

4

ADVENTURE
BREAK!



Cycle through Wayanad's many beautiful tea and coffee estates

Wayanad, Kerala, Zen and the art of cross-country biking

WHY GO

It is when you are hurtling downhill through picture-perfect tea gardens that you begin to truly appreciate the genius of that distant ancestor who discovered the wheel. It is all the more heartening when you consider that throughout the subsequent evolution of transport, the bicycle still remains the most efficient vehicle ever invented. It certainly helps if the one you are riding is a sleek, 14kg, 21-speed velocipede. In the saddle, you are a self-propelled master of

your destiny, least concerned about rising fuel prices.

Cycling through Wayanad is one of the best (and least intrusive) ways of getting to know this often ignored part of Kerala. You can choose a trip that's best suited in length (and difficulty) to your stamina, as you cycle through forests, hills and tea and coffee estates. The down-to-earth, delicious food, garnished with the goodness of coconut in all its forms, and the people, who are genuinely

warm and welcoming, are added bonuses.

Having someone else take care of things – so that all you have to do is show up – is the icing on the cake. Enter MuddyBoots, which organises bicycling and hiking expeditions in and around Wayanad. Backed by excellent resources (including a back-up vehicle that carries your luggage and a medical kit) and in-depth knowledge of all the place has to offer, this operator makes quite a difference once you're

GREAT FROM
Cochin

on the road.

With two wildlife sanctuaries, Tholpetty and Muthunga, en route, sightings of elephant, bison, chital, the Malabar giant squirrel and others are fairly common. There are also routes that wind through undulating tea and coffee estates, but this kind of scenery can get a bit monotonous after a while.

Thankfully, the routes also include rest stops near interesting wayside food stalls, like the one at Thettuvazhi (literally "wrong way", as it is at a fork in the road) in the



...before wheeling your way past some spotted deer in adjoining Nagarhole National Park, stopping for a sugar-palm fruit (right), a breather on the banks of the Kabini River (below), or even to buy a duckling or two for dinner (below right)



GO NOW

April is when the trees begin to renew their foliage. While it does get hot, you might catch pre-monsoon showers.

Tholpetty Wildlife Sanctuary, well-known in the area for its scrumptious *unniappams* (deep-fried rice and coconut cakes). You can also try a surprising variety of pickled fruit and veggies, like *amla* or raw mango in brine, or pineapple in chilli and vinegar.

It must also be noted that

Wayanad has a lot of ups and downs, so be prepared to exert yourself a bit. Once you get a hang of the gears, though (and the guides are always around to help you learn), the climbs become a whole lot easier to manage. The good news is that each up has a down, and these can be serious fun – there are sections where you will cover many kilometres without once having to pedal. The key is to learn how to keep your pedalling to a minimum, which will keep you going far longer than you would

expect. And finally, if you feel like you are about to collapse from sheer exhaustion, you can flag down the back-up vehicle, a constant, reassuring presence. At the end of a day's cycling, repair to the comfortable cottages at Pranavam Retreat, tucked away on a lush coffee estate. Once a homestay, Pranavam is now managed by MuddyBoots, and Rema will cook up traditional food for you while you engage her husband, K Ravindran, in conversation. After a couple of days of biking, be warned that you will

find it hard to part from your two-wheeled steed. You will entertain thoughts of purchasing one for the daily commute, and will begin dreaming of that utopia where everyone chooses to travel by bicycle, or – who knows? – maybe even join a bicycling club back home. But even if all these hopes and dreams fizzle away on your return to the big, bad city, you can always come back to Wayanad and your two-wheeled friends.

WORDS LUCANO ALVARES
PHOTOGRAPHS VINOBHA NATHAN

5 EASY TRIPS

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: Bangalore (300km).

Closest city: Cochin (260km), is a five- to six-hour drive from Kalpetta in Wayanad, which is where most trails start from.

Kozhikode (75km) is closest to Kalpetta. Leave early for a full day's cycling.

