffalo on the side of the road which appreciated them.





Ooty

From the parks we travelled on through the Western Ghats towards our next hotel in Ooty, (officially known as Udhagamandalam).

We climbed up through 37 hairpin bends to just over 2000m where the colourful houses and tea plantations came into view.

Established by the British as a Hill Station, it has a cooler and more comfortable climate. It sprawls through the valley base with the better housing and the tea plantations arranged up the sides.





Having checked in to our Ooty hotel, situated high up the valleys edge, Kannan kindly offered to drive us down into the town for a walk through the central market. We were able to see all the fantastic produce on sale and absorb a bit of local life.





With two nights in Ooty, we had a full day of exploring, most of which was planned out in the provided itinerary. We started with the botanical garden.

The Botanical Gardens started out as a small vegetable patch in the 1840s supplying fresh vegetables to the residents of Ooty. The Marquis of Tweedale, then Governor of Madras Presidency, converted the place to a public gardens, employing the services of W.G McIvor from Kew in 1848, who planted Ooty's first Mulberry tree and the red and white Camellias. The McIvor Fern House in the garden is named after him.

The garden is one of the oldest public gardens in India. It was really off season for the garden, but the big green house was worth a look and it was nice to wander around and take in the 55 acres. The flower beds, which were recently planted, appeared to be growing dead twigs as all the plants were protected by twigs, presumably as supports, to keep the crows and pigeons from pulling them up.











Ooty Lake

Our next stop was Ooty lake, an artificial lake constructed by John Sullivan, in 1824. The water flowing down mountain streams in the Ooty valley was dammed to form the lake.

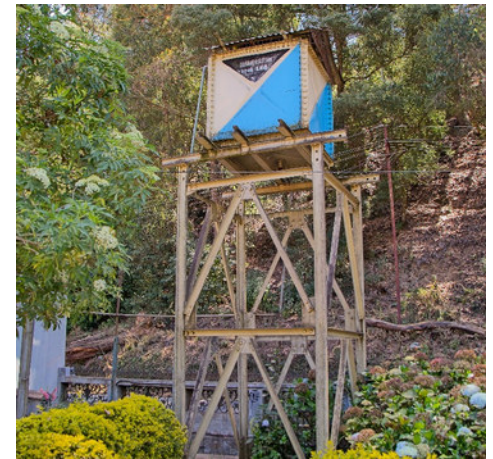
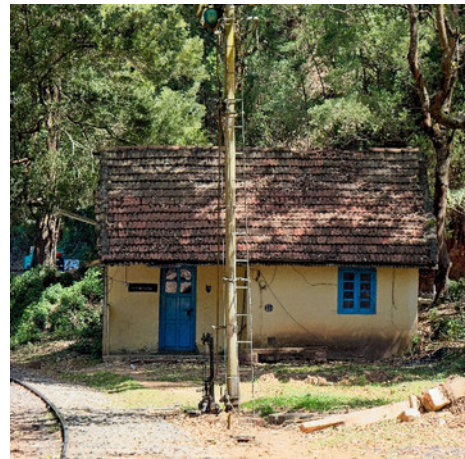
Kannan told us Ooty lake was very popular with couples as it is where many scenes from Bollywood movies are filmed. We could not really see the appeal with its plastic pedalos and fairground rides.





Lovedale Station

Next, we made a stop at Lovedale station to have a good look at a train station, which, other than the huge red LED clock, could have still been in 1907 when it was built. We would be passing through the station later on in the day, as it is one of the stops on the Nilgiris Mountain Railway.







High Field Tea Factory



Climbing higher into the hills, we visited the High Field Tea Factory, where a guide showed us around the very dark and noisy factory. He explained how the different teas are made and showed us the machines which dry and sort the tea leaves into different sizes for different products, i.e. the tea dust which goes for tea bags up to full leaves for high end cuppas.

We also saw the area used to extract Eucalyptus oils from the leaves harvested from the extensive forests of these Australian trees which grow all around the tea plantations. Finally we visited the chocolate makers who take the locally grown cocoa and create some extremely sweet chocolates. Once the walking tour was finished, we tried a few tea samples before escaping the shopping opportunity and spending a few minutes admiring the views across the camellia plants.



Sim's Park

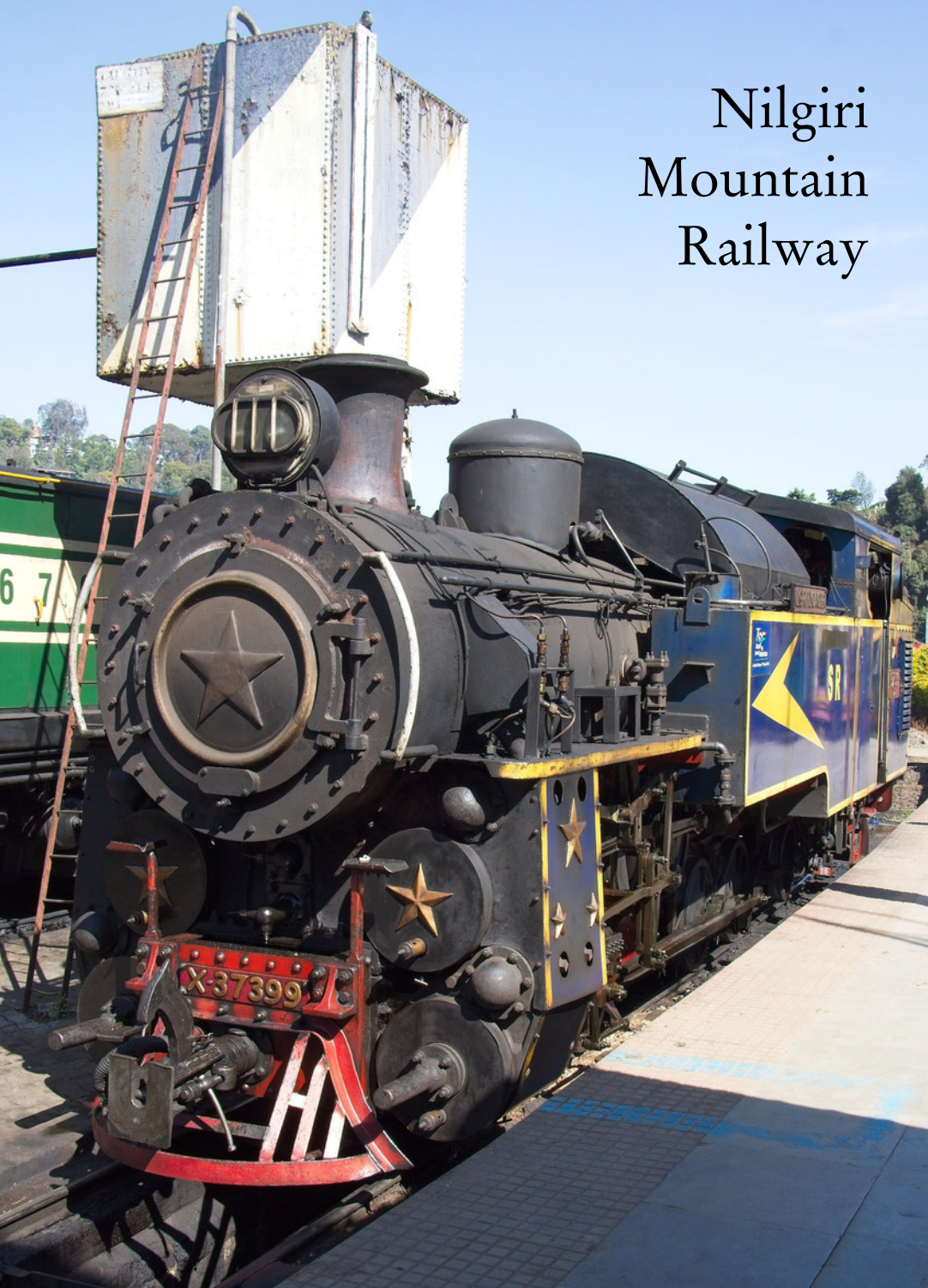


This is an unusual park-cum-botanical garden that was developed around the natural contours of the land more than a hundred years ago by Mr. J.D. Sims and Major Murray in the year of 1874. Naturally occurring trees, shrubs and creepers are in the park as are many unusual species of plants that have been brought in from a variety of places around the world.



