

Serenading Mother Earth

FOLLOWING THE PANDEMIC, A NUMBER OF RESORTS IN INDIA ARE LAYING EMPHASIS ON SUSTAINABILITY IN ORDER TO LURE THE DISCERNING TRAVELLER

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI



A) The Elephant Beach in Havelock is virtually deserted and private;
B) Kotagiri red-cheeked bulbul in Tamil Nadu

As the pandemic winds down, many off-trail resorts in India are foregrounding sustainability to lure the discerning traveller without compromising on luxury, cuisine and adventure.

Here's a cