

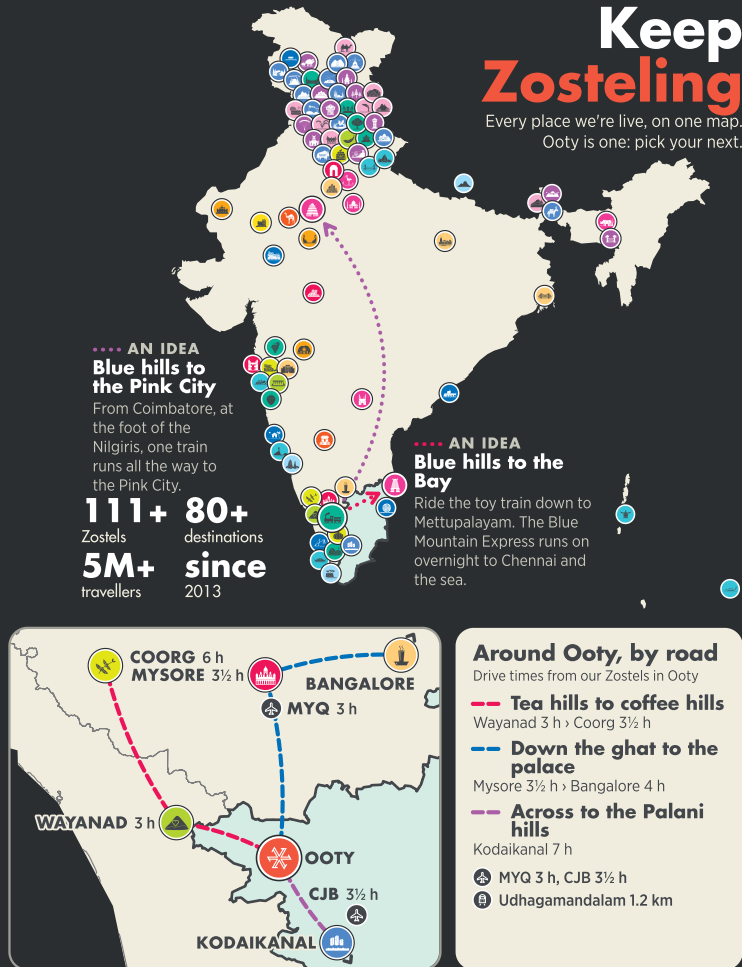
Ooty

a map made by Zostel
for young travellers
FREE MAP • TAMIL NADU



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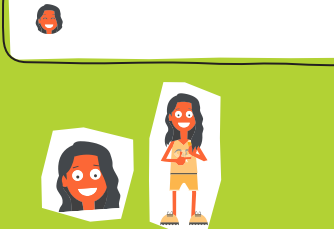
ZOSTEL



India and its states: DataMeet (CC BY 4.0), the Survey of India outline. Roads, airports, station: © OpenStreetMap contributors; drive times by FOSSGIS OSRM, scaled to Zostel's own published times (2026-10). Pins nudged apart where they crowd; edge pins point the way. Flights and trains change; check before you plan.

Vanakkam, Ooty!

Vanakkam! We're the Ooty Zōbus, and these are the Blue Mountains: grassy downs and dark sholas over 2,200 m up, where the Toda kept their buffaloes, the Badaga their villages and the Kota their forges long before a Collector of Coimbatore built a house of stone here in 1822. The toy train still climbs to us on a rack, steam on the steepest part. Walk the garden's terraces, row the lake he dammed, find the club where snooker got its first rules, and dunk a varkey in hot Nilgiri tea. Then climb Doddabetta, the highest of the hills. Come home to our two: one by the station, one in Pudumund's valley.



Stay with us in Ooty

Two Zostels: one a short walk from the bus stand and the station, one in Pudumund's valley north of town.

Zostel Ooty
A short walk up from the bus stand and the railway station, on Welbeck Road above Derby Garden, with views of Doddabetta, bonfires and hikes with the house.

Zostel Ooty (Pudumund)
In a hill-ringed valley north of town on Marlumund Road: hammocks, a machan over the hills, a bonfire when the evening turns cold, and a snooker table in the common room.

Maps: © OpenStreetMap contributors (ODbL), data fetched 2026-10-13 (UTC) - Terrain: Terrain Tiles on AWS (Mapzen/Tilezen), from SRTM courtesy of NASA and the U.S. Geological Survey, Walk lines routed by FOSSGIS OSRM on OpenStreetMap, Drawings: the Zostel brand's own. Things change; check the day's timings at the gate.

Every number is a tip on the map overlaid, in the colour of its kind: ● Gardens and Gables ● Downs, Sholas, Lakes ● Varkey and Hot Tea ● Tea, Chocolate, Thread ● Blue Hills Stories ● Off the Rack. A drawing beside a line shows what you will find there: 🚗 🚂 🐃 🌲 🧑

Hill roads and wild neighbours

Every road up is a forest road of hairpin bends; no overtaking on the curves, and patience in the mist. The short way through Mullalai closes at night. Gaur walk the slopes round town and elephants and tigers live in the forests below: stay in the vehicle and give them room.

Booking the toy train

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway runs from Mettupalayam up through Coonoor to Ooty: steam on the rack to Coonoor, diesel above. Book on the Indian Railways site well ahead, as seats sell out, above all in summer, when extra trains run. Up takes about five hours; down is quicker.

5 minutes of history

Before 1799 The hills' own peoples

The Toda graze their buffaloes on the downs from mounds of a few thatched huts; the Badaga farm from their hatts the Kota make pots, tools and music in their own villages, and the Irula and Kurumba speak languages of their own. Tipu Sultan holds the hills in the 18th century.

1799 The Company arrives

After Tipu Sultan's fall, the British East India Company takes possession of the Nilgiris.

1819 A Collector's report

John Sullivan, Collector of Coimbatore, reports on the hills on 31 July 1819. His road up from Sirumugai is done by May 1823.

