



COONOOR A LOT LIKE HOME

There's an inimitable joy in visiting a town where unassuming but historic establishments—schools, parks, old shops—and the people are bound by an affable and strong camaraderie. It reminds me of my home, Dehradun, where 'everyone knows everyone' is a phrase often peddled to hold onto its 'small town' tenor. Coonoor feels a lot like that.

Once a summer refuge for Britishers in the early 19th century, Coonoor has fostered its colonial lineage till date. You can see it in the numerous boarding schools, architecture of the older buildings and the devotion to plantation clubs. It still remains a place to escape the blazing summers. Fortunately, most holidayers pull the brakes in Ooty, and only a handful make it to Coonoor.

Criss-crossed by muddy trails through tea plantations, it's a destination best explored on foot to fully take in the green hillsides that appear to be covered in carpets of broccoli from a distance. What makes tea plantations even more scenic is the trail of brightly-dressed tea-pickers dotting the green canvas, hunched over the bushes, basket straps stretched over their heads. If not the plantation walks, the 1874-established Sim's Park is the most soothing leafy oasis in the middle of the town. If you are visiting in May, you might find it a bit crowded at the annual fruit and flower show, else you'll only bump into regular walkers and those who stroll in to appreciate the botanical bliss the park offers.

As hill stations go, the viewpoints are both Coonoor's trump card and Achilles' Heels. The forest-fringed road leading

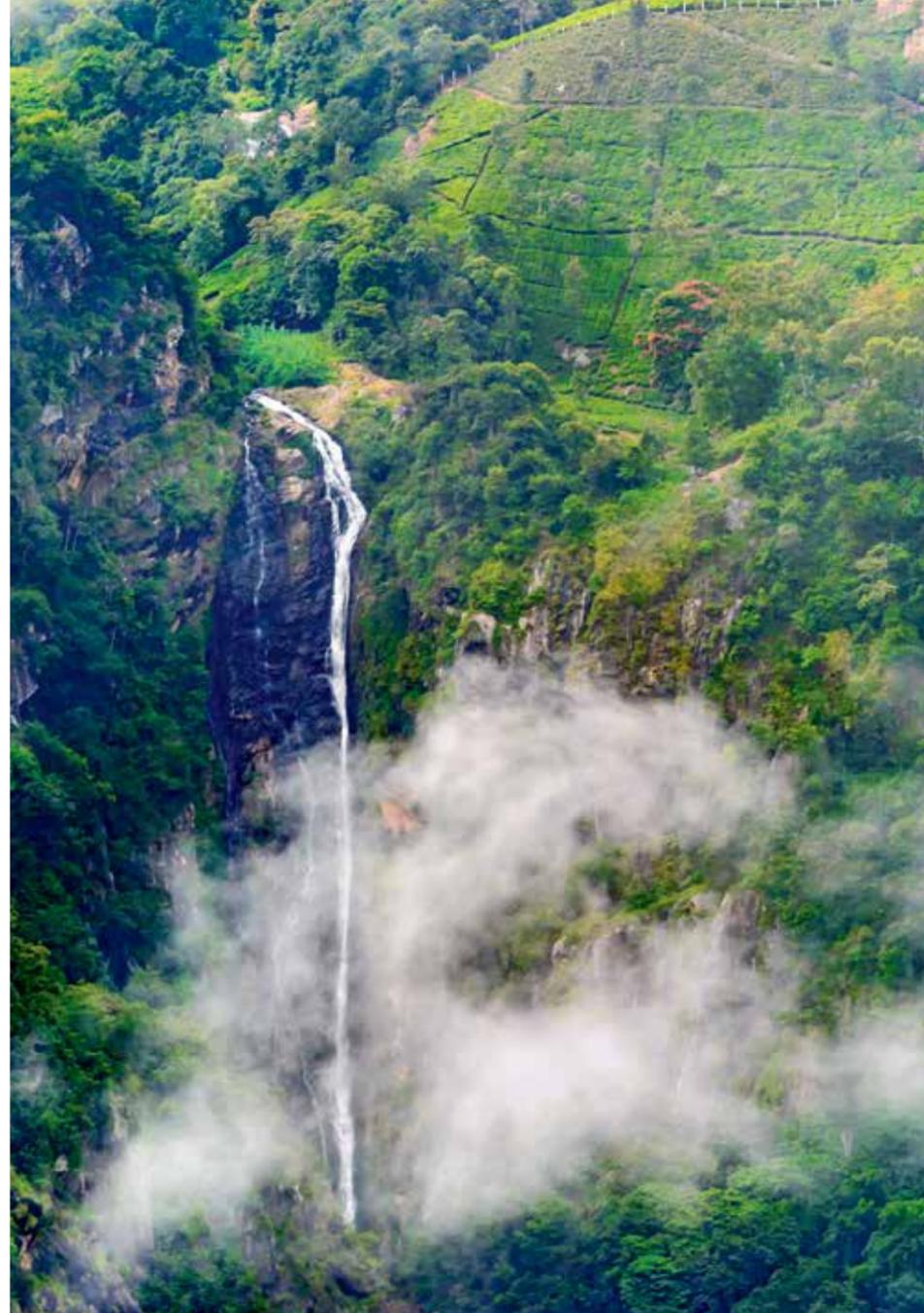
up to Lamb's Rock, the most popular one, is delightful, but the road ends in a packed parking space, especially on the weekends. Naturally, the ubiquitous selfie sticks and accompanying pouting faces are not made for the reclusive traveller. Those travellers should focus only on the stunning Coimbatore plains below. Lady Canning's Seat is more elusive. Named after the Lord Viceroy's wife, the spot commands a stunning view of the tea estates and distant mountains. It's best seen with fingers wrapped around a hot cup of tea. The other veritable viewpoint is Dolphin's Nose, which offers the view of Catherine Falls located in Kotagiri, from a distance—a white strip of water slung over a craggy rock face.

