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India

The Wild Landscape Of Athirappilly Shows Humans Who's The Boss

Upon visiting the Athirappilly Falls of Thrissur, two travellers make a connection to the landscape that humbles and awes them



The Athirappilly Waterfall UNNIPK/Shutterstock.com

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The thunderclap sounded like an evil genie in a child's fable clearing his throat. The sky wavered between a storm and bright sunshine. We were heading for Athirappilly Falls, letting the name of the mighty cascade roll off our tongues with a sing-song flourish like the locals.

We hadn't heard of the waterfall before arriving at Athirappilly as it's one of those hidden gems in Kerala that Keralites keep to themselves. The falls are located 40km from Cochin International Airport in the district of Thrissur on the Chalakudy river. It is this river which meanders through the thick jungle of the Vazhachal Forest Division before hurtling down in a series of falls at Vazhachal, Charpa and Athirappilly.



A kingfisher surveys its surroundings Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

Upon reaching the entrance to the waterfall, we trod downhill along with other tourists on a winding rocky walkway. Another path for visitors would take them to the top of the falls.

We were soon enveloped in nature's soundtrack of bird calls, the roar of the still distant cascade, and the rustle and crackle of dry leaves crunching underfoot. Suddenly the world darkened and grew mysterious as thunderclouds gathered overhead with the backdrop of the Sholayar forest range in view.

Encountering A Wild Landscape



Reflections of the greenery in the water Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

In this reserve forest the air felt like chilled wine even in the midst of a scorching summer. A few tourists and locals sped down the path like nimble mountain goats, unafraid of the drops of rain that pelted down and which warned of a shower that would soon drench us all. Way below us, dwarfed by the cliffs pressing around them, a few intrepid trekkers dipped weary feet in the river.

Mercifully, after a few deafening claps of thunder, rain pattered down for a while and then stopped as though nature had merely wanted to present a trailer of its power and special effects.

The Athirappilly Falls throw up a light mist



The Athirappilly Falls throw up a light mist Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

After about 15 minutes, we were on level ground and it was as though a curtain had parted on a stage performance. The largest falls in Kerala came into view—three milky white cataracts gushing onto bald rocks 24m below—creating swirls of mist that seemed to chase each other like otherworldly beings in an alternate universe. A grand tableau of mountains and forests enveloped us even as a few tourists splashed around in the spray of the falls. The primeval landscape reminded us that humans are insignificant in the fabric of creation.

A Fitting Name

Come monsoon and the cascade roars like an out of control demon, slipping and sliding over the earth as it continues its onward journey in the form of the iridescent Chalakudy river. It is this performance which earns it the moniker of the “Niagara of South India.”



Currents in the Chalakudy river Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

But when we were there in late April, much of the river had dried up, exposing a rocky bed dotted with large limpid pools of water over which thick vegetation leaned. There was a raw, primeval beauty about the landscape; lush green with a come-hither charm even in a bone-dry summer. And in the depths of the forest, elephants, tigers, leopards, gaur, sambar deer and lion-tailed macaques moved about while richly plumed birds flitted overhead.

We walked down the river bed, gazing at the little rocky islands where birds had spread their wings to dry as they got ready to roost for the night. A kingfisher preened on a bough; long-necked herons and snowy-white egrets dipped sharp beaks in the water to spear fish for dinner; butterflies darted around creating dazzling designs on the water's surface; and curtains of forest parted intermittently to reveal secret paths into its green depths. We joyfully inhaled the sights and sounds of the jungle as it readied to curl up for the night. Unfortunately, we did not spy any hornbills, nor hear the whoosh and flap of their large wings. Their shrill calls did not rent the still fabric of the forest.

Preserving Hornbills



A pair of great hornbills Copyright: Esmail Samiwala

The Athirappilly-Vazhachal rainforest shelters four species of endangered hornbills, revealed Dinuj Viswanathan, the resort manager at the Sterling Athirappilly, a river-fronted resort where we were staying. The great hornbill, daubed in yellow and black hues with a large curved beak, is the state bird of Kerala. It is locally called “malamuzhakki” or “the bird with the deep call that echoes in the mountains.”

Its presence in the canopy of the rainforest is often signalled by a whooshing sound that has been compared to jets flying overhead. The other three hornbill species are the Malabar pied hornbill, the Malabar grey hornbill and the Indian grey hornbill. These long-beaked birds were once poached by villagers for their meat and eggs which were then added to medicinal herbal concoctions. Today, the Kadars—a tribal community who lives in and off these forests—no longer poach the birds but protect them, even study them, and channel their native wisdom and deep understanding of the forests under the World Wildlife Fund-India Ecological Monitoring Programme.

A bird takes flight



A bird takes flight Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

Thus, a 163MW hydroelectric power project on the Chalakudy had to be abandoned in the face of stiff resistance from environmentalists and tribal organisations, who averred that the project would sound a death knell not only for the hornbills whose habitat would be submerged but also for the entire riparian ecosystem.

Better Than A Bollywood Movie

After an hour of trudging across pristine terrain, we finally reached our resort. A few guests sat angling on the river bank, an arm's stretch away from the property. We retreated to our river view suite whose floor-to-ceiling glass windows invited the outdoors indoors for a party. The engaging vistas of the river and a deep mysterious forest lining it transfixed us.



The patio of the Sterling Athirappilly Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

Later, we sipped coffee at the patio of the restaurant and curled up with a book in the library lounge where views of the river gurgling past and emerald doves drying their wings on isolated rocks filled the viewfinder of our cameras. A sweet finale to our weekend getaway was a candlelit dinner on the terrace where an infinity pool seemed to slip into the vast nothingness of the river below. That night, the air was tinged with romance as a guitarist and the chortling river serenaded our senses.

The hushed landscape of the slate grey and green river framed by rearing forested mountains has featured in many Bollywood song-and-dance sequences. Ultimately, it is nature's handiwork, and not comely heroines gyrating by the falls, who is the showstopper and star of celluloid fantasies.

Getting There

Cochin International Airport (40km) is the nearest airport while Thrissur Railway Station (58km) and Chalakudy Railway Station (33km) are convenient railheads from where taxis and buses ply to Athirappilly. The town is well-connected by road to major cities in Kerala, the nearest of which are Kochi and Thrissur.

Best Time To Visit



The landscape of Athirappilly in April Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

While Athirappilly is a year-round destination, the waterfall is at its most picturesque in the monsoon months.

Where To Stay



The infinity pool at the Sterling Athirappilly Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

The Sterling Athirappilly is a top-of-the-line luxury resort. Visitors can consider other high-end stays at the Rainforest Resort, Niraamaya Retreats Samroha and Casa Rio Resorts. The Silver Storm Resort, Greenland Resort and Athirappilly Tourist Home are some budget options.

Itinerary



A water bird scans for its next meal Copyright: Gustasp Irani and Jeroo Irani

On Day 1, explore the Athirappilly Falls by hiking the path to the top and bottom of the cascade. On Day 2, explore the Charpa and Vazhachal Falls which are 5-6km away. On Day 3, visit the Thumboormozhi Dam and Butterfly Garden which has a colourful collection of butterflies.

Always follow the safety instructions while trekking, swimming or river rafting in Athirappilly.

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