

Practical permaculture in the hills of KODAGU

Learning about biodiversity and the real meaning of 'eco-tourism' in modern India

A 'Garden of Eden' in the Western Ghats

Despite its beauty, the province of Kodagu in the Indian state of Karnataka remains a world away from the well-worn backpacker circuit, still more popular with domestic tourists on weekend getaways from the southern cities of Bengaluru and Mangalore than with foreign travellers.

Kodagu, formerly known as Coorg, is a region of wild forested mountains in the lush Western Ghats. The area was famously praised by the author Dervla Murphy, who declared it a 'Garden of Eden' in her famous travelogue *On a Shoestring to Coorg*, which recounted her journeys through the region in the early 1970s. Then Murphy found Kodagu wild and unspoilt. Relatively speaking, it still is; although now, as well as coffee plantations and remote villages, its jungle landscapes are populated with a handful of eco-retreats and homestays from which visitors can explore the natural landscape and unique culture of the region.



The misty vistas of Madikeri

On the four-hour bus ride from Mangaluru to Kodagu's district capital, the market town of Madikeri, it's hard to believe that much has changed amidst this verdant landscape in the 40 years since Murphy was here. As we make our sluggish ascent up winding passes, palm trees give way to rubber plantations and densely forested ridges; the air grows cooler with each twist in the road.

Our destination, Madikeri, is a low-key town of colourful buildings set amidst green hills. It feels remote from the rest of South India, as if the layers of mist that settle around it, that veil the town's outskirts and obscure the views across the surrounding forests, keep Madikeri at arm's length from the surrounding state.

Mojo Plantation

For most visitors, including us, Madikeri acts as a jumping-off point for exploring the surrounding jungle. We find ourselves here quite unprepared, a spontaneous detour on a month-long tour of India with no planned itinerary. Knowing only that we would like to stay at one of the nearby eco-retreats, which range from chic luxury resorts to tents in the jungle, we are lucky enough to find our way to Rainforest Retreat. The retreat is situated in

Mojo Plantation, a certified organic spice farm growing coffee, vanilla, kokam, cardamom, black pepper and other spices in one of the highest rainfall zones of Kodagu.

The plantation was established by Drs Sujata and Aunrag Goel, who came to Coorg from North India 21 years ago, seeking to live a life in harmony with nature. Since then they have developed and continue to manage the plantation along principles that ensure a diverse and healthy agri-ecosystem.

Learning about biodiversity

Accommodation for those staying at Rainforest Retreat is in eco-lodges or tents, scattered amidst the forest. On our first night we are struck by the astonishing array of wildlife we encounter as we wander the grounds, including snakes, snails, frogs, spiders, crickets, fireflies, beetles, moths and leeches. Shivani, the fervent and knowledgeable young woman in charge of managing the hospitality side of the retreat, takes the opportunity to guide us around the paths that wind past the lodges, while the sounds of toads' mating calls and cicadas whirl all around us. She explains that the plantation is home to breeding populations of many endangered frogs, including some that have only recently been discovered in this region. 'There, you see,' she whispers, shining her torch onto a tiny frog clinging to a fence wire, its back marked with delicate stripes. 'He is very rare.'

Guests of Rainforest Retreat carry torches during the hours of darkness to avoid stepping on any wildlife, and live side-by-side in the forest with a huge diversity of creatures. This immersion is integral to the ethos of Mojo, which also operates as an NGO, educating groups of school children and local farmers about biodiversity and the ecosystems of the Western Ghats.

On our first morning, Shivani takes us on a guided walk of the forest. She explains the principles behind crop cultivation and biodynamic pest control employed on the plantation, which include encouraging populations of natural predators such as spiders, snakes and dragonflies, eliminating the need to use pesticides. This has led to a finely balanced eco-system in which every organism has a part to play and is treated with respect. 'Even a fallen leaf is very important here,' she says, gesturing to the forest floor.

The future of farming?

