



# MATHERAN

## A memorable trek

PRASHANSA

**M**atheran, literally meaning 'forest at the top', has the twin attraction of having a pleasant and cool weather, apart from the clincher—it's the only hill station devoid of motor vehicles. So, besides the much-needed break for urban folk weary of pollution, Matheran gives an opportunity to find out how people lived in those days when there were no automobiles.

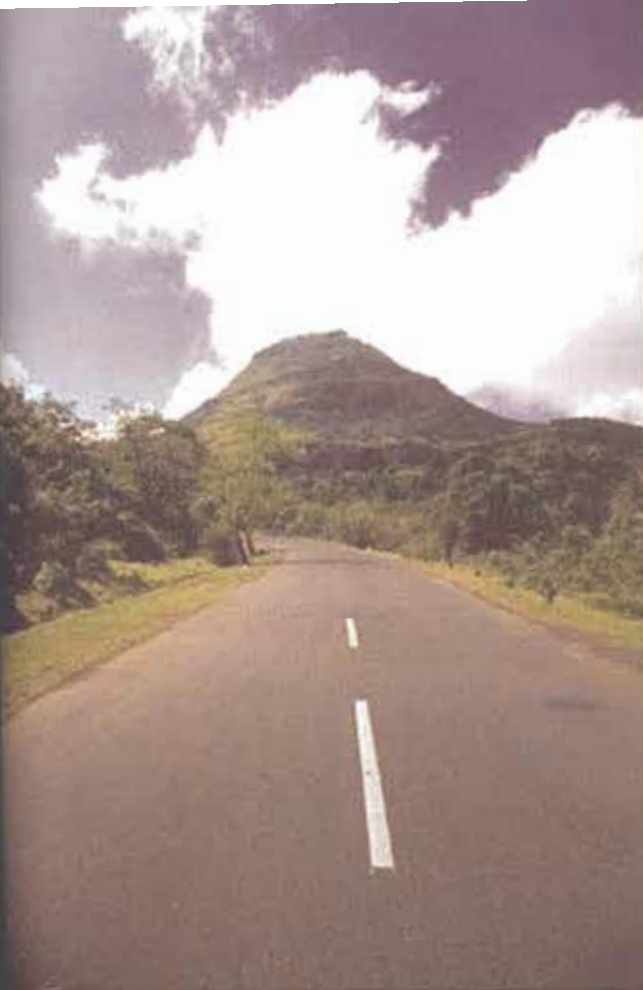
It was discovered by Hugh Mallet, the then Collector of Thane, in 1850, while on a hunting expedition. Soon after Mallet's discovery of this 800 metre high hill station, it was used as a retreat by the British. Its salubrious climate gave a big respite from the

heat and dust of Bombay. Though they seem a bit forlorn now, some of the grand residences built at the time, can still be seen. The best way to enjoy Matheran is a well-planned, two-day trip. Reaching here itself needs planning. One can choose between a toy train from Neral and a taxi. The toy train takes a little over two hours to cover the 21-km journey between Neral and Matheran, but is a wonderful experience – great views, scenery, monkeys for company.... it is a great sight, specially during the monsoon, as the hillside is spotted with small waterfalls and foggy valleys. If you drive up, you park at Dasturi Naka, then walk, ride a horse, get into a hand-drawn rickshaw or get carried in a

palanquin into Matheran. It takes about an hour to reach high street on any of these modes of transport. Walking and trekking tops the to-do list while you are in Matheran.

Matheran has many vantage points that provide stunning views of the Western Ghats and its lush plains dotted with villages far below. Worth visit are – Panorama Point (to catch the sunrise), Louisa Point (for the sunset) and Garbett Point, which gives a good view of Neral. Most of the points are named after the British who were the earliest visitors and developers of the place. We started for One Tree Hill Point, as walking there would cover most of the points in Matheran. We walked crossing the bazaar. Morning

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#### GETTING THERE

**By rail:** Take one of the Mumbai-Pune express trains to Nerul Junction (not all of them stop here) and then chug up the hillside on a toy train for 21 km (two hours) to Matheran. Those who prefer faster transport can hire a taxi or minibus for a 20-min drive from Nerul to Dasturi car park – which is as far as motor vehicles are allowed.

**By road:** Mumbai is some 110 km from Matheran.

time saw the hustle and bustle of one-day trekkers too. There were people on horseback, walking through the rail tracks and elderly folk who preferred the hand-pulled rickshaw. Matheran, like the spirit of life, is all about strolling; enjoying the walk, the nature, the chilling rain, the green grass, watching horses gallop in the fog and hearing the beautiful birds sing.

We reached our first point and the valley full of white milky clouds. Cameras were out to click some stunning pictures. As we moved ahead, it started raining. Cameras were packed inside and rain-gear came out. We came across a huge, horse race course and circled for no reason. Soon, the rain was in its full fury, dropping the visibility to barely 3 to 5 metres. We came across a Parsi cemetery. One

wonders why a cemetery for Parsis; according to my knowledge, Parsis leave their dead atop the Tower of Silence. Rain was daunting as ever, we were shivering due to the freezing downpour and

blustery weather. Evading the small brooks, we continued walking and made our way to a tea shop. After a long wait, we got our tea and biscuits, an irresistible combination and a must energy supplement for trekking.

After some beautiful clicks, we resumed walking. The place was fully engulfed in fog and the route became difficult to guess. Hungry as a hunter, we gobbled down the food and then decided to have a nap to recharge ourselves, as we were only halfway through our trek. Now, the drizzle on the roof was music to the ears and so were some birds. After our evening tea, we headed for Monkey Hill Point. It was a fantastic site; a vast expanse of earth lay before us. Suddenly, the sky looked beautiful with fiery colours and shades. It changed its colours and patterns like a

kaleidoscope. It was getting darker so we started to get back to our hotel. The sun was setting and the bazaar was coming alive. During the daytime, the bazaar is like any other hill station mall area, but as the sun goes down and the electric lights, are switched on, men flock around pool tables, a volleyball game begins, the horse keepers and rickshaw pullers become less persuasive, and through the buzz, you feel the town unwinding.

Chikki (a softer version of peanut brittle), honey, walking-sticks, and custom crafted leather footwear are the best buys here. The next day, which was a Sunday, brought loads of people to the hill station and the people became busy in all kinds of innovative picnic games.

Next, Echo Point and Charlotte Lake figured in our itinerary. First we headed for Echo Point. It was engulfed in fog and attempts to produce an echo proved futile. We moved to Charlotte Lake, the main source of drinking water for the town. It sports a dam at one end and a temple at the other. We visited the Pisarnath Temple. Coming back, it was a beautiful sight to see the fog cleared up on the lake.