**It's time for Kurinji**

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| It's considered the princess of the Palani Hills and it blooms once in 12 years |

   
**CELEBRITY BLOOM The Palani Hills come alive with the spectacle of the Kurinji**

Did your tour operator recommend Kodaikanal for this summer holiday? Bright chap. Actually, he could promote it as a stunning, all-free, must-see, open-air show on the Palani Hills and beyond.

Kodaikanal just got prettier this year. By a special act of Nature. Yes, the hills are alive with the spectacle of the legendary Kurinji. It is in its cycle of blooming and you don't want to miss it. So get into your car or board a train and head for Kodaikanal Road.

A small detour to naturalist Theodore Baskaran's door for details about the famed flower. "Kurinji is a gregarious shrub," he says, reading off a piece he has written on this celebrity bloom. "You'll find them at a height of 1,000 to 1,500 m, growing in big clusters covering whole slopes. Trekking up and down will be an unforgettable experience."

You know what you should be taking on this trip, don't you? A good pair of walking shoes and sensible clothes.

I can't have darshan if I can't walk? The wait is twelve summers. Travel to Kodaikanal Road, take a bus or a taxi to Tiger Shola or Madikettan Shola.

The Kodai-Munnar Road, beyond Berijam is Kurinji country. When you sight them on the slopes, get off for a dekko. You want a couple of trekking guys to keep you company? Get in touch with the Palani Hills Conservation Council. They will have the information. Want more specifics? Ask for Maltavangudi village. The flowers are in bloom now and will be around till the monsoon sets in.

If you're still in Kodai, check out Pamban Cholai. Hire a cab for a day and drive to Kurinji Andavar temple. Coax the cabbie to move around the neighbourhood. On a whole day, you're bound to spot a couple of spreads. Is Kurinji playing hard to get?

Head for the hills around Mallupatti, Gundumalai and Kundala. Climb the High Ranges of Munnar, if one mountain is not enough for you. There it is, in abundance, in all its breathtaking beauty! There are plenty of references in History and Literature to this mountain lovely. Poets looking for largesse would go to the king and say, "*Arase,* you are the one who gives Kurinjithen (honey) to your guests!" Kurinji honey is obviously highly treasured, so you might want to go looking for it in a local shop. "Kurunthogai", a literary work in Tamil sings Kurinji's glory.

Fast forward and two botanists, Robert White and Beddome, explored the area a century ago.

"She lies in beauty," they must have said and revealed Kurinji's charms, its habit of appearing once in 12 years, to the world. And 12 km away from Kodai, Kurinji caught the attention of Jesuit fathers at the Seminary at Shenbagam who kept tabs of it, waxing and waning for over a century. OT Ravindran, the plant artist of Chennai, sent sketches of this princess of the Palani Hills to the Postal Department proposing a stamp. Hope you can put it in your stamp collection one day. It's a good thing you are here this year. Dark forces are working against our pretty neighbour in the Western Ghats.

Baskaran explains, "Acres of land have been cleared for tea, cardamom and timber. Wattle has been planted in the heart of Kurinji country. Eucalyptus, an alien, stands as fodder for rayon and paper industries. Hydroelectric projects have submerged vast stretches of virgin forests. In the little space left, Kurinji is battling for survival."

The Palani Hills Committee for the Protection of Kurinji hasn't given up yet. Members are fighting for a sanctuary to protect Kurinjidom lying between Kodai and Munnar. So tread carefully, as you would a queen's palace. Wherever it blooms, there is a bridle path. Stick to it. Feast your eyes and leave behind only a good impression.

Never, never, pluck the flowers. Don't pull out the two-and-a-half-foot tall bushes for any reason. Kill the temptation. Repeat to yourself, "I shall not pick Kurinji." Tell the kids that the plant withers and dies at the end of the season and won't grow in your balcony.

Tell them Kurinji is the flower of gods.

**How to get there**

Nearest airport — Madurai (120 km)

Nearest railway station: Kodai Road (80 km)

Regular bus services to Madurai and other towns

Tourist info: 04542 - 241675

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