

Southern Sentinel

trekking Agasthyamalai's sacred slopes

Text and photographs by Ian Lockwood

The man next to me, a young pilgrim with a fragile frame, mutters a prayer, barely discernible over the thunder and rain. A ferocious wind blowing in from the northeast threatens to sweep us off the precipitous summit on which we are bivouacked. Flashes of lightning illuminate gnarled trees and the profiles of my companions huddled under a tarp. It leaks like a sieve, but we're holding on to it with all hands, lest the wind blows away our only sense of security. Surely, the young pilgrim's prayers are going out to Agasthya, the great sage on whose mountain we are camped. The 1,866 m.-high Agasthyamalai is the highest point in the southernmost tip of India and is one of the richest biodiversity zones in the Western Ghats. To the west, the mountain drops a perilous 700 m. into the tropical forests of Kerala. The drop on the other three sides is no less severe, and the thought of a sudden evacuation is disconcerting. Visitors don't normally stay overnight on this magnificent peak and, if the weather is anything to go by, the gods aren't pleased with our choice of a camping spot either!

Beginnings

I first observed Agasthyamalai's distinctive profile in the mid-1990s when I was exploring the Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR). The peak had mesmerised me but permission formalities, logistical hassles and lack of time had postponed a summit bid. Last summer, while taking a year off from my teaching job, I initiated the paperwork for the expedition. I visited the Chief Wildlife Wardens of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and obtained the consent of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, New Delhi. My goal was to document the Western Ghats landscapes to aid the conservation of this fragile biodiversity hotspot (*Sanctuary* Vol. XXI, No.2, April 2002). By spring, I was ready for the trek.

Along with five friends from the Dhonavur fellowship – a community with strong conservation ties in these hills – and *Kani* tribal guides, we set out across the Karaiyar reservoir to the starting point of our four-day expedition to Agasthyamalai. Built in the 1960s as part of a massive hydroelectric scheme, the reservoir is surrounded by steep hills carpeted by dense evergreen forest. Protruding from these hills is a jagged granite ridge, which includes the Agasthyamalai peak. Jerry Rajamanain, the leader, has a special

interest in *Pothigai* (as the peak is locally called) and was instrumental in organising the expedition.

Our boat approaches the sandy shore littered with leaf debris and blackened tree stumps. A waterfall cascades over house-sized boulders before emptying into the dark waters of the reservoir. This is the sacred Tambraparani river, whose watershed comprises the forested slopes of Agasthyamalai. We clamber up ancient rock-cut steps on the side of the falls. It is slippery and steep enough to dissuade casual explorations beyond the falls. Soon we have the river to ourselves. Two Fairy Bluebirds and a group of Ruby-throated Black-crested Bulbuls flitter in a low tree by the stream. We can just discern the awesome Agasthyamalai peak over the tree canopy.

Manikandi, the most knowledgeable of our *Kani* guides, leads us along the river and then cuts into the forest on a small path. From the scorching heat of the open, we enter the cool rainforest filled with the cicadas' deafening calls, where gigantic canes and towering lianas crowd between large buttressed trees. Our destination is the *Kani* settlement of Injukuli. *Kanis*, indigenous forest-dwellers of the Agasthyamalai hills, once practiced shifting cultivation, but many have been relocated out of the interiors of KMTR. In the 1990s, much attention was focussed on the *Kanis* in Kerala when they struck up an innovative deal with a pharmaceutical company to share the proceeds of developing the wild *arogyapacha* (*Trichopus zeylanicus*) plant, believed to have invigorating properties. However, what promised to be a landmark deal to benefit indigenous forest-dwellers floundered in government red tape.

Injukuli consists of a dozen scattered thatched huts and cleared fields under the imposing Agasthyamalai. Three *Kani* children lead us down to the Tambraparani and show us the best spots for an afternoon swim. We turn in early, knowing that tomorrow will be a difficult day of trekking.