1822 The house of stone

Sullivan begins the first bungalow on a hill the Toda had left, bought for a token sum: Kal Bangala, the stone bungalow. It is finished in May 1823; a bund he raises nearby becomes Ooty Lake, made in 1824.

1829 A church of a palace's timber

The Governor of Madras lays St Stephen's foundation stone on 23 April 1829. Its timber comes from the Lal Bagh Palace at Srirangapatna; it opens for worship on Easter Sunday 1831.

1848 A garden from Kew

William Graham McVior, sent from Kew, lays out the Botanical Garden on Doddabetta's lower slopes, terrace by terrace, over ten years. Its first Flower Show is held in 1896.

1870 The summer capital

Ooty, a municipality since 1866, is the Madras Presidency's summer capital. From 1870 to 1930 Stone House serves as its summer secretariat; since 1955 it is part of the Government Arts College.

1880s Snooker gets its rules

A game first played by army officers at Jabalpur gets its first written rules in Ooty. Neville Chamberlain posts them at the Ooty Club, where a table of the time is kept to this day.

Practical tips

Getting in

Government buses (TNTSC and KSRTC) run up from Coimbatore, Mettupalayam, Mysuru and Bengaluru to the Ooty bus stand. The nearest airport is Coimbatore, about 90 km down; Calicut and Bengaluru are further. By rail, Mettupalayam is the foot of the hills: take the toy train up, or a bus by Coonoor. From Mysuru the road runs through the Bandipur and Mudumalai forests.

Getting around

Town is small and steep; walk it, with a layer for the shade. Autos and taxis wait at the bus stand and the station, and town buses reach the main sights. Agree the fare before you get in, and say no if a driver picks your lunch. For Pudumund, take an auto or taxi from the bus stand.

Weather and what to wear

Mild all year at 2,240 m, and cold at night. March to June is the bright season and the busiest. July to September brings rain, mist and fewer people. October to February is clear and cold; winter nights can drop below freezing. Bring a warm layer in every month, and shoes with grip.



The e-pass

Every vehicle not registered in the Nilgiris needs an e-pass to come up, from the state's e-pass website. The rule has stood since May 2024, now until the High Court says otherwise: government buses are exempt. Our Ooty listing asks you to apply on the day you book.

Plastic stays down the hill

The Nilgiris ban single-use plastics, water bottles included: checkpoints on the way up (Kallar among them) look in vehicles and take what's banned. Bring a steel or copper bottle (kiosks at the checkpoints sell them) and refill at the water points at the sights. Carry a cloth bag.

Money

Cards and UPI work in town; at our homes, cards, and UPI at Pudumund. Keep cash for the buses, the small bakeries and the stalls. A free tea tasting can come with a sales pitch: buy the leaf you tasted. Taxi day trips have extras, such as parking, so ask before you go.



1908 The train reaches Ooty

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway, open to Coonoor since June 1899, is extended to Ooty. On 15 July 2005 UNESCO adds it to the Mountain Railways of India.

Today One town, three names

Udhagamandalam is the official, Tamil name; the British wrote Ootacamund (a letter of 1821 has 'Wotokymund'); everyone says Ooty. Where the name began is still argued over: some read a Toda stone in it, some a Badaga word.

Talk like a local

Vanakkam
Hello (Tamil)
vuh-nuhk-kuhm

Nandri
Thank you
nuhn-drih

Aamaam / illai

Yes / No
ah-mahm / ihl-igh

Eppadi irukkeenga?

How are you?
ehp-puh-dih ih-ruk-keeng-guh

Evlavu?

How much?
ev-luh-voo

Thanni

Water
thun-nee

Theyneer

Tea
thay-neer

Volle

Good (Badaga)
vol-lay

Betta

Hill (Badaga): Doddabetta, the big hill
bet-tuh

Mund / Hatti

A Toda hamlet / a Badaga village
moond / hut-tee

Eat like an Ooty local

The hills eat warm and sweet: a flaky varkey dunked in a glass of Nilgiri tea, chocolate made at home, carrots straight from the farms round town, and the Badaga kitchen of ragi and greens in the villages. The old counters first, then the things to hunt down.

7 King Star. Three generations of homemade chocolate on Commercial Road: truffles, fudge, and varkey for the tea.

Maddy's Chocolates, Ooty's other chocolate name, on Garden Road: milk, dark, fruit and nut. Taste it beside King Stars.

33 Earl's Secret. A colonial bungalow on Havelock Road, its famous hot chocolate and baked desserts, mist in the windows.

13 Frost tea (January-March). Not a festival, a season: the first, cold harvest of Nilgiri tea. Ask for it in the tea shops.

The toy train, by the numbers

The climb. From 326 m at Mettupalayam to 2,203 m at Ooty, on 46 km of metre-gauge single track.

The rack. Between Kallar and Coonoor a toothed rail runs between the tracks and the engine's cog wheels grip it: the only rack railway in India.

The steepest. A gradient of 1 in 12 at its steepest, the steepest track in Asia.

The steam. X class steam engines, first built in Winterthur in Switzerland, work the rack; on the climb the engine sits at the downhill end and pushes.

The line. Sixteen tunnels and 250 bridges. Open to Coonoor in 1899, to Ooty in 1908; a World Heritage Site since 2005.



The Nilgiris' own peoples

Toda. Herders of buffalo on the downs, living in mounds of three to seven dogies: arched bamboo and rattan under thatch, with a door so low you crawl in. Their language is close to Kannada; most of the Nilgiris' small tea growers are Badaga.

Kota. Potters, smiths and musicians to the other hill peoples, from seven villages of their own. Only Kota women make the pots; Kotagiri is named for them.

Irula and Kurumba. Two more of the hills' first peoples: Irula and Kurumba are among the Nilgiris' own languages.

Sholas, peaks and lakes

35 Doddabetta.

The big hill, over 2,600 m, the highest of the Nilgiris, under 10 km from town. Sholas fill its hollows and stunted rhododendrons grow almost to the top.

