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DIVINE MEETS THE WILD

Experiencing a combination of hilly terrain, lush greenery and abundant wildlife at Masinagudi leaves **Hema Narayanan** enchanted

Where the Bandipur wildlife sanctuary ends at the Karnataka border, Mudumalai wildlife forests begin at the Tamilnadu border. At this exotic intersection of the borders is situated the beautiful Masinagudi at the foothills of the Nilgiris. A few km away from Ooty, here the Deccan Plateau rises to meet the wrinkled folds of the Nilgiris and the Western Ghats.

Masinagudi not only makes for a picturesque hill station with abundant refreshing beauty but also for a mystical, nerve-tingling wildlife experience. As if the Gods had decided to play a prank on us, we heard a small thud on the car the moment we entered the wildlife area. Our hearts paused, and we waited to find out who our guests were. Thankfully, the cat family had spared us and we were greeted by the langoors, the Old World monkeys.

I have been to lush green hill stations and wildlife sanctuaries individually, but getting to witness a combination of both in a single place was a double treat, and just the reason why Masinagudi is a unique destination to welcome the first sunshine of the year in more ways than one. Let the first rays of the sun warm your soul as they peep in through the dark, deciduous-laden mountainous paths or go for an early morning safari to the jungle atop an elephant, and experience the

sunrays light up the jungle in myriad colours. Listen to the incessant chirping of birds at the Wild Canopy Reserve that offers bird watching treks, or simply climb up the Gopalswami Betta and wait for the first sunrise of the year to take your breath away. Surrounded by the Western Ghats, Masinagudi has an addictive atmosphere and gripped us with a feeling of sheer ecstasy.

Milky-white clouds here surround the Nilgiris hills so up close that it looks like you could almost get to them at the slightest

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jump. Against a perfect contrast of deep green, a stroll here seems like a walk in the clouds. During one such walk, we saw a few black-faced langoors, one of which was cuddling its little one and feeding it green leaves from the trees. With the *sholas* and jungles providing a perfect habitat for birds, Nilgiris are home to over 320 species, both migratory and sedentary. With the topography of this area being distinctive with patches of grasslands, scrub jungles and deciduous forests all over, it makes it a

great halt for environmentalists apart from tourists.

Interestingly, the entire area now constitutes the vast Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve. Been designated as a tiger reserve in 1973, it is one of India's most extensive tracts of protected forests that we can get to see. I had read that Bandipur National Park, a forest reserve, holds a special place in India's efforts towards natural conservation. Created in 1931, it has Bengal tigers and a large elephant population. Mudumalai (which means 'first hills'), the first wildlife sanctuary in southern India, was formed in 1940 and is home to many endangered species.

On our safari, we spotted deer, wild elephants, langoors, herds of bison and plenty of peacocks. Tigers and leopards rarely make an appearance as a result of which spotting them has been documented at the Sanctuary office.

Divine-meets-the-wild could not have been better said for any place other than Masinagudi. As we drove towards Casa Deep Resorts, we spotted a small but beautiful temple which happened to be the historic temple of Lord Subramanya (Venugopala) atop Gopalswami Betta. We had our minds set on it right away and one of the days, we took a trek uphill to it. Albeit a short trek, the walk gave us a sense of freedom – perhaps due to its elevation, the vast expanse and also for the view of the plateau it gave us. ■



Heavenly abode: (left to right) The temple atop Gopalswami Betta; trekkers' day out at a Nilgiri peak



PHOTOGRAPHS: HEMA NARAYANAN

GETTING THERE

By air: The nearest airport is Bengaluru, around 210 km away

By rail: There are a number of trains connecting Bengaluru and Mysore to the rest of the country

By road: Located on the highway connecting Mysore and Ooty, all buses plying between the two places pass through the park

WHERE TO STAY

Club Mahindra Zest Casa Deep Woods, Tariff: Rs 3,500 onwards. Tel: 044 39881000, reservations@zestbreaks.com, zestbreaks.com

MUST-SEE MUST-DO

Take the van safaris organised by the Masinagudi National Park to some areas of the sanctuary. The rides last for about 45 minutes to an hour. You can also go on a jungle safari atop an elephant's back and go to those areas not covered by the van safaris. Visit the elephant camp in Masinagudi forest managed by the forest department, and boasting of 29 pachyderms. Witnessing the elephants being cleaned and offering puja is almost therapeutic.