It becomes clear during our stay that the eco-credentials of Rainforest Retreat are the real deal. This is a working model of sustainable farming first and foremost, a tourist resort second. Chatting before dinner one evening, a guest asks Sujata about her views on local agricultural practices and the future of farming in the region. She explains that part of Mojo's raison d'être is to educate local producers



Workers harvesting cardamom, which is grown on the plantation along with coffee, vanilla, kokum, tea and other spices.



The plantation is rich in biodiversity and guests are encouraged to explore and learn about the region's native flora and fauna.



Mojo Plantation is located in a densely forested area in one of the highest rainfall regions of Kodagu.

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about the negative effects of deforestation and single-crop cultivation. The plantation acts as a model of what is possible through organic practices and permaculture. However, she explains, there is still resistance to changing environmentally harmful practices.

Though perfectly composed, she grows more passionate as she speaks, her words conveying the sincerity of her belief in a better way for India. 'This destruction, this killing, has got to stop.' It's a sobering thought, but Mojo offers a gleam of hope, an alternative way, and this is something that's shared and celebrated with guests from all over the world here at the retreat. Smiling gently at Sujata, her partner, Anurag, stands up and gestures towards the food that has been laid out: 'Everyone, please, let's eat together.' <

THE CULINARY HERITAGE OF KODAGU

Kodagu has a unique food culture quite distinct from that of its Karnataka neighbours. Specialities include rice dumplings and richly spiced pork (pandi) curry, prepared with vinegar distilled from fruit. The region's pork dishes, Shivani explains, are a result of the history of hunting wild boar in the area, which, although now prohibited, occasionally continues today.

Some of these regional specialities make it into the repertoire of dishes served at the retreat's communal meals, which are prepared with ingredients grown on the plantation. We are served fried seafood with coconut sauce, vegetable curries prepared with bitter gourds from the plantation, and delicate, rose-coloured beetroot broth spiked with warming pepper. The dishes are far more homely and nourishing than the food typically found in hotels and restaurants. 'People come with a cold or sniffles and they leave rejuvenated,' says Sujata.



Beetroot and Pumpkin Soup

This recipe is a heartier, but just as nourishing, version of the soup we ate during our stay at Mojo Plantation. It is adapted from the Recipes from the Rainforest Retreat cookbook, available from www.rainforestours.com.

Serves: 3-4

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp olive or vegetable oil
 7 tsp garlic paste
 or 7 cloves crushed garlic
 1 onion, finely chopped
 2 tsp ground mustard seeds or mustard powder
 500g ready-cooked beetroots (cooked in their natural juices, without vinegar), roughly chopped
 ½ tsp cumin powder
 ½ tsp coriander powder
 1 tsp freshly ground black peppercorns
 ½ small pumpkin or ½ medium squash, peeled and chopped into cubes
 500ml veg stock
 Salt to taste
 1 tbsp lemon juice (or to taste)
 ½ tsp sugar (optional)
 Small handful of coriander leaves (to garnish)

HOW TO MAKE

- Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in a large pan and add 5 teaspoons of the garlic paste with the onion and ground mustard. Fry until softened and golden.
- Remove from the heat and transfer the onion mixture to a bowl with the chopped beetroots. Combine well and set aside.
- In the same saucepan, heat the remaining tablespoon of oil and add the rest of the garlic with the cumin and coriander powder and ground black pepper. Fry for a minute, adding a splash of oil if the mixture starts to stick.
- Add the pumpkin or squash and fry for a few minutes until starting to soften.
- Add the vegetable stock and cook, covered, until the pumpkin or squash is cooked through.
- Remove from the heat, add the beetroot and onion mixture and stir to combine.
- Using a stick blender or food processor, blend the mixture to a smooth consistency. Return the pan to the heat and add a little boiling water if the soup seems too thick.
- Season with salt, lemon juice and sugar to taste. Serve hot, garnished with coriander leaves (and an optional swirl of yoghurt or cream, if you like).