Shola grassland. The hills' own cover: rolling grassland on the slopes, dense evergreen shola in the valleys. The pine, wattle and eucalyptus came later, planted by the British.



29 The lakes.

Ooty Lake was made in 1824, out on the plateau, Pykara's reservoir and Avalanche lie in shola and grass.

Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Set up in 1986, India's first biosphere reserve, across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, with Mudumalai and Mukurthi in it.

Who lives here. Gaur, the glossy black Nilgiri langur, elephants, leopards, sloth bears and tigers in the forests below, and more than 200 kinds of bird.

Thread, clay and leaf

Toda embroidery, GI 2013. Pukhoor, 'flower': red and black thread on white cotton with woven bands, worked only by Toda women, counting threads. Buy it from Toda women's own sellers.

Kota pottery. Only Kota women make the pots, from black and grey clay dug once a year, worked from December to March. A craft nearly lost, now coming back.

Nilgiri tea, GI 2008. Black tea grown here since 1835, brisk and fragrant; the cold first harvest is the frost tea.

Homemade chocolate. Ooty's sweet trade: homemade chocolate fills the shops round Charing Cross and the market.

Eucalyptus oil. The blue gums the British planted give the oil you'll smell in the shops, with the spices.



Ooty varkey, GI 2022-23.

The flaky baked biscuit of the Nilgiris, from more than ninety bakers.

Only in Ooty

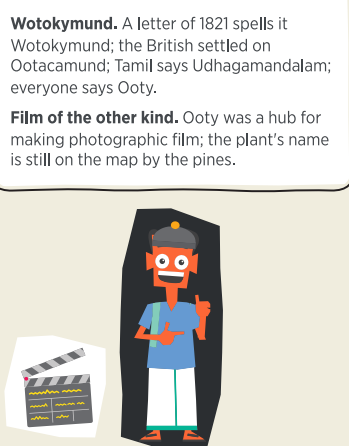
Snooker's first rules. Officers played it first at Jabalpur; its first rules were posted at the Ooty Club, where a table of the time is kept. The man who claimed it said so only in 1938.

A film set for decades. Over 200 films have shot here. Kuch Kuch Hota Hai's summer camp is Wenlock Downs, Maine Pyar Kiya's songs are in the garden and on the lake, and A Passage to India came too.

Older than the garden. A fossil tree trunk, about 20 million years old lies in the Botanical Garden.

Wotokymund. A letter of 1821 spells it Wotokymund; the British settled on Ootacamund; Tamil says Udhagamandalam; everyone says Ooty.

Film of the other kind. Ooty was a hub for making photographic film; the plant's name is still on the map by the pines.



Charing Cross to the garden, the stone house and the church

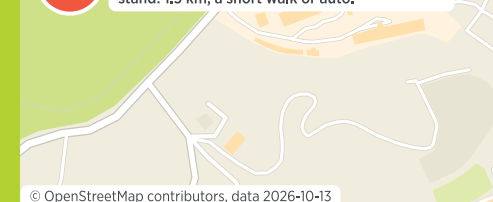
7.1 km • about 4 hours with stops • 5 stops

Charing Cross to the Botanical Garden's terraces and fossil tree, past Stone House, the first bungalow, to St Stephen's, built of a palace's timber; then varkey and tea in the market.

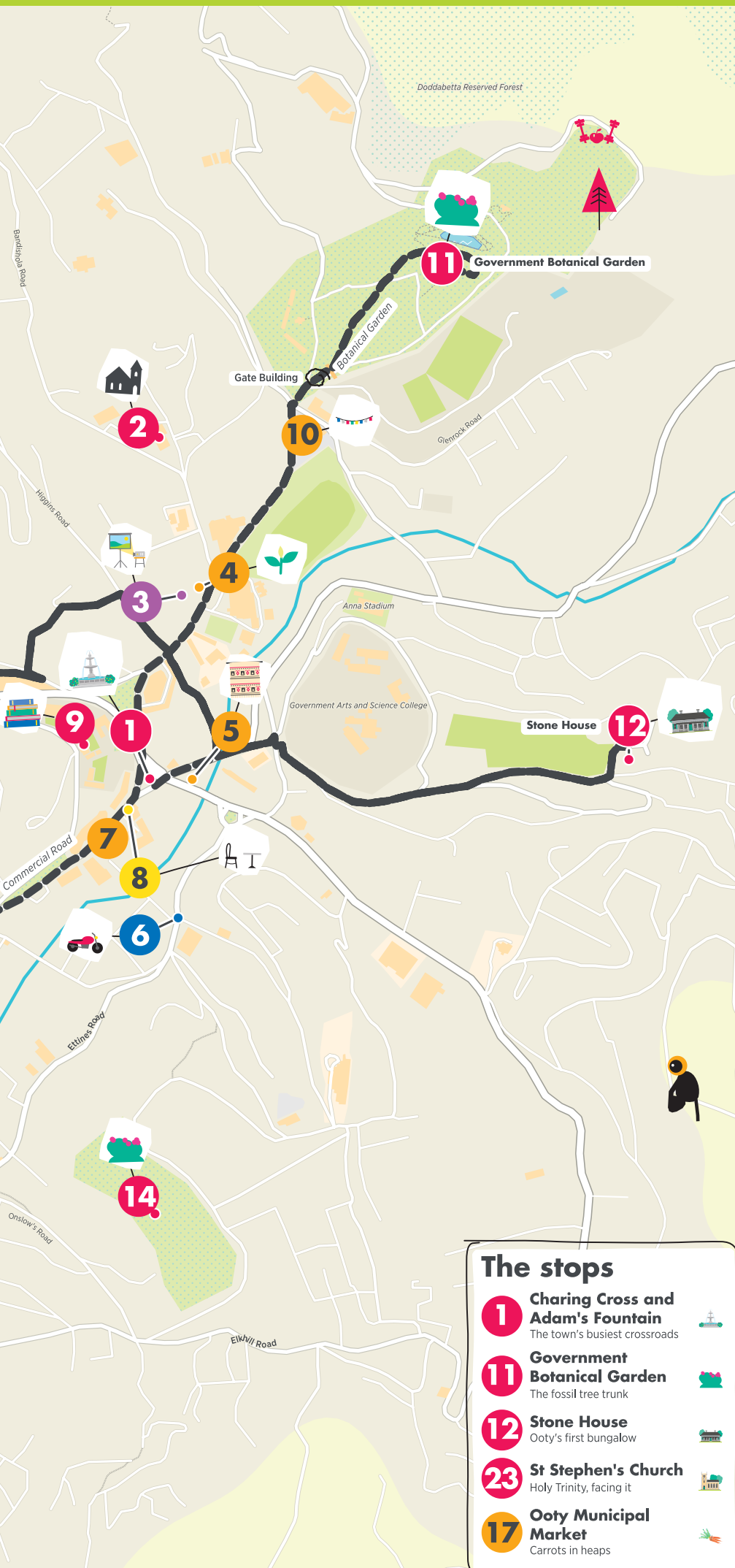
1 Zostel Ooty (Pudumund) • 2.4 km North of town on Marlumund Road: a taxi or auto from Ooty bus stand.



2 Zostel Ooty • 1.7 km Up Welbeck Road from the station or bus stand: 1.5 km, a short walk or auto.



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The stops

- 1 Charing Cross and Adam's Fountain
The town's busiest crossroads
- 11 Government Botanical Garden
The fossil tree trunk
- 12 Stone House
Ooty's first bungalow
- 23 St Stephen's Church
Holy Trinity, facing it
- 17 Ooty Municipal Market
Carrots in heaps

19 Shinkows.

A Chinese family kitchen in town for decades: fried mushrooms, chilli beef, American chop suey.

21 Hyderabad Biryani House.

Biryani at Hill Bunk, chicken, mutton, prawn or vegetable, with spicy South Indian curries.

8 Nahar's Sidewalk Cafe.

At Charing Cross: wood-fired pizza and pasta, and a queue that tells you it's worth it.

Bismillah Hotel. Upper Bazaar's plain hotel for meat and fish cooked the Calicut way.

Adayar Ananda Bhavan (AZB). Dosa, idli and vada for a Tamil breakfast before the hills.

37 The Culinarium.

Out-towards Ketti: pastries, chesecake and thin-crust pizza in European rooms.

13 Nilgiri tea.

The hills' own black tea, brisk and fragrant, grown here since 1835. Black, green or white in the town's shops; cardamom, ginger or masala at the factory.

Ragi hittu. The Badaga breakfast: roasted finger-millet flour cooked into balls, ghee in a hollow on top, eaten with a three-bean curry, greens or sandeja, a peppery gravy. Home food: if a Badaga family asks you in, go.

Thuppadhittu. The Badaga festival pancake: banana, cardamom and poppy seed in a soft batter, made for festivals and weddings, eaten with hutti kaapi, black coffee.

Hilli carrots and vegetables. Potatoes, carrots, cabbage and cauliflower from the farms round Ooty, auctioned every day at the Municipal Market. Eat a carrot raw.

Strawberries. Grown in the hills round town and whipped into cakes and ice creams in season.

Dishes to hunt down

7 Ooty varkey.

The Nilgiris' flaky baked biscuit of wheat flour, mava and ghee, sweet or salty, from more than ninety bakers; GI-tagged in 2022-23. Dunk it in your tea.

Homemade chocolate. Made in small batches round town and sold by the box: fruit and nut, fig and honey, milk, dark, sugar-free.

Nilgiri tea, from bush to glass

1835, Ketti. The first tea seeds, sent from China, planted in the governor's garden at Ketti, down the toy train line.

The first estates. Thiashola from 1859; tea sold from 1862; by 1904 over 3,200 hectares of it.

Ooty Municipal Market. Over a thousand shops behind fifteen gates: the hills' vegetables auctioned daily, flowers, oils, spices, chocolate. Cash.

Charing Cross and Commercial Road. Woolfens, leather, cakes, homemade chocolate and eucalyptus oil, from the fountain down.

Upper Bazaar Road. Spices by the scoop: jeera, chilli, pepper, nutmeg; little shops of eucalyptus and camphor oil.

Tibetan Market. Shawls, jackets, caps and gloves for the cold, beaded necklaces, embroidered kotes.

The lake's market. Snacks, souvenirs and bottles of eucalyptus, camphor and citronella oil by Ooty Lake.

Toda embroidery. The hand-stitched pukhoor, red and black on off-white (GI, 2013), from the Todas' own sales unit, never a print.

Green Shop. Wild honey, beeswax, organic spices and tribal-made crafts, from the Keystone Foundation.

Modern Stores. Loose Nilgiri tea in several grades, and homemade chocolate, on Garden Road.

Kairali and Poompuram. Kerala's and Tamil Nadu's government craft showrooms near Charing Cross: fabrics, handicrafts.

Every ten days. The bushes are plucked about every ten days, some thirty times a year, at 1,000 to 2,500 metres.

Frost tea. After a short winter rest in December, the first leaf from January to March: the most prized of the year.

13 CTC and orthodox. Most leaf is crushed, torn and curled by toothed rollers into small pellets (CTC); orthodox tea is rolled whole. A few factories make white, green and oolong.

Small growers. Most small growers are Badaga farmers, who sell green leaf to 'bought-leaf' factories; the big estates run their own.

The auctions. Made tea is sold at auction in Coonoor (since 1963), Coimbatore and Kocchi.

In the cup. Brisk, fragrant, citrus and flowers; clear even when iced. GI-registered since 2008.

13 Tea Factory and Museum. Watch it all on Doddabetta Road: withering, rolling, drying, then a glass of cardamom or ginger tea.

