

ethereal

# ooty

*This otherworldly mountain town  
in the heart of southern India offers an escape  
from the country's bustling cities.*

BY AARTI VIRANI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NISHANT SHUKLA

India is a country whose mention triggers images of pulsing megacities and colossal crowds. But Ooty, a eucalyptus-scented town in the Nilgiri mountains of the southernmost state, Tamil Nadu, is an unexpected escape.

Ideal for tourists who have crossed the nation's palaces, temples and beaches off their to-do lists, this eccentric "hill station"—the name given to a town carved from rocky mountainsides and high plateaus—once served as a welcome respite for British colonists eager to retreat from southern cities (the nearest, Coimbatore, is roughly 55 miles away) during parched summer months. These days visitors flock to this windswept haven, a lofty 7,349 feet above sea level, for its rolling tea plantations, pine-framed views, charming parks and remnants of colonial heritage.

### Getting There

For more than a century, a miniature ivory-and-blue steam locomotive affectionately dubbed the Toy Train has chugged along the Nilgiri Mountain

Railway, a succession of picturesque curves, valleys and tunnels that earned UNESCO World Heritage status in 2005. The Nilgiris, or Blue Mountains, are named for the *kurunji* flowers that dot their summits. You can get on board at Mettupalayam (an hour's drive from Coimbatore) and take in an incredible array of waterfalls and rice fields and the occasional cluster of rowdy macaques on this otherwise peaceful five-hour journey. It's best to book your train tickets several weeks in advance ([indiarailinfo.com](http://indiarailinfo.com)). Note: Ooty is usually listed as Udagamandalam on train timetables. Once you arrive in Ooty, you can explore on foot or shuttle around in auto rickshaws and taxis (roughly \$1\* from the train station to Charing Cross, the city center), available throughout town.

### Floral Fun

Though mid-19th-century European settlers grew and harvested reasonably priced produce there, Ooty's **Botanical Gardens** (*Vannarapetta*; adults, \$.30; kids, \$.15), a 10-minute walk from Charing Cross, now teem with ferns, orchids, herbs and lily-studded ponds. Spanning an impressive 55 acres, the gardens also have a rare and curious centerpiece: a gnarled fossilized tree trunk that's rumored to be about 20 million years old. In May there's a buzzed-about flower show that lures crowds for events, like bonsai competitions and vegetable-carving contests.

For sweeping hilltop views, stroll through the town's **Rose Garden** (*Elk Hill*; admission, \$.30), complete with curvy terraced lawns and more than 20,000 bushes crammed with miniatures, ramblers and hybrid teas, to name just a few



**SPICE OF LIFE**  
A plate of *dosa*, a crepe-like breakfast bread, served with coffee and accompanying dips at Ooty Coffee House. Opposite: The sun sets over Ooty.



varieties. And the **Thread Garden** (*N. Lake Rd.*; 91-423-244-5145; [threadgarden.com](http://threadgarden.com); admission, \$15), at the opposite end of town, is a staggering collection of faux flowers, plants and lawns crafted entirely from thread, canvas and wire. It's the vision of Keralite artist Anthony Joseph, who assembled a team of 50 craftsmen and took nearly 12 years to finish this kitschy but lovable Ooty mainstay.

### Shopping Spree

Commercial Road, Ooty's main drag, is packed with stores carrying everything from bottled eucalyptus oil to Tibetan woolen shawls. **Jai's King Star** (54 *Commercial Rd.*; 91-423-245-0205) is a 72-year-old "bean to bar" establishment that specializes in slabs of handmade chocolate. The minuscule confectionery stocks more than 40 melt-in-your-mouth varieties, including fig-and-honey, praline and butterscotch.

At the quirky antique emporium **Mohan's** (*Commissioner's Rd.*; 91-423-245-2175), the goods are displayed in ancient wood-framed cases. You'll also find chunky silver jewelry crafted by artisans from the region's indigenous Toda community. Round off your excursion at **Higginbothams** (*Commercial Rd.*; 91-423-244-2376), an English-language bookstore where you can browse through tomes on Hindu mythology alongside the latest best sellers.

