

Strangely familiar

With its mild, summery days and herbaceous plants, Kodaikanal seems more British than Indian, says Rhymer Rigby.

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- ▶ [Top hill stations down to a tea](#)
- ▶ [India basics](#)

To appreciate the town of Kodaikanal, it helps to start out, as the American missionaries who founded the place did, in nearby Madurai. This is one of southern India's great religious centres, but it is also a swampy, sweltering city, with a climate that has you wondering which tropical disease you're going to catch.



Tea-time: locals work the tea plantations of Munnar

For the missionaries, the answer was invariably malaria. After a few years of dropping like flies, they realised they needed to head for the hills, to higher, cooler climes, where they would be untroubled by the region's rapacious mosquitoes. In 1845, therefore, they hauled themselves up to a beautiful valley in the nearby Palani Hills and founded Kodaikanal.

Hill stations, of course, were a British innovation, and it didn't do to have the Americans running such a nice one all by themselves, so before long the British had muscled in on the act. Soon "Kodai" was thoroughly anglicised, and many of southern India's colonial administrators and bureaucrats were building houses in this place, high in the Western Ghats.

The Ghat road from the broiling plains is spectacular, switchbacking steeply up, first through scrub, then jungle, before reaching 4,000 feet and the Shola, the temperate subcontinental rainforest. Dwarfed as they are by the Himalayas, the Western Ghats are often dismissed as mere hills. But India's second-highest mountain range is an impressive and dramatic place in its own right – and the tallest peak is still over twice the height of [Ben Nevis](#).

After several magnificent waterfalls and a brief stop at the Kodaikanal Museum (whose exhibits include a 14ft python and a pickled baby) we caught our first glimpse of the town. Spilling higgledy-piggledy down a steeply terraced hillside, the outskirts have a distinctly Nepalese feel. Then we passed over the ridge, into the main valley and an exotic vision of a long-vanished England.

At 7,000 feet, Kodai is a place of mellow mists whose season is a permanent late British summer. Streams chatter over rounded boulders, down damply mossy valleys; fingers of fog reach through pear orchards; the temperature hovers between cool comfort and warm comfort; and stone houses sit on neatly clipped lawns that roll down to the lake. You could be in the Lake District.

But there are plenty of clues that all is not quite where it seems: eucalyptus trees lend the lakeside woods a surreal aspect, and monkeys, not squirrels scabble in the branches. And in the middle of the day, you have the strange combination of English summer temperatures with blinding equatorial sunlight.

After settling into our hotel – a charming place whose terraced lakeside gardens seemed designed with endless tea-drinking in mind – we decided to explore the town. The star-shaped lake, dotted with rowing boats, forms Kodai's centrepiece and circumnavigating it takes about an hour. Well worth a stop are the botanical gardens, which make you realise how many of our favourite garden plants were bought back from the subcontinent by Victorian naturalists. It's nice to see your herbaceous border in its natural habitat.

The town boasts numerous magnificent views. Most famous is Coaker's Walk, a short stroll from the town centre. From here, on a clear day, you can see Madurai, 50 miles away and 20 degrees hotter.

After a couple of days, we decided to strike farther afield, at which point we realised that the place is really set up for Indian and not British tourists. Suggesting that you might like to spend a whole day walking (for pleasure!) is met with looks of incredulity. One taxi driver's response was: "No, I will drive you there. Then you make good trekking – one kilometre only, very nice, – then I drive you back."

Our wish to walk was further thwarted by a visit from an Indian government official – a VVIP, in the local argot – which meant that many of the longer hikes were off limits. But we persevered and eventually we found a map and a route that gave

the VVIP the sort of berth a man of his standing clearly required.

And very nice it was too. The views are fabulous: west of Kodai the mountains have strange, bulbous shapes; the air is perfumed with eucalyptus and pine; and everything is tinged blue by haze. Once we were a mile or two from town, we saw absolutely no one. But what we lacked in human company we more than made up for in wildlife, notching up innumerable monkeys, a pair of eagles and, best of all, a flying squirrel that glided across our path.

