

Jilling

27 Jan 2006 – 29 Jan 2006

After giving a good thought on where to go on a vacation this year, my husband, Veeresh and I decided to explore the Kumaon region of Uttaranchal. I had planned this trip several months ago and carefully chose the destinations away from crowd, peaceful. Jilling was the obvious choice of such a destination.

Jilling is the name of the estate owned by Mr. Steve Lall, former air force pilot, which is at a distance of 2km from Matial village. Matial is 36km from Kathgodam, the nearest railway station. The motorable road is only upto Matial and from there you have to walk (actually climb up) till Jilling. There is also an option of taking a pony ride or "palki" till Jilling.

We chose to walk. As soon as we got out of our taxi at Matial, we felt the first shiver of the biting cold in the morning at around 7:30am. We put on our woollens, jackets, stoles, mufflers, caps, gloves and tried to adjust to the sudden change in our surrounding temperature. Matial is a small place with only a couple of houses and small farms. A local person over there mentioned that we could start walking towards Jilling and leave the luggage behind. Someone will get the luggage carried for us in sometime. So we started off, asking the local people around for the initial directions.



The initial climb was not tough but steep. And for me, it was a bit too much after a flight journey from Mumbai till Delhi, followed by hanging out the entire day on Delhi streets, followed by an overnight train journey till Kathgodam, followed by an hour long taxi drive through twisted ghats till Matial. I kept stopping for a short rest after walking a little distance and my husband took those opportunities to click some snaps of the pine trees around. A person arrived with our luggage shortly after we started off, he was leading us to Jilling but due to our slow pace, we asked him to go ahead thinking that the way to Jilling was straight forward if followed the stony path.

After covering some distance, the views and surroundings changed pleasantly. It was filled with screaming noise of Striated Laughing Thrush at some places and at other, it was only the sound of silence. There are couple of small villages (comprising of not more than 3/4 houses) that you come across during this climb, and every villager passing by greets you with a "namaste ji". We asked directions to these passers by and carried forward the "journey". But at one point we realized that we took the wrong path (actually not wrong but a difficult path) when the stony path was gone and we came across a land slide. There were two little kids across that land slide who offered us to guide till some distance ahead. But for that we would have to cross that patch of the slide where one side was a valley (though not too deep) and other side was a hill, leaving only a goat path width to walk. We thought of going back some distance and taking the other way, but that point was far behind and we were already devoid of energy. So we decided to cross this dangerously looking (but a piece of cake for those kids) small patch. The hilly side of it

was covered with a plant which the locals call as "bichhoo booty" and whose "sting" my husband got to taste.

And finally we crossed it and the little kids took us through a small village till the other side of it. We thanked them and moved ahead after taking further directions. After walking some distance ahead, we didn't know where we were and where we should head. The village was left far behind and there were no passers by. Thankfully my phone had signal and I called up at Jilling Estate, explained them where we were, and they sent a person to look after us. Apparently we were not very far from the place.

After reaching there, we were greeted by the owner's daughter Nandini and wife Parvati with all smiles and warm hugs. They shoved us to the cottage where we would be staying which was again a short distance up. The mere sight of the place and the cottage location made us forget all the tiredness and troubles we had to go through. It was located on a hill top with magnificent views of Himalayas far away on one side and a dense forest on the other. It was a nice place and had a living room with fireplace, a library with rich collection of books. In the verandah we could enjoy the sun and the warmth with a cup of tea and listen to the everlasting birdsong. I couldn't stop saying the words - "I am not going anywhere else from here."



The place also had a kitchen and a dedicated caretaker cum excellent cook, Ramesh, who never got tired of serving us meals, helping us with bird identification, lighting the fireplace in the evening for us. He really took good care of us. After having a heavy breakfast, we went on a walk in the jungle over the ridge. Bijay, another helper to Ramesh assisted us. We were lucky that we could see some rhododendrons in the month of January. In summers, Jilling is full of red rhododendrons. There were eagles gliding gracefully over the ridge, a wonderful sight, making you wish you were a bird. It was good to just walk through the forest and get accustomed with the surroundings, the pine trees and the green forest. We paid a short visit to Lall's on our way back.