### Remnants of the Raj

No trip to Ooty is complete without a photo op at **St. Stephen's Church** (*Mysore Rd.*), the town's most famous landmark. Around 1820 its massive wooden beams were dragged by elephants from a palace nearly 75 miles away. The shrubby neighboring cemetery contains headstones honoring colonial-era big-wigs, like Ooty's founder, John Sullivan.



Across the street, the cherry-red Gothic **Nilgiri Library** (*Hospital Rd.*), home to 25,000 books, including some very rare volumes on the region's hill tribes, has a charming reading room that's open to the public Thursday through Saturday.

### Vistas and Peaks

You can rent a paddleboat or rowboat and glide across **Ooty Lake** (*N. Lake Rd.*; rentals, from \$2), an L-shaped artificial body of water created by the aforementioned Sullivan, who dammed a mountain stream in 1824. If you're after something a little more strenuous, you can hike up to **Doddabetta Peak**, about five miles north of Ooty. At nearly 8,600 feet, the mist-encased summit provides unrivaled views of the lush Nilgiri mountains. Resort concierges can typically arrange for a local guide (*half-day trips*, from \$7, including lunch) to accompany you on a range of treks, including one to **Pykara Falls**, 10 miles northwest of Ooty.

### Tea Time

There may be no better place to catch a behind-the-scenes glimpse of tea production than in the Nilgiris—the sprawling mountains are famous for their intensely aromatic leaves. The **Doddabetta Tea Factory** (*Doddabetta Rd.*; 91-423-223-1679), which produces nearly 30 tons a month, treats visitors to a crash course that includes a peek at the Rotorvane, a ferocious machine that crushes



## EAT

### Curry & Rice

Anglo-Indian recipes—chicken with tamarind; corn-and-spinach crepes; pork stewed with ginger—take center stage at this elegant restaurant, inside a former palace. *Fernhill Post, Fernhill, West Mere; dinner for two, \$25\**

### Kabab Corner

Tuck into spicy skewers—chunks of grilled lamb, chicken or *paneer* (homemade cheese), all served with buttery wedges of naan—at this centrally located spot. *Commercial Rd.; dinner for two, \$12*

### Nahar's Sidewalk Café

Wood-fired-oven pizzas and hearty bowls of pasta are the highlights at this casual vegetarian eatery, a cross between a diner and a trattoria. *Commercial Rd.; lunch or dinner for two, \$15*

### Ooty Coffee House

Despite its crumbling exterior, this Ooty spot is a hit because of its traditional south Indian breakfast spread (*dosas*, or crispy-rice-and-lentil-flour pancakes, are the crowd pleasers here) and sweet, frothy coffee poured into stainless-steel cups. *Upper Bazaar Rd.; breakfast for two, \$5*