We spent a couple of hours sitting in the shade of the pagodas as we were running early for the next activity, which was the train back to Ooty.

Nilgiri Mountain Railway



Our last adventure of the day was a train ride from Coonoor to Ooty on the Mountain railway.

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway was among the most ambitious engineering projects of the British Raj. Nearly all tracks, bridges, viaducts and tunnels from a century ago are intact. Trains continue to ply on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway, with its steam locomotives stirring memories of another time.

While officers could manage the hazardous climb across the Nilgiri Mountains, transporting wives and families wasn't easy. As Ooty grew into the summer capital of the Madras Presidency, the British decided to invest in a railway line that would reduce travel time from 10 days to 5 hours.

It isn't just the town names that are evocative of the British Raj. Old-style semaphore signals lie on the route, not modern electric signals. Drivers hand in a bamboo hoop with a metallic tablet at every station—this “token” is used to confirm a train's arrival. A metallic safe-like device called Neale's Tablet Token Instrument is used to regulate traffic. Old-style telephones, ancient clocks and handwritten registers fill railway stations.

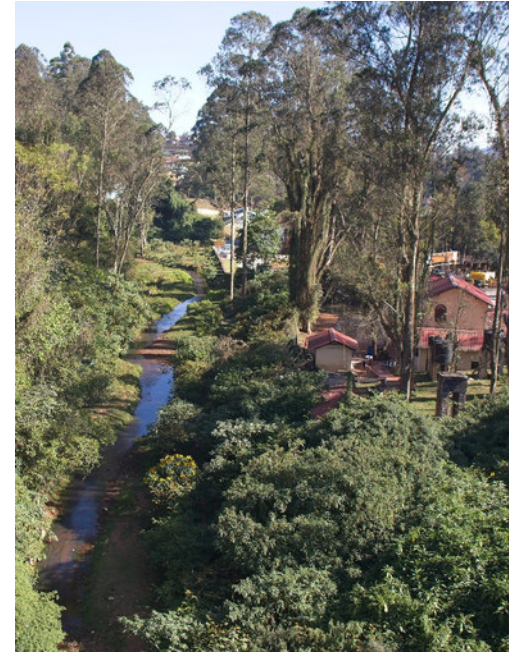
Coonoor is where the diesel engine that has drawn the train so far is replaced by a steam engine. Although we only did Coonoor to Ooty, we saw the Steam train arrive to replace the diesel for the downward journey. The retention of steam for part of the journey isn't purely for nostalgic reasons. The Coonoor-Mettupalayam stretch is steep and the only way to overcome this gradient in the 19th century was to use a rack-and-pinion system. However, only steam engines have pinions, diesel engines do not. When the railways tried replacing steam engines with diesel engines on inclines, they started to slide. Thus, steam engines are still used on the route because only they are safe enough for the task.





The train journey was rather hot and crowded with very limited leg room in 2nd class. If we had realised how tight the seats were, we would have asked Kannan to get 1st class tickets and paid the difference.

We did have some excitement along the way, in the form of a small trackside fire which the guards kicked down into a water run, before continuing the journey. We suspect the extensive Eucalyptus leaves with their high oil content burn very easily. We also slowed down to pass a huge water buffalo, who was next to the track..









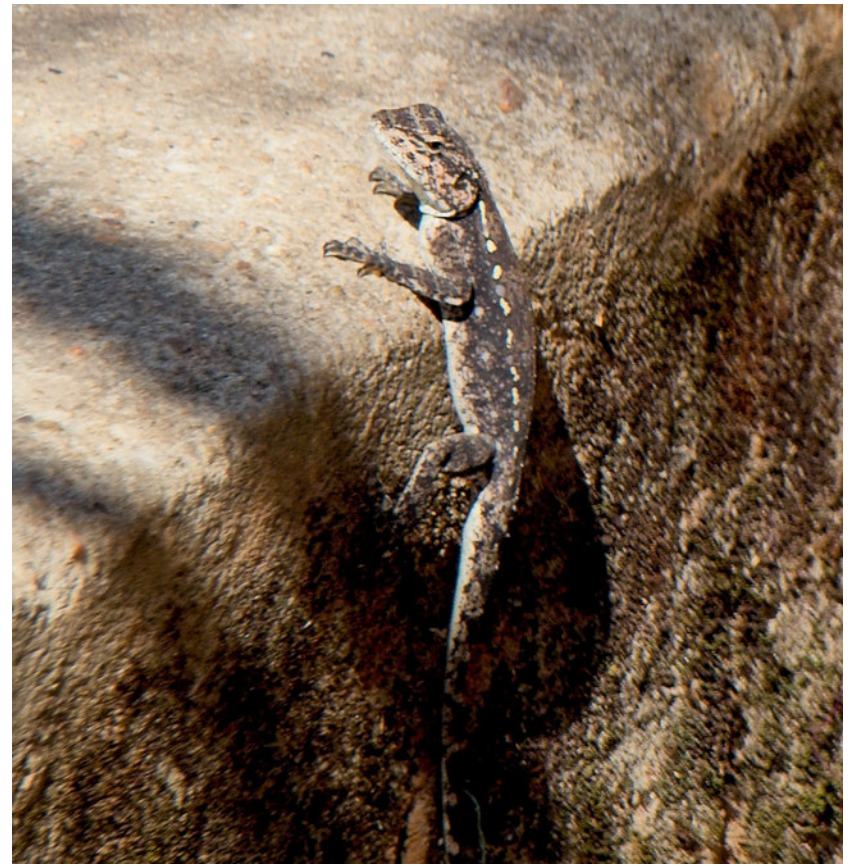


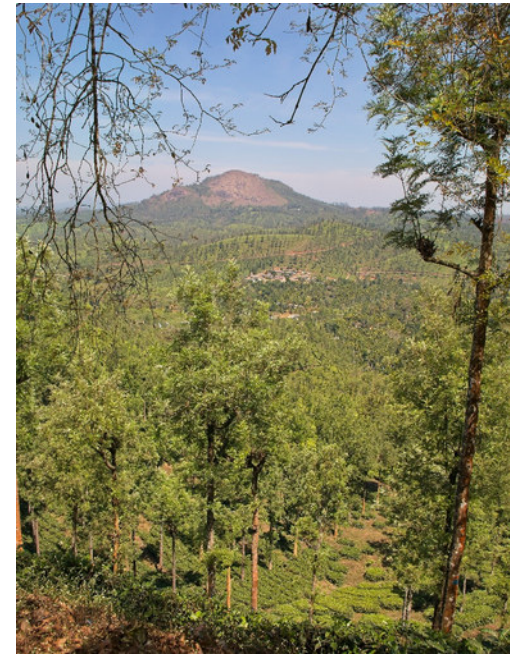
Having spent two nights in Ooty it was time to head on to Wayanad. Heading out along the winding hill roads, our first stop was a chance to stretch our legs and walk up to Needle Rock Point, which is located 51 km to the west of Ooty. It is about half a mile up, on foot, to the view point from the main road. It is worth it though, as from the top you get a 360 degree view.

Wilson Pine plantations, Frog Hill, Kokkal Hill, Rockwood hills, Silver Cloud Tea Estates, Gudalur Town and the Mudumalai Forest can all be seen.

We had to grin at the two fibre glass goat positioned on the top of the hill.







