

Tree time

**Introducing sport of a different
nature – tree climbing.**

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From J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Ents* to Enid Blyton’s *The Faraway Tree*, trees have existed in mankind’s collective consciousness and culture for a long time. And yet, despite the famous fairy tales, it is only in remote India that I still see children and trees bond. The city folk have long forgotten what it feels like to be up, and not in structures of steel and concrete, but in the life-laden branches of nature’s bounty.



Caitlin McDonough ascends into a spruce tree at Willapa Bay, Washington State, USA.

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During my several years of travels, I came across many impressive trees besides the ones in Kodaikanal with their mystical aura, and the gigantic cedar trees of the north. India has its own share of mammoths, such as The Great Banyan in Kolkata, the 450-year-old giant banyan of Chennai and the tallest deodars in Chakrata, Uttarakhand. Nevertheless, tree climbing in the country was, and mostly still is, a local activity. Trees are mostly climbed to gain something from them, unless of course, for research with crews up in canopies bringing us some of the most interesting visuals and conducting exciting projects most of us usually don't even hear of.



BRANCH OUT

At most adventure camps, the young ones always want to climb a tree, making it an activity they actively try to learn. Delving into the past, there is no actual reference as to when people went up trees, but at some point between being man and monkey, the tribes learnt more about trees—which to climb, which to avoid and which to harness and evolve around. For us, it comes naturally, a survival trait which we have chosen to ignore over the centuries.

Above: John Miller clambers up into a baobab tree in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Top: Abby Barrows measures the girth of a *Eucalyptus obliqua*, in Tasmania, Australia.

Left: Amongst the western red cedars, at Cathedral Grove, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada.

In ancient times, trees were the life source, and apart from some Indiana Jones type of setting, people actually did survive in trees. Although we don't need the earlier techniques to go up trees for industrial or other purposes, it makes sense to use the knowledge of yore to further a childhood of lost passions. There are various methods to climb trees, some demonstrated by the famed coconut climbers of South India and a few others by the toddy (sweet sap collected from palm trees) collectors across the Indian coast, many using a device such as a rope or a sling for support.

ROPES AND VINES

There are many professions that require tree climbing skills. Researchers, filmmakers, documentary makers and outdoor enthusiasts are regularly up in canopies along with equipment, using natural skills complemented by technology.

There are others though, who specialise in tree climbing more as a passion than as a work endeavour. As I spoke to Xavier (from Bengaluru), a climber and friend, the importance of safety issues became evident. Any distance from the ground can be dangerous and a fall through the tree can be disastrous. For beginners the trees may be a few feet over two floors, but there are trees as high as 120 feet which are climbed, and those prove to be feats. It is never safe to climb alone, and even during the climb it is better to be harnessed up as opposed to attempts at free climbing. This is especially important if your involvement with nature has been sporadic of late. A jumar (ascender) is usually used for ascending, and for a prolonged

stay, machans (tree houses) are built or canopy nets are used.

The surest way to get up and in between the branches is to have the will to do it, access to good equipment and professional guidance. It might seem tough to locate the latter in India, but there are camps in Chikmagalur and the Andamans where tree climbing is conducted. Else there are adventure enterprises which would mostly cater to the request as well. The last time I went climbing a tree I remember the fear as I tried to undo the knots of the base (the base is used to connect the rope and harness) at the top of the swaying tree, wondering when The Fall would happen. Nevertheless, everyone has their reasons to climb trees, be it getting closer to nature or mastering a demanding sport. As Tolkien said, "If a Ragnarök would burn all the slums and gas-works, and shabby garages, and long arc-lit suburbs, it could for me burn all the works of art—and I'd go back to trees."

In Hong Kong, a banyan tree preserved amongst the shopping malls and hotels of Central district.

CLIMBING TIPS

- Always pick a tree that's alive (the dead ones may be unsafe as they can break).
- Besides the tree, pick a surrounding which seems relevantly hospitable. Don't climb trees surrounded by thorny plants and marsh.
- You can use creepers to climb, especially the thick ones that wind around huge trunks.
- Always check with forest officials in special conservation areas before the climb.
- Climb in groups; in case of an emergency, first aid will be close by.
- Always double-check knots and harnesses for safety.
- Hire professional help or join an expedition.
- Always wear shoes; climbing barefoot may seem more adventurous, but it can be a pain in the sole.

