



A tourist's paradise

Srisaillam, besides being an important pilgrimage destination, has lots of attractions for tourists. ■ by Murli Menon

With an area of 3,50,000 hectares and sprawling over five districts of central Andhra Pradesh, the Srisaillam Tiger Reserve is the largest tiger reserve in the country. It has also been one of the largest wildlife habitations in the country. The Srisaillam Tiger Reserve lies in the Nallamalai Hill ranges, which is an offshoot of the Eastern Ghats. There are cliffs, gorges, ridges and plateaus within the reserve.

The Srisaillam Reserve is well-endowed with a variety of flora and fauna. The sanctuary has a thick cover of the tropical, dry, deciduous forests. There are plain vegetation of herbs, some shrubs, a few trees and marshes with sedges. The scrub jungle and climbers are found at the foothills. There are thorn forests on the well-drained hill slopes.

Fauna found in Srisaillam include the bonnet macaque, Bengal fox, four-horned antelope, giant flying squirrel, Indian muntjac, Indian porcupine, Indian tree shrew, jackal, jungle

cat, langur, *nilgai* (blue bull), palm civet, smooth-coated otter, striped hyena and wild boar. The gray hornbill, peafowl, Indian python, Indian soft-shelled turtle, monitor lizard and marsh crocodile are also found in the sanctuary. In the core of the reserve, tigers, leopards, sloth bears, wild dogs, pangolins, spotted deer, *sambar*,

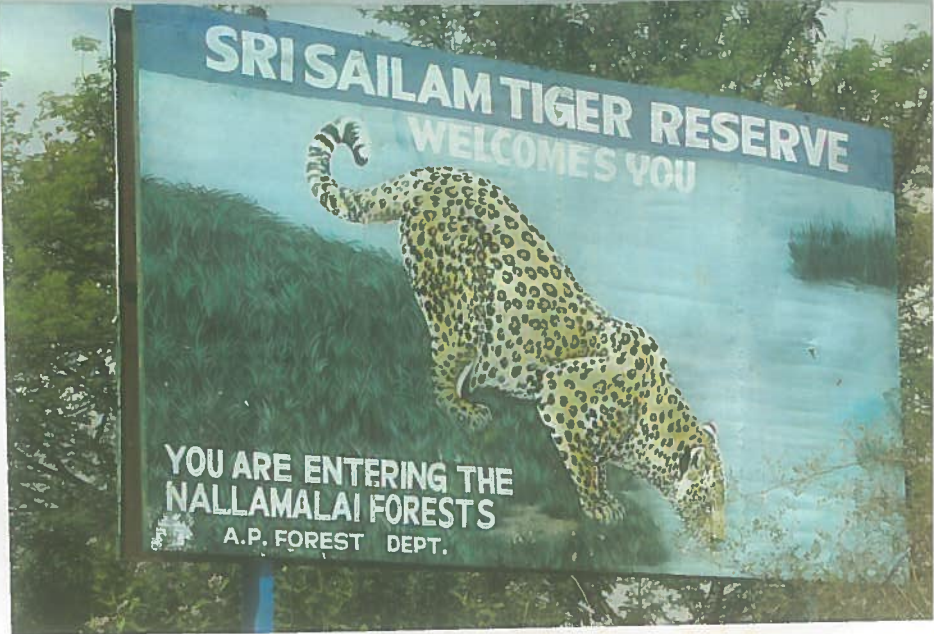
mouse deer, black bucks and *cinkaras* can be found.

The six-hour bus journey from Hyderabad to Srisaillam takes one through these forests during the concluding part of the journey. In winter, if you board the bus at noon, it is possible to watch the picturesque sunset as the bus reaches the peak of the hills.

The trek through the deciduous forests to spot the tiger, is no less exciting. As one enters the forests, several stray deer, *sambar* and *cinkaras* can be seen. The deeper we trek into the forests, the higher are our chances to see the tiger. It may take days on end and long stays with the forest guards, who patrol the interiors of the forest on foot, before one can get a glimpse of this majestic feline. However, if synchronicity favours one, one can sight a tiger as soon as one enters the forest – as it happened with me!

Trekking through the thick, dry, deciduous forests of Srisaillam is an exciting adventure. One can spot several monitor lizards, lazing around in the hazy yellow of the





sun at mid-day. A solitary wild boar scampers into the bushes on hearing one's footsteps. Tiny rabbits keep shooting across your bridle-path like bullets. Barking deer and *cinkaras* take flight and disappear into the rust-coloured background in minutes.

Every moment of one's trek is a close encounter with wildlife. The leeches, which cling to one's feet, swell and fall with every step. One can quench one's thirst at any of the many mountain-streams that criss-cross one's path during the jungle sojourn. The water is soft, cool and rich in natural minerals – unlike the chlorinated, fluoridated water or factory-manufactured water.

Srisailam, besides being an important pilgrimage destination, has lots of attractions for tourists. There is a ropeway, which takes you from the top of the hill to the reservoir and back. Andhra Pradesh Tourism also offers boat-cruises on the river Krishna, which depart from the bathing-ghat.

The ropeway gives one the opportunity to see a bird's-eye view of the azure waters of the Krishna flow between the lush-green hills. In the river, small, umbrella-sized boats, made out of coir and dried palm leaves, float on the waters, anchored by the locals. Hundreds of pilgrims can be seen taking a holy dip in the Ganges of South India, especially at dawn and dusk.



Tourists near a *machan* (watch-tower).

How to get there

There are daily flights to Hyderabad from New Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai and Mumbai. Both Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka Road Transport buses depart every hour for Srisailam from Hyderabad. The fast buses complete the one-way journey in six hours. Andhra Pradesh Tourism boats are available at Srisailam to take you for a boat-cruise on the Krishna River. The two-hour boat-ride costs ₹100 per head.

Where to stay

There are several budget hotels near Srisailam Temple. Andhra

Pradesh Tourism's guest house is a comfortable place to stay. It offers minimum but clean and comfortable rooms to stay.

Where to eat

There are lots of pure vegetarian joints at Srisailam. Steaming-hot *idlis* and *dosas*, with coconut *chutney* are sold throughout the day; vendors operate makeshift stalls all over this pilgrim town. Fresh drumsticks, pumpkin, raw bananas and raw papayas are available from the farms around Srisailam. Fresh watermelons, musk-melons and tender coconuts are available in the market. ■