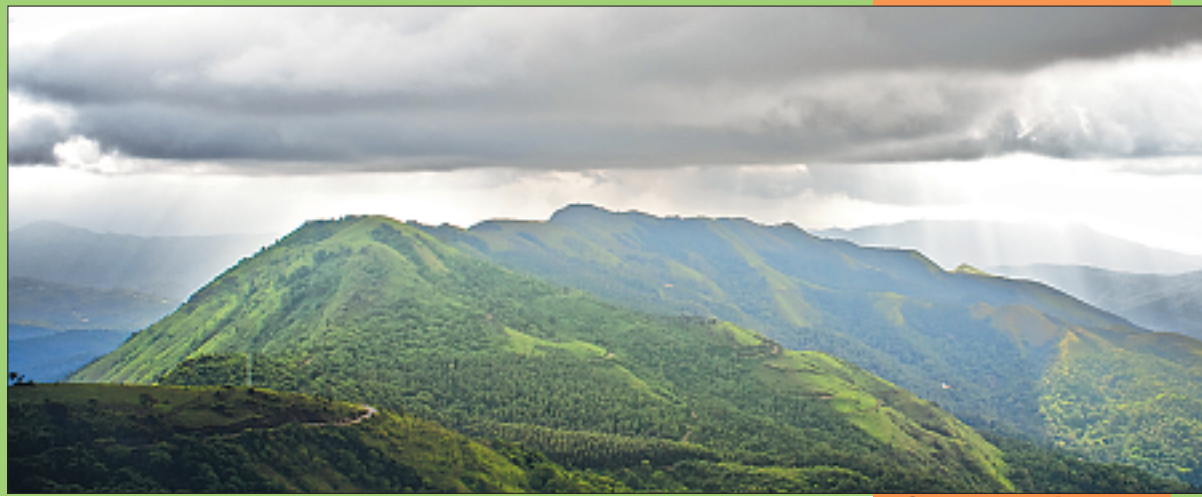




### WILD WEEKEND

We were surprised to find that coffee blossoms smell of jasmine (above); The Mulayangiri hills (top right); The Hoysala temples are covered in sculptures (right and below)



### TAKE A HIKE

If you're eager to tackle the great outdoors, just head to the Mulayangiri hills, less than a couple of hours away by road. The Mulayangiri peak is the highest in Karnataka, and the 500 steps that lead to the temple atop the mountain offer a free cardio workout with some of the most spectacular and unspoiled scenery you can find in South India. We were pleasantly surprised to see no plastic waste, that regrettable trademark of tourist spots, littering this region. The hills around us were every possible shade of green, and the reservoirs and ponds below reflected the sunlight like gleaming mirrors. Every 12 years, the hills are festooned with beautiful kurinji flowers, with lilac run riot amid the green. The last blossom in Chikmagalur was in 2006, so it's a long wait before this legendary plant decided to bless us with its blossoms again.

The hills abound in waterfalls that are spectacular during and right after the monsoons, and there are many trekking and hiking trails. If you risk it in the dark, however, you might become dinner for a

predator. There's no dearth of adventure just a few kilometres away from laid-back Chikmagalur.

### FOOD HIGH

Foodies have reason to rejoice too. The local Malnad cuisine is delicious, and vegetarians will be pleased to know that we were greeted with a spread of a dozen dishes at every meal. The lightly spiced, ever-so-slightly-coconutty and aromatic food will make sure you find it difficult to get out of your chair after your meal. Having visited the area in summer, we enjoyed a delicious local mango dish that is quite easy to rustle up at home – just puree some mangoes (with a bit of sugar) in a mixie, add some mango chunks and season with fried mustard seeds, dry red chillies and a pinch of salt. Serve with piping hot puris for heaven on a plate.

Your visit is incomplete without a stopover at the Belur and Halebidu temples. We studied about them in school, but it is not until you step into the premises that those two lines from a textbook take on their full meaning. These 12th

century temples offer lovers of both art and history an unparalleled experience. Built over more than 100 years, these temples are covered in sculptures depicting gods, mythical beasts, scenes from the epics and glimpses of daily life. As we spent hours marvelling at the craftsmanship, we couldn't help wonder how many generations anonymously worked on huge blocks of stone without living to see the final temple. Did they know that hundreds of years later, their work would remain unparalleled? The devotion required for such an exercise humbled us: these houses of God are now as much a tribute to the human spirit and skill.

Another Hoysala temple, under repair when we visited, is at nearby Belavadi. Tucked inside a village settlement off the tourist map, it stands grand and indulgent as its modern guardians try their best to match the art of the original. The temple compound is protected from vandalism by a small Archaeological Survey board requesting you to not vandalise it, and the vigil of the village children, who clamber up the fence at the arrival of the stray tourist. They yell out "hello" and when they have your attention, they say their magic words: "pen please!" Only those with the hardest of hearts can leave Belavadi with their stationery intact.

### AFTER THE SUNSET

After a day's activity, it's great to sit out in your hotel or homestay and watch the sun set as you breathe in lungfuls of aromatic air. Deep sleep is a rare luxury in the city, and the heavenly silence of Chikmagalur (broken only by the chirping of 'morning alarm' birds) ensures that you leave with recharged batteries, all set to face the week ahead. Whether you're looking for a sample of the wonders of Karnataka, or a long weekend you'll fondly remember for a long time, you can't go wrong with Chikmagalur.

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## Getting there

**By Air:** Mangalore is about 120 km away, Bangalore about 250 km away.

**By Road:** Regular bus and taxi services from Bangalore (5 hours) and Mangalore (5 hours) get you to Chikmagalur easily. The newly installed cheerful yellow Karnataka Tourism sign boards will ensure you don't lose your way. (If travelling from Bangalore, make sure you stop at Mayura – the government-run restaurant – to sample the heavenly pineapple ke-sari bhat).

**By Rail:** Chikmagalur does not have a railway station. Kadur/Birur, about 40 km away, are the nearest railheads.

**BEST TIME TO VISIT:** Visit at the end of April, and you might be lucky enough to catch the coffee blossoms; December could see you picking coffee beans. The weather is good throughout the year, though the rains can keep you indoors if you visit between July and September.

**MUST CARRY:** Good walking shoes, an umbrella, mosquito repellent cream (if you plan to be outdoors after dusk) and a shawl if you feel chilly long before others do.

**MUST TRY:** Akki roti dipped in all the delicious vegetarian and non-vegetarian curries that are part of Malnad cuisine. There are few eating out options in town, so it's best to go with the food served where you're staying.

**STAY AT:** Book yourself into the Taj property or the Serai if you want to splurge. Pick a homestay to sample local cuisine and lifestyle. Choose a nature camp if you're in the mood for adventure.