The sun rises early over Injukuli and two groups of pilgrims who also spent the night here are making their way to the summit. Their presence surprises me, since permissions to visit Agasthyamalai were difficult to come by. None of us had expected that our group would have company. Most pilgrims climb Agasthyamalai using the well-worn path through Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary on the



The slopes of Agasthyamalai are covered with a variety of vegetation, ranging from Bentinckia palms (facing page) to tree ferns (above), which shelter a variety of life-forms, including tiger, leopard and jungle cat.

No ordinary mountain

Though dwarfed by other Western Ghats' peaks such as Dodabetta in the Nilgiris and Anaimudi, there is an unmistakable spiritual quality to Agasthyamalai. Its conical profile is nearly identical from the eastern and western sides and it supports rich biodiversity. Straddling the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border, south of the Shencottah gap, it includes thorn forest, moist deciduous forest, tropical wet evergreen rainforest and high-altitude grasslands. The Tamil Nadu side is composed of the 900 sq. km. Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR), while the adjoining Kerala side hosts the Neyyar and Peppara wildlife sanctuaries. These excellent habitats have been disturbed by plantations and hydroelectric projects. Nearby are the reserved forests of Courtallam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala's Shenduruny Sanctuary. Agasthyamalai boasts of 150 plant endemics, including wild relatives of jackfruit, mango, cardamom, turmeric and banana. The area is India's southernmost tiger habitat and hosts significant populations of elephant, tahr, lion-tailed macaques, Nilgiri martens, king cobras and Great Pied Hornbills. KMTR is also famous for its reptiles and amphibians.



Pilgrims make the long trek up the mountain to worship at the shrine erected in memory of the great sage Agasthya, after whom the mountain is named. Unfortunately, the large volume of pilgrim traffic also disturbs and pollutes the mountain, especially on the Kerala side.

Kerala side. During a two-month season, 50 pilgrims per day are allowed on this route. It is an arduous trek but one that offers the chance to conduct a *puja* at the small Agasthya shrine at the summit. However, the impact of even such modest numbers is telling. On an earlier trip, we had walked out via Peppara and had observed signs of garbage, fire and degraded forest. This on the slopes of a mountain known for its sensitive plant diversity and endemism! In discussions with friends in the Kerala Forest Department, it was clear that such impacts remain a concern, but one that is tempered by the fact that a religious pilgrimage is nearly impossible to control.

By 7.30 a.m., we start out on a disused path that winds its way from Injukuli up the Tambraparani and over several valleys to the base of the massive Agasthyamalai. The first bit of the trail takes us through dense evergreen forest with towering trees and an exquisite understorey. The *Cullenia excelsa* tree, favoured by lion-tailed macaques, is abundant. Most pleasing to me are the dry conditions and dearth of leaches! A White-bellied Treepie is calling noisily in the canopy just above us. Several hours later, we reach Pongalam, a stream-fed pool that

offers the last source of water on the way up to the summit. It is surrounded by dense *Ochlandra* reed brakes that are a favourite of elephants. We drink homemade oral rehydration solution, feast on tamarind rice and rest before starting up the side of Agasthyamalai.

The Legend of Sage Agasthya

Several interesting myths are associated with Agasthyamalai, named after the sage Agasthya to whom the Dravidian people owe the Tamil language. He is associated with herbal remedies and is often depicted holding a stone crusher and a vessel. The hills where he meditated are rich in medicinal plants. According to legend, when the wedding of Lord Shiva and Parvati was announced at Mt. Kailash (the sacred peak in Tibet), all the gods and sages migrated to the venue. The earth went dangerously off-balance and Shiva asked Agasthya to go south to counterbalance it. Agasthya was disappointed about missing the great ceremony but with his powerful meditation, the world's balance was restored. The striking similarity between the profiles of Mt. Kailash and Agasthyamalai strengthen the mythological connections of these sacred peaks.

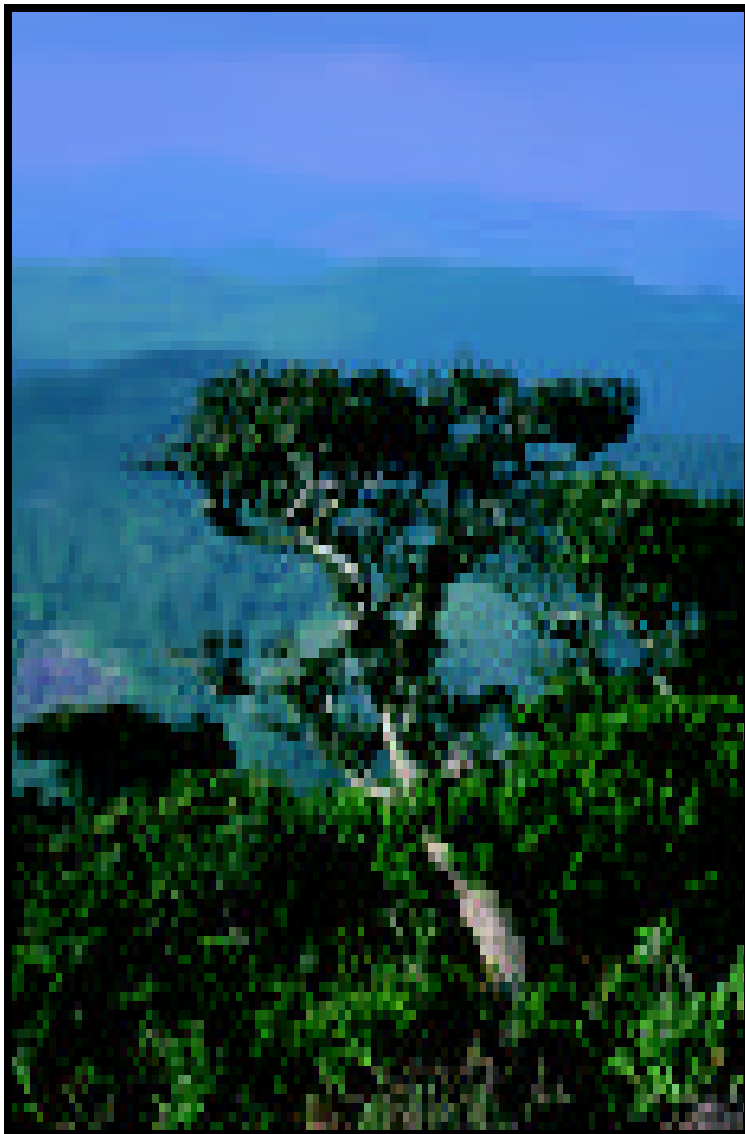
After Pongalam, the path ascends at a dizzying angle up the exposed sheet rock that forms the near vertical eastern ramparts of Agasthyamalai. At times, our path ascends at gradients that force us to scramble on all fours. Clearly, this would be impossible during the rainy season. We pass through clumps of stunted tropical evergreen forest, distinctive to Agasthyamalai and its neighbouring peaks. Severe wind keeps the canopy low and ancient trees are deceptively stunted. Although it looks and feels like *shola* forest, it is technically not, since this is below 1,900 m. (the lower limit of *shola* forests). We see the endemic *Bentinckia condapanna* palm trees clinging to precarious slopes. They appear strangely out of place here, as if Dr. Seuse had painted them on to the mountainside. A group of Brown-backed Needletails and other lesser swifts are circling overhead. I look in vain in the grassy clumps for the enigmatic *Paphiopedilum druryi*, the lady's slipper orchid endemic to Agasthyamalai and perhaps the rarest epiphyte in the Western Ghats. Just as I'm dreaming about stumbling on a *paph*, I spot several large clumps of bright pink *Aerides ringens*.

After walking under an enormous wall of charcoal-black sheet rock, we find ourselves approaching the main north-south ridge of the mountain. Now in thick forest, we join the more worn trail from Peppara. It is late afternoon and I am perspiring heavily. I get ahead of the group and emerge on the exposed shoulder of Agasthyamalai. The view is spectacular. I can see from the Mundanthurai valley clear around the mountain to the western side. To the south, the lesser peaks protrude from the forest in a dazzling array of weathered granite and windswept vegetation. Surprisingly, there is practically no wind. In the distance, there are thunderstorms but the peak is enjoying a rare calm.

The final approach to the summit is straightforward, although there are a few unnerving rock faces to negotiate. A few steep stretches and then a final patch of forest. Finally, I am there, standing on top of Agasthyamalai, breathing fast and elated by the panorama spread before me. The summit is dome-shaped with a pile of rocks at the high point. Visitors have vandalised it by painting their names on the rock in an ugly yellow. On the southern side, a small crown of forest protects the Agasthya shrine.

By the time we set up camp, it is twilight and the best spot, protected by a ring of trees, has been taken. We find a grassy slope nearby and are able to tie up our large tarp. Meanwhile, two or three different thunderstorms are lashing the eastern plains and the ranges south of Agasthyamalai. It seems obvious that we are going to have precipitation sometime soon. Knowing that we are on the highest peak in the area, I can't help being slightly nervous about what's in store for us.

We enjoy a subdued sunset and a murky moonrise behind thick clouds. When it emerges later, the moon casts an ethereal glow over the hills and the approaching thunderheads. The storm moves closer and we take refuge under the tarp, eat a dinner of biscuits and prepare for the inevitable. It hits around 8.30 p.m., starting with ferocious winds that threaten to blow our tarp off the mountain. At the first gust, the ten of us under the tarp grab on to corners and folds. For two hours, we continue to cling to our scanty cover. Lightning bolts strike all around us and light up silhouettes of the wind-blown trees. Thunder rolls through the valleys. Things are more or less fine, except for the



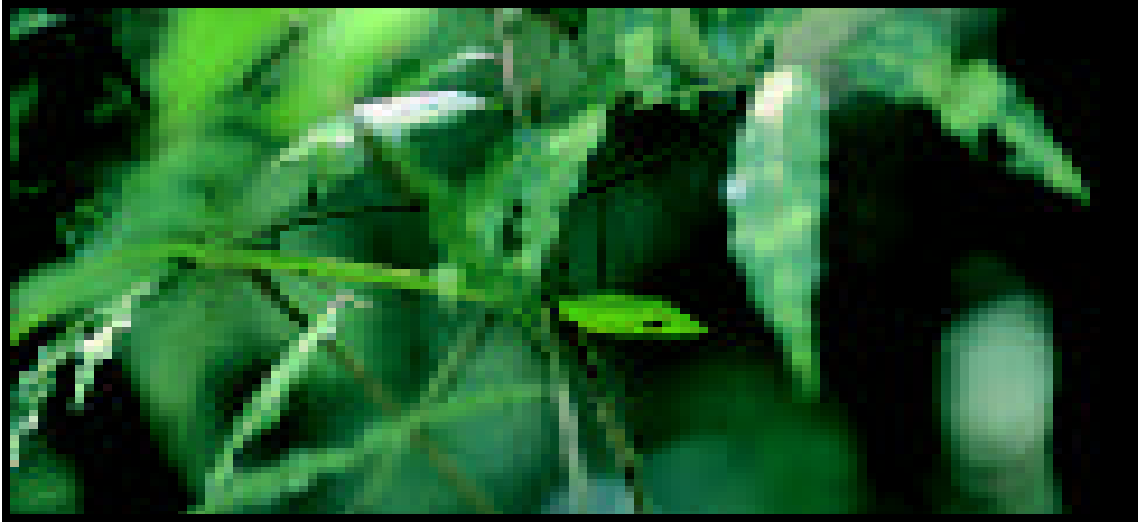
An evergreen tree stretches its limbs up to the sky from the slopes of Agasthyamalai. The mountain heights offer trekkers an unparalleled view of these Western Ghats ranges.

fact that the tarp leaks horribly! Sitting up in my sleeping bag, I put on my rain jacket and contemplate taking out my umbrella. However, there is no room for this luxury and I'm soon drenched. A group of six pilgrims takes cover with us and it is a cozy gathering, to say the least! They seem a little surprised by nature's fury and suggest that Agasthya is upset about us sleeping on the summit.

