

Monsoon Forests

DELICATE ORCHIDS, TOWERING TREES, AND THE RARE TAHR ARE AMONG THE ATTRACTIONS AT NEYYAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

By ASHISH KOTHARI

huffed and pulled up the rainforested slopes of Neyyar Wildlife Sanctuary in southern Kerala, wondering when we would reach our destination. Fortunately, there were other distractions. A green forest lizard scampered close to my foot when I sat down to rest. It climbed up my shoe and looked up at me quizzically, before realising that I might be dangerous and scooting off. I was also mesmerised by the pretty fruits of the cycad, a palm-like species that has been around for several million years.

I was glad when we broke through the tree cover and reached the meadows on top. The sight of the rolling slopes of the Western Ghats, the mist slowly rising from the valleys, the lush forest below, and tall grasses swaying in the wind, enough to rid me of all tiredness. Suddenly, I felt like the world was at peace. It's not easy to find a place in India where nature is in its near-pristine form. Luckily, there are regions like Neyyar, which forest officials or communities have managed to conserve, not giving in to the temptations of logging, mining, or large-scale tourism.

Neyyar is one of Kerala's oldest wildlife sanctuaries, notified in 1956, and spread over 128 square kilometres. The majestic Agasthyamalai peak (1,868 metres) towers on one side. Believed to be sage Agasthya's abode, this mountain is also the source of the Neyyar river, the water of which is supposed to be like *ghee*—or "neyya" in Malayalam. The sanctuary is part of the 3,500 square kilometres Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve that was recently listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

WILDLIFE

My trek up the slope was considerably slow, since I stopped every few minutes to listen to bird calls and craned my neck to look for their singers. A **black crested baza**, an attractive small bird of prey, let me watch its movements for a long time, but **flycatchers** and **warblers** gave me only tantalising glimpses. The chatter of **bonnet macaques** and **Nilgiri langurs** interrupted my walk every once in a while. Beyond where I'd reached, there is a cave from which visitors can get a good view of the grasslands, where the **Nilgiri tahr** like to

graze. The tahr is endemic to the Western Ghats of south India. Since they are not found anywhere else in the world, sighting one is an exciting prospect. Also roaming in this forest are endangered **lion-tailed macaques**, **gaur**s, **elephants**, **tigers**, and the occasional **leopard**.

PLANTS

Walking up through the thick forest I marvelled at the girth and height of the trees, their buttress roots helping them stand tall despite the typically shallow soil of a rainforest. **Mesua**, **silk cotton**, **ironwood**, **myristica**, wild species of **mango**, **jamun**, **cinnamon**, and many other trees towered above me. Then there were lianas and creepers, some as enormous as tree trunks and some as thin as reeds. Every once in a while I'd spot one of the **125 species of flowering orchids** found here, or a cluster of bird's nest fern. Moss and lichen were everywhere, covering gnarled tree trunks and fantastically shaped branches, which made me half expect an elf or gremlin to pop up and say hello. The bountiful region has over 1,000

A gentle boat ride on the Neyyar Dam reservoir is made exciting by the possibility of spotting wildlife like gaur, sloth bear, and Nilgiri langur near the shore.



The stocky, goat-like Nilgiri tahr (top left) is endemic to the area. There are only around 2,000 left in the wild; The Moss and lichen that grows during the monsoon give tree trunks a multicoloured look (top right); The lion-tailed macaque (bottom left) is one of the most threatened primate species in the world; Waterfalls (bottom right) are a common sight during a monsoon hike in the park.

species of plants. A great variety of them are known for their medicinal properties.

EXPLORE

Since Neyyar is not a tiger reserve (though it does have tigers), nature lovers can walk through it, which is a better way to experience the forest than via jeep safaris. Visitors can do easy hikes along the foothills, or a tougher climb up to some dizzying heights.

The sanctuary's administrative complex, near the Neyyar Dam, has an information centre where activity bookings can be made (contact the wildlife warden on 0471 2360762 or 0471 2272182). Apart from trekking, there is a lion safari where visitors

can see the big cats roaming around in the open and a crocodile park and research centre, where the large reptiles laze around. The safari should not be a replacement for a trek since that is when the region's true wilderness is experienced. There are also elephant and deer rehabilitation centres, where tourists can get close to animals. Boating is also available in the Neyyar reservoir (a 30-minute ride for 10 people in one boat costs ₹400). An ecotourism package for a day visit includes boating, visits to the lion safari park, crocodile park, and deer and elephant rehabilitation centres. The Neyyar Ecotourism Ecodevelopment Committee runs this, so that local people benefit from the revenue

(Indians ₹200, children ₹100, foreigners ₹300, students ₹100).

SEASONS

The sanctuary is open throughout the year. November to March is the most pleasant time to visit. June to October brings heavy rain which makes trekking plans unpredictable. This is also the time when armies of leeches surface.

