



PHOTO ESSAY

KODAIKANAL

Higher Ground

The forest trails of Kodaikanal.

Text and photographs by

IAN LOCKWOOD

The south Indian hill station of Kodaikanal has long attracted a variety of visitors looking for something out of the ordinary in a hill sojourn. Founded in 1845 by Yankee missionaries drawn from a generation that produced Thoreau and Emerson, Kodaikanal was not your typical imperialist summer retreat. Alas, the days in which it was a well-kept secret are now long gone. Despite this, Kodi still offers something unusual not highlighted in tourist brochures. The lakes, vistas and viewpoints are well known. Less recognised are the unique *shola* forests, and their endemic plants and bird life.

Shola forests are montane evergreen forests unique to the high-altitude regions (above 1,800m) of the Western Ghats. Stunted by fierce winds, sholas contain a wealth of plant, animal and bird species. Together with native grasslands, this ecosystem plays a key role in absorbing monsoon rains. Sholas are most often found in the protected folds of hills. They are the most enduring image of Kodaikanal, and also the most fragile element of this magical place.

View of southern plains from Coaker's Walk

Looking east over the Palani hills on a clear morning. Eucalyptus trees fill the lower valleys. The full extent of the plains lying almost 2,000m below is clearly visible. Days like this are becoming rare as pollution from industrial centres and agricultural fires clog the air.



Morning panorama, Coaker's Walk

The sun rises over the Palani hills, as seen from the very popular Coaker's Walk. Perumal Peak, the distinctive hat-shaped mountain, dominates the lower valleys in the east. The plains below the walk were once native grasslands. These grasslands hosted the famous kurinji (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*) plant that blooms in 12-year cycles. In recent years invasive lantana plants have taken over the hillside. There is a project underway to restore the grasslands in time for the next blooming of the kurinji in 2006.

Bombay Shola has several roads winding through it that make for

excellent walks and easy sightings of Western Ghat bird species

Enormous Syzygium, Bombay Shola

Bombay Shola sits amidst the municipal limits of Kodaikanal, immediately next to the lake basin. Most visitors are unable to distinguish this native cloud forest from the expansive plantations of non-native trees in the Palani hills. Bombay Shola has several roads winding through it that offer excellent walks. Endemic Western Ghat bird species like the White Bellied Shortwing, Grey-Breasted Laughing Thrush and the Black & Orange Flycatcher can be seen from these roads. The large tree in this picture is a *Syzygium densiflorum*, which at 500 years is said to be the oldest in the Palani hills.

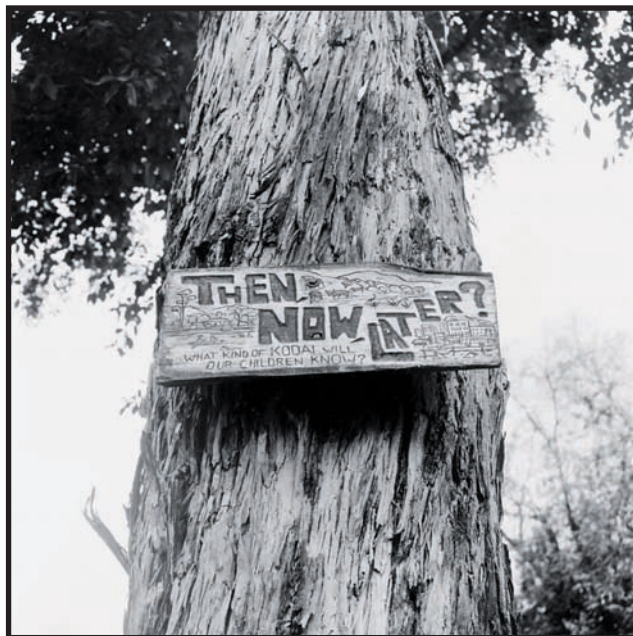




Tree ferns in Blackburn Shola (above): Gigantic tree ferns (*Cyathea nilgirensis*) in Blackburn Shola just adjacent to Kodaikanal. This remarkable Shola is seriously threatened by a large municipal dump recently established near it.

Rear view of Dolphin's Nose (right): Rhododendron tree and remnant grasslands on the southern escarpment of the Palani hills. This popular spot was named in colonial times for a rock that projects out over a deep gorge.

Sign at Kodaikanal International School (below): A sign posted at the school encourages visitors to think about changes in the ecology of the lake basin, and the problems caused by the growing number of tourists.



THE INFORMATION



If you are at all with it, you won't dream of a weekend break in Kodaikanal or Ooty—blah, been there, strictly for Gujjus with timeshares or honeymooning provincials from Namakkal. But the secret of travelling, I have found, is not just in the place, but also as much in you and what you choose to do there. The most absurdly clichéd places have the ability to spring surprises. Like Kodi.

First, try and ignore the colour-coordinated newly-weds. They're just part of the scenery and usually harmless. Next, find out where all the big buses and Sumos are heading, and head the other way. The alternative has plenty to offer.

GETTING THERE
If you're trying to get to Kodi from Chennai, you can take the

A view of the Kodi Lake



PRASHANT PANJIAR

Nagercoil Express (runs Thursdays and Sundays; leaves Egmore station at 8.30pm and arrives at Kodi Road at 5.50am; 2A costs Rs 840) or the **Pandian Express** (runs every day; leaves Egmore at 9.30pm and reaches Kodi Road at 5.30am; 2A costs Rs 870.) Taxis from Kodi Road to Kodaikanal (80km; 2hrs30min) cost between Rs 500 (shared) and Rs 800 while the bus costs Rs 25 and takes 3hrs30min. The direct bus from Chennai (12hrs) costs Rs 300-500.