After the viewpoint we headed south east through the rolling hills covered with tea plantations. Kannan would stop anytime he thought there was something we should see, be it some ladies picking tea or a view across the hills. This is one of a lovely things about being in a private car rather than on a coach.

When we reached the border with Kerala, his home state, Kannan stopped so we could get a photo of the sign.





കേരളത്തിലേക്ക് സ്വാഗതം
പൊതുമരാമത്ത വകുപ്പ്
നിരത്ത് വിഭാഗം, വയനാട്
Welcome to Kerala
PWD Roads Division
Wayanad



Not long after Kannan asked if we would like to try Bambo rice Payasam, on the grounds we had never heard of it, we of course said yes. The road side stall was brightly coloured and there were several huge metal pots on the heat.

The payasam turned out to be a thick warm drink with slightly crunchy bamboo seeds, and I suspect quite a lot of sugar. The funniest thing was the owner hunting out some plastic chairs for us to sit on, even though we would have been pleased to stand up for a bit.

The bamboo rice (mungil arisi , mulayari) is more of a collected or foraged product than a cultivated variety. Towards the end of life, the



bamboo flowers. As the seeds mature the whole bamboo plant dies. The shoot that carries the flowers is collected and threshed to get the seed pods. This is polished to extract the seeds. The laborious and time-consuming process makes bamboo rice exotic.

Making Bambo payasam is a long process as the seeds have to be soaked overnight and then be cooked for a long time to soften them.

I found a recipe on line which uses a pressure cooker to speed up the process, although I suspect finding Bamboo rice outside of Kerala is unlikely.

Soaking the bamboo rice

1/2 cup bamboo rice

2 cups drinking water

For cooking the payasam

2 cups full cream milk

1/2 cup condensed sweetened milk

1/4 tsp green cardamom powder

Instructions

Wash and soak bamboo rice in water for 6 hours or overnight

Drain the water and pressure cook the bamboo rice with 1/2 cup milk and 1/2 cup water.

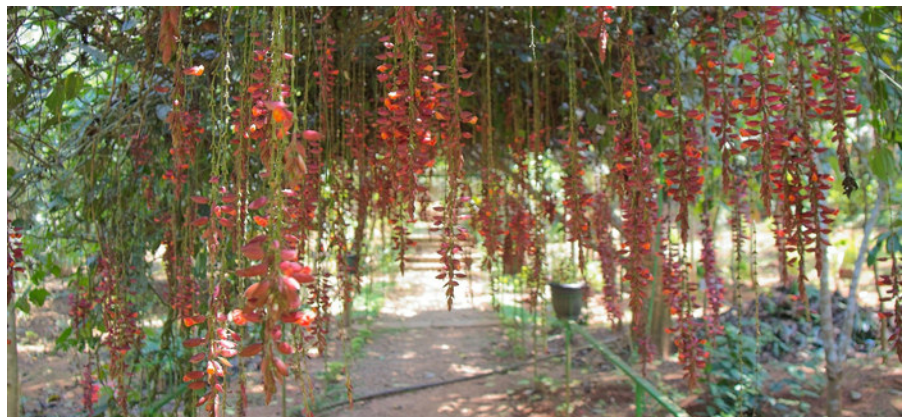
Open the lid when the pressure releases open and check the rice, it will be tender to touch. Add one more cup of milk and cook on a medium flame. Keep stirring.

When it becomes really soft add the cardamom powder. Mix well

Add half the cup of condensed milk and check the sweetness.

Continue to stir in more to reach the desired sweetness. Now bring it only up to a simmer and remove from heat.

We then headed to a Spice Garden for a quick tour of the plants they grew with a guide who explained the different uses of the plants. We did purchase a few spices as 100g in Kerala was around the same price as 10g in the UK.

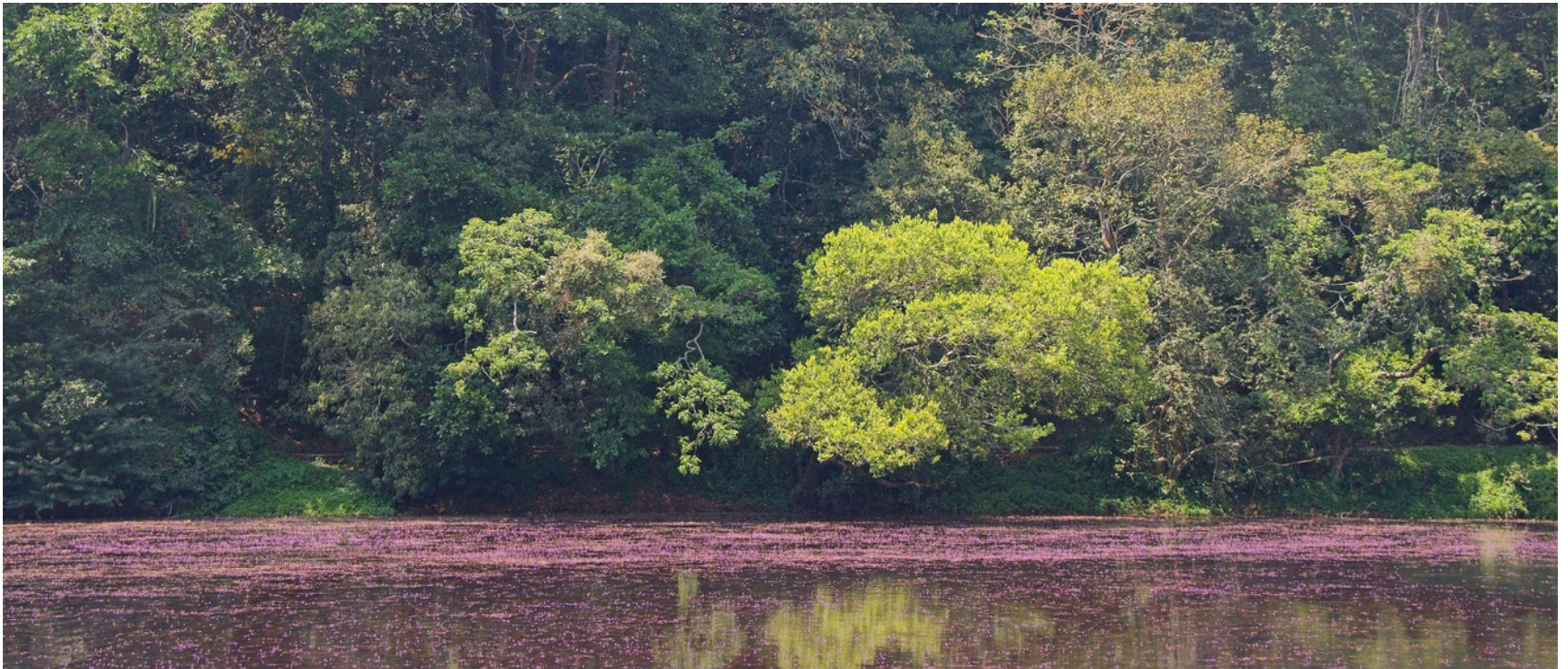
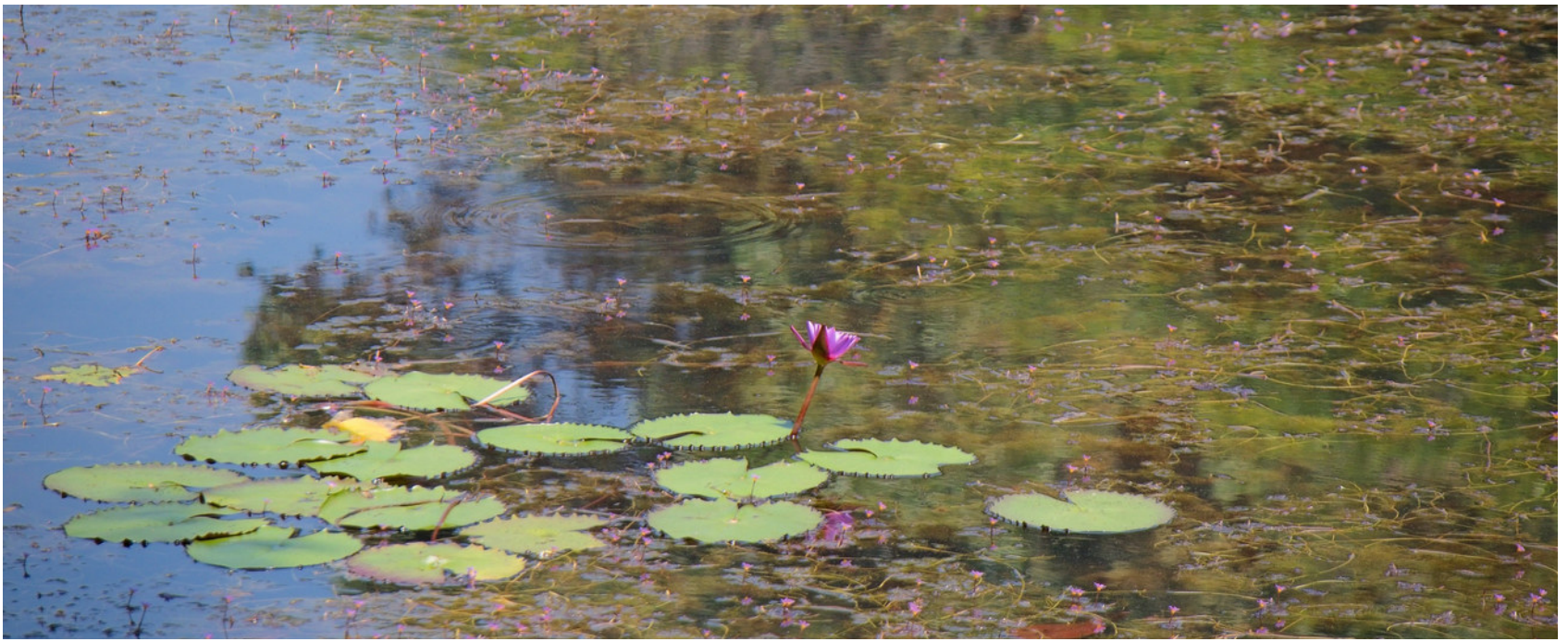