The storm does eventually clear and by midnight, we are left with the sounds of water dripping through the tarp and frogs croaking in the grass. My sleep is erratic at best. I wake

every hour or so, excited by the prospect of dawn. I know that the rain should wash the plains and mountains clear and I am eager to see and photograph it all!

I get up and out of my slushy sleeping bag at 4.30 a.m. A waterproof poncho has protected my cameras. A light breeze is blowing and there is still a magical otherworldly glow from the setting moon. The lights from towns on the eastern plains twinkle brilliantly and the brighter constellations are visible. I want to see the view in the complete darkness and



The forests that clothe Agasthyamalai harbour a diversity of life-forms, including reptiles such as this green vine snake and the giant wood spider (below).

witness dawn from the very first light. Jerry, the only other team member interested in giving up sleep for the first view, joins me. We locate Tirunelveli in the east and Thiruvananthapuram in the west, identified by their large clusters of twinkling lights. Four different lighthouses are visible, demarcating the Arabian Sea in the west and the Gulf of Mannar in the east.

Dawn is a magnificent affair and makes the stormy night worth all its fear and discomfort. As the rays of the new day begin to fill the sky, they paint the cirrus clouds in fantastic hues of gold and scarlet. A kestrel is hovering over the precipice near the summit and Grey-breasted Laughing Thrushes are chattering in the trees by the Agasthya shrine. Looking north, we are blessed with a view of the dark evergreen tiger forests of the Mundanthurai range. The azure mountains stretching beyond the Shencottah gap and up towards the Periyar Tiger Reserve are imposing.

Then something incredible happens. The sun, just a hair above the horizon, projects the conical shadow of Agasthyamalai into the light haze of the west, creating a surreal pyramid-shaped shadow that shifts as I walk along the summit. This is a phenomena often observed by mountaineers on high peaks at sunrise. It is well recorded on Sri Lanka's Adam's peak, but this is the first time I've seen it happening in the Western Ghats. The magical shadow doesn't last longer than ten minutes and disappears when the sun slips behind a low cloud.

The pilgrims head down almost immediately, while we linger to dry things out and enjoy the view. Jerry and I work on identifying the local peaks. As the sun rises higher, we are thrilled to spot both coastlines! They are not as clear as I had imagined, but the dark blues of the seas are distinctly visible.

By mid-morning, wispy mist is gathering at Agasthyamalai's summit and we move down the mountainside. The

night's rain has made the rock faces slippery and we proceed with great caution. I flush a Peregrine Falcon from a patch of grass and it flies out over the edge, giving out its mournful alarm call. Although our knees start to feel like jelly, the descent takes much less effort than yesterday's climb. At Pongalam, I bathe in the pool and am soon convinced about the divine properties of the ritual. The hike back to Injukuli is long, but less tiring and we are back by late afternoon.

Our final day in the shadow of Agasthyamalai goes smoothly. We pack up and thank the *Kanis*. It is a gentle path back to Banerthetum and I walk most of it alone. I am able to spot a troop of Nilgiri langurs and two Malabar giant squirrels, but am disappointed at not seeing any lion-tailed macaques. We've seen plenty of mammal evidence on the path – sloth bear, civets, jungle cats and the occasional leopard, but I am surprised by the few sightings of animals and birds. On past trips to KMTR, I have had excellent sightings of Great Pied Hornbills and Malabar Trogons, but this time the bird sightings have been modest. Just before descending to the falls and catching the boat out, we take a refreshing bath in the Tambraparani. It is Sunday and the falls are packed with local tourists bathing and picnicking. We must look a little strange, emerging from the side of the waterfalls, unshaven and thinner, but elated after an unforgettable pilgrimage to Agasthyamalai's summit. 🐸