GETTING AROUND
Kodi has the advantage of smallness—most hotels are around the heart of the city (Seven Roads) and most places within walking distance, or at best a brisk hike away. You could hire a bicycle (approx. Rs 50 per day). Taxis are aplenty but expensive—they charge a minimum of Rs 50 for 3km. If you want to quickly check out the mandatory views, waterfalls and suicide points, hire a small car for about Rs 800 a day. There are tourist buses as well, for about Rs 25 a head: if you can cope with the day-trippers, why not.

WHERE TO STAY
Regular: Kodi has plenty of hotels, so take your pick (all rates for double rooms). **Hotel**



The Kodai Club

RR Residency (Rs 900-1,500; 04542-244300/31) has no views but is right on Seven Roads, the city centre. It's comfortable and pleasantly appointed. **Hotel Garden Manor** (Rs 900-1,300; 240461/242176) has terrace gardens and views. **Hotel Carlton** (Rs 3,000-4,000; 240056/71) is perched right on the lake with fabulous views. Luxurious rooms, very good service and food. *Different:* **Elephant Valley** (Rs 2,500-5,000; 230399; www.elephantvalley.com), a 100-acre eco-resort and organic farm about 15km outside Kodaikanal, is on an ancient elephant migration route. You can sight elephants and other wildlife. **Cinnabar** (Rs 2,250-2,750; 240220, www.geocities.com/cinnabarfarm) is a homestay run by a charming couple. Lovely rooms and garden; everything is home-produced—from the bread and jam at breakfast to the cheese and coffee. **Bison Wells** (Rs 1,200 approx.;



Pillar Rocks makes for a good excursion

240566) is a rugged log cabin in a forest, very far from the madding crowd, with no modern trappings like TV or music. Plenty of wildlife and birds. A great escape.

WHERE TO EAT
The place is littered with Tibetan eateries and the usual indeterminate restaurants serving Tandoori or Chinese. Try **Swad**, a basement place on PT Road that looks like nothing but has homey North Indian food at reasonable rates. But **Daily Bread** near the bus stop is an absolute must: try their bread, cinnamon rolls and brownies. And the fresh fruit ice cream (plum, banana and peach) is simply superb. Prices are ridiculously low—bread Rs 10 a loaf and ice creams Rs 6 a scoop. Fruit in Kodi is a meal in itself—pig out on plums, peaches and avocados in season. Practically every shop sells eucalyptus oil as well as homemade chocolates, so splurge. Do visit **Eco Nut** on PT Road for health foods like organic muesli, cheeses, grains and flour, plus great jams and juices.



WHAT TO SEE & DO
The usual suspects (all distances from Seven Roads): **Coaker's Walk** (1km): Built in 1872 by Lt. Coaker, it's a winding walk around Mt Nebo, with great views. **Berijam Lake** (20km): Great for picnics/camps, with wildlife sightings. You need a permit, so prepare in advance. **Silver Cascade Waterfall** (7km): A 80ft-high waterfall. **Suicide Point** (10km): A spectacular view of Periyakulam town from 7,000ft up. **Astrophysical Observatory**

(3km): Built in 1898, it has an array of spectroscopic instruments. **Shembaganur Museum** (5km): Displays flowers, butterflies, birds, etc and 300 orchids. **Kurinji Andavar Temple** (3km): A small Murugan shrine, supposedly centuries old and with great views. *And the not-so-usual:* **St John's Convent**, known locally as the Belgian Convent. At Munjikal (3km; 04542-240726). An old-fashioned convent, where you can buy exquisite hand-embroidered linen and lace. You'll pay a fortune but won't find such stuff easily. A fine cut-work tablecloth costs about Rs 3,000, a hankie Rs 50, and if you want real Venetian lace, be prepared to pay upwards of Rs 50,000 for one tablecloth. **Jaysh Quilts** (5.5km; 240921) is where you can learn quilt-making from charming Jayashree. Just watch or buy some very lovely handmade quilts. There's a story in every piece, and she'll create a special one around whatever theme you choose, including your life story! Rs 1,500 (baby size) to Rs 12,000 (full size). **Potter's Shed Trust** (243968) has a retail outlet on PT Road, where you can pick up Pondicherry-style glazed stoneware. Or you can spend some time at the wheel at their workshop (10km). About Rs 200 per person, and, for a little extra, they fire and ship your masterpiece across to you.

Horse rides are an option

Bodhi Zendo (www.bodhizen.do.org) is strictly for people who have already tried Vipassana or Yogic meditation and want to try Zen. Set in a coffee estate about 12km from Kodi near Perumal Malai, it is run by India's only Zen master, who is, strangely enough, a Catholic priest. **Sheep in a Jeep**, off Seven Roads, has some nice appliqué cushions and bags. They make



The Biscuit-Tin church

great gifts, especially for kids. **Pillavali Coffee Estate**. (62km). For a tour through a coffee estate, call the Nagarajans at 224271 to book in advance. **The Lake**. Just carry a picnic basket and a book to one of the benches around Kodaikanal Lake: you could happily spend the whole day there. I did.

VAISHNA ROY