Coonoor. 19 km down the line and some 400 m lower, in tea and coffee estates: Sim's Park, with over a thousand plant species and a fruit show in May, and the views from Dolphin's Nose and Lamb's Rock.

Got a day to spare?

13 Coonoor. 19 km down the line and some 400 m lower, in tea and coffee estates: Sim's Park, with over a thousand plant species and a fruit show in May, and the views from Dolphin's Nose and Lamb's Rock.

Elk Hill's Murugan. About 1 km from the Rose Garden, the Elk Hill Murugan temple sits up some 400 steps, with a tall statue of Murugan and views over the town; Thaipusam, in January or February, is its big festival.

A little train by the lake. Beside the boat house, a lakeside park runs a little train about a kilometre along the shore; the state's tourism board has run boating on the lake since 1973.

A day on the state's bus. Tamil Nadu Tourism runs a one-day bus tour of the town's sights, the Botanical Garden, Doddabetta, a tea garden and the boat house, with lunch: an easy answer for one when a taxi day is too much.

Forest land needs a permit. Much of the hills is reserve forest; the Western Catchment beyond Avalanche needs the Forest Department's permission, treks there go in organised groups, and in cold spells some spots close. Obey the boards.

Weekdays are calmer. Weekends and the Christmas and New Year week are the busiest, and the May Flower show jams the roads. Go to the lake and the gardens early on a weekday.

Honey from the cliffs. Kurumba honey hunters climb to the hives of the giant rock bee on cliffs and trees, and Keystone Foundation's Last Forest sells their wild honey.

44 Pykara. A river the Toda hold sacred, 19 km out: its last two drops make Pykara Falls, and a power station has run on it since 1932. Boats on the reservoir; pine forest round the falls.

41 Avalanche. A lake in shola and grassland about 25 km out, in a reserve the Forest Department guards: you go in on its own eco-tour vehicles.

47 Mudumalai. Down the hills to the forest: a tiger reserve since 2007, with elephants, gaur and leopards. At Theppakadu, on the Moyar, the elephant camp where the Oscar-winning The Elephant Whisperers was filmed.

34 Kotagiri. Kota-giri, the mountains of the Kotas: a quieter town in tea, with Kodanad's view point, Catherine Falls and the Longwood Shola on its edge.

Summer Festival (May). The Rose Show in the second week, the Flower Show in the Botanical Garden in the third, held since 1896; fruit at Coonoor, vegetables at Kotagiri, spices at Gudalur, a boat race on the lake.

Hethai Habba (December-January). The Badaga honour Hethai, the grandmother of their community, village by village over a month; the biggest gathering is at Ketti. If you're invited to eat, go.

World Heritage skyline. Mukurthi National Park, about 78 sq km of grassland and shola on the plateau's western edge, has been part of the Western Ghats World Heritage Site since 2012, inside India's first biosphere reserve.

The town that made film. Ooty once made India's photographic film: Hindustan Photo Films' plant at the edge of town went quiet in 2012.

Fruit of a temperate hill. Plums, pears and peaches grow round Ooty with the strawberries, and the horticulture department holds its fruit show at Sim's Park, Coonoor, in late May. Look for them in the market in season.

From our Ooty home round the lake to the roses

8.5 km • about 4 hours

From Zostel Ooty to St Thomas Church and the lake, along the shore to the boat house, back by the station where the toy train comes in, then up to

★

QUESTS

Dares for the brave and the curious. The map marks each with a star; tick them off as you go.

★ 35

Spot a black monkey with a golden mane. The Nilgiri langur belongs to these hills: glossy black, with a gold-brown mane on its head. Look up in the trees and keep your snacks away.

★ 5

Find the buffalo horns in the embroidery. Toda embroidery is red and black on white, worked by Toda women by counting threads. Look for the buffalo horns, the sun and moon, and the rabbit ears along the border.

★ 14

Find a rose you've never seen. The Government Rose Garden holds thousands of varieties, the largest rose garden in India. Come late April to early June and find one with a name you can't say.

★ 29

Row the lake a Collector made. Ooty Lake was made in 1824, behind a bund raised by the town's founder. Take a rowing boat out and look back at the hills.

★ 13

Taste the frost tea. Nilgiri tea's first harvest, plucked January to March in the cold, is called frost tea. Taste it beside a later flush and pick a side.

★ 23

Look up at a palace's beams. St Stephen's, opened in 1831, was built with timber brought from the Lal Bagh Palace at Srirangapatna. Step in quietly and look up.

❄ By Pudumund

Zostel Ooty (Pudumund). In a hill-ripped valley north of town on Marlumund Road, hammocks, a machan over the hills, a bonfire when the evening turns cold, and a snooker table in the common room.

GARDENS AND GABLES

1

The fountain in the middle of everything

Charing Cross and Adam's Fountain. Ooty's busiest junction, where the Coonoor road meets Commercial Road, Adam's Fountain was raised by public subscription in 1886 and moved here in 1898. Garden uphill, market and lake downhill: everything starts here.

2

Big painted windows, re-built roof

Sacred Heart Cathedral. Up from Charing Cross, built in 1897, a cathedral since 1955, reopened in 1989 after its roof fell in. Large painted windows and the Stations of the Cross inside. Go quietly; a Lenten walk starts here for Kandal.

9

A school named for the first Commissioner

Brecks Memorial School. Built in the 1870s off Charing Cross in memory of James Brecks, the Nilgiris' first Commissioner, who died here in 1872 and left a book on the Nilgiri tribes. A working school look from the road.

14

Called India's largest rose garden

Government Rose Garden. Made for the flower show in May 1995, five terraces on Elk Hill, thousands of varieties, called India's largest rose garden. Come from late April to early June, and climb to the top terrace for the town below.

16

A racecourse in the middle of town

Ooty Race Course. The green oval between the station and Charing Cross is a racecourse: summer races from April to June, as when the plains came up to escape the heat; 125 years of racing marked in 2011. Walk round it between market and lake.