Places aside, it's the people that make Coonoor an endearing town. The Nilgiris tribal population of Todas, Badagas,

Coonoor is the quintessential Indian hill station, only quieter—coloured with a green canvas of tea gardens, waterfalls and toy trains



Words SUPRIYA SENGALE Photography SHUTTERSTOCK



Kurumbas, Irulas and others are celebrated original settlers, who face the spotlight through foundations like Keystone and their retail arm, the Green Shop. Both sell products sourced from the local tribes with a view to offering sustainable income. The fair trade establishment has Kurumba paintings in vegetarian dyes, organic food, pottery, handicrafts, oils, and so on. Others like Transcultural Mission, led by Pamela Bennyvalves, work with slum dwellers to create a spectacular range of hand-embroidered products.

If not the souvenirs, one is sure to come back from Coonoor with a refreshed mind and firm plans of revisiting.

NAVIGATOR

Getting There

Coonoor is best accessed by the road. It is a brilliant drive along the woodlands of BR Hills, after you've crossed Kollegal. The nearest airport is in Coimbatore.

Stay

A variety of accommodation, from budget to plush options, are available in Coonoor. But nothing beats the view of tea-clad hills from Tenerife Hill, the cosy De Rock near Lamb's Rock viewpoint and the over a century old 180° Mc Iver.

Travel Tip

Book ahead to get a window seat in the UNESCO-World Heritage List toy train that runs between Ooty and Mettupalayam. You can jump in from Coonoor for a few stops to get a flavour of the picturesque route.

Checklist

- **The Droog** The 18th century fort of Tipu Sultan is also known as Bakasura Malai. It can be reached by a combination of road travel (13 km) and a short trek, and is ideal for a picnic.
- **Highfield Tea Estate, Swamy & Swamy Plantations (P) Ltd** The 50-year-old factory allows visitors to have a short trip inside to see the tea-making process. Apart from the factory you can also go mid-plantation to click photographs and into the in-house shop.
- **Ralliah Dam** This is Coonoor's little secret. The still waters of the Ralliah Dam (built in 1941) are the chief provider of water to the entire town. If you walk along the bank, you can see small Toda (tribe) settlements alongside.
- **Kurinji Flower** Strobilanthes (kurinji) springs up in conversations every 12 years in the Nilgiris. The flower blooms only once in every 12 years (between August-November), taking over entire hillsides. This year was marked by thousands of tourists to the Nilgiris this season. If you've missed it now, the next window will appear in 2030.