



Where Ferns Still Live

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Bird's Nest Fern, Vazhachal Reserved Forest

I'd forgotten what monsoon in the Western Ghats was like.

Until one Thursday morning in August when we set off across the Tamil Nadu border and into Kerala's Vazhachal forests. It rained. Oh my goodness did it rain. Mist rose from forest floors to spiral up and mix with clouds where you could not even tell them apart. Rain drenched leaves shone verdure and drip-dropped everywhere. Puddles were ankle deep throwing up a neat arc of spray each time we drove through it. Frogs and tiny toads jumped out of our way and eager leeches sensed us and stood on tip-toe (not really, you know) to latch on!

It was not early. We'd been through some classroom sessions before setting out. Our intrepid leader at the helm had rushed us along the way so we could get time here, in this forest. Radha and I were pouting a bit, before this, for we wanted to go to another special place. Little did we know then, what we know now. Our leader had a good head on his shoulders and a great plan. Vazhachal Reserve Forest unfurled wet, green, wonderful and as beautiful things go, fragile. The windshield wipers were ineffective at times and the going was slow. Which is as it should be, for the forest is breathtaking. It is where the ferns still live, you know.



*Dendrobium sp.,
Vazhachal Reserved Forest*

Malabar Giant Squirrel, Vazhachal Reserved Forest



Banks rose up from the sides of the road, covered in roots and ferns, fungi and moss. Rock faces seemed to melt into rivulets as water seeped through and over them. Boughs and lianas were smothered in moss, and there were epiphytes everywhere. Creepers hung from branches like curtains and every bend in the road had a frothy, white, rushing waterfall. It looked like a set from the movies. The bigger characters in this drama – the nilgiri langurs, the Malabar giant squirrels and aves seemed to respectfully give way to the small, the immobile and the green. The set breathed and pulsed with life. From the smallest snails chomping on leaves to the fairy lantern fungi that defied my camera to catch its color. And then the impatiens. Those little pink, fuchsia, white flowers that grow on wet rock, were everywhere. There were whole beds of them, small clumps of them, and lone sentinels bending and twisting but holding their own under waterfalls.

The sun had pushed its way through the thick blanket of grey and briefly spotlighted a moss here and a fern there and I had this incredible urge to simply jump out. Stuck in the middle seat of the Scorpio, though, I waited my turn. Tucking two cameras and one pair of binoculars under my new rain jacket, I looked silly and pregnant as I jumped out and took in a lungful of forest air. I was longing to walk, ever since entering this forest and my jaw was scraping the road in a perma-smile – if that combination is possible.



Green Calotes, On the way to Valparai

It was the paradise I'd imagined and longed to walk in.

Vazhachal is a primary forest, albeit logged, and the trees were old growth. Electric transmission lines scarred the landscape in regular intervals, but around it foliage determinedly continued on. Fabulous as the scene was, there was a sinister undertone. A four-lane highway was to replace this 20 foot road. That means that the ferns and the first few rows of trees will be cleared. Traffic would increase and with it, one can only guess what else might impinge on this patch. It rankled, for here there was no lantana, no profusion of parthenium or eupatorium. This place had none of those invasives we see in disturbed forests – yet (though we did see the beginning of a *mikania micrantha* invasion).

As we walked just a few hundred yards, the rain came down in torrents again. The light was low, and photography in that rain was a prayer. But, for me, tack-sharp images and camera dryness respectfully retreated in the grand drama of green that surrounded me. Low light, shaken shots, grainy high-ISO and all that jazz as a memory of a photography expedition? So be it. The dark of the forest in monsoon is what it is. The raindrops on every blade, every edge, every petal, every moss-fruited-body, is it. That is life as it is happening. And from this photo expedition, that would be my takeaway.



Fairy Lantern Fungi, Vazhachal Reserved Forest

I remember one moment clearly.

I stood on the road, looking up an embankment. The roots of a ficus spread like talons on the mud-rock. Layers of fern and moss dressed it up as fungi sprouted all over. Life was happening. I could feel it. These trees, roots, plants, fungi were not immobile or static. These creatures (yes, creatures) were at work, making things happen. And bugs and leeches and microbes and what-not were stopping by their kitchens and partaking meals – like travelers do at inns. This was life, hard at work.

Fern filled rockface, Vazhachal Reserved Forest



My camera and lens by now were soaking wet. And so was I. finding a dry corner of my t-shirt to wipe my lens clean was nothing more than a dream. My knees were muddy from kneeling to take wide angle shots (that did not pan out, unfortunately) and my butt was wet. Yeah, irresponsibly, I had squatted on a very wet rock to take yet another wide angle shot which did not work out like I wanted it to! I'd found a couple leeches on my neck, one on my face and one on my lip. I'd no idea what was elsewhere and inside my clothes. I was faced with a choice. Wetness and leeches can make one miserable. But I had one glorious day in such a forest, and a few hours to simply soak it all up (pun intended). And so I took all my leech-bloody-wetness thoughts in my head and locked it up in a small compartment. Then I threw away the key.



Fern spores, Vazhachal Reserve Forest

Access denied to negative emotions, I laughed and sang as I walked down to the stream where our intrepid leader was setting up a landscape shot (boy, did he get some good ones) and tried my hand at it (I didn't – haha!). Then Divya and I chased some snails and sloshed across a stream in search of some insanely huge fungi, Mandy took us to see. Clambering up mud walls and leaf litter, still laughing inwardly at the sheer joy of being there, I balked when I saw the fungi. Why it was bigger than the whole of Divya's forearm, which I managed to capture in a blurry photo to show scale. By the time we crossed the stream and got back to the group, the sun had given up the fight with the clouds and called it a day. The group was getting up-close-and-personal with a *Euplecta* sp. Snail and getting this angle and that flash bounce right. I didn't have a macro lens that day, and so tried some shots with my 70-300mm. Not spectacular, but a record of the beauty, I thought to myself and moved on.



Impatiens, Vazhachal Reserve Forest





As we drove back, I remembered our plaintive calls for Manamboli when we heard we were coming here instead. Sometimes you think you know best. But life unfolds in mysterious ways and those surprises cannot be beat. As I leaned back on the wet Scorpio seat, I knew my lens would be kaput the next day. Fogged up at a minimum and auto-focus not working as the worst-case scenario.





Mist meets a downpour, Vazhachal Reserved Forest

We'd probably see the highly endangered lion-tailed macaques up close and I'd have nothing to photograph them with. Or maybe I'd see 25 waterfalls in Eravikulam National Park looking like absolute heaven from this site of the valley. And I'd have only my mind's eye to capture that magic. I smiled. Life had its ways of giving and denying. Sometimes, the denial is a gift, maybe? Do you cherish the short experiences more, hold it dearer when easy access or memory aids are denied? Do you remember things better when you don't have a way of capturing them? I guess so.

After 24 hours:

My lens did fog up. Both of them. We did see lion-tailed macaques. Small, big, old, young, very young. And many more things around Valparai.

Some I have photos of, some I have only words for. All of it in the next installment :)

And if you are wondering what this excellent expedition is, check out our intrepid leader's website for details:

<http://kalyanvarma.net/workshop-rainforest>

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