

# HILL THAT LOOKS LIKE A HORSE

On a clear day, you can see the Arabian Sea from the summit of Kudremukh. Even when you can't, the stunning view makes the trek up the horse-faced peak in Karnataka eminently worth it.

Words SUPRIYA SEHGAL

**A**s if arriving alone at his doorstep without notice wasn't preposterous enough, a request to help me in climbing the mountain the next day only added to the incredulity. Of course, my embarrassingly poor Kannada skills didn't help in the persuasion. Rajappa looked at me, verified in broken Hindi if he had heard me correctly about venturing on my own, and then brushed away my request to join me with a nervous laugh. Emboldened by success on many such ludicrous plans travelling solo, I knew I would break his resolve soon.

Next morning, armed with a cheeky smile and some basic gear, I was at the hamlet of Mullodi, where he lives, at 6 am. Rajappa was still noisily slurping his tea from a saucer and letting his wife fuss over the preparation for the trek with a bottle of water, a small snack, his shoes and cap.

I had heard about the seasoned trekking guide in the Sahyadris at Kalasa, the base town of the Kudremukh (horse-faced) trek, and thought it would be best to ask him to come along. His reservations seemed valid; I had been refused cab rides and homestays in remote parts of Karnataka as no one wanted to take the onus of hosting a lone woman traveller. Ironic, since such travellers might be the ones who need help after all. But I was determined to scale the third highest peak in the state, and that too with him.

The trek to Kudremukh takes one past gurgling streams, grasslands and lush forests, with the Somavathi river for company, for the most part

DREAMSTIME



Chikmagalur, about 80 km from Kalasa, the base for the trek, is home to some of the most scenic lakes. Seen here is the Ayyanakere lake around sunset

DREAMSTIME

## NAVIGATOR

### LEGEND

Kudremukh is both rich in natural bounty and history. Both the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* mention the mineral-rich mountain. In the *Ramayana*, King Sugreeva instructs his army to search for Sita in the Ayomukh (horse-faced) range of mountains. Even the Pandavas of the *Mahabharata* are said to have taken refuge in the evergreen, untamed forests of the Sahyadri range, especially Kudremukh.

### PERMISSION AND PLANNING

Since the Kudremukh trekking trail lies within the Kudremukh

National Park, you need permits from the office of the Range Forest Officer (+91-9480807653, 10.30 am – 5.30 pm, Trek/Forest Entry/ Guide – ₹75/200/500). Most trekkers ask the well-known guide, Rajappa (+91-9481179008/08263-249333), to secure it in advance. The most convenient way is to put up with a homestay and let them arrange the permits for you.

### GETTING THERE

It is important to understand the key landmarks of the region in order to optimise time, as the trek is time-consuming even for moderately

skilled trekkers. The Kudremukh peak lies on the southwest edge of Chikmagalur district, 20 km from an important town called Kalasa. It can be reached by an overnight bus from Bengaluru (KSRTC Volvos starting from ₹314). From Kalasa, you need to reach Ballagal (9 km) by auto (₹250) or a jeep (₹400). From Ballagal, there is another short drive of six km to the starting point of the trek, Mullodi, which can be reached only via a four-wheel-drive vehicle. This is where Rajappa lives. Jeeps are easily available from Ballagal (₹600-700 one way) or from Kalasa (₹1,200 one way).

### STAY

Upasana Retreat ([www.upasanaretreat.com](http://www.upasanaretreat.com); 09481651988; ₹3,000-4,500 per person full board) is an ideal yoga-inclined, home-run resort to rest weary legs after the Kudremukh trek. The owner, Sukumar, is a yoga teacher with over 30 years of experience. It is a good option to get an orientation if you are visiting for a short while. Yoga classes at ₹100 per hour are a great deal for personalised classes. The money from the yoga classes is used for a good cause—the education of girls in the region with the help of a Trust.

Fuelled by a cup of tea and the crisp cool air, we started on an easy trail that wound its way along the edge of the mountain. He gestured that I should be prepared for the 18-km (round trip) walk and that it would take us nothing less than nine hours. I was secretly glad that I had managed to shake the yawns and arrive in time, as the forest authorities let you stay in only up to 6 pm. One has no choice but to factor that in when starting.

The peak lies within the national park named after it, which spreads over 600 sq km. The topography changes from lush shola forests teeming with wildlife to sun-baked grasslands. You are likely to spot deer, wild boar, *sambar* and, if you are lucky, even a herd of bison. While the best time for this trek is between October and February, I opted for the less crowded period pre-monsoon when it might be hot but the dense copse of sholas in the middle would afford some respite. Besides, once the rains hit, the forest is

infested with leeches and snakes, making it a treacherous climb that even the guides refuse to attempt.

Despite the language gap, Rajappa was able to fill me in with some anecdotes. I learned that we could, if lucky enough to get a clear day, spot the Arabian Sea; about a tiger that he had once encountered; and why our first landmark was called Onte Mara (it was the lone tree in the middle of the golden grasslands). Onte Mara stood only a kilometre from Mullodi and until now, we had managed to keep up a good pace. After a well-earned swig of water, we were off to the second stop. The sound of the Somavathi river accompanied us through most of the trek, growing faint in some places and then returning with full-throated gurgling. This background score of the river was broken only by the rude chatter of babblers, and they too fled on hearing the sound of footsteps. We must have hopped across five small streams to reach the next distinct landmark, Lobo



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## DISCOVER THIS

Being the third highest peak in Karnataka at 1,892 m, the towering horse-shaped rock was said to work as a beacon for the sailors who landed on the coast of the Arabian Sea. On a clear day, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the sea from here. The peak lies within the Kudremukh National Park, sprawled across 600 sq km, teeming with shola forests and wildlife

House. The actual house was tucked away behind a forest patch, but the forsaken grave of the owner, Simon Lobo, stood in the middle of a sun-bleached patch of grassland. The 80 acres of Lobo's land now lie vacant as the owners have moved out due to forest restrictions but the derelict tombstone does make you think of the foreigner who lies there, amidst such grand views.

After Lobo House the walk began to weigh on me. The path meandered between thick swathes of undergrowth and grassland, becoming steeper and windier as we went up. "Zig zag," I remembered reading somewhere. A thousand shades of green draped the stack of mountains ahead. A few clouds seemed to have lost their way and got wedged between them. Apart from that, the sky was a bright blue. The only thing shattering the silence was the sound of the jungle and the rustle of leaves below our feet. I was glad that Rajappa and I didn't share a language to spoil the silence with dialogue. It gave us the privacy of savouring the views on our own. The steep climb to the peak must

have been about 1.5 km but it seemed longer. My muscles were starting to protest. Compared to me, Rajappa, though wrinkled enough to be likely 60 years old, had the agility of a mountain goat.

There were moments when I had to stop, arms akimbo, and draw in some extra breath. That's when Rajappa would look back, and throw two most encouraging words at me: "Arabian Sea." Face flushed and heart beating fast, I would propel my feet farther.

Finally, there it was. The peak itself was just a jagged pile of rocks standing amidst about 50 acres of flat land on top. But there was reward enough for the steep ascents, descents and streams that had to be forded en route. Despite the wind slapping me smack in the face, nothing could take away from the gorgeous views below.

I caught my breath and surveyed the sight with a squint. No Arabian Sea. I looked at Rajappa questioningly. "Next time," he smiled. At least I knew he wouldn't play so hard to get the next time. ♦