

THE WEEKEND TREKKER

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It happens every weekend. Come Friday and there is a call of the wilderness, beckoning to rediscover the joy and thrill of exploring the mysteries of nature. Fortunately, there are quite a few who share these feelings and there is always company available on such missions of adventure.

Karnataka state, India, is bountiful as regards natural treasures. Majestic mountains, gorgeous gorges, wonderful water-falls and fantastic forests make it a trekker's paradise. The Western Ghats running through the length of the state, the beautiful Nilgiri Range in the South, river Cauvery with its frothy waterfalls, wildlife and bird sanctuaries, and the region around the many lakes scattered throughout the state offer an infinite number of routes. There are several places around Bangalore, within a hundred kilometers, providing excellent opportunities for a one or two day treks, ideal for a weekend.

One of our earliest experiences was in the Western Ghats, from Sakleshpur to Yedekumari. There, a narrow gauge railway connecting these two places serves as the guide. The track hugs the forest covered mountains and there are sheer drops of several hundred feet on the other side.

We had trekked there in October (1989), just after the rains, and there was lush greenery all around. I still vividly remember the magic moments as the early morning fog lifted, like the curtains on a stage, revealing the green paddy fields glistening in the rays filtered through clouds, shadow like forests behind them, and violet hued mountains rising beyond. There was adventure too, in the form of railway bridges to be crossed using a foot-wide iron strip running through the middle: after sometime you feel stationary and the rails seem to be moving in the opposite direction. The view directly below is both terrific and terrible. Then there were pitch dark tunnels, a few meters to a kilometer long, some of them with screeching hordes of bats and water dripping from the roof – fit for a typical horror movie scene.

There are several rivers and fast flowing mountain brooks in the Western Ghats. One of the things we look forward to in a trek is a splash in one of them at noon-time. Near Yedekumari there was a fabulous setting in a secluded spot, with cool crystal clear water flowing through rocks. The sounds of splashing water and occasional bird calls makes it irresistible to leave.



High on railway tracks near Sakleshpur

For the most part, the trek led through thick forests and thinly populated areas. Wild life ranging from snakes to elephants is reported here. The guard of the goods train in which we travelled the last part to Kukke Subramanya told us about the man who sat on a log of wood in the jungle, only to discover that it was a huge python.

We went to this region again the next year, but in the middle of summer (May 1990), and this time trekked in the opposite direction, from Shrivagilu to Yedekumari. Again the tunnels, bridges and green forests. The railway track is at a great height, often parallel to the river down below and road on the other side, which are visible for most of the route. Thick forests separate the two. This time we entered the jungle at a point in an attempt to reach the river. But had to give up, and run back for safety: there was a herd of wild elephants. When we were in the middle of one of the tunnels, half a km long, a train was upon us suddenly. We flattened against the walls of the tunnel. The roar of the train was deafening.

It is the elements of risk and danger that add excitement. During the trek from Samse to Kudremukh in November, we lost our way, even the trail. Dense trees surrounded on all sides and since it was noon, it was difficult to estimate the direction. We even climbed up a steep mountain to detect any traces of civilisation, but all that was visible from the top was still many more mountains extending on all sides. Finally, we detected a patch of wet ground, and searched for the source of water. It was a small rivulet, but we followed it to a stream, and eventually to a trail that set us back on path.



On way to Kudremukh in early morning

In this particular trek we carried provisions and even a pressure cooker. Collecting wood is easy, and cooking in a glade or an alcove of trees is great fun. And whatever the resulting concoction, it tastes like ambrosia.

Jungle trekking after the rains is exhilarating. At the same time, there are a few problems too, such as leeches. One can never know when this dreadful creature, thin as a thread will attach itself to its victim's feet and suck blood, growing as big as a thumb. The way to remove it is to sprinkle salt or tobacco on it, lift its sucker with the edge of a knife, or burn it away. For prevention, the best way is to dip the feet in salt solution and on thick stockings.

We could just manage to reach the base of Kudremukh by the evening, and stayed in a 96-years old priest's cottage, known as Father Lobo in the surrounding region. He ignited our imagination by describing the beautiful sunrise from the Kudremukh peak. Ignoring the demands of rest by our worn-out bodies, we got up at 4 in the morning to begin the climb to the 6000 feet high peak in the biting cold weather. I still shudder to think of that climb under the moonless sky through waist high elephant grass wet from dew, the trail inches from vertical drops of hundreds of feet. Without torches, and the able guidance of Father Labo's nephew and his pet dog, we could have never made it. It was only much later, after sunrise, and after hoisting our 'flag' (a thin towel) at the peak, that we had a chance to have a panoramic view of the complete path (and also discovered several leeches on us). And Oh! the view of the rising sun shooting up multi-colored rays from the velvety mountains is just too beautiful to describe in words. The whole trek is worth just for this experience.

Depending upon the place and the duration, several things have to be carried on a trek: extra pairs of clothes, food items like bread, biscuits and glucose, an emergency medical kit, candles, matches and torch, carry-mat for sleeping, water bottle, a large plastic sheet to guard against accidental rain, an all-purpose knife, a rope and so on. All these can be comfortably packed in a rucksack strapped onto the back, keeping the hands free for

balancing and holding in case of a slip or fall. A cap and sunglasses are essential for protecting against sunlight.

We had problems in the trek to Yercaud, 33 km from Salem, when we ran out of water. There is a road for the buses taking tourists to this beautiful town at the top, winding round and round the mountains, but we chose to attempt the 2900 feet vertical climb through the forest and dense shrubs. There were several steep rocks made slippery due to loose earth and ashes, and a few dangerous overhangs to negotiate. The climb seemed to go on and on; at every peak, there would be one more to climb, slightly away and hence not visible from the previous one.

