

Cover story





Coffee and Coorg

A REFRESHING SAUNTER THROUGH THE LUSH HILL STATION IN KARNATAKA

Text **Supriya Sehgal**

The lush green coffee and pepper plantations form a spectacular backdrop.

Despite countless trips to the region and having explored every possible dimension of the district, I'm always ready for one more trip to Coorg. I had hiked to Tadiandamol – the highest peak here, picked coffee beans with plantation workers, bowed before temples, been to Ayurvedic resorts wedged in the middle of nowhere, and lived the plantation



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Clockwise from left: Relax at the stilted and luxurious Eden Lotus cottage at The Tamara Coorg; Ripe coffee beans – plump and red – signal harvest season; A leisurely stay can be enjoyed at the charming Silver Brook Estate, nestled amidst vast coffee plantations.



Silver Brook Estate

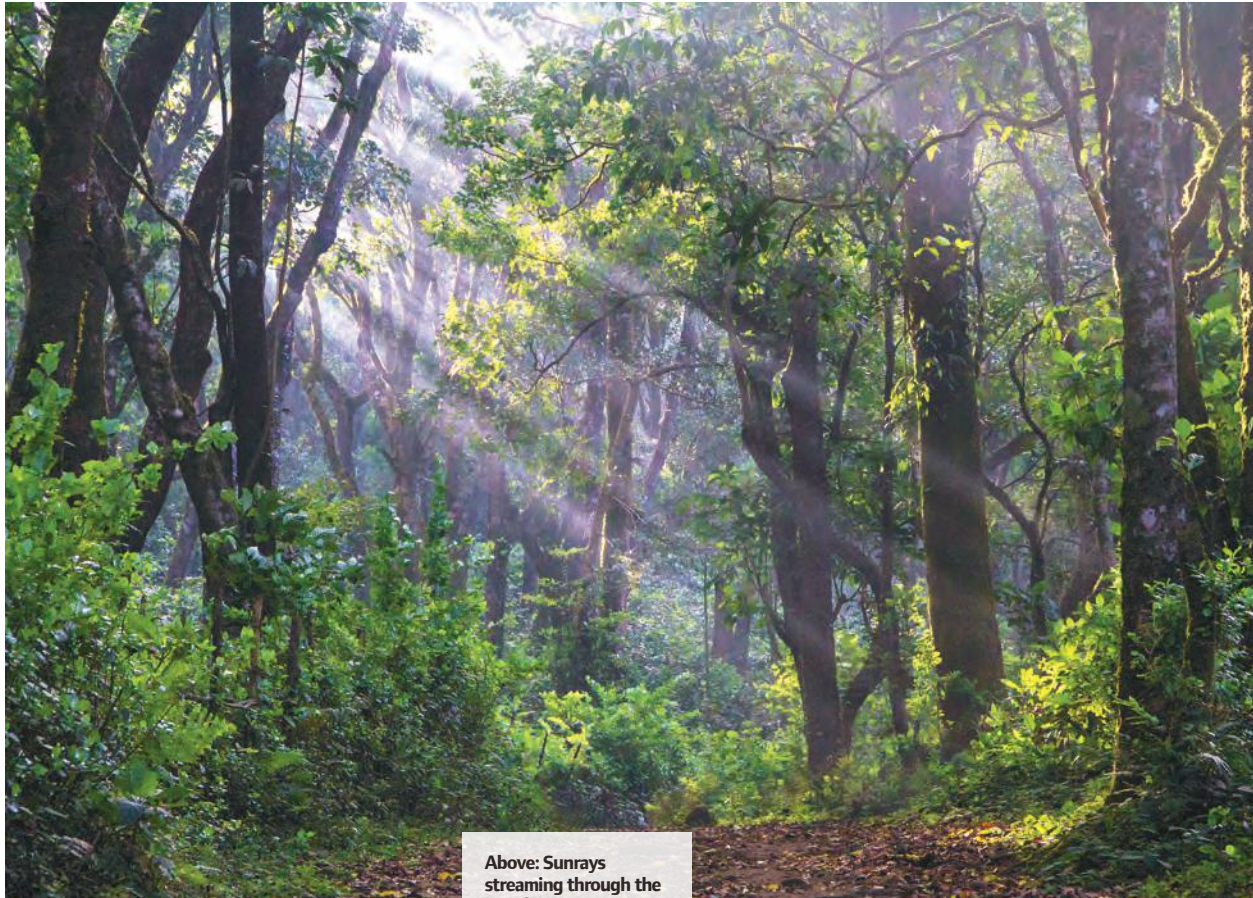
life on several occasions. The only thing that I hadn't experienced was the coffee bloom which happens around March-April, when entire hillsides of plantations turn white with its flowers. Coffee flowers bloom and last for a short period of time – between three days to a week in most cases – after which they turn brown and fall off, leaving tiny stubs that gradually swell and turn into green coffee cherries. I had missed a sighting every year, for nine years!