Pookot Lake

Our next opportunity for a walk arrived with a visit to Pookot lake. This fresh water lake has the shape of India's map. It is the only one of its kinds in Kerala. *Pethia pookodensis*, is a species of cyprinid fish known to occur only in Pookot Lake. There are groups of Blue water lily flowers scattered here and there in the lake.

We managed to walk all the way around the lake, which had strange purple haze from the water plants just below the surface. Finally heading back to find Kannan to continue our journey to Wayanad Wild.



An ordinary-looking fig tree on the Kozhikode-Wayanad route near Lakkidi has a thick metal chain hanging from it and a small 'temple' built in front. Popularly called Changala Maram, (Chain Tree), the tree is at least a few hundred years old, and the chain has been hanging on it for more than a century.

It is believed that the spirit of Karinthandan, a tribal Chieftain, is chained to the tree. There are no historic records to establish the life of Karinthandan, but according to local folklore, he lived between 1700–1750. Karinthandan was the chief of the Paniya tribe, one of the most prominent tribal communities in Wayanad. According to legend, he helped the British discover the road connecting Thamarassery to Wayanad, which is still being used, even now. The British had struggled to find a route to the resource-rich Wayanad, and that is when they came across the local knowledge of the Paniya tribe. With the help of Karinthandan, a British engineer 'discovered' the forest route to connect Thamarassery to Wayanad. The British engineer allegedly did not want to share the credit of his 'discovery' with the tribal man, and it is believed that he killed Karinthandan in deceit. There are several versions of how Karinthandan was killed - according to some claims, he was pushed off a cliff, while others say he was shot dead at night inside the forest.

The legend of Karinthandan then took a paranormal turn. After the Thamarassery Churam road was built and opened for traffic, there was a series of fatal accidents. Rumour spread that Karinthandan had cursed the road, and his spirit was causing the mishaps. Somewhere in the late 1800s or early 1900s, the wandering spirit of Karinthandan was ritually summoned to the tree. Either way, the mysterious road accidents reportedly stopped after the spirit was contained and chained.

Today there is a small 'temple' in front of the chained tree, and people offer prayers there while reliving the nearly-forgotten story of Karinthandan. There is also a statue of Karinthandan nearby to remind everyone passing through Thamarassery Churam about the legend.





The Chain Tree and the story of Karinthandan



As we got back in the car at the chain tree, Kannan said not to bother settling in as we did not have far to go. He was right, as about 50m down the road he turned off into a parking area. We were headed for a jungle resort high on the hills and to get there we needed to catch the hotel jeep. Kannan was concerned that there was no licence at the resort as it was in the national park, but promised to send up some beers for us the next day. We could have managed a couple of days, but he wanted to be helpful. As we waited for the Jeep another couple with a young child also arrived, and so we were all jammed all into the jeep, along with the

luggage, for the 4 km journey up the dirt track to the resort. The wife and child sat in the front with her husband in the back with us. His bag and coat were on the seat opposite him, but as the jeep lurched away his jacket flew out the back. Stephen managed to catch the rucksack before it joined the jacket. The jeep bounced and wobbled up the rough track until we got to the resort gates when the road improved. We were warmly greeted by some of the resort guides and after check in we driven up to our cabin, which was a little way up the hill from reception



There was no danger of us getting bored as there were lots of scheduled activities to take part in. Once settled in to our gorgeous room with views over the pool, we headed down to watch the cookery demonstration. At which we learnt you should not go anywhere on Wayanad without a camera when a troop of monkeys came to visit the restaurant.

Then it was time to go to the lecture on "Hidden Nature" which included a set of photos with "beasties" in them somewhere.

Then it was dinner time, before heading out for a walk in the dark to spot nocturnal beasts, which included lot of frogs, snakes and sleeping lizards. The lizards were right at the end of thin branches so they would be woken if a snake decided to come for a snack.

We were lucky on the first night as there were very few people on the walk, so we were able to see lots thanks to the very powerful torches the guides were using.

The following day, we went for the pre-breakfast walk. After lunch we participated in the afternoon hike, which turned out to be harder than we expected as the paths were quite rough and the heat and humidity were both high. We saw signs of the wild elephants which live on the reserve, but no actual elephants. We did learn if any elephant did come at us to run down hill as apparently elephants can not run fast down hill.

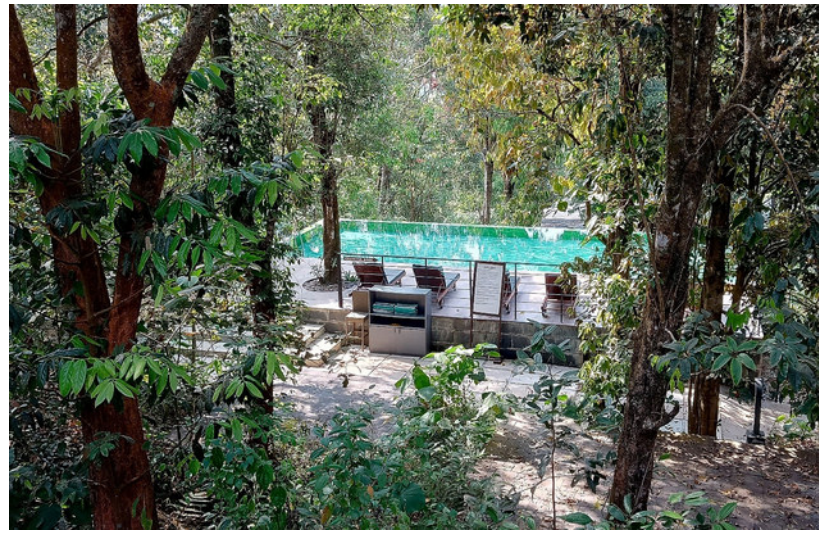
On our return Stephen went to the cookery again, but this was somewhat disrupted by a giant squirrel clambering around near the restaurant.