23

The Nilgiris' old church, beams from Srirangapatna

St Stephen's Church. Begun in 1829, opened Easter 1831, its beams from the Lal Bagh palace at Srirangapatna. A clock tower, stained glass, and the zero stone at the gate that Ooty's distances start from. McIvor and Brecks lie behind.

24

A quiet church among trees by the lake

St Thomas' Church. Begun in 1867, opened in 1871, among trees at the lake's eastern end: a timber roof inside. Its churchyard holds a Governor of Madras and Josiah Goodwin, Swami Vivekananda's stenographer. Stop on the walk to the lake.

25

The Maharaja of Mysore's summer house

Fernhill Palace. A bungalow of the 1840s or 1850s that the young Prince of Mysore bought in 1873; the Maharajas' summer palace, a Swiss chalet in the hills, a heritage hotel since the 1990s. Locals call it Mysore Palace. Admire it from the gate.

27

The end of Asia's steepest line

Udhagamandalam station and the Nilgiri Mountain Railway. The top of the toy train: 46 km of metre gauge up from Mettupalayam, to Ooty since 1908. UNESCO since 2005. It climbs on a rack at up to 1 in 12, Asia's steepest. Book ahead, or ride from Coonoor.

28

Sambar and chital by the water

Deer Park. Opened in 1986 on the lake's bank and kept by the Forest Department: sambar and chital, with birds and rabbits too. Small, quiet, very high up. A gentle stop on the lake walk, not a safari.

30

A garden where nothing grows: it's all thread

Thread Garden. Opposite the boat house, a glasshouse of more than 150 kinds of plant; all hand-wound thread over wire, no needles: Antony Joseph and about fifty helpers took some twelve years. Look closely and find the wire.

39

A school of seven hundred acres of forest

Lovedale station and the Lawrence School. The toy train's first stop below Ooty. Beside it, the Lawrence School (1858), begun at Stone House, now some 700 acres of forest; it played the Rajput College in Jo Jeeta Wahi Sikandar. A working school: see it from the train.

42

A hilltop shrine over the lake

Kandal Cross Shrine. On the hill west of the lake: a bronze crucifix and a relic the faithful hold to be from Christ's cross. Go quietly.

DOWN, SHOLAS, LAKES

29

John Sullivan's lake, paddle boats included

Ooty Lake and the boat house. Dammed by John Sullivan in 1824, about two and a half kilometres long, Tamil Nadu Tourism's boat house hires paddle, row and motor boats, with pony rides out front. Go early, then walk the bank to the Deer Park.

38

A valley of fourteen hamlets

Ketti Valley. On the way to Coonoor, Ketti looks over a valley of terraced fields, tea and more than fourteen hamlets, sometimes called the Switzerland of South India. The toy train stops at Ketti station: get off and walk.

41

A landslide's lake, trout and rhododendrons

Emerald and Avalanche lakes. Past Emerald's tea and shola to Avalanche, about 25 km out, named for a landslide in the early 1800s: rhododendrons, orchids, birds, and a trout hatchery since 1907, its first eggs from New Zealand. Bring binoculars.

43

The 'Shimla' summer camp was here

Wenlock Downs (the 9th Mile). Rolling downs on the Pykara road, once a hunting ground; the 6th and 9th Mile stops are named for their distance from Ooty. Kuch Kuch Hota Hai's 'Shimla' camp was shot here. Greenest in the monsoon.

44

The river the Todas hold sacred

Pykara Falls and Lake. About 20 km out, past Wenlock Downs: the river sacred to the Todas drops in cascades, the last two falls 55 m and 61 m. Its power station has worked since 1932; boats on the lake. Go after the monsoon.

48

Bird-watchers' falls above the hairpins

Kalhatti Falls. About 13 km out on the Stour ghat road, the 36-hairpin way down to Masinagudi; the Bird Watcher's Falls, a 3 km walk from Kalhatti village, where sambar come to drink. Check the road's status first.

VARKEY AND HOT TEA

8

Pizza and pasta at Charing Cross

Nahar's Sidewalk Cafe. At Charing Cross, in the Nahar hotel: a cosy café of wood-fired pizza and pasta, with the hotel's South Indian place steps away for a dosa. There's often a wait: put your name down, walk the shops, come back hungry.

19

Ooty's old Chinese kitchen, decades running

Shinkows. A Chinese family kitchen in town, running for decades, in a room that once held the family's shoe shop. Old-school menu: fried mushrooms, chill beef, chicken soup, American chop suey. Regulars argue; everyone calls it an Ooty institution.

21

Biryani for a cold hill evening

Hyderabad Biryani House. At Hill Bunk junction on the Mysore road: chicken, mutton, prawn or vegetable biryani, spicy South Indian curries, or a gentle bisi bele bath. Big plates, busy tables. Good after a cold day on Doddabetta.

TEA, CHOCOLATE, THREAD

4

Tea and chocolate under one roof

Modern Stores, Garden Road. On the road up to the Botanical Garden: a departmental store with loose Nilgiri tea in several grades, and homemade chocolate. Buy your tea to take home here, ask which is this year's leaf, and smell it first.

5

Real pukhooor, stitched by hand, counted thread

Toda embroidery shops. The pukhooor, the Nilgiris' own embroidery: red and black thread on off-white cloth, worked by hand counting threads (GL 2013). Buy at the Todas' sales unit by Charing Cross or the Club Road shop that finishes their work. Machine prints are copies.

7

Three generations of homemade chocolate

King Star, Commercial Road. Ooty has made chocolate at home for generations, and King Star on Commercial Road is one of the two names our Ooty guide gives; the family is on its third generation. Truffles, fudge, marshmallows, and a packet of Kilby varkey biscuits for the tea.

★ 17

Dunk a varkey in hot tea. Flaky, layered, baked with ghee: Ooty varkey is the Nilgiris' own biscuit, made by more than ninety bakers. Buy it warm, dunk it in a glass of tea.