In the afternoon, Ramesh served us a delicious north Indian lunch of rajma-chawal, aloo-gobhi and chapati. The Lall family had sent for us some home made "gehoon ka halwa". After taking a nap to relax after more than a day long journey, we headed off to another walk to Devi temple, again through the jungle. This time, Girish assisted us and told us leopard stories. Yes, Jilling has leopards and almost every person over there has spotted a leopard sometime or the other. We collected some pine cones on our way. Saw lovely colors of sunset. We were back just in time, and had crossed back the forest before it got too dark. By the time we reached the cottage, it was very cold and outsides were no more comfortable. Ramesh had already lit the fireplace and the living room was cozy already. Dinner was a fantastic homely chicken. Ramesh religiously served us with delicious meals throughout our stay of two days.

The birdsong woke us up in the morning. The barbets were calling from somewhere far away and there was melodious sound of several birds attracting us. Its difficult to hold on yourself from following those lovely voices and so I followed them. It was one of the most wonderful morning

music I had ever heard. I followed the voices and tried to spot the birds producing them. Though bird watching was not the original intension and motivation of this visit, my recent exposure to bird watching and binoculars made me enjoy the trip even more. That morning, I saw great hill barbets, crimson throated barbets, blackbirds, warblers and many more. Somewhere a little far away, behind the trees, I felt there were some things... a group of somewhat bigger birds. I could only see glimpses of something that looked like silver colored wings in the morning sunlight. I followed them. By that time Veeresh had also joined me. You get to see something beautiful when you are least expecting it. And there they were, the redbilled blue magpies, one of the beautiful birds I had ever seen. Their color, their size, the shape of their body when they flew, everything was mesmerizing. They were in a flock, real close to us, but neither of us wanted to move our eyes away from them, not even for clicking the camera. And within few blinks, they were all gone, free will.

In the afternoon, we chose to go on a walk ourselves, though Ramesh instructed us not to go deep into the jungle unassisted. After walking some distance, Veeresh stopped suddenly like a statue, and did sshhh... to me. We were there, standing still for few moments, there was a beautiful little barking deer in the bushes in front of us.

We sat at one place in the woods, and saw a tree in front of us, slowly filling with a variety of sunbirds of colors of green, yellow, black, white and slowly the tree looked as if having multicolored leaves.



On our way back we again dropped by Lall's where Nandini made a sweet nimbu-pani with pudina. There was a tree of large lemons (bigger than oranges) in front of their house. I don't know if it was the place, or the love of people, or the primitive way of grinding the mint leaves on stone, but I had never found fresh lime juice this tasty. After lunch we spent some time in the backyard with Ramesh and Daya watching the woodpecker pecking, tree pies and the loyal blackbird. Ramesh told that this blackbird was an old and a regular visitor of this place. He had put a plate of meat pieces on a tree so the magpies also visited to have a treat.

In the second half we walked on the other side of forest with Daya, this was a bit of trek too. The rhododendron dried leaves on ground are really slippery. This was denser side of the forest with taller trees. We could only hear the birds and not see them. On our way back it was dark, thank God we had carried a torch. After this long trek (I insist on calling it trek and not walk) we were there, in the safety of home, warmth of fireplace and care of those wonderful people.

Next morning, it was time to leave. Time to have the most of Jilling and wonder about how quickly time passed by. People over there had so different problems - the sambar deer eats up the wheat plants at night, the bear eats potatoes, leopard eats their dogs. Lalu was the only dog who might die of old age, he had survived one leopard attack, rest of their dogs had died young. They had a honey comb over the door of one of their rooms. One honey bee had fallen on ground, Nandini gently put it on her palm, put some water drops near it, and held it till it moved a bit, then released it. It was a male bee, beaten and abandoned by other bees for being useless and hogger, who recovered by the water Nandini gave, and was ready to join the bee group

again. Such rich is the "life" there. When we were leaving, with our luggage on a pony directed by Ramlal, Parvati walked with us some distance to see us off. She said "mummy papa ko pyaar dena".

We left Jilling that morning, but Jilling will stay with us forever. There are so many memories that cannot be described in words and so many moments that cannot be captured by the lens, you have to be there once and take Jilling with you, forever.

--Smita R K