We attended an evening lecture on snakes which was excellent. Then after dinner we out for a walk again. This one was quite busy with a large group of guests so we were pleased we had gone out the previous evening.

Top: View from the Room

Middle: Our room block

Bottom: Looking for hidden nature.













Top left: Asian Brown Flycatcher
Top right; Ants nest with woodpecker nest
in the centre. The ants protect the nest and
eat the left overs from the chicks.
Bottom left: Vine Snake
Bottom right: Moth caterpillar, 6" long.

Malabar Gliding Frog (*Rhacophorus malabaricus*)

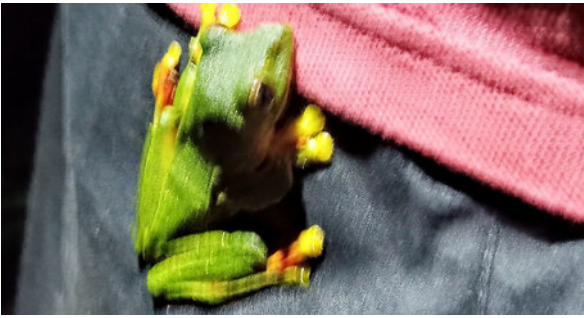
On the way from reception to our room was a small still pond, put in place to encourage Malabar Gliding Frogs. It certainly worked as once the sun set there were lots of small green frogs clustered around the pond. There were also lots of tadpoles in the pond.

We were lucky enough to find a female spawning with a huge patch of foam which contains the eggs. Stephen also got up close and personal

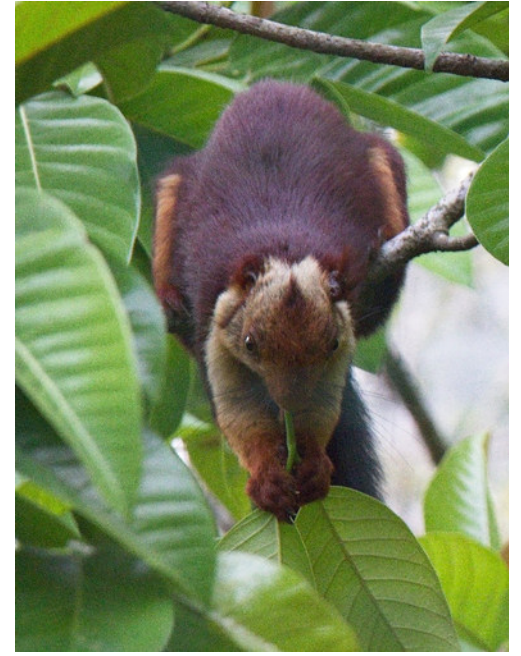
with one of the male frogs which decided his trousers was a good place to jump on, when we were looking at the pond in the evening.

In the daytime they are generally hard to spot as they hang under leaves and tuck their limbs in so they look for all the world like leaves. At night they come out and you can see their huge pink feet which allow them to glide between trees and leap large distances.









An early start was needed to head to Kochi (Cochin). Just as we were packing up a huge moth came into the room, it was probably 8" across. Thankfully it flew out again before we needed to vacate the room.

Wayanad packed us a picnic breakfast, before we were once again loaded onto the Jeep, to head back down the trail to meet Kannan. As it is a long drive down out of the hills and along the coast, and he was keen to make a start.

After a while we passed a rubber plantation, so Kannan stopped to allow us to take a closer look. The younger trees were under planted with Pineapples, while the older productive trees had simple grasses below them. There were also fields of coffee plants along the way.







In India you can never be sure what you may find along the way. As we passed through Pattambi we got caught up in the processions of the Pattambi Nercha, which straddled the whole main road and seemed to go in both directions through the traffic. The processions included a large numbers of elephants and groups of young men and marching bands.







Our Kochi tour was planned for the afternoon, so we had a quiet morning pottering around the hotel. The idea was to tour Fort Kochi, which is effectively the old town area, before heading to the theatre later in the day.

St Francis Church, Kochi

Constructed in 1503 by Portuguese Franciscan friars, this is believed to be India's oldest European-built church. The white edifice that stands here today was built in the mid-16th century to replace the original wooden chapel, though it was later altered by both the Dutch and British. Explorer Vasco da Gama, who died in Kochi in 1524, was buried in this spot for 14 years before his remains were taken to Lisbon – you can still see his tombstone in the church.









The unofficial emblems of Kerala's backwaters are the half-dozen giant cantilevered Chinese fishing nets on Fort Kochi's northeastern shore, known locally as cheena vala. A legacy of traders from the AD 1400 court of Kublai Khan, these spiderlike, 10m-tall contraptions rest on teak or bamboo poles and require five or six people to operate their counterweights at high tide. Modern fishing techniques are making these labour-intensive methods less and less profitable, with nets slowly disappearing from Kerala's coastline.





Dhobi Khana at Veli in Fort Kochi, is where the Tamil-speaking Vannan community carry out laundry works, the profession practiced by the community traditionally. The story goes that the Vannans were brought by the King of Kochi from Coimbatore and Tirunelveli to wash the army uniforms of the Portuguese or the Dutch. In 1975, with the support of Greater Cochin Development Authority (GCDA), Vannans established a 'Dhobhi Khana' at Veli near Fort Kochi, a place specifically set aside to wash and dry clothes. This was set-up in the form of a sangham or a society. Prior to that, they carried out their work near the ponds at Veli. It is said that there were 70 ponds in 13 acres of land which were owned by the Vannans. By the time we reached the Dhobi it was quiet, with most of the work having been done in the cooler temperatures of the morning. There were many traditional charcoal irons, plus a few electrical irons scattered around. There are around 40 to 45 cubicles across a couple of acres of land. Each cubicle is given to a different family and a pool of water is also provided for each cubicle. Clothes are washed using the traditional method of soaking the clothes in bleach and detergent water. Soaked clothes are washed by beating on a laundry stone. Starching the clothes is done by dipping the clothes in starch obtained from boiled rice.



We then headed to Jew town, an ironic name as according to our guide there was only a single Jew left, most of the other families having migrated to Israel since its foundation.

We headed for the the Paradesi Synagogue, supposedly the oldest synagogue in the commonwealth. To serve the Jewish community which was growing in number, in 1568, the Paradesi Synagogue was constructed in the Mattancherry area of Cochin. The Raja of Cochin Rama Verma generously allotted land to the Jews in Cochin da Cima, or Upper Cochin, next to his own Dutch Palace. By this point, the membership of the community consisted of a core that had migrated from Cranganore along with a larger group who were relative newcomers from Europe and Western Asia. Because of these new refugee Jews coming in from various regions, it was named as the Paradesi (Foreigner) Synagogue.

The floor of the Synagogue is covered with beautiful hand painted Chinese blue and white tiles. It is also full of mismatched light fittings.

The clock is unusual as it has different faces on three sides, each in a different script. So the one which faces the courtyard is in Hebrew, the one facing the Dutch Palace is Mayalmamand the third is in Roman Numerals.

From there we headed to the Dutch palace to admire the 17th c murals (no photos). We were then due to go to the theatre, but it was so hot and muggy we decided to call it a day and headed back to hotel.



Engineering Workshop near the Laundry.