★ 43

Stand where a film's summer camp stood. The summer camp in Kuch Kuch Hota Hai was shot on Wenlock Downs, not in Shimla. Strike the pose, then walk the grass.

★ 1

Say vanakkam before you ask anything. Hello in Tamil is vanakkam; thank you is nandri. Use both at the bus stand, the bakery and the gate, and count the smiles.

★ 12

Find the town's first house. Kal Bangala, the stone bungalow, was begun in 1822 and is now part of a college. Look at it from the road and find the oak named after its builder.

★ 35

Look through the telescope on the highest hill. Doddabetta, the big hill, tops the Nilgiris. The telescope house at the summit has looked out over the hills since 1983. Find the town below.

11

Fifty-five acres and a very old log

Government Botanical Garden. Laid out in the 1840s by McIvor, a Kew gardener: about 55 acres of lawns, an Italian garden, a cork tree, a monkey puzzle and a fossil trunk said to be 20 million years old. May brings the flower show.

12

Ooty's first bungalow, still standing

Stone House. Ooty's first bungalow, begun by John Sullivan in 1822 on land he got from the Todas; the Lawrence School started here. Now the Arts College principal's home: look from the college grounds, quietly.

13

Leaf in, tea out, a glass after

Tea Factory and Museum. On the Doddabetta road: watch Nilgiri leaf withered, rolled, dried and sorted, with old machines and the hills' tea story. A glass at the end. Taste before you buy.

25

The Maharaja of Mysore's summer house

Fernhill Palace. A bungalow of the 1840s or 1850s that the young Prince of Mysore bought in 1873; the Maharajas' summer palace, a Swiss chalet in the hills, a heritage hotel since the 1990s. Locals call it Mysore Palace. Admire it from the gate.

27

The end of Asia's steepest line

Udhagamandalam station and the Nilgiri Mountain Railway. The top of the toy train: 46 km of metre gauge up from Mettupalayam, to Ooty since 1908. UNESCO since 2005. It climbs on a rack at up to 1 in 12, Asia's steepest. Book ahead, or ride from Coonoor.

28

Sambar and chital by the water

Deer Park. Opened in 1986 on the lake's bank and kept by the Forest Department: sambar and chital, with birds and rabbits too. Small, quiet, very high up. A gentle stop on the lake walk, not a safari.

34

Two drops, best seen from Dolphin's Nose

Catherine Falls, Kotagiri. Near Kotagiri, two drops of about 76 m in all, best seen whole from Dolphin's Nose above Coonoor. Said to be named after a planter's wife, though 'St Catherine's Falls' was in use by 1852. Go after the rains.

35

The top of Tamil Nadu

Doddabetta Peak. The highest point of the Nilgiris and of Tamil Nadu, over 2,600 m, about 9 km out on the Kotagiri road: drive to the top. On a clear morning, Coimbatore's plains below; the Telescope House brings the valleys close.

36

From Coonoor, a garden in a ravine

Coonoor and Sim's Park. From Coonoor, the next town down the line: Sim's Park fills a ravine by the station, laid out in 1874, temperate trees from round the world, the bead tree among them; May brings the fruit show.

45

Three states' forest from one needle

Needle Rock viewpoint. About 8 km before Gudalur, a 1 km walk to Oosi Malai, needle mountain: a view all the way round, pine and tea, Gudalur and Mudumalai's forests. Best at sunrise or sunset, on the way down the ghats.

46

Bollywood's favourite slope of pines

Pine Forest. Between Ooty and Thalakudi, planted pines slope down to the Kamaraj Sagar water. Barfi, David and Deewana all shot here. Mind the steep path after rain; on a weekday morning you get the mist to yourself.

47

One of India's first sanctuaries, down the ghats

Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. Down the ghats where three states meet: a sanctuary since 1940, a tiger reserve since 2007. Elephants, gaur, chital, tigers and leopards along the Moyar. Rides on set routes. Theppekadu's elephant camp; give it a full day.

33

Hot chocolate in a colonial bungalow

Earl's Secret. In the glass room of an old colonial bungalow on Havelock Road: Indian, Continental and Chinese, and the reason to climb up, a famous hot chocolate and baked desserts. Come on a misty afternoon, take the window, make it last.

37

European pastries in the Nilgiri hills

The Culinarium. Out towards Ketti, the café our own guide sends you to for pastries, cheesecakes and thin-crust pizza, in European rooms. A ride out: pair it with the tea gardens and the toy train's Lovedale and Ketti stations.

10

Woolens for the cold Ooty nights

Tibetan Market. On the road up to the Botanical Garden, the Tibetans who live in Ooty sell woolen products: ed shawls, jackets, gloves, caps, plus beaded necklaces and embroidered totes. Come up in a T-shirt? Fix it here before the evening cold comes down.

17

Fifteen gates and the hills' carrots

Ooty Municipal Market. The middle of town: over a thousand shops behind fifteen gates, where the hills' potatoes, carrots, cabbage and cauliflower are auctioned every day. Come for sweet hill carrots, flowers, oils and spices. Carry cash; some lanes move while it is rebuilt.