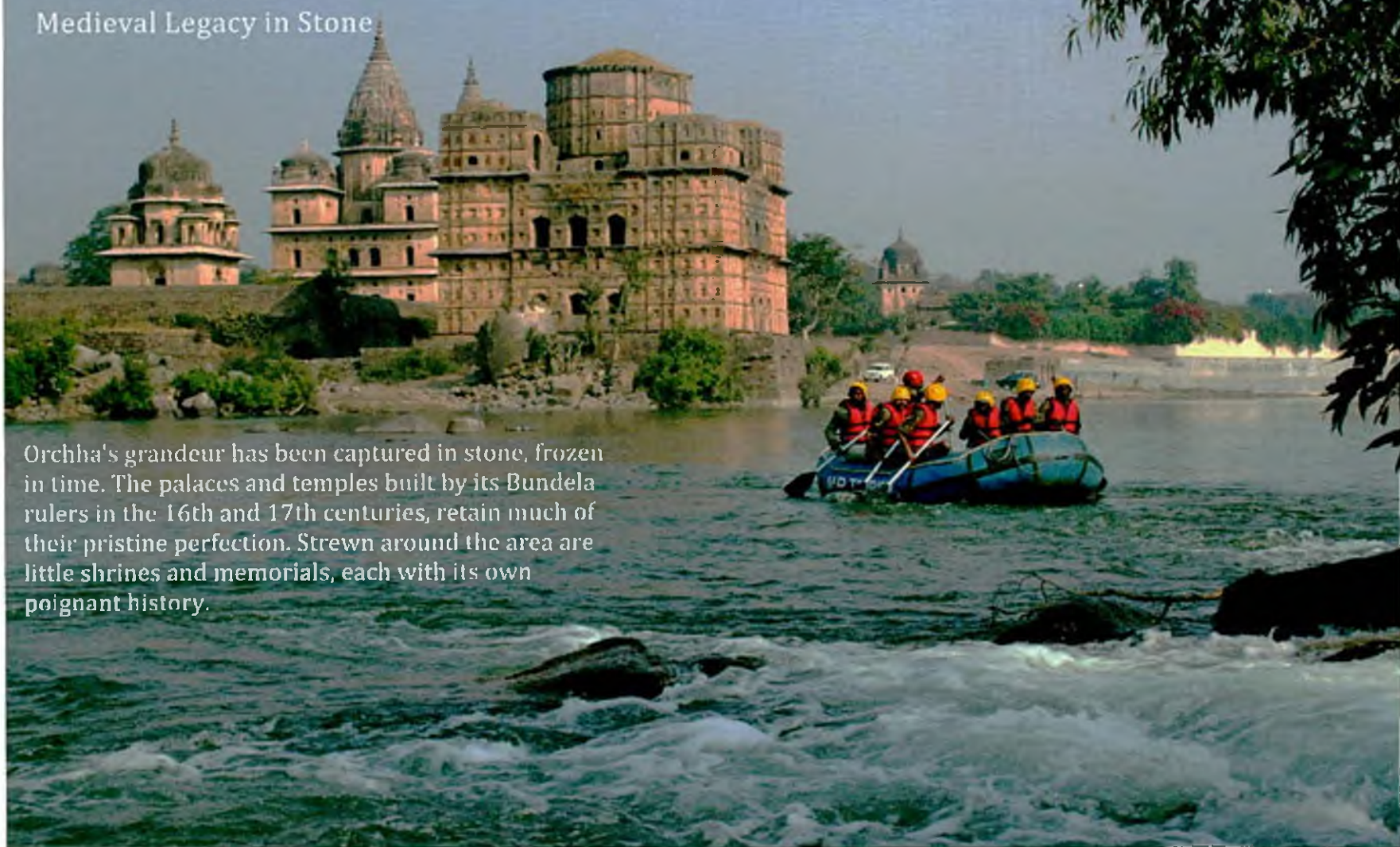
GETTING THERE

Thiruvananthapuram is the closest airport (30 km/1 hour) and Neyyittinkara, the closest rail station (20 km/1 hour). Taxis can be hired from the station, airport, and city (₹500 one way). ■

ASUSH KUTHARI: TIGER & WATERFALL; DIRIIMAN MUKURJE: NILOGIRI TIGER RESERVE; LION-TAILED MACAQUE

Orchha

Medieval Legacy in Stone



Orchha's grandeur has been captured in stone, frozen in time. The palaces and temples built by its Bundela rulers in the 16th and 17th centuries, retain much of their pristine perfection. Scattered around the area are little shrines and memorials, each with its own poignant history.



Madhya Pradesh Tourism

BHOPAL Tel : 0755-2778383, **AHMEDABAD** - Tel: 079-26462977, 32939000, **HYDERABAD** - Tel: 040 40034319,
KOLKATA - Tel: 033-22833526, 32978000, **LUCKNOW** - Tel: 0522-2391003, 4021413, **MUMBAI** - Tel: 022-22187603, 32539000, **NAGPUR** - Tel: 0712-2442378, 3259000, **NEW DELHI** - Tel:
011-23366528, 32599000, **PUNE** - Tel: 020-25534007, **RAIPUR** - Tel: 0771-4048810, **RAJKOT** - Tel: 0281-2927966, **SURAT** - Tel : 0261-2918688, **VARANASI** - Contact : 09235402180,

The best of
Incredible India

For online booking, log on to www.mptourism.com, Tourist Helpline (Toll Free) : 1800 233 7777, E-mail : info@mptourism.com