On the Road









Alleppey

Travelling down from Kochi to the backwater area of Alleppey, we passed several villages with flags out and speakers blaring for the various festivals that were occurring. Crossing over a bridge we saw hundreds of the distinctive boats docked along the river. There are apparently over 1200 houseboats operating on the backwaters. At that point we wondered how crowded our trip would be. As it was, our boat was docked well away from the main crowd and was to our surprise a one bedroom boat just for us, complete with a driver and chef. We were welcomed aboard and settled in, and then set out on our loop around the channels and into the largest lake in Kerala.

In fact for the first 3 or so hours we did not see any other houseboats as we were on channels too small for the larger houseboats to ply. Along the way we tied up to a bank and were served a delicious lunch, while watching the small boats and bird life along the channel.

Sailing along you could see life going on along the banks, everything from ladies doing washing to old men fishing and young men playing around in the water.

We sailed on eventually reaching the lake, which was packed with houseboats of all shapes and sizes from small ones like ours to two storey boats with 10 or so bedrooms.

We soon turned back along one of the narrow channels to complete our loop back. Coffee and a snack of deep fried bananas fritters provided a sweet treat in the afternoon.

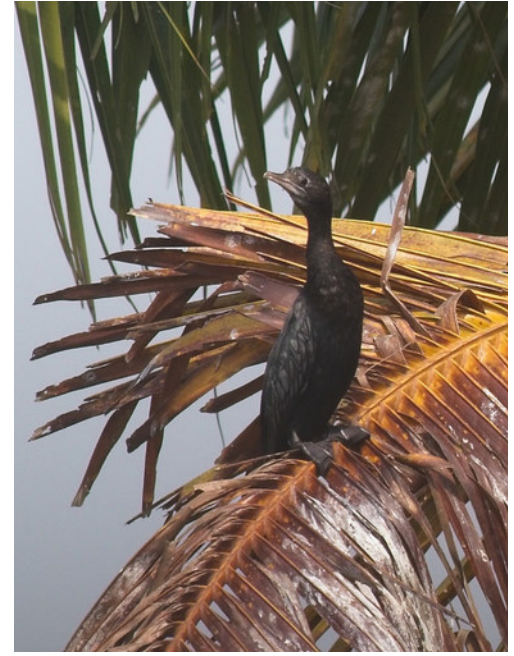
Heading back to the dock, we were able to go for a walk through the village and watch the sun go down, before being treated to our evening meal back on the boat, before heading to bed.

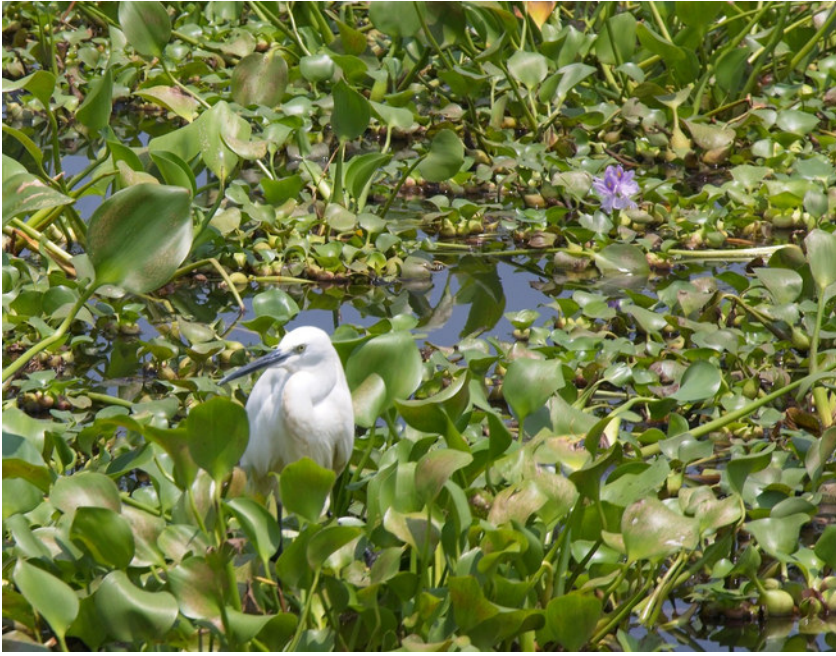




























In the morning we had a quick sail down the channel, before putting the cases into Kannan's car for the last time. We had a quick stop at Kovalam to see the beach, then headed down to Poovar for a bit of quiet time before heading home.

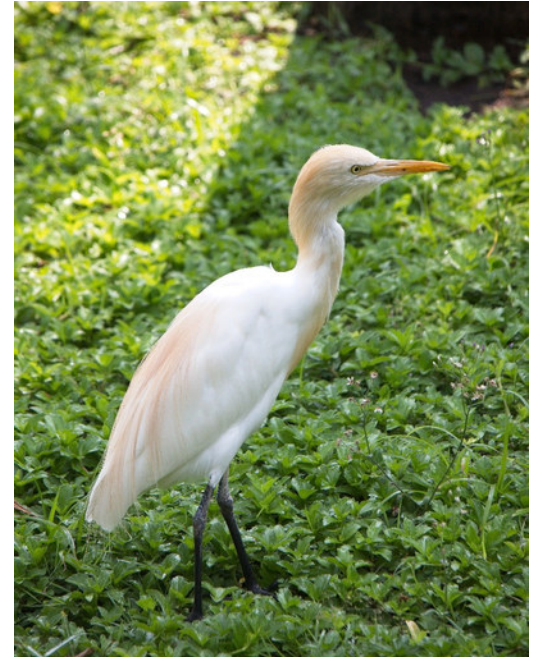
It seemed strange to say goodbye to Kannan, who was heading back to see his family, before starting all over again with a new couple in 3 days time.

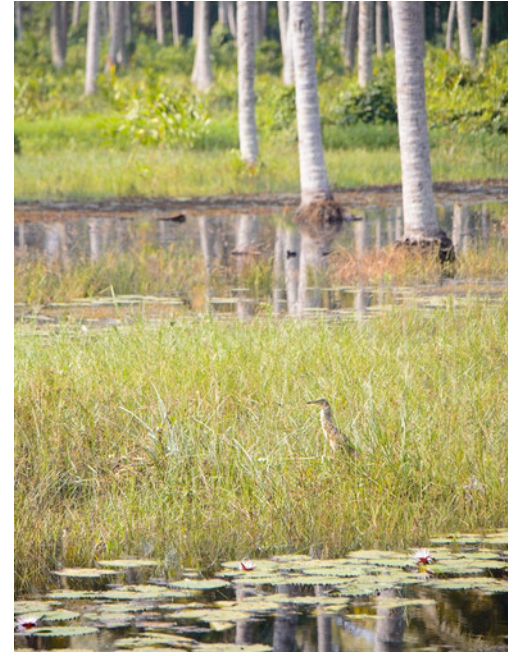


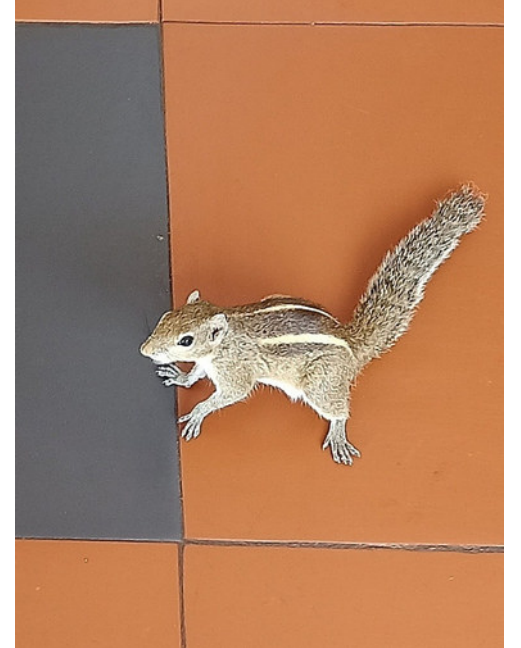
We had two days / three nights on Poovar island, so we took some time to settle in and had a wander around the extensive grounds. The next morning was Jane's birthday, so after opening some presents and having breakfast, and before it got too hot, we walked over the bridge and along the track which led to the village and back again.