We walked about 16 miles in all, ending at a pretty little mountain village where we ate mangoes and pears before catching a bus home. Our fellow passengers asked us what we'd been up to. When we explained that we'd just spent a very pleasant day walking they looked at us as if we were we were mad: "Why walk," came the inevitable question, "when you can get a bus?"

Top hill stations down to a tea

Ooty

The most famous of the hill stations, Ooty — or Udhagamandalam — is located in the Nilgiri Hills (or Blue Mountains) about 62 miles north-east of Kodaikanal. Similar in layout to Kodai, it is considerably bigger and far more commercial; most agree that town centre has been blighted by uncontrolled growth over the past few decades. But if you stay on the outskirts, you can still experience a certain Raj-era charm. Particularly good is the Savoy Hotel, a beautiful colonial building, whose lawns and terraces feel like part of a bygone age.

Perhaps Ooty's greatest attraction is the journey there. The narrow-gauge, steam-driven Blue Mountain Railway may not be very fast, but it is one of the most beautiful journeys in India, the train crossing 23 viaducts and 16 bridges as it winds its contorted way up from Mettupalaya m. As much of the route is through tropical rainforest, the chances of seeing wildlife, especially elephants, are good. And, if you are very lucky, you might spot a tiger.

Like Kodai, the trekking around Ooty is spectacular. Popular day hikes include Dodabet ta, the Ghats' second-highest peak, and guided walks through the beautiful Nilgiri tea plantations and tribal villages of the Toda people.

Ooty is just the highest and most important of three Nilgiri hill stations. The other two are Coonoor and tiny Kotagiri. There is not much to Kotagiri, but Coonoor is a pleasant alternative to Ooty and is surrounded by lush tea and coffee plantations.

Munnar

Over the state line in Kerela, Munnar is less of a "resort" than Kodai or Ooty and more of a working tea town. It is beautiful, tranquil and surrounded by spice plantations. Like most places in the Ghats, there is spectacular walking and great views, while nearby Eravikulam National Park offers a large population of rare Nilgiri Tah rs (mountain goats). There's a decent range of accommodation, much of it on the tea estates themselves; well worth checking out is the High Range Club, a place virtually unchanged since the 1930s.

If you are adventurous – and tenacious enough to negotiate the bureaucracy needed to get the walking permit – it is possible to walk from Kodai to Munnar, along the highest road in peninsula India. The walk takes two to three days.

India basics

Getting there

Greaves India (020 7487 9111; www.greavesindia.com) offers a 14-day tour that includes Kodaikanal, Ooty and Munnar, as well as Mumbai and the temple city of Madhurai, from £1,655 per person, including all flights, accommodation and some meals. Real Holidays (020 7359 3938; www.realhols.co.uk) offers a 14-day tour, including Munnar, Kodaikanal and Cochin, from £980 per person, excluding flights but with accommodation and some meals. The most convenient airport is Cochin (or Kochi) in Kerela, which is served by Emirates (0870 243 2222; www.emirates.com) and Air India (020 7495 7950; www.airindia.com).

Visas

All visitors to India need a visa (020 7836 8484; www.hcilondon.net). Your tour operator might be able to organise this. If not, they can be obtained in London, Birmingham and Edinburgh.

Staying there

In Kodaikanal the Carlton (0091 4542 240056; www.krahejahospitality.com/carlton) is the only five-star in town, and feels like an upmarket ski lodge with a colonial twist. The Garden Manor (240461) next door is a less plush, but has delightful lakeside gardens and excellent food. The Astoria hotel (240524) offers an authentic Indian dining experience with great food. In Ooty, the Savoy (4232 444142; www.tajhotels.com) resembles a luxurious old-fashioned boarding school; while in Munnar, the High Range Club (4865 230243) is a little remnant of a long-vanished England.

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