

Western Ghats Trek

NOVEMBER 2018



The Western Ghats are a mountain range in South India, running from near Mumbai in the North, virtually down to the southernmost tip of the sub-continent. We trekked in the southern part of the range, where the second highest peak, Meesapulimala, is located.

We flew to the coastal city of Kochi, where we were greeted by a massive thunderstorm. The trek was so late in the year mainly to avoid the monsoon rains, which a few months earlier had brought flooding and mudslides to the region. We were fortunate - the first night's



thunderstorm was the last heavy rain we saw - and the roads to the Western Ghats have been repaired sufficiently to enable us to drive by minibus to the hill station of Munnar. The next morning, we headed off by jeep to the start of the trek. It was a bumpy ride!

We were thrown in at the deep end - or rather the high end - by tackling Meesapulimala on day one.

We set off in a forest, which then gave way to less wooded, and later open, grassland.



The push for the summit - at 2,640 metres (8,661 feet) - was long and arduous. We were encouraged on by talk of the spectacular views from the top. However, by the time we finally arrived at the peak the cloud had blown in and we could barely see each other for a while.



We headed down to our campsite. It was in a beautiful location, but not appreciated greatly by most of the group, as that evening and overnight nearly everyone was hit by various combinations of vomiting, diarrhoea and fever - including the trek leader and doctor. Most people were sufficiently recovered to walk the next day, but the itinerary was changed so that we returned to the same campsite for a second night.



Unlike some places we have trekked, this region is not short of water, and we had the relative luxury of toilet and shower blocks at each site. Each shower cubicle had a (cold) water tap, bucket and jug, and the local team heated up some water on a fire nearby, so we could mix the nearly boiling water with cold, for a warm shower in the evenings.

There hadn't been mention of leeches in the trek itinerary, so our hearts sank a little as we were handed leech socks to use on two subsequent days. Leeches lurk in the undergrowth and on the path. They jump on to walking boots and legs with surprising speed. They can easily work their way through ordinary socks, but leech socks are so tightly woven, they cannot get through - but they can still move up the socks with their somersaulting motion.





Anyway - on to more pleasant things. The area in which we were trekking, was amazingly varied. We passed by tea estates, and walked through cardamom plantations. I must admit that I'd never given much thought to how cardamom grows. The plants are taller than human height, but the cardamom berries are on smaller stalks at ground level, along with pink and white flowers. Looking after the plants, and frequently harvesting the berries, is obviously a major source of employment in the area we visited, and we went to a small factory that dries and packs the cardamom locally.



We passed by, and had the opportunity to visit, a small remote primary school. The children we met were up to 9 years old, and already learning English alongside the local language of Malayalam - they will also learn the national language of Hindi when a little older. We received a warm welcome, the children practised some of their English skills with us, and we all photographed each other!



The flora and fauna of the region are so lush. We saw colourful grasshoppers, moths and wild aubergine plants with thorns on their leaves. Excitingly, we came across the rare Nilgiri tahr (a type of large goat) which is endemic to the region, and the colourful Malabar giant squirrel.



Our final full day's trekking saw us once again climbing above the vegetation. It is an area where there are wild elephants, but we only saw their footprints and some elephant dung - to our disappointment, but to the great relief of the local guides. The advice we were given, if we came across an elephant, was to drop our rucksack for the elephant to attack - and run!



Initially fighting our way through the undergrowth, the path opened out to grassland with rocky outcrops which we needed a rope to negotiate.



This time the clouds stayed away, and we could look back to see the narrow path we had followed, close to a massive precipice which fell away to the plains far below.



Teenage Cancer Trust makes sure young people do not have to face cancer alone. The charity's work ranges from giving straightforward answers about diagnoses and treatment, to developing specialist units in NHS hospitals, and delivering specialist nursing care. Much of this has been possible through your generosity. I hope to trek again in 2019, and my fundraising page is open most of the year at: <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/trekraise>

Thank you again for your support!

Nigel Turner