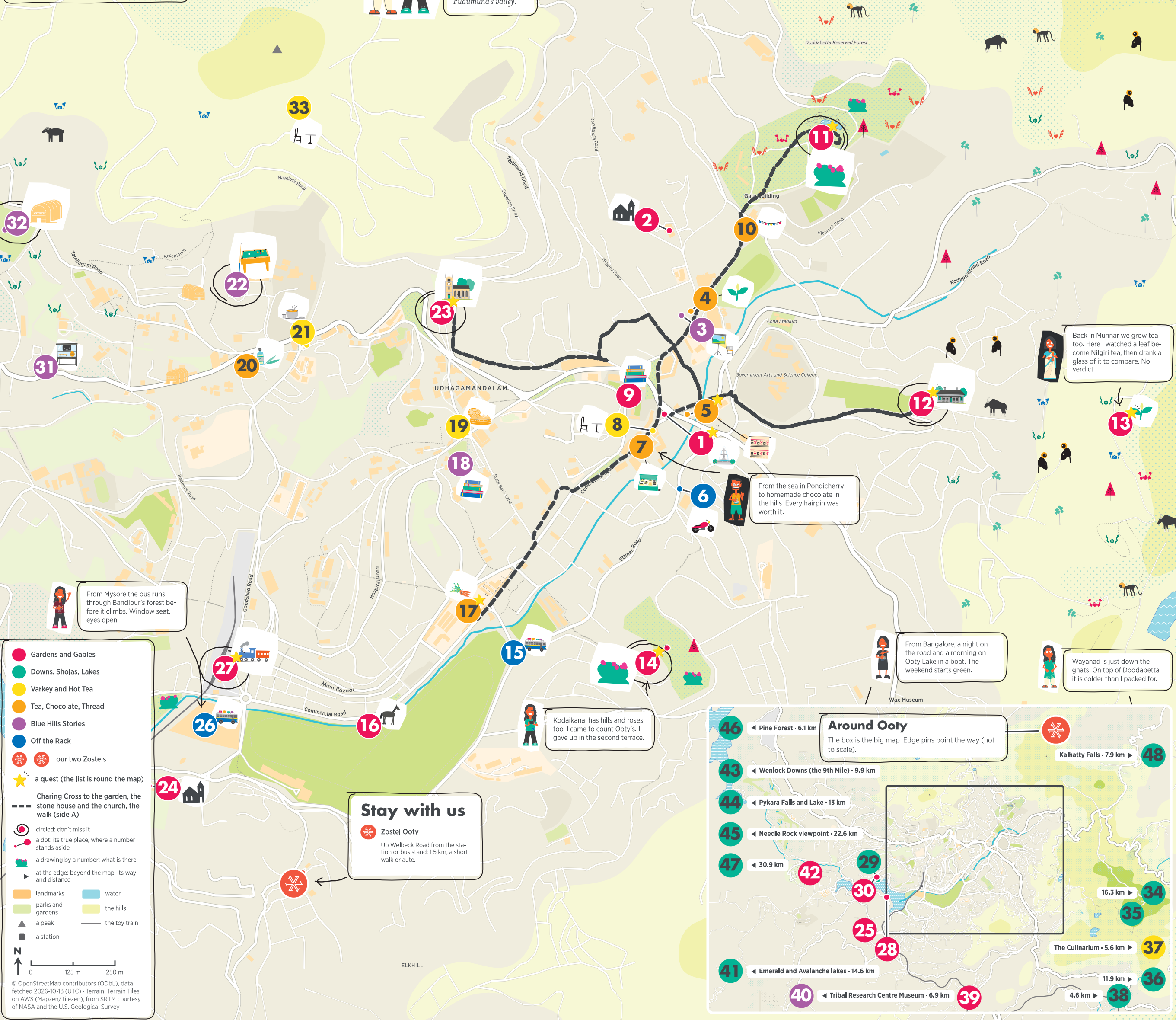
20

Forest honey from the people who gather it

Green Shop. Keystone Foundation's shop for the Nilgiris' indigenous communities: wild honey and beeswax, organic pepper and cardamom, tribal-made shawls and bags, farm cheese from Coonoor. India's first bee museum opened next door. You know who gathered the honey.

Ooty

Every number is a tip around the map, in its colour. Every star is a quest.



BLUE HILLS STORIES

3

The hill station's old picture house

Assembly Rooms. A home for choirs and plays, named the Assembly Rooms in 1886, given to Ooty's residents in 1922; films for over a century, reopened in 2015. Catch whatever is on: the hall is the show.

18

A red Victorian reading room since 1859

Nilgiri Library. Founded in 1859, in its red-and-white Victorian building since 1867: arched windows, tens of thousands of books, one of the hand-somest buildings in town. Members' library: ask at the desk, speak softly.

22

Where snooker's rules were posted

Ooty Club (Ootacamund Club). Snooker started in a Jabalpur army mess, then took root here: by the club's account Neville Chamberlain first posted its rules in the 1880s. A private members' club since 1841: admire the white front from the road.

31

Tribal life, old coins and Nilgiri wildlife

Government Museum. On the Mysore road, open since 1989: the hills' plants and animals, tribal life, archaeology and coins. A rainy-day primer before the downs. Check the day's timings at the gate, and it isn't Stone House.

32

The Todas' hamlets, homes not a show

A Toda mund. A mund is a Toda hamlet: dogles, half-barrel homes of bamboo and rattan under thatch with a crawlin door, buffaloes on the grass. Some sit above the Botanical Garden. These are homes: ask before any photo, buy the embroidery.

40

The Nilgiris' six peoples, explained properly

Tribal Research Centre Museum. At Muthurail Palada on the Avalanche road: a government museum since the mid-1990s, on the Nilgiris' six tribal peoples: Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and Kattunayakans: their tools, ornaments and homes. Learn before you visit.

OFF THE RACK

6

Two wheels for the Nilgiri loops

Bike and scooter rentals. Scooters and motorbikes round Lower Bazaar and Commercial Road, helmet included: carry your licence. The best way to loop to Pykara, Avalanche and the tea villages. Sleep, often wet roads: ride slow. Ask the hostel whether an e-pass is in force.

15

Town buses: the cheapest way round

Town bus stand. Beside the Municipal Market: the town buses to the villages and sights round Ooty, far cheaper than taxis. Ask which bus passes the Botanical Garden, Doddabetta Road or Pykara. Autos fill the gaps: agree the fare first.

26

Buses to Mysuru, Coimbatore, Kozhikode

Central bus stand. By the railway station and the lake, a short walk from our town Zostel: state buses to Coimbatore, Mettupalayam, Mysuru, Bengaluru and Kozhikode. The Mysuru road crosses Mudumalai's forest, shut at night: leave early. For Pudumund, take an auto.