One January, when all my pursuits of extorting a weekend trip to Coorg failed with friends, I decided to take a bus and get there on my own. The Tamara Coorg, off Virajpet, was my plush destination. It was evening when I arrived. A sinuous road swung up to the top of hill with luxuriant foliage clinging to it on either side. The last rays of the sun were trying to cut through the near opaque undergrowth resulting in a golden curtain of light angled on the hillside and the thrum of nocturnal life of the woods was getting louder. Unable to really get my bearings of the place

in the evening, I was happy being deposited to my sprawling luxury stilted cottage in a golf cart.

I walked out to the wooden-floored verandah and my nostrils were instantly filled with a heavy aroma of spices, vanilla and coffee – what a pleasant break from inhaling traffic fumes in the city. The air was abuzz with the sound of cicadas. It sounded like a tireless symphony orchestrated by a master. Whenever there was a dip in the volume, it would be swiftly replaced with a swell of their hum, as if someone had suddenly prodded the musicians again.

Excited for a hike the next morning, I slumped into my bed for the night. It was so early in the morning when I woke up that it felt like the fireflies had still not left the scene. I made a short visit to the verandah to get a sense of my surroundings and saw that I was propped right in the middle of a silver oak forest at the base of which lay a labyrinth of unruly coffee bushes. There was nothing else in sight – not



The Tamara Coorg

Above: Sunrays streaming through the lush foliage paint a dreamy picture.
Right: Pretty coffee flowers adorn the vast plantations for only a few days.

even another cottage. The inky blue sky was getting diluted with the light by every minute and it was time to leave. A small group of six, we trailed the guide who was leading the hike to Manje Motte Peak and Cliff Viewpoint that lies, in mountain terms, just behind the resort. It was not more than 6 km and promised stupendous views, birdwatching opportunities on our way and a crash course in how the plantations work.

Our necks were swung back to spot bee-eaters, velvet-fronted nuthatch, barbets and robins till the plantation trail ended, and then the clearing offered gorgeous views of the lower hills – stacked one behind the other, with all possible shades of blue from a large palette. A forested trail marked the rest of the path and was cradled by moss, tree roots, a dirt path and slim clear streams that we had to hop across. The guide, a local Coorgi, knew every leaf and branch and regaled us with his experiences as a young boy, especially since he had grown up quite close to this hill. He promised that our summit – technically only slightly higher than where we were – was going to be jaw-droppingly beautiful.



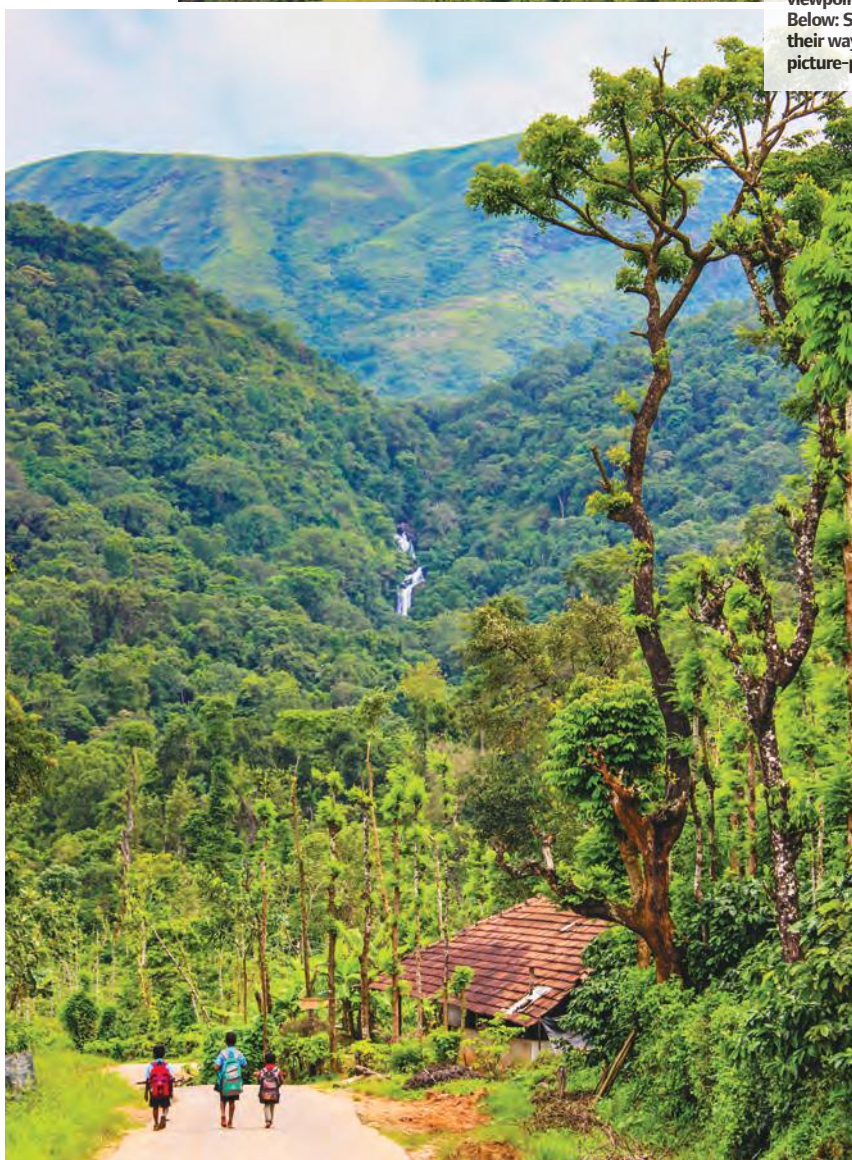
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We must have walked for about two hours, keeping our eyes peeled for birds and insects when a rocky clearing appeared. The guide nudged us to walk to its edge. As we took nimble steps forward, a panoramic view unfolded and yes, the jaws did remain dropped for a while. Our group of six managed to inch towards the edge and hang our legs from the side. The view from the Manje Motte cliff had a cathartic effect; there was complete silence as all of us soaked in the wild vagaries of nature. The deep valley in front of us was slathered in a hundred shades of green. After spending about half an hour at the cliff, we headed back for breakfast.



