



Western Ghat Cycling Expedition—2

September 20 to 23

411 km

(ambasamudaram, manjolai, courtalam)



Day 1- Which way to go?

Checklist

- MP3, Camera, Mobile
- Dress, Towel
- Maps, Diary
- Umbrella
- Sun Lotion & Cap
- Cycle Light

In pursuit of craziness!

Why this crazy expedition? What do I get after all the perspiration? What is it that I want to prove?

Its much easier to pack bags and pedal off to sunset amongst mountains than to fully and convincingly document the objectives, perplexities & delights of such an expedition.

But I owe this travelogue to all those well wishers who have been pouring in advices and praises (and even some very witty remarks) since my last escapade.

Trip objectives

- to explore uncharted roads connecting Ambasamudram (Tamilnadu) & Bonarcadu (Kerala) through Agasthyar forest
- to discover a lesser known hill station - Manjolai
- to break previous records of kilometers covered on a single day.

Rain gain

Though I was flagged off with incessant rains, I was very much ready for it. In fact I was counting on rains to help me put behind more miles than usual.

Escaping from the morning rush of Trivandrum, I was soon heading towards picturesque beach side of Kovalam. The climate was perfect and greenery accentuated. It seemed like the roads and the trees were washed hastily for welcoming some one.....me?

Kids running school wards took few moments off to wave at a funny looking guy doing a balancing act with heavy baggage and an umbrella!

A short halt at a temple around noon gave me one last chance to review the route ahead. Now you might wonder, after so much ado about meticulous planning, why I was not sure which way to go! The truth is that I had been searching in vain for over six months for the route to Manjolai. Now I admit that was the greatest thrill of all. Going to uncharted places!

Like switching TV channels

Enter Tamilnadu and it was almost like switching TV channels. Rains were replaced by scorching sun and signposts vanished altogether. It is obvious that Tamilnadu has better plans of revenue than tourism.

And *that* was an advantage that stayed with my all the trip. Pollution free scenic spots and clutter-free roads. Now for all those who are planning trips to Tamilnadu let me list out my observations and opinions.

- In contrast with Kerala, only roads within a town or a city are congested and in bad shapes. Once you enter country side roads are unbelievably in excellent conditions
- People really make up for the lack of signposts. I was lost after Nagercoil. I was not sure if I should go to Balamore, Buthapandi or Tirunelveli. I approached an idling man for directions. He excitedly gave me his suggestions, opinions and possible directions (I was really pleased, Manjolai was really unheard of). Funniest thing was that he thanked me for asking him directions! Almost like I gave some purpose to his existence
- The erstwhile kings and his administrators had great sense of road planning. The huge avenue trees spanning almost the entire stretch are proof enough
- Though not very literate, tamilians lead more eco-friendly life styles. Cycling is much more accepted and appreciated. I got to see men arguing, women gossiping and both romancing on cycles! Popularity of windmills is another example
- And last but not the least there are hundreds of scenic spots, most of them yet to be discovered and put on the map, all over Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli districts.

Anyway one thing was clear by evening. I was heading for the most pollution free, stress free, solitary expedition of my life. I was reveling in this psychedelic joy when it happened. The axle of my cycle broke, momentarily filling me with panic. I was in the middle of nowhere and fixing it at night seemed impasse. Had it happened in Kerala I would have been done for but Tamilnadu with its popularity of cycles saved the day. Within a kilometer I located a cycle shop. Thus ended the first exciting day of the trip. I hit the sack early knowing well that if I wouldn't reach my destination next day I would be literally stuck in the forest.



Of windmills & pedals



Day 2– From Frying-pan to Ice!

Anyone who has done all day driving, even the most comfortably upholstered versions with conditioned temperature, would readily agree with me about the lethargy the following morning. Then here is something about cycling. No denying the fatigue by evening, but sleep comes deep and rested. And you would be raging and humming to go before dawn the next day!

So there I was moving away from the sleepy Nagercoil town which had yet to start its day. The morning drizzle could hardly deter my progress as by now I had mastered rain-riding. In fact it was one of the most uninterrupted stretch of cycling. By noon I had left covered around 80 Km with almost no halts. The road from Nagercoil to Tirunelveli is indeed in good shape but it was the sun which was making things difficult. By noon I was so famished that I was not sure if I would reach the target I had set for the day - Ambasamudram , or Ambi in short, Tamilians have a penchant for pet names - Kovai, Trichy, Ooty and now Ambi!