### Shinkow's Chinese Restaurant

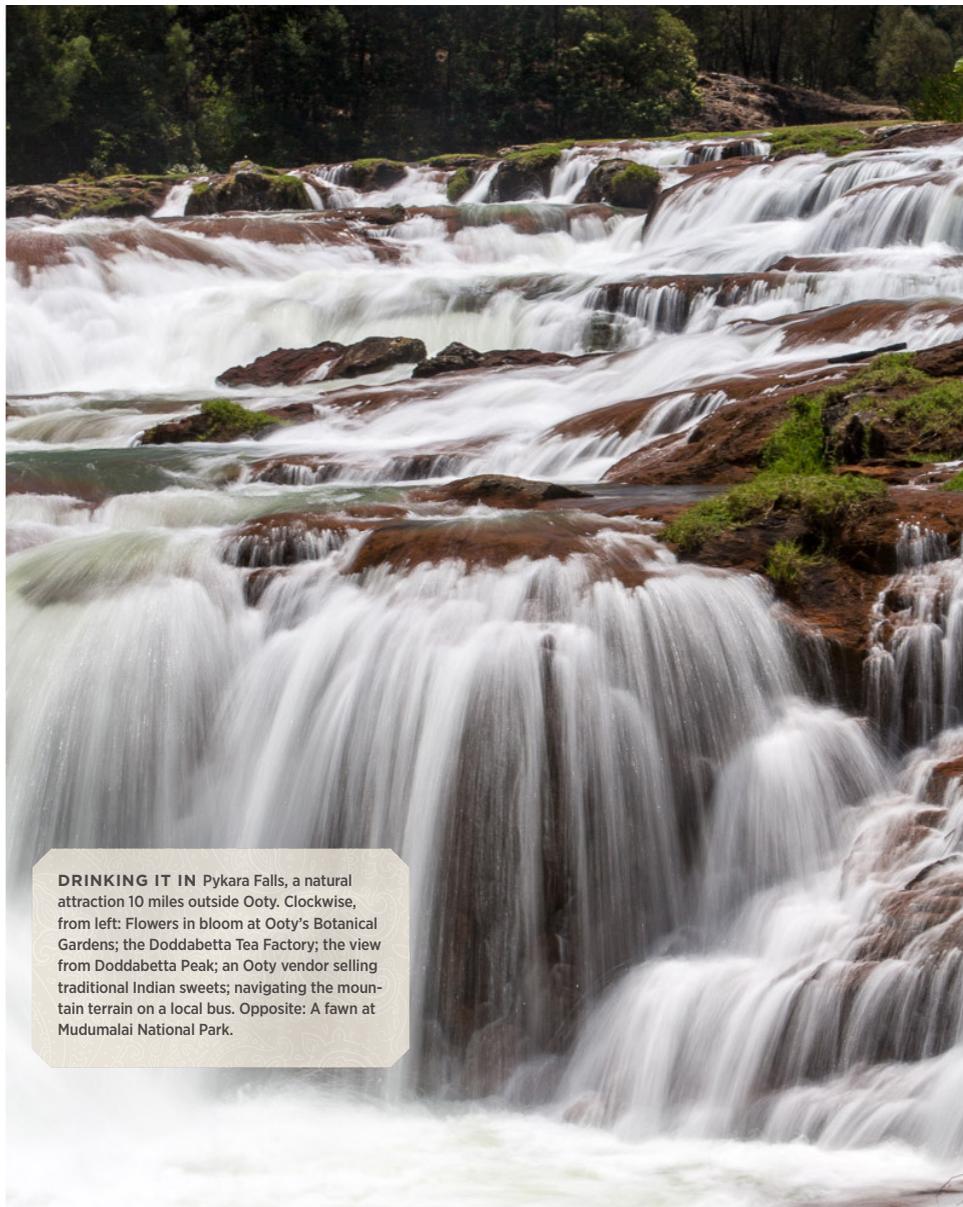
Checked tablecloths and dim lighting lend a vintage vibe to this Indo-Chinese institution, which serves up simple chili-and-vinegar-spiked pork, chicken and beef dishes. *38/83 Commissioner's Rd.; lunch for two, \$12*

*\*Estimated meal prices do not include drinks, tax or tip.*



Find additional content for this article in the *Endless Vacation*® magazine app for iPad®. Download it free from the iTunes® App Store today.\*

**FIT FOR A KING** Curry & Rice restaurant, in Fernhills Royale Palace. Opposite, from left: Tea grows on the hills near Ooty; processing fresh tea leaves at Doddabetta Tea Factory.

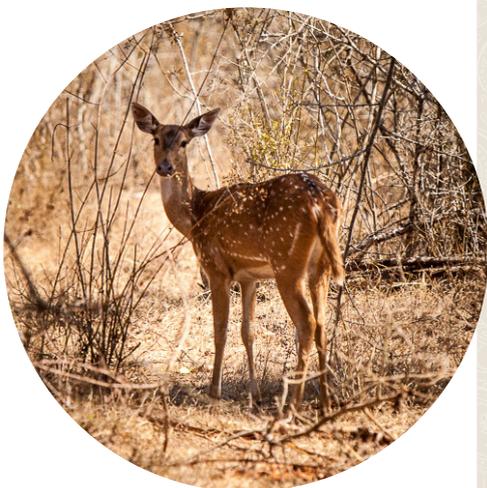


**DRINKING IT IN** Pykara Falls, a natural attraction 10 miles outside Ooty. Clockwise, from left: Flowers in bloom at Ooty's Botanical Gardens; the Doddabetta Tea Factory; the view from Doddabetta Peak; an Ooty vendor selling traditional Indian sweets; navigating the mountain terrain on a local bus. Opposite: A fawn at Mudumalai National Park.

