

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

MUNNAR

The Tea Hills

No. KL-03 — RAJASTHAN COLLECTION · 32 PAGES

IN 60 SECONDS

A hundred and thirty-six thousand acres leased for three thousand rupees a year, planted by Glasgow money and Tamil hands, and since 2005 majority-owned by the people who pluck it — Munnar is a company town at sixteen hundred metres.

The hills are upholstered in tea because one lease, one Scottish firm and a workforce from the Tamil plains made them so; the old railway station is a tea-company office, and the railway went into a river in 1924 and was never rebuilt. What matters: the tahr on the Rajamala road (Eravikulam shuts 1 February to 1 April), sunrise above the clouds at Kolukkumalai, Top Station before the mist, Marayoor's dolmens. What to refuse: the jeep tout, 'kurinji season' in any year but 2030, the chocolate. Come late September to November, or January.

Altitude

≈ 1,600 m

estates 975–1,965 m; Anamudi 2,695 m

Best months

Sep – Nov · Jan

Eravikulam closed 1 Feb – 1 Apr for calving

Give it

2–3 days

one axis a day: Top Station, Marayoor, Kolukkumalai

From Kochi

4 – 4½ h

130 km on NH 85; no railway

01 The Story, in Five Acts

I MUTHUVAN COUNTRY · before 1877

The Kannan Devan Hills were Muthuvan country long before a planter saw them — a people of the high shola believed to have come up from the Madurai side, whose name is commonly read as 'those who carried the idols on their backs'. A Muthuvan hamlet is a kudi: two rows of houses facing each other, dormitories for the unmarried, six matrilineal clans. The planters say two Muthuvan guides, Kannan and Devan, led the first surveys and named the range; no document says so.

II THREE THOUSAND RUPEES A YEAR · 1877-1897

In 1877 John Daniel Munro, a Travancore officer who had come up during a boundary settlement, leased about 136,600 acres of the Poonjar raja's hereditary land for three thousand rupees a year and a five-thousand-rupee deposit. His society tried coffee, cardamom, cinchona and sisal; A.W. Turnor tried tea in 1879, and in 1880 A.H. Sharp planted fifty acres of it at Parvathi, now the Sevenmally estate. Glasgow money arrived in 1895-96: Finlay Muir bought the concession and gathered thirty-three estates, and by the turn of the century the Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company held the lot. The labour came from the Tamil plains, which is why the hills still eat, pray and strike in Tamil.

III THE RAILWAY THE RAIN TOOK · 1902-1926

Tea went out by a cart road in 1902, then a bullock-drawn monorail — one wheel on the rail, one on the road — and from 1908 by a two-foot steam railway to Top Station, a ropeway down to Kottagudi, carts to Bodinayakkanur and ships from Tuticorin. On 15 July 1924 a planter's wife at Chundavurrai measured 4.4 inches of rain before noon, 'an unusually large amount for July'. Five bridges were gone by the 16th, the railway on the night of the 17th, old Munnar under water by the 18th. The line was never rebuilt; a ropeway replaced it in 1926, and the station became a tea-company office, which it still is.

Stand here. Look for this.

Five things almost everyone walks straight past — where to stand, and what you're actually seeing.

1 The table

Any estate road at eight: the flat pruned surface and the line of pluckers moving across it, baskets on head-straps.

2 The bud

Look closely at a bush — the bright unopened tip and the two leaves beneath it are the only part that goes in the basket.

3 The weigh-in

The roadside collection point, twice a day — ask the estate for the hour: bags on a hook scale, the day's thirty-odd kilos made visible.

4 The layam

Rows of one- and two-room company houses along the estate roads — the lines the workforce has lived in since the first plantings.

5 The bungalow

A planter's house with a verandah and a lawn; KDHP lets eight of them to guests — Chokanad East is dated 1917, Kalaar 1936.

One more thing

Shoot from the road and ask before going near a plucker; never walk into a field without a supervisor. The Tea Museum answers the questions in an hour; an estate bungalow night answers the rest. Which factories admit visitors changes by season — ask your host, not a tout.

01 ARRIVAL

Mist lifting off the tea

Pothamedu viewpoint · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 1x

Family small → mist → tea ridge

02 THE PLUCKERS

Two leaves and a bud

An estate road near town — Sevenmallay or Nallathanni — 08:00–10:00 · Morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Pluckers across the middle; family at the edge

03 THE WEIGH-IN

Thirty kilos on the hook

Any estate road's collection point · Late morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Bag → scale → hand; child at the edge

04 THE MUSEUM

The wheel from the drowned railway

The KDHP Tea Museum · Midday · 1x · portrait · 1x

Wheel → hand → rollers

05 THE TAHR

Eye to eye on the Rajamala road

The Rajamala road inside Eravikulam · Morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Tahr → family → slope

06 THE PEAK

Anamudi from the road

The Rajamala road · Morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Family in the corner → road → Anamudi