“I wouldn't mind a voyage around the world or even a flight over the Everest.

Cycling gives blackouts and wears me to the bone but that's exactly what I enjoy best!”

A heavy meal was playing villain and I was tempted to cut short the journey. Around four in the evening I got into a café to browse for places to stay. Now I feel that was the luckiest whim. A casual search for blogs about Ambi and its jungle trails and within minutes I was back on the road. Around seven in the evening I reached Ambi, the gateway to all the excitement ahead!

So far so good. Had a light dinner but sleep wasn't coming easy as I was anything but tired.

The most amusing part of the day was the variations in temperature. I had seen it all by night. Heavy rains followed by scorching sun and in the end shivering misty chill. Yes I had seen it all!



*Day 3– Mission Accomplished
(but I am NOT going to write about it)*

The whole idea of getting up early was to catch sunrise amongst the mountains. But I have done enough of such trips to know that everything can't and won't go as planned. And with a sigh I realized that sun rises on the other side (of the mountain) much earlier than in Kerala. The wonderful rainbows definitely made up for the loss. And if you are wondering, sorry, everything can't be captured on camera. Morning drizzles pursued me but gave me no inconvenience to write about.

I reached Manimuttar around eight in the morning and had to take a break from cycling for a while. This was essential as the forest guard was not convinced that I was safe in the forest alone.

Around one in the after noon my mission was accomplished. Manjolai. But I am sorry I have decided NOT to write about it. The tranquility and serenity of the place is better-off the way it is now. Unknown. Sooner than later it will be discovered and the beauty would be lost to noisy tourists and their plastic leftovers. But I don't want a part in spoiling Manjolai. So I am very sure I am not going to write about it. I had rather sum it up modestly. I have been to several hill stations in India but this would be where I would retire to, if I have to, some day!

Yet another mission, the one to find uncharted roads connecting Ambasamudram to Kerala, too was accomplished. As you are reading this plans are being made for the next trip!



From background to all around.....misty magical Manjolai!





Day 4– The Usual (at least that's what I was expecting)

So what excitement could I expect from a route that I had done several times before. Honestly I was lacking motivation and desire that was propelling me so far. Though the morning sky offered some spectacular shots, progress was slow. To cheer myself up I had a dip in the water springs for over two hours!. Now that was refreshing and played a key role in the twist of events ahead. Shtupp. Bursting of a tyre sounds much louder when it happens in a forest! And as if on cue it started to pour heavily. Not the



Chilling out...naturally!

kind of excitement that I would pay for. I am sure you might not have got the full picture. Let me come again. It was a Sunday, and it was getting darker and rain heavier and no repair shops, ATMs or hotels nearby. This happened almost a month back and I can still feel the shiver, I had felt, down my spine!.

Anyway I got a little lucky at around six when I reached a small town. I was down to my last few rupees and was sure of a long hungry night ahead. Now there occurs a stretch of road around fifty kilometers after then-mala which passes through a forest. I frequent this was every now and then and truly enjoy the uninhabited roads and clean air. Well never in my wildest imagination did I expect this stretch to give me creeps. Anyway the missing element of the day finally arrived, motivation. I had to get out this place and quick. Motivation indeed! Eighty kilometers non stop and home base at two in the morning!

Thus ended yet another exciting expedition, but let me assure you this is not the last of it.

And now back to the question, why such crazy expeditions? Well let me try list out some answers

- It helps me fine tune some desirable attributes like patience and stamina
- Life style changes! Over the years I have slashed expenses on petrol by around 20%. Cycling has replaced other modes of transportation and trust me when I say that within city limits, especially during peak hours, I leave behind most of the traffic!
- There is bliss in solitude and serendipity. Apart from the unknown trails and destinations I have re-discovered myself over and over again. What a splendid after taste!

