



Deep in the Heart of Coffee Country

Coorg, the paradisiacal hill station in Western Ghats, has come to be one of the most visited tourist spots in the country. The cosy accommodation options, rich wildlife, pleasant climate, and a fascinating history add to the charm of this quaint little town.

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Mandalpatti is a vantage point that unfolds the brilliant glory of the Western Ghats.

A rich aroma of coffee, pepper, and spices betrayed the fact that the tropical forest that hedged the narrow, winding road harboured a wealth of plantation crops in its ample embrace. Across much of Coorg (now known as Kodagu), tucked away in a corner of southwest Karnataka, Nature and manmade estates have struck a happy balance. A cascade skipped down a rocky outcrop and sprayed the road ahead of us with a silvery mist. Suddenly, the forest receded, ceding ground to the palace of a forgotten raja who once ruled the land.

Rusted, wrought-iron gates creaked as we entered Nalknad Palace, the royal retreat, snuggled within crumbling retainer walls. Time and neglect had taken their toll on this little gem of a stately mansion. Faded and peeling murals of gods and dancing girls; moss-coated stone reliefs of nubile, prancing nymphs on the walls; chipped pillars.... The ghosts from the past slowly started to fill the void as a lone watchman showed us around the darbar hall and private chambers, even an escape hatch in case of an attack.

He spoke in a hushed voice as he told us of how Raja Chikka Virarajendra, the last king of Coorg, refused to cower down to the British and paid a heavy price for it. In 1834 (after the Coorg War), he was deposed and his kingdom annexed by the colonialists. The watchman spoke of how in an apologetic gesture to appease the family, Queen Victoria took the Raja's beautiful daughter, Princess Gouramma, under her imperial wing as her godchild. She even renamed her Victoria Gouramma.

Raja Chikka Virarajendra's short but sharp uprising—the Coorg War—was in keeping with the warrior spirit that



Both Arabica and Robusta coffee varieties are grown in Coorg, the 'Coffee Cup of India.'



Left (top and bottom): Built by Dodda Veerarajendra, Nalknad Palace has an architectural design typical to the region.



Right: Princess Gouramma, daughter of Chikka Veerarajendra, was baptised in the presence of Queen Victoria who became her god mother in 1852.



runs deep in the blood of the people he once ruled over. The origins of the Coorgis (or Kodavas as they are now called) are obscure but one version has it that they are the descendants of the soldiers of Alexander the Great's army who chose to stay on after he withdrew from the subcontinent. Even today, the Kodavas are not covered by the Indian Arms Act and have the right to own and carry guns. They even celebrate a festival of arms (Keilpoldu) in early September during which they perform a *pūja* over their guns, swords, and daggers before offering them to the Gods.

"Almost every Kodava family possesses one or more guns; and little boys dream of joining the armed forces," Bopanna K D, the eager, young naturalist, informed us as he unlocked the wonders of Nature around our resort. Butterflies with rainbow wings flirted with wild flowers; dewdrop-studded spider webs hung across branches like diamond necklaces; a symphony of bird calls filled the air; waterfalls tumbled into gurgling streams. We got a glimpse of why Coorg spawned a tribe of fierce warriors to protect its abundant bounty.

Likewise, no efforts were spared at the resort to ensure that it left minimum footprints on the land. Spread over 180.2 acres of a lush organic coffee and spice plantation, and embraced by a tousled forest

of rosewood and bishop wood trees and stands of bamboo and wild ferns, the resort sought to blend into its surroundings. Each timber-themed villa, propped on stilts, offers guests a sense of private space along with commanding views of forested hills rippling like waves to a far horizon. The villas, crafted of Canadian spruce wood and Burmese teak (purchased from green farms), with shingled roofs and private sit-outs (the suites come with open-air Jacuzzis) snuggled amidst dense greenery.

