



Life in a SLOW LANE

Beauty of Ooty and Coonor, coupled with the charm of a heritage toy train, is what makes for an unforgettable journey

Pallavi P

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway train was started in **1908**

Growing up in Delhi, my only experience of the mountains were the rugged, pine-laden, hill stations in the Himalayas. The short vacations spent in the northern hills instilled in me fascination for the mysterious peaks that rise high above dusty, crowded plains and I always held a desire to visit the gentler slopes of the Nilgiris that lie in southern India.

When I got a chance to visit the Queen of the southern hills, Ooty, and Coonor, in Tamil Nadu, my happiness knew no bounds. What

added to the excitement was the knowledge that I would travel from Coonor to Ooty in the Nilgiri Mountain Railway (also known as the Nilgiri Toy Train). Ever since I saw SRK and Malaika Arora Khan dance to *Chaiyya Chaiyya* on the roof of this train in *Dil Se*, I too had wanted to experience this journey.

All I knew about Ooty and Coonor — situated just 18 kilometre apart — was that they are famous for tea plantations. Much to my surprise and pleasure, these two pretty hill stations in the Nilgiris packed in much more than I knew or expected.

Colourful houses on the hills of Coonor make for a pretty sight. (Facing page) The Nilgiri Toy Train crosses a bridge along the route



Chaiyya Chaiyya from Dil Se, featuring Shah Rukh Khan, was shot on the roof top of Nilgiri Mountain Railway

Coonor charmed me with its rolling tea estates and the vivid green that clothed the slopes soothed my jagged city nerves. It is a perfect place to unwind with a cuppa. There's an interesting story of how the first tea plantation came about up here. Way back in 1819, when the Scottish collector of Coimbatore visited this hill station, he found that there was no tea to be served. Miffed, he decided to plant tea himself, and today the plantations stretch out across acres.

A visit to one of the tea factories is a must. Here you can observe the entire process of tea-making, from plucking leaves, pruning to how it finally turns into the brew that you sip each morning. Don't forget to buy a packet before you leave; the Nilgiri teas are the finest

Interesting FACTS

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway was awarded the status of World Heritage Site in 2005

It covers a distance of 46 km from Mettupalayam to Ooty in about five hours, going from 326 to 2,203 metre (1,070 to 7,227 feet), making it the steepest railway track in Asia

It passes through 250 bridges and 16 tunnels

It's the slowest train in India operating at a speed of 10.4kmph

in the world, and since they are grown on peaks higher than the ones in Darjeeling, there is a great aroma to the tea.

Although Coonor is not as buzzing as Ooty, it's got a charm that's addictive. The highlight in Coonor is definitely Sim's Park that was built in 1874. It is a great place to spend hours walking around and drinking in the scenic beauty. You can stop by to admire flowers of all shades and hues.

Then came the most enchanting part of my trip — onboard the Nilgiri Mountain Railway to get to Ooty. A ride on this toy train, a World Heritage Site, was something straight out of a Enid Blyton story. The blue-and-cream carriages take you through a picturesque route that covers lush tea estates, rolling hills, 250 bridges and 16 tunnels. There is something magical about this miniature train that winds its way around slopes — nobody is in a rush, nobody is competing to reach first and nobody cares about that 100kmph speed.

I boarded the train at Coonor, which is the second last station along the route. Although

DID YOU KNOW

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway turned 106 on October 15, 2015. On this occasion the Nilgiri Railway Museum opened at Mettupalayam railway station. Besides photographs of the train, tickets issued and the first locomotive, which was made in Switzerland, are displayed here.



Rare flower blooms in the Nilgiris

Strobilanthes, a gorgeous lilac-blue flower, also known as Kurinji, only blooms once in 12 years. It is only grown in the Nilgiris in the Western Ghats. The next flowering will be in 2018. People from across the country plan trips to see the entire valley covered in these pretty blue flowers.



How to reach:
The nearest railway station to Coonoor is Coimbatore Junction, located 70 km away

I was prepared for it, the train chugged at a speed that came as a surprise — the cars were zipping faster than us. But I wasn't complaining — coming as I was from a city where speed is everything, life in the slow lane was truly therapeutic.

At every turn, you encounter a different scene — if at one point you are craning your neck to admire a tall peak shrouded in grey mist, at the next turn you find yourself staring down into the vale, looking at beautiful houses perched on the slopes and children playing

out in the open. As the light and shade keep shifting, your journey takes on different hues. Many tourists choose to travel on the stretch from Mettupalayam to Coonoor because this is where you get to view the most spectacular scenery. It is the steepest railway line in the continent and chugs along a distance of 46 km, starting from Mettupalayam at around 7.10 am and reaches its destination Ooty at noon, in roughly five hours.

At the next station — Lovedale — many school children boarded and suddenly the carriage



Upper bhavani Reservoir in the Nilgiris is one of the most beautiful and amazing place to visit. (Top) A postcard-perfect building at Doddabetta peak



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Women picking tea leaves at a plantation in Coonoor. (Below) Ooty lake



India's first Chocolate Museum

Ooty is famous for homemade chocolates like truffles and fudges and to make things more interesting a chocolate museum opened at Indunagar on Ooty-Mysore road. It has been opened by brothers S.M. Fazloor Rahman and S.M. Abdhul Rahman who've been selling homemade chocolates for more than 15 years. One can see the entire chocolate making process here. It also has a chocolate fountain. The sheer variety of chocolates on display is quite interesting to see.

was filled with squealing, laughing, chattering kids eager to get home. For a minute, I almost envied their carefree attitude.

Soon we were in Ooty, the town the British established in early 19th century as their getaway in the south from the stifling summer heat. It is still the pride of the southern hills, although the heart of the hill town is now crowded and the screeching traffic is no different from what you are used to in big cities. But move away from all of this and you will see that Ooty still packs a lot of charm with

its pretty houses, colonial churches, parks and gardens. Other than that, the hill town is famous for its delicious homemade cheese and chocolates, a legacy left behind by the British.

And to soak in the beauty of the southern peaks, I made my way to Doddabetta peak — the highest point in the Nilgiris. Spread before was a beautiful vista — the entire southern ranges that I had been longing to see were ringed around me. I closed my eyes for a minute, just to soak it all in the beauty before I went back to the crowded plains of North. **A**

TOP THREE STATIONS