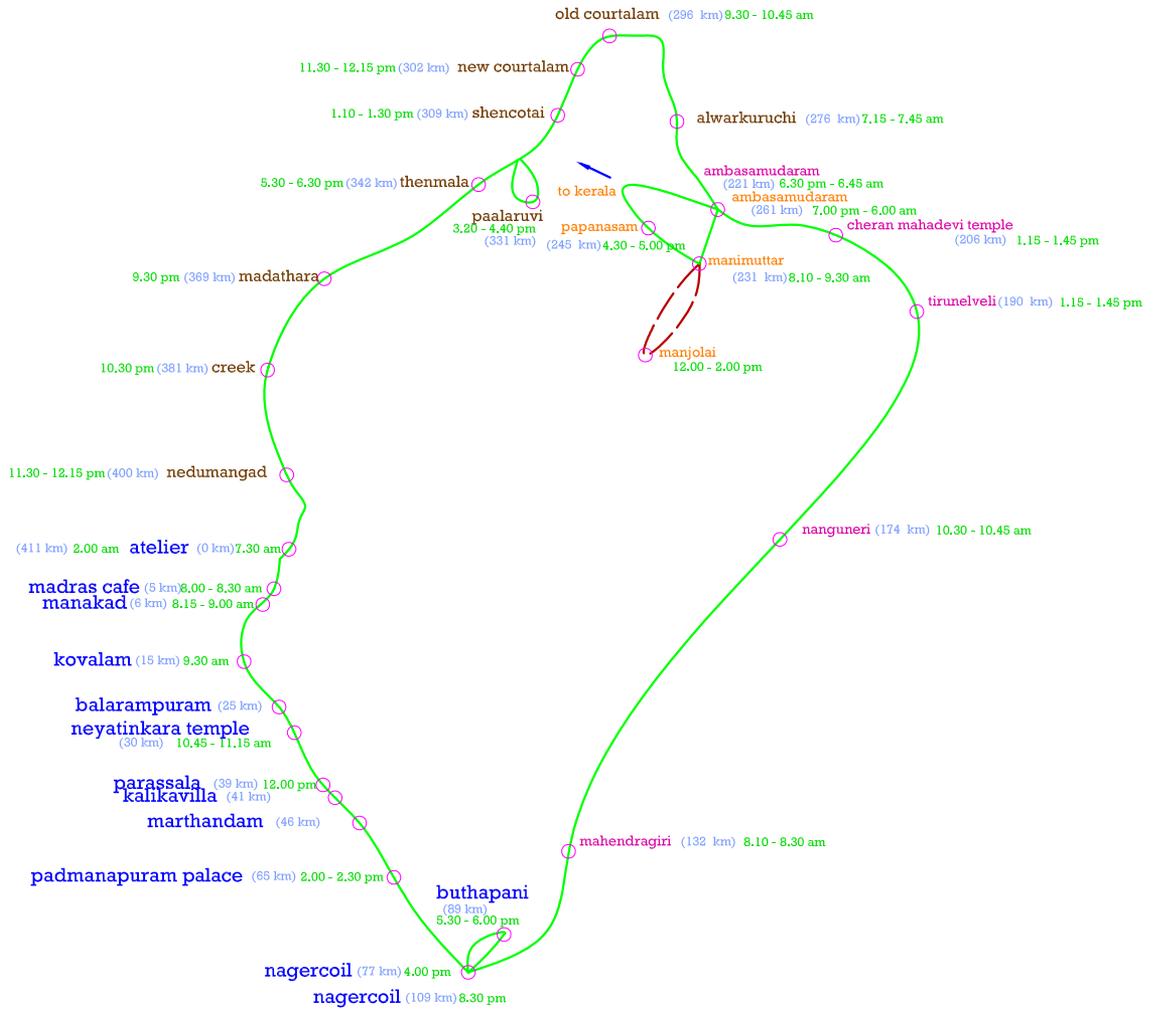
Summing It Up!

<i>1</i>	<i>Total Distance Covered</i>	<i>401 km</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>Total Mountain Terrain</i>	<i>140 km</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Total Forest Trails</i>	<i>40 km</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>Total Expenses</i>	<i>Rs. 1400 only!</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>Best Moments</i>	<i>Manjolai, Ambasamudaram, Paalaruvi</i>
<i>6</i>	<i>Toughest Moments</i>	<i>Midnight cycling between Thenmala and Nedumangad</i>
<i>7</i>	<i>Average Daily Mileage</i>	<i>Level Terrains—90 to 105 km per day</i> <i>Mountain Terrains— 60 to 80 km per day</i>

Lessons for the next trip

- Start early, anything before four in the morning will take me a long way
- Carry some more cash, I should not expect ATMs in forests!
- Carry camera battery charger. More exotic snaps like these wouldn't hurt
- Minimize luggage—a heavy bag does not help when pushing the cycle up hill. I actually did not learn this lesson last time!

Western Ghat Cyclic Expedition - 2 - Distances and Time Map



Legend	
atelier to nagercoil	Day 1
nagercoil to ambasamudaram	Day 2
ambi-papanasam-ambi	Day 3
ambi to atelier	Day 4