The spirit of the place was best captured in the open-sided restaurant, cantilevered over a waterfall. Yes, our fine dining experience of Kodava cuisine conjured up by the chef was garnished with a generous helping of ambience: the rustling of the forest on one side, the gurgle of a frothing white cascade below a glass-bottom floor and a chorus of crickets.

Early next morning, we drove to Dubare Elephant Camp on the banks of the Kaveri, revered as a holy river in these parts because of its life-giving waters. From there, we trekked down a narrow jungle trail, past towering bamboo groves that rustled in the wind and large twisting vines that lassoed their host trees. A fast-moving black cloud that whizzed through the forest canopy turned out to be a swarm of bees escorting a young queen to her new hive. We wrestled

with mixed emotions: the hope of crossing paths with wild elephants, maybe even a leopard, reined in by the fear of not knowing what to do if we did.

We arrived at a little tribal settlement at the very moment the village doctor (he later showed us the tools of his trade: scorpions, bones, spiders, roots, herbs...) was treating a young boy for snake bite. He chewed on a mixture of roots and leaves and applied the paste on the affected leg, all the while mumbling mantras. Slowly, the droopy-eyed boy's eyes opened and he said he was feeling better. "Cobra", our guide said, and we took his word for it. The doctor's wife was the village high priestess and her domain was a little shrine built over a vermilion-stained termite mound.

Back at Dubare Elephant Camp, the forest department's elephants were revelling in their daily bath; rolling around on the river while their mahouts soaped and scrubbed them down. We joined in to lend a hand; not that we did much, other than delight at the idea of interacting with these gentle giants.

The bathing ritual over, we decided to cross the river. Our prime objective was to get to the other side in a coracle—a circular boat made of thatched bamboo. We sat in the hollow of this rustic craft as it drifted down a watery avenue that fielded the reflection of the forest that lined its banks. Plop! Fruits dropped from overhanging branches of trees to take root in the fertile soil downstream.

Our next stop was a Buddhist settlement in Bylakuppe that had all the frills of a Tibetan monastery—monks in orange robes twirling prayer wheels, pagoda-roof shrines that housed gilded incarnations of the 'enlightened one', ancient legends retold in colourful murals. Bylakuppe, we were informed, is the second largest Tibetan settlement outside Tibet, after the one in Dharamshala.

After a silent prayer, punctuated by a monk tapping on a prayer drum, we set off for our luxurious base at the resort where we had a pick-me-up shot of local filter coffee at the cosy veranda. We spent many happy moments at this, the resort's coffee-museum-cum-coffee-lounge-cum-boutique, located in a charming vintage bungalow which once housed the staff of the plantation. Coffee was once again the theme at our treatment at the spa which included a good scrub with its powdered beans before the oil massage. ■

LIFE IN A COFFEE PLANTATION

During our stay at a coffee plantation in Coorg, we got to sample the luxury of a plantation manager's lifestyle minus the trouble of running the estate. Here old-world indulgence was the keynote of our stay—the staff anticipated our needs even before we stated them. Guest cottages snuggled in the embrace of Nature's abundant bounty.

Shade-grown coffee, a salient feature of plantations in Coorg, means that the estate thrives under a forest canopy. We would wake to the alarm call of bird song and walk down meandering pathways in the company of fluttering butterflies and dragonflies. The coffee bush is a busy plant—branches painted with white flower blooms are soon studded with green berries that slowly ripen into deep-red. We happened to check into an estate at plucking time, and they encouraged us to help harvest the crop and we topped off the adventure with a perfect cup of traditional filter coffee.



FACT FILE

Bengaluru, the closest airport, is a six-hour drive to Coorg. Coorg has a number of accommodation options, from homestays to time-share and luxury resorts.

A trip to Coorg is incomplete without a visit to the Dubare Elephant Camp, a project undertaken by the Karnataka Forest Department. It is a rare chance to observe the gentle giants at close quarters and to capture a glimpse of their interesting life.