

## The History of the Nilgiris

Ooty, "The Queen of the Hill Stations" is the administrative centre of the Nilgiri district.

It was recorded as long ago as 1117 that the Nilgiris were seized by Vishnu Vardhana, the King of the Hoysalas, and that it was the land of the Todas.

An enigmatic Jesuit priest, Father Fininico, made the first expedition by a European to the Nilgiris in 1603. He made the journey up from Calicut, but all that remains of his visit to Todamala is a small fragment that reveals that he tried to converse with the Badagas about Christianity and that he gave "Toda women looking glasses and hanks of thread, with which they were very much pleased".

Nearly two centuries later, in 1799, the Nilgiris were handed to the East India Company by a treaty signed by Tipu Sultan.

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It was in 1818 that two youthful Assistant Collectors of Coimbatore, Whish and Kindersley, made it to the Nilgiri plateau. It is not known why they made the journey, but one story has it that they may have been on a shooting expedition, another that they were chasing tobacco smugglers.

Their account of their explorations, which were of a place that was cool and teeming with game and wildfowl, stoked the interest of John Sullivan, who was then the Permanent Collector of Coimbatore.

In January of the following year John Sullivan set out from Coimbatore to the Nilgiri Mountains and made camp at Dimbhatti, just north of Kotagiri. The letter he wrote from the "Neilgherry hills" to Thomas Munro, who went on to become Governor of Madras, is euphoric. "This is the finest country ever... it resembles I suppose Switzerland more than any other part of Europe... the hills beautifully wooded and fine strong spring with running water in every valley."

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In May 1819 Sullivan began the construction of his bungalow at Dimbhatti (near Kotagiri), the first European house on the hills.

The first mention of "Wotokymund" is in a letter of March 1821 to the Madras and the first house to be built here was the 'Stone House' by John Sullivan in April 1822.

In 1821-22 Captain B.S. Ward surveyed and mapped the Nilgiri Hills. Captain Ward said in his report that travellers' temporary bungalows had been erected at Kodapamund, Nanjanna, Killur and Yellanhali and European vegetables including strawberries and apples had been grown successfully.

By 1828, there were some 25 European houses in Ooty, not to mention churches and the houses of immigrants from the plains. This was also the year that Ooty was made a military cantonment. Sullivan's dream of making it a sanatorium for British troops had been fulfilled.