

A pale view of the Ooty hills



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Bison have very little will to stir them to action but when they move, it is with a complete disregard for the safety of the two-legged. | Photo Credit: [M. Sathyamoorthy](#)

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Ooty: there's silence, bison sightings, forest-scented air. And any amount of plastic

The name itself is like a poem, Udhagamandalam. The first time I went, we climbed out of Coimbatore into the hills and the driver asked tentatively if he might turn off the air-conditioning so that he could spare the engine. I agreed and the windows went down and suddenly the air swooped in; there was no other way to describe

this forest-scented air. Soon, of course, it was smelling of eucalyptus and I knew from what reading I had done that this tree was up to no good. But how wonderful it smelled here, a clean crisp smell, a smell out of old teak cupboards with crisp linen and senior citizens who held on to old ways.

Ooty itself is like any other hill station. It has been built with a reckless lack of attention to character. It is over-crowded. It is noisy and there are tourists everywhere. Not that I have anything against tourists. I am often one myself. When I went to the U.S. for the first time, my friend N said that in New York it was very important not to appear like a tourist.

“But I am one,” I said. “This is the first time I have ever left the country.”

He looked at me with some sympathy, perhaps even pity.

“Yes, but you don’t have to show it,” he said.

I was 30-something but my inner 14-year-old, never too far from the surface, was prodded into life.

I turned to the New Yorker next to me.

“Hi,” I said brightly, “I’m a tourist.”

“Good for you,” he said and hurried away.

N ducked into an alley and hid his head. When he came back out again, I repeated this.

“Hi, I’m a tourist,” I said to an old lady in a red coat.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“India,” I said.

“I went there when I was a girl,” she said. “So I was a tourist too.”

Like a tourist

It happens to all of us, then, and as I lumbered through The Last Forest and The Nilgiri Shop buying Toda embroidery and

Moddy's chocolates, I do not think I could have been any different from other day trippers.

I do not think I would have fallen so hard if it were not for the fact that soon Ooty was left behind and we were climbing into the quiet hills. This time I was a guest at the Chamraj Tea Estate — which went organic decades before it was fashionable — and stayed in their guest house. It was a tiny bit of heaven. We were perched on a promontory and were surrounded by vistas of spreading hills.

When night came, the silence was absolute. The darkness was near total. Once every night, the roof would be assaulted as a troupe of monkeys made its way home but otherwise, all was silence.

It is very difficult to explain how different this is from where I live where a steel river of turbulent traffic thunders past my eardrums all day and through most of the night.

Each morning and each evening, I went for walks along the windy-circling roads of the hills, past a shrine to the Virgin Mary, past a little temple to another Mother Goddess, past the virgin forest itself, sholaas it is called. Bison wandered past us and we were told to watch out for them because they seem quiescent, they seem as if very little will stir them to action but when they move, it is with speed and with celerity and a complete disregard for the safety of the two-legged.

One day, a cloud passed through the forest in which I was walking and the birds went silent. It was an odd moment, to walk within a cloud.

This, I thought, as I walked is what Reginald Heber meant when he said every prospect pleases and only man is vile. For of course, there was any amount of plastic in the forest, plastic bottles, tin cans, food wrappers, chocolate wrappers, those awful packages that have held a few grams of crunchy junk food, old slippers, even clothes. Lots of beer bottles too.

Old tiles

In my youth, a beer bottle was a rare find because it was a highly recyclable object. The *raddiwala*, the waste-paper man, would pay a rupee for a beer bottle where they would only pay 10 paise for any other glass bottle. And so you never came across a beer bottle. These days, they seem to be everywhere. There were dozens in Goa, where I spent some part of May; there are many in Shivaji Park after the Sunday-evening Bacchanalia are done; and here they are all over the shola too. Aren't the liquor companies buying their bottles back? Can't they be made to?

It was possible to forgive the person who had dumped a sack full of old tiles, they would return to the earth from where we have all come, and the sack we put to use to do a little impromptu clearing of the forest.

On one clean-up evening, I bumped into Babu and Selvam, both of whom had arrived on a motorbike with a pint of rum and some crunchies. When I walked into their impromptu party, they took me for a forest officer but when I kept smiling and waving to them, they went back to their amusements. But after half an hour of piling up bottles and packets, they were moved to help and soon we had a nice little mountain of plastic and glass piled up in a corner. Then they warned me that this was a tiger trail so we had all better leave.

A tiger? I didn't believe it. But on a drive down to Coonoor, Greaves Henriksen, photographer extraordinaire and an employee of the Chamraj Tea Estate, stopped to show me a black eagle float and glide through the air, with a small but valiant crow attacking it.

"Her nest must be close by," he said. "She'll risk everything for her nest."

If only we could be like that with our nest.