Closest airport: Kozhikode Airport is 75km from Kalpetta, although Bangalore (300km) is better connected. Kingfisher Red, Jet Airways and Air India fly to Kozhikode from Cochin, although the connections are terrible – you'd probably be better off taking a train.

Closest railhead: Kozhikode is well connected to Indian cities. Take the daily 12706 **Jan Shatabdi** (leaves Ernakulam Junction 9.20am, arrives Kozhikode 1.05pm, ₹ 285 AC Chair Car), and return by the 12705 **Jan Shatabdi** (leaves Kozhikode 1.35pm, arrives 5.20pm, ₹ 285 AC Chair Car).

GETTING AROUND

MuddyBoots provides lightweight cross-country bikes and other local transport. They also arrange for pick-ups and drop-offs from Mysore and Kozhikode (Mysore: ₹ 2,500 one way, Kozhikode: ₹ 1,300 one way).

Locals cooling off in the river by Pozhuthana

Below: You must try *unniappams* when in Wayanad



outdoors on the wildlife trails – carry toilet roles and sanitizer. If you're driving from Kozhikode, it's advisable to wait till you reach your hotel in Wayanad; it's just a two-hour drive.

SAFETY

Both English and Hindi are fairly well understood, in Wayanad. All cycling trips are accompanied by a back-up vehicle and a guide.



MEDICAL AID

The guides are trained in first aid, and carry a first-aid kit. The **Fathima Mata Mission Hospital** in Kalpetta is the best-equipped hospital in Wayanad (00-91-4936-202413).

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

MuddyBoots encourages family travel, speak to them while picking a trail.

GOOD TO KNOW

◆ We rode with **MuddyBoots**. It offers packages with a focus on either nature, culture or adventure, but you can talk to them if you want a vacation made to measure. We recommend cycling through the forests, along with the adventure 'triathlon' package on the Kuruva islands, which includes a high-adrenaline crossing of the Kabini River, a hike through dense evergreen forests, and swimming in rock pools (00-91-9544201249; muddyboots.in; info@muddyboots.in; Bangalore: 1679, 23 Cross, 27 Main, Sector 2, HSR Layout, Wayanad: c/o Ravindran, Edom, Pozhuthana; starting at ₹ 1,000 per head for a full day's cycling, which includes imported geared cycles, helmets, a guide, a back-up vehicle and lunch).

◆ The trees in the sanctuaries shed their leaves from Feb to Mar, and most safaris do not run at this time. The trees renew their foliage between April and May. Also, the neighbouring Mudumalai, Bandipur and Nagarhole sanctuaries tend to dry up by April, sending a lot of the wildlife (particularly elephants) into the sanctuaries in Wayanad, resulting in better wildlife sightings.

WHERE TO STAY

Pranavam Retreat has four elegant cottages to choose from (00-91-9544201249; pranavamretreat.com; pranavam@muddyboots.in; Vasudeva Edom, Pozhuthana; ₹ 3,500 per couple per night with breakfast).



Pranavam Retreat, you will be treated to the most amazing local vegetarian cuisine. Also make sure you try *ela sadya*, a multi-course vegetarian meal served on a banana leaf.

WHAT TO PACK

Cottons (preferably in neutral colours), light woollens if you go in winter, swimwear, sunglasses, a good pair of bicycling shorts (make sure they have inner padding to prevent saddle soreness), bicycling gloves, sunscreen and insect repellent.



WHAT TO EAT

The food around Wayanad is generally excellent (more so if you like coconut!), and both veg and non-veg options are easily available. If you choose to stay at



SHOPPING

You can buy spices, coffee, tea and honey. You can also arrange for a visit to **Uravu**, an NGO that works with women's cooperatives and self-help groups, training them to manufacture and market bamboo handicrafts (00-91-4936-231400; uravu.net, uravu.india@gmail.com; Thrikkaipetta; ₹ 100 onwards).



CLEAN LOO GUIDE

The loo options depend on the trail taken. Decent toilets can be accessed on trails through the tea and coffee estates, while you'll go in the

