

The tree houses offer a will peek at swinging monkeys and singing birds.

Coffee, Tea or Me?

AT WAYANAD'S PEPPER TRAIL, ONE CAN FIND TREE HOUSES WITH A SIDE OF BIRDSONG; COFFEE, TEA AND PEPPER PLANTATIONS; AND HEARTY SERVINGS OF KERALA PUTTU
BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

It might seem like a strange thing to remember *Coffee, Tea or Me?*, a popular book about the lives of two American air hostesses while staying in a tree house 40 feet above the ground. But then, this long weekend away from Bangalore is in the midst of a lush estate in Wayanad, growing both tea and coffee. Of course, there is some land devoted to pepper in the sprawling 200 acres, but I decide to stick with the title of a somewhat salacious memoir.

Leaving our home early in the morning, my husband and I manage to navigate the urban traffic till Mysore without much trouble. The Wayanad region in the northeast of Kerala is close to two other state borders—Karnataka and Tamil Nadu—and is partly included in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. This means, once we cross the small towns of Nanjangud and Gundulpet, it is a charming drive through the seemingly endless trail of forests—Bandipur, Mudumalai, and Muthanga.

At Pepper Trail, an eco-property perched on the leafy lap of Mangalam Carp Estate, my suite is on Hornbill Tree House. The estate is an idler's delight, and mine is one of the two tree houses that come with their own little balconies. Immediately attracted by the calls of local avian species—pied cuckoos and Asian koels, with the occasional spotted owl hooting in the distance—I expect to be able to do a bit of armchair birdwatching from here. But I also discover over the next two days how perfect this perch is to watch the fascinating games played out between the trees' other residents—monkeys.

The wooden ramp snaking all the way to our tree abode wobbles slightly each time we huff and puff up the gentle gradient. The ramp meanders through coffee trees; plump and green jackfruit seemingly ready to be plucked hang on trees flanking the path. Soon after we arrive, lunch is served at the Pavilion, the dining area set high up in the midst of thick foliage.

It is a vegetarian meal of Kerala delicacies including *ulli theeyal* (a pungent stew made with shallots) and *beetroot pachadi* (curd-and-beetroot raita), ending with *semiya payasam* (vermicelli kheer). The meal is delicious, but we are distracted by sightings of Malabar pied hornbills and rose-ringed parakeets that fly out of the trees with sudden ferocity.

Early in the evening, we head out for a plantation tour on a jeep with young naturalist Manu Edayan, who is also a budding



The Hornbill Tree House comes with its own little balcony (top); A canoe tethered to the banks of the property's reservoir is perfect for sunset rides on calm waters (bottom).

ad-film maker. The bumpy ride over mud tracks is punctuated with frequent stops, and lessons on the herbs and spices grown here, used as both food and medicine. We pull up at the small reservoir right in the middle of the property, bordered by tea shrubs on three sides. The coracle we are supposed to ride has sprung a leak of sorts, so we hop gingerly on to a canoe tethered by the banks. On our sunset ride, we are cheered on by hooting owls hiding out in tall trees—it is beautiful.

Waking up early to the loud chatter of monkeys on the verandah, we make our way straight to a hearty breakfast of *puttu* and *kadala* curry, washed down by coffee from the plantation. Afterwards, we head towards a modest shrine at one end of the property, a couple of stone huts dedicated to the local avatar of Shiva. Built by the original tribal owners of the land over a century ago, rituals are still performed here during the harvest season. Manu disappears, emerging with a huge pomelo in his hands—locally known as *bamblimaas*. We dig into the peppery-sour, but refreshing fruit with gusto.

Pepper Trail is the brainchild of Anand Jayan, third generation owner of the estate. Mangalam Carp was purchased by his maternal grandfather P. Balram Kurup from a Scottish company in 1932. Apart from the two tree houses, there are two other rooms open to guests, both in the 140-year-old Pazhey Bungalaav (Old Bungalow)—in operation since the estate opened under planter Colin Auley Mackenzie.

The ground floor is the Malabar Suite, while the upper level has been converted into the Mackenzie Suite, each section designed to retain privacy. Both suites have been carefully restored using traditional Kerala wooden furniture into warm and welcoming spaces; think cozy planters chairs and massive pillars. Five more villas—two with their own swimming pools—are under construction, expected to be ready by the end of the year. Personally though, I would choose my arboreal suite over anything else.

ESSENTIALS

Pepper Trail is in Sulthan Bathery, roughly 320 km/7 hr from Bengaluru, accessible by car via Maddur and Srirangapatna (NH 275), and then Gundulpet and Bandipur (NH 766). The closest airport is Calicut International Airport, three hours away (www.peppertail.in; doubles from ₹12,800).