and juices, and ends with a complimentary cup of brew. For an even closer look at the process, venture to the neighboring hill station of Coonoor (smaller and quieter than Ooty, it's a 45-minute ride away), where you can tour **Tranquilitea** (91-94-4384-1572; [tranquilitea.in](http://tranquilitea.in); tea tour, \$4 a person; reservations required), an expansive estate that relies on the crisp mountain air to nourish rare types, like silver tips, delicate and floral, and the more full-bodied Crush, Tear, Curl.

### Where the Wild Things Are

An hour northwest of Ooty is **Mudumalai National Park** (91-423-252-6235; [forests.tn.nic.in](http://forests.tn.nic.in); admission, \$.50), one of India's first wildlife sanctuaries. Because hiking is not allowed on the 124-square-mile reserve, it's best to opt for a 45-minute minibus tour (\$.50), on which you'll spy wild elephants—on an evening excursion you can see them having dinner—deer, peacocks, bison and long-limbed langur monkeys. The luckiest visitors may spot one of the reserve's 50 tigers—Mudumalai has the most tigers per area in the country. You may see one slinking among tall stalks of bamboo and hear it let out a *chuff* before it vanishes back into the blue mist of the forest. Much like Ooty and its striking surrounds, it'll leave you spellbound. 📍



## STAY

### RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS IN OOTY INCLUDE:



**Sterling Elk Hill, Ooty 3721**  
Enjoy magnificent views of the Nilgiri Hills. 25 Ramakrishnamutt Rd., Ramakrishnapuram Elk Hill, Tamil Nadu  
MEMBER REVIEW: "Good view from the rooms facing the valley."



**Club Mahindra Derby Green, Ooty C674**  
A five-and-a-half-acre historic landmark, this resort also features landscaped gardens and a view of the Ooty Racecourse. 29-49 Balkey Rd., off Etinnes Rd.  
MEMBER REVIEW: Not yet posted.



**Sterling Fern Hill, Ooty 2969**  
Spread across seven acres, this sprawling yet quaint resort provides modern accommodations in the Nilgiri mountains. Kundah House Rd., Fernhill, West Mera  
MEMBER REVIEW: "Housekeeping staff is great."



**Sterling Fern Hill, Ooty—3 Night SEA1**  
Shares amenities with resort to the left.  
MEMBER REVIEW: "A great place from which to do all your sightseeing."



**Sterling Fern Hill, Ooty—4 Night SDA1**  
Shares amenities with resort above.  
MEMBER REVIEW: "Lovely location on top of a hill."

For complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed) and additional resort listings, visit [RCI.com](http://RCI.com) or call 800-338-7777 (Weeks) or 877-968-7476 (Points). Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

### NON-RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS

**Savoy Hotel**  
One of Ooty's oldest hotels, offering 40 rooms in a series of colorful cottages on six landscaped acres. 77 Sylks Rd.; 91-423-222-5500; [tajhotels.com](http://tajhotels.com); doubles from \$86 a night

**King's Cliff**  
Nine stately rooms in a hilltop mansion known for its panoramic view of town. Havelock Rd.; 91-423-245-2888; [littlearth.in](http://littlearth.in); doubles from \$45 a night

**Lymond House**  
A six-room intimate Victorian hotel. Sylks Rd.; 91-423-222-3377; [serendipityo.com](http://serendipityo.com); doubles from \$68 a night

**Fernhills Royale Palace**  
Surrounded by forest, this hotel offers 19 suites in a restored summer palace. Fernhill Post, Fernhill, West Mera; 91-423-244-3910; doubles from \$183 a night

**Destiny the Farmstay**  
This high-altitude retreat, about 15 miles from Ooty, has working fireplaces in each of the 25 rooms and an on-site spa offering lakeside Balinese massages. Muligoor Village, Emerald Post; 91-423-222-4545; [littlearth.in](http://littlearth.in); doubles from \$106 a night