

TEA TIME



SOOTHING Sprawling tea gardens. PHOTO BY AUTHORS

Land of the Kurumbas

At Kurumbadi in the Nilgiris, **GUSTASP** and **JEROO IRANI** dip themselves into a lost tribal lifestyle and soak in the peace and beauty of their surroundings.

We sat on a bare rock while the dense rain forest unfurled around us in welcome. The air was cool and astringent, and resonated with the playful swoop of the Great Indian Hornbill and the song of birds — the seductive call of the whistling thrush. The sweet trickle of a stream, the sight of mossy trees from which creepers hung down like serpents waiting to strike, and a fugitive glimpse of a Giant Malabar Squirrel made us feel that our trek had been worth every drop of sweat.

We were in Kurumbadi in the Nilgiris, the land of the Kurumba tribals, 14 km away from Coonoor. We had set out from Kurumba Village Resort, a swish outpost sculpted into a hill, on a two-hour trek in the forest with our guide. Along the way, we had examined fresh elephant dung because the behemoth had passed by fairly close to the resort early that morning, even as our guide kept an eye out for a stray bison or Indian gaur loping unseen through a thicket.

In the course of our walk into the moist green heart of the forest, we had inhaled the fragrance of wild flowers, gazed at cascading sun beams that filtered through the thick foliage of ancient trees and revelled in the fact that these were the same misty hills that Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India from 1876 to 1880, had described to his wife in a letter: "It far surpasses all that its most enthusiastic admirers and devoted lovers have said about it. The afternoon was rainy and the roads muddy but such beautiful English rain, such delicious English mud..." In front of us rose Pukka Suran hill, a sheer smooth granite massif on which Tipu Sultan had built Droog fort which is now a favourite destination of trekkers.

Tired yet energised, we returned to our resort ensconced in the zesty fragrance of a spice plantation... the individual notes of nutmeg, clove and pepper assailed our nostrils. The cluster of 15 cottages and suites, seemingly coaxed out of the earth,

follows the lay of the land so that not a single tree has been felled. The use of local material and motifs in the decor and even the invitation to savour a tribal meal in the resort's thatched open-sided restaurant made us feel like we were indeed in the land of the Kurumbas.

The Kurumbas, we were told, are one of the five ancient tribes of the Nilgiris (like the Todas, Badugas, etc) and the ones who were most intimately connected with nature. For centuries, the forest provided them sustenance — roots of wild yams and honey and the few animals that they occasionally hunted for food. They know the forest like the proverbial back of their hand and many work in the resort as wait staff and forest guides.

Apart from dipping into a lost tribal lifestyle and soaking in the peace and beauty of our surroundings, we explored the evocatively named pockets of loveliness around the hill station of Coonoor, wrapped in the mystique of tea plantations as green as a parrot's wing. We drove through waterfall-streaked vales around lush Sim's Park and scenic spots such as Lamb's Rock, Lady Canning's Seat, and Catherine's Falls, awash with a colonial hangover.

The cup that cheers...

Since the dominant essence of the Nilgiris is tea, we stopped at Tranquiltea in Upper Coonoor, where we experienced a gourmet tea tasting session in the picturesque home of tea planter Sandeep Subramani. He inducted us into the finer nuances of the "cup that cheers." The glass-enclosed drawing room where the tea tasting took place lassoed spectacular views of Upper Coonoor, carpeted with tea plantations and sloping red-roofed homes. From elegant glass decanters filled with different kinds of tea, ranging from dark red to light honey yellow, the brew was poured into our glass cups for a tasting. With the reverence that one would accord to wine, Subramani then proceeded to explain what flavours to look for with each offering; sub-

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tle oak wood, black currants and citric, and introduced us to a host of Nilgiri teas as well.

Our love affair with the beverage continued when we stopped to sample an innovative tea-based lunch menu at a colonial plantation bungalow dating back to the 1800s and now a home stay called Tea Nest, located 3 km away from Coonoor. We savoured fish grilled in tea leaves, tea-smoked, skewered paneer, a tea sorbet to cleanse the palate, and even a tea-infused soufflé...

Tea Nest is part of a cluster of three green-roofed colonial cottages with gables, high ceilings and lace curtains, embedded in 1,800 acres of emerald green tea plantations and surrounded by misty barrel-chested mountains sloping down to soft green valleys. Post lunch, we sipped Nilgiri tea on the sun-stunned patio and garden of Tea Nest and it turned out to be a perfect vantage point to watch wild ponderous bison lope through the plantation to graze on unwanted undergrowth. Later we walked through the plantations that rose in tiered folds, listening to the sweet chatter of the nimble-fingered women who clipped the tea bushes, tossing the two leaves and a bud into baskets tied to their backs. The women moved agilely through the plantation, unmindful of the bulky bison in their midst, occasionally shooing them away if they came too close.

As dusk daubed the mountains in a lavender light, we drove back to our resort in Kurumbadi whose lights glimmered like multiple fire flies in the forest.

We were due to fly out the next morning but Kurumbadi wasn't through with us. One more surprise was in store — breakfast in a tree house. Up high in a jackfruit tree, we sat at a table for two enveloped in the soft scented embrace of the forest. As we sipped fresh avocado juice and savoured some south Indian breakfast specials, our senses were on red alert. The forest symphony was in full swing — life couldn't get better than this!