This was in March 1989, and with the sun beating fiercely down on us, stocks of drinking water were soon depleted. Fortunately, we met an old coffee planter who guided us to a small water hole in a grove of trees.

After nearly eight hours of continuous climbing we reached the town, full of grime, dust and thorn scratches. After lunch in a local hotel, we all collapsed on the banks of the Yercaud lake. This partially put us back in gear, and at four in the evening, we started on the way down, by road route. This was not to last long however, and we had to stop a passing ambulance midway to take us rest of the way down.

Some experiences are esoteric. By the time we reached the peak of Kudajadri (in September 1990), it became dark and started raining. We had planned to climb down the same day and catch the night bus to Bangalore, but this was not possible. We looked around and found a hut, with two children– a 10-year old boy and his younger sister, who told us that their father had gone to the village below for provisions. Even in biting cold, the boy wrapped a wet cloth around his waist, and cooked a meal of rice and dal for us; the little girl helped in serving. Then they showed a broken hut nearby to take shelter for the night. Early in the morning, before leaving, we tried to give some money to the kids, but they refused. Years later, I came to know that the hill is associated with Adi Shankaracharya.

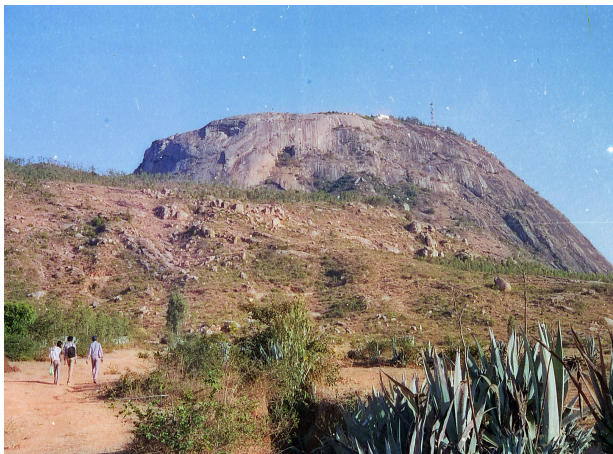


Trekking in rains near Kudajadri peak

There are many more beautiful places in Karnataka suitable for one-day treks: Ranganthettu Bird Sanctuary, an hour's walk from Srirangapattana with a large variety of birds, small animals and reptiles; Nagarhole wildlife sanctuary 100 km from Mysore with elephants, tigers and bison; and the forests, ravines and waterfalls along Cauvery: Talakaud, Mekedatu, Sivasamudram, Dodda Makali and Hognekal. All these places can be reached by bus in three to five hours. For trips of longer duration, there is Yana and Jog Fall, September being the most suitable season. Trekking to Ooty along the railway track is a marvellous experience, just before the winter, with numerous waterfalls on the way. For serious jungle trekking and camping, Silent Valley has no equal.

Rock climbing is a complete sport in itself, but a basic knowledge of the same comes handy in trekking. Ramanagaram, and Devarayanadurga quite close to Bangalore offer excellent opportunities to learn and practice this art. Some of the techniques seem to belie intuition, but are based on solid principles of mechanics. Consider climbing an inclined rock face. Should one walk upright or climb inclined, using the hands as well? It is difficult to believe that the chances of slipping are much less in the former. Even when the rock face is steeper than 60 degrees, it is advisable not to hug the rock, but climb upright, using 'jug handle' holds in recesses. There are other useful techniques too, such as horizontal traversing parallel to a ridge, jamming hands or feet in a crack, chimney climbing in the gap between two rocks, bridge climbing when the gap is more and along a corner, and a combination of two or more techniques such as corner lay-backing.

Advanced rock climbing techniques such as rappelling or zummaring need the use of different types of ropes and special equipment which cannot be carried conveniently on a trek. However, there is no harm taking a couple of manila ropes a few metres long. They come in handy in different situations: crossing a stream, hauling up backpack, as a clothesline, a tourniquet or even as footwear as we did in Sakleshpur trek when somebody's shoe completely came apart.



Climbing up Nandi Hill after leaving our cycles

One need not always confine to trekking. Cycling is also great fun, to places like Shivaganga, Nandi hills and Anekal. It is advisable to check the cycles thoroughly before starting, and to carry a puncture repair kit, with pump, if possible. Hundred kilometers can easily be covered by cycle in a day, with enough time to spare for lunch and diversions for exploration, compared to about thirty kilometers in trekking. Sports bikes can be as good as, if not better than, the big sturdy cycles.

We cycled to Nandi Hill, 60 km away from Bangalore, in February. For a change, we started at 4 in the morning to experience night cycling. It was nice to glide under the starry skies. Now and then the headlights of an oncoming truck made it difficult to see the road in front, and one of us miraculously escaped when his cycle slipped on the road berm. We reached the base of Nandi Hill where we parked the cycles in front of a small shop, and climbed rest of the way up. The climb looked easy, so we decided to try our own path. We ran into thorny bushes, but undaunted, we pressed on and crossed the thorn belt by crawling, and getting scratches all over. Needless to say, this path was not repeated on the way down.

With all these slips and falls, scratches and bleedings, dirt and grime, twisted ankles and hurting backs, what is it that makes we want to go again and again on mad trips of adventure trekking? Become a weekend trekker and find out!

And best of luck!