Above: Sweeping views of the lush green valley from the Manje Motte viewpoint.
Below: Schoolkids make their way home in the picture-perfect hill station.

Supriya Sehgal



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Estate stays are designed to spur laziness. So for the rest of the day, I did exactly what the surroundings prescribed. I sunk in a chair in the verandah, book in hand and needless to say, copious cups of coffee at my disposal. Only in the evening did I stir from my place to attend a roasting session, where I would be able to brew my own cup. The Verandah, an atmospheric heritage structure of the otherwise swanky resort, was the assigned spot for learning how to brew your own coffee. Coorg has a fair mix of robusta and arabica plantations, we learned and clumsily followed the instructions of the roaster in charge. Uncertain of my culinary skills, I eventually conceded defeat on the brewing table and instead plopped into one of the easy chairs outside and ordered a cappuccino.

On my way back home, I decided to stop at Madikeri, the main town in the Kodagu district. I must have spent only about twenty minutes on the road that loops out of the resort, when on one such turn, my eyes remained transfixed. Instead of the deep green of the coffee bushes, all I could see was white. I rubbed my eyes to be sure but it looked like the coffee bushes were low green peaks with snow on top. Untimely blooms in January had disrupted coffee order, but gifted me a view of a lifetime.



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Start your day in Coorg with a freshly brewed cup of coffee!

Fact File

Getting there

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Bengaluru from all major Indian metros and cities. From here, Coorg lies about 240 km away and can be reached in approximately 6 hours. Jet Airways also operates regular flights to Mangaluru from Bengaluru and daily flights from Mumbai to Mangaluru. From here, Coorg lies about 150 km away and can be reached in approximately 3 hours.

Accommodation

The Tamara Coorg is a luxury resort that offers multiple cottages, a spa, a plantation tour, a nature walk, a coffee brewing experience and more.

+91 80 7107 7700; www.thetamara.com
(See box for more stay options)

For more information

Visit www.karnatakaturism.org

Top Five Plantation Stays

For An Immersive Coffee Experience

Estate homes in Coorg are the best place to get acquainted with plantation life. If not actively brewing their own coffee, they focus on cultivating, picking, cleaning and selling the beans. Take your pick from these stays:

Honey Valley

Perched 4,250 ft atop a mountain, the Honey Valley resort can be reached via a four-wheeler. The homestay, surrounded by thick coffee plantations and rainforests, offers an exclusive trek to Tadiandamol peak.

08272-238339; www.honeyvalleyindia.in; single room between ₹450–2,000

Chingaara

A promise of 'TV-less' time, a private waterfall and the sounds of the jungle keeps regulars coming back to Chingaara. Coffee plantations carpet the hills around the homestay. The perfect place to unplug from city life.

08272-238633; www.chingaara.com; double room between ₹2,300–3,200

Bel Home Homestay

Relax in the verandah of the 1928-built cottages to get an uninterrupted view of green. Third generation of planters, Vijay and his wife Ramola are excellent company, ensuring that you get a taste of real Coorg with a 'bean to cup' coffee experience, local food, birdwatching and places to see.

08276-204477; www.bellhome.co.in; double room ₹4,500 onwards

Silver Brook Estate

The handpicked collection of wooden vintage furniture and the small library unit are the highlights of Silver Brook. But before that, the dark green coffee plantations around trump the experience.

08272-200107; www.silverbrookestate.com; double room between ₹5,500–6,500

Victorian Verandaz

The view of the valley from this 150-year-old hilltop estate, a jeep drive through the thick coffee plantation and the homely delicious food are the highlights of Victorian Verandaz. Lying just off Madikeri it provides good access to Coorg's sightseeing highlights.

08272-200234; www.livingcoorg.com; double room between ₹2,000–5,500

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