After a lazy afternoon, we caught a tuk-tuk to one of the many places offering backwater boating tours. Our tour was recommended by the hotel and included an hour going through the mangroves and out along the lagoon that separated the hotel from the sea.

The following day we did very little, which is almost unknown for us, but with the temperatures in the high 30's and 75% humidity, outside was very much like a sauna. We did enjoy watching the palm squirrels sneaking into the restaurant to pinch any items left on the table and running around under the table looking for items there as well. It was just a good job they were only the size of chipmunks.













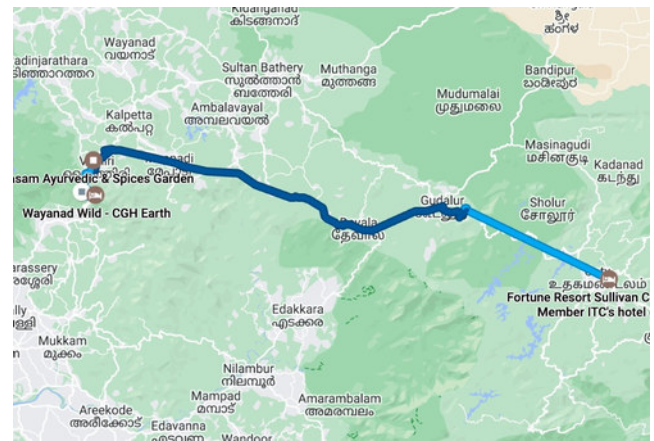
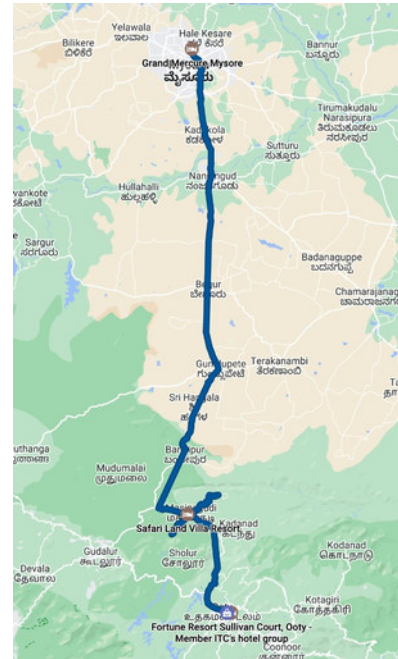
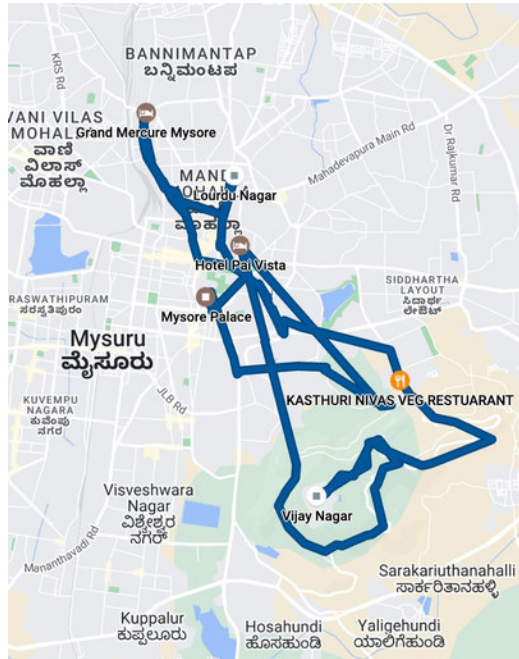
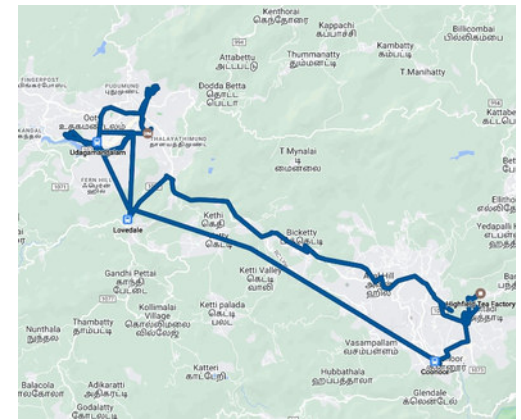
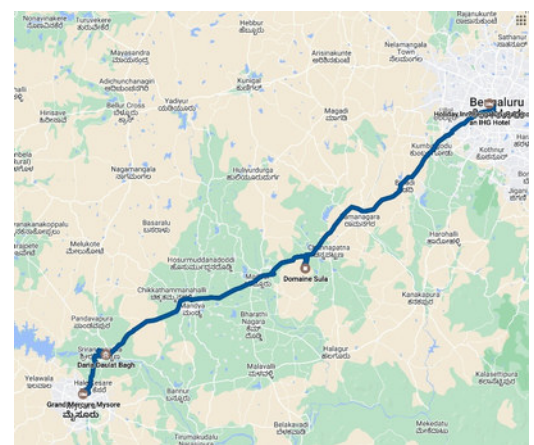
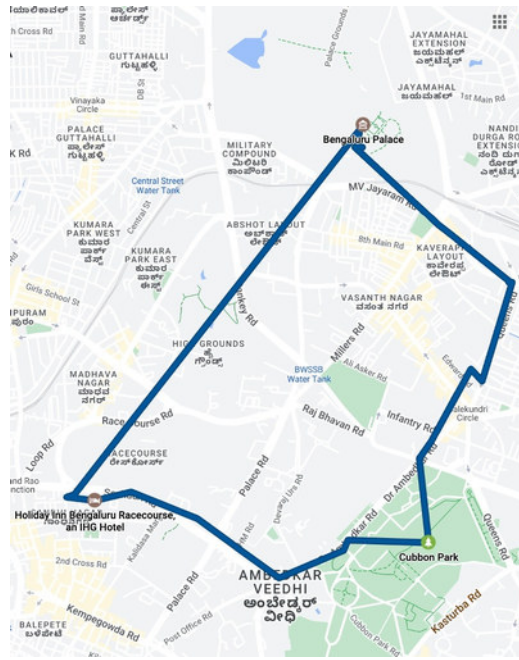
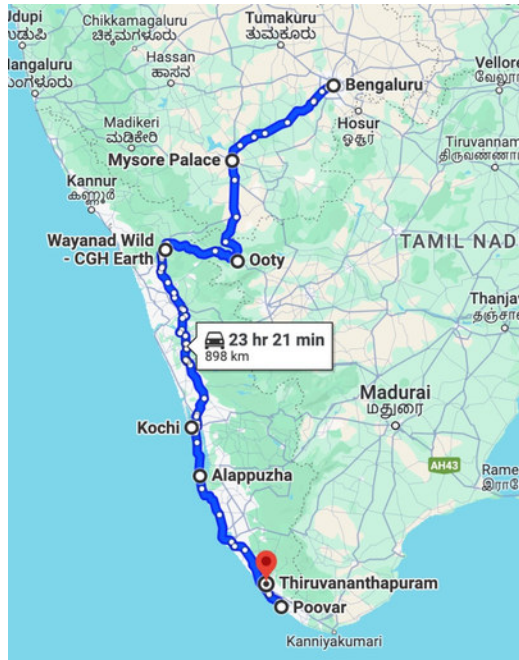


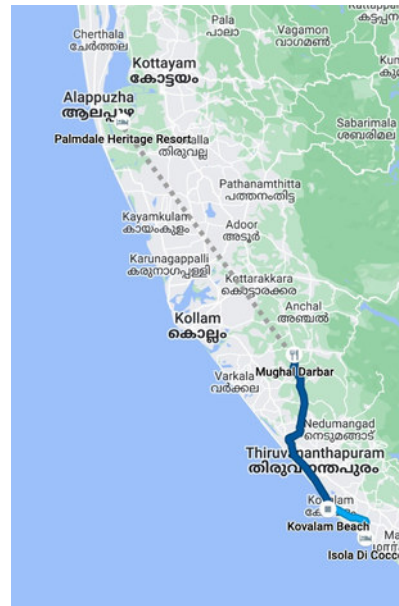
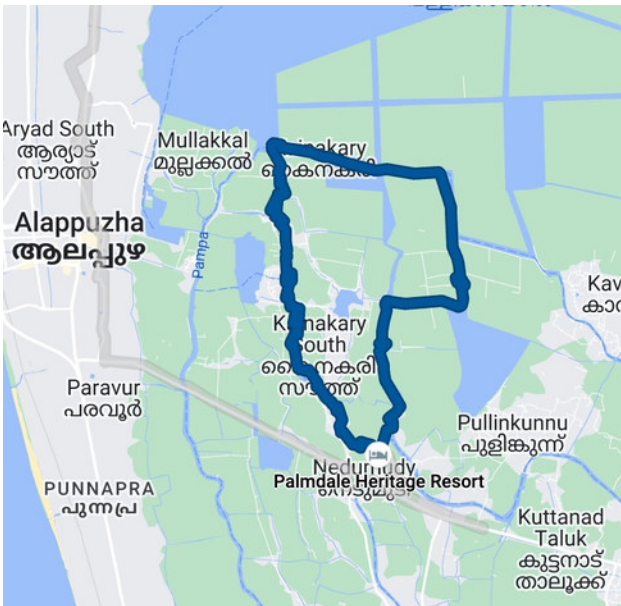
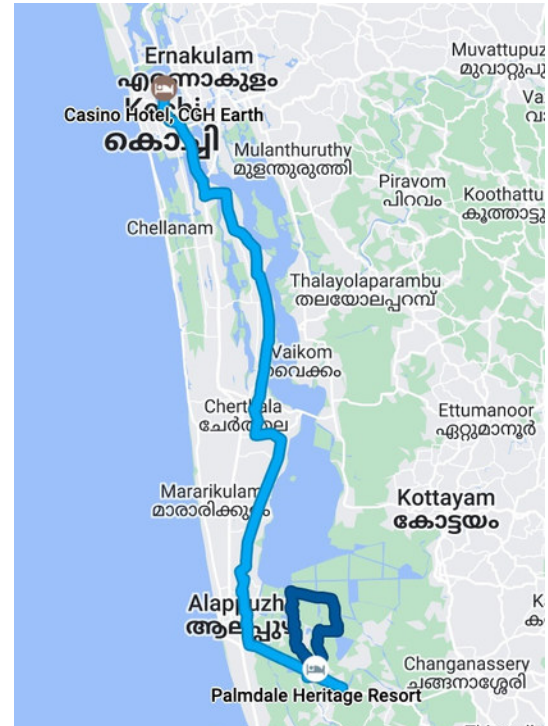
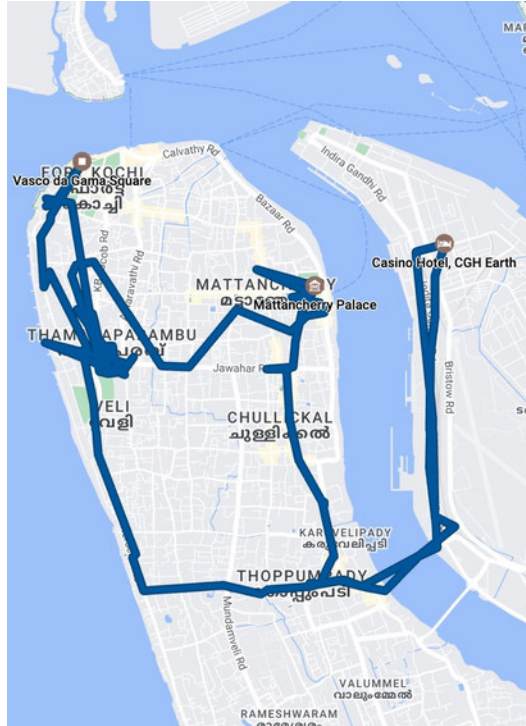
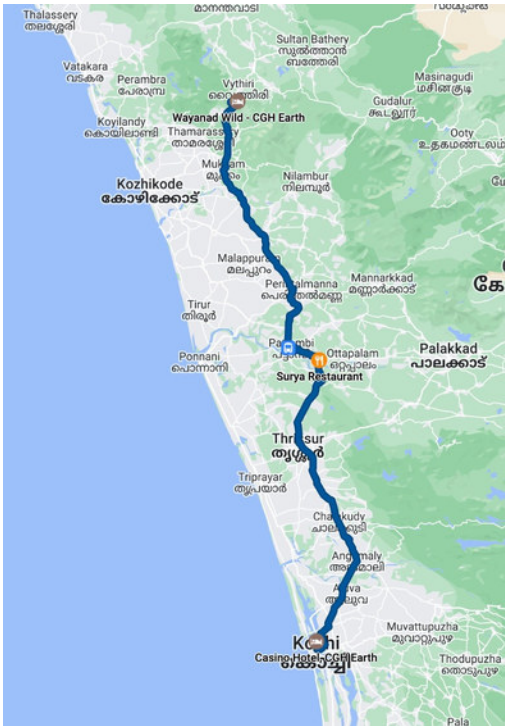


We were picked up early (6:00 am) on the 3rd day for the drive back to the airport for our return flights, just as Kannan had organised. Having arrived at the airport at such an early time, the check-in process was relatively easy but security was troublesome, probably as the guards had nothing else to do. Stephen's carry on bag was scanned three times and Jane's bag twice before we were allowed through.

We were a little apprehensive about the transfer in Abu Dhabi, given the experience on the outbound journey and a very tight connection time, but everything ran like clockwork and we arrived back to the UK and checked back into the Premier Inn on terminal 4. Our plan to spend time in the British Museum the next day was foiled by a huge queue so we potted around until catching the coach back home.







Distance with Kannan 930 miles
 Alleppey boat 20 miles
 Heathrow to Abu Dhabi 3400 miles
 Abu Dhabi to Bangalore 1700 miles
 Thiruvananthapuram to Abu Dhabi 1,850 miles





Holiday Inn Bengaluru
Sheshadri Road, Gandhinagar, Ward No.94
Gandhinagar

Grand Mercure Mysore
2203 60 New Sayyaji Rao Road, Nelson
Mandela Circle, Karnataka 570021 Mysuru

Fortune Resort Sullivan Court, Ooty
123, Selbourn Road, Ooty - 643001, Tamil
Nadu

Wayanad Wild CGH Earth Experience
Lakkidi P.O Vythiri - 673576

Casino Hotel, Kochin
2 nights Half Board
Willingdon Island , Cochin , Kerala - 682003

Alleppey Houseboat
1 Night Full Board

Isola Di Cocco
3 Nights Half Board
Isola Di Cocco Ayurvedic Beach Resort
Poovar P.O, Trivandrum- 695 525 ,Kerala

Transport
Berry's Superfast
London underground
Etihad Airways
Kannan's Car

Booked with "Flights and Packages"
www.flightsandpackages.com



23rd February - 20th March 2024



"There are some parts of the world that, once visited, get into your heart and won't go. For me, India is such a place. When I first visited, I was stunned by the richness of the land, by its lush beauty and exotic architecture, by its ability to overload the senses with the pure, concentrated intensity of its colours, smells, tastes, and sounds. It was as if all my life I had been seeing the world in black and white and, when brought face-to-face with India, experienced everything re-rendered in brilliant technicolour."

- Keith Bellow