here is an exaggeration in the quaintness that is Kerala. The mossy carpet of coconut groves, its ribbon-like streams and the neat little wooden bungalows nestling in the shade—it is too picture perfect.

The clock, too, keeps a different time here. The women with fresh jasmine in their hair, the men in their white mundus and shirts, and the neatly-dressed schoolchildren walking without a hurry, teach you to slow down as well, and breathe in.

Kerala redefines the colour green, washes it and presses it till it shines. Come here and give your eyes and ears a vacation. The state is as lush, as it is silent—soulfully so.

In the plains there is the hegemony of coconut. Drink it, eat it, sleep on it or wear it—the tree and its fruit are an integral part of life in Kerala. A small state with a large heart—where do you start discovering Kerala?

Kochi. Strictly speaking, it is a small town, but strategically close to every destination, and some out-of-the-way ones, as well.

I was headed to Munnar, 4,000 feet above the sea and a little more than two hours of driving time from Kochi. Ever since my sister and her husband had shifted there to work in the tea estates, she had waxed eloquent about Munnar. “Walk as much as you like, as far as you like. It’s safe. It rains most of the time. It’s pretty. Come and see for yourself.”

Finally, I gave in, a little skeptical—after all, I hailed from the east of India. I had seen the Himalayas unfold through the morning mist. Would the Anna-malai range impress?

My journey began in the plains of Kerala—on a road that cut through parrot green paddy fields. After a while, our car climbed up, and the sensory overdrive began.
First, the green—fresh, darker and deep, covering every part of the earth. Then, the smells—heady and strong. As my city nose struggled, my sister took pity and stopped at a smallish plantation. Cardamom, cinnamon, coffee, vanilla and black pepper—an army of aromas. In Kerala, most plantations grow two or more of these aromatic substances. Sometimes, all of them are planted in a large magical garden where smells mingle with the wet earth to create a whiff so thick you can cut through it.

Higher up, the road spiralled through mountainous jungles. There was a lack of city noises, a hush that was just a little uncomfortable, to begin with. However, as the ears got accustomed, there were small jungle voices that spoke—the occasional bird, the loud cricket and the swish of the cool breeze through the leaves—carrying a hint of rain. And it rains, or drizzles, or pours, most of the time. The showers come unannounced.

The hills of Munnar are not the jagged-ragged kind, but smaller, rounder and with softer edges. We left the aromatic plantations behind, to travel through rolling tea gardens with their acrid-smelling leaves. And, the mist was everywhere, or were they clouds? I couldn’t be too sure.

The small town of Munnar is as idyllic as it is rain-drenched and quiet. It smells of tea, and life revolves around the herb here. It has several estates and gardens devoted to it, some hotels and guesthouses and a tiny main market. The town hosts tourists from all over India, and a smattering of foreign faces—but, at the end of the day, it belongs to its residents, who take a quiet pride in their home.

Every place has its rules—Goa asks its tourists to “chill”, the Himalayas to “discover”. In Munnar, it is to relax. Breathe. Walk. Contemplate.

Indians designate pretty and lonely spots to honeymooners, or trekkers. Surely Munnar is for the two, but it is also for the lonely traveller. It is for anyone who wishes to wake up to freshly brewed coffee. It is for you, if you wish to take a morning walk breathing in the smell of wet leaves and greet busy pluckers (friendly, pretty women in ridiculously oversized gumboots, ready with a smile and a wave).

It is for the tourist who doesn’t mind getting drenched before breakfast. And more so, afterwards. It is perfect for treasure hunts—play spot the stream, or find the falls, as you hear gurgling water.

When you get hungry doing so, roadside kiosks offer deliciously different vegetarian and non-vegetarian food that doesn’t dent the pocket. Munnar is home to Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities, and all three have left their marks on the cuisine.

A quick online search reveals that Munnar, or “moon” (three) “aar” (rivers), is situated on the confluence of three mountain streams and is surrounded by the Anna Malai range. Websites let you know that the place is pretty, and pretty wet. However, only when you walk through it, do you see just how pretty, and how wet. Divine.

I was happy in my bungalow, overlooking tea gardens, exploring the surrounding estates with my sister’s two dogs, my faithful companion-cum-guides. And reading. I even picked up the paint brush after years. A day’s drive can take travellers to a number of spots. For more information, a visit to the tourism office in the old part of the town is worthwhile. Impromptu treks also throw up a few picnic-worthy locations. Decide at leisure, while sipping a hot brew (tea, or coffee, we leave it up to you).

My visit to Munnar was in a year when I was at my harried and hurried worst. Before I knew it, half of the year had flown by in a scurry of assignments and papers. It was but a moment at Munnar, but, by the time I was back in the city, the clock had slowed and the senses had sharpened. I had breathed. And, I felt free.

Finally, I had to leave a little note to my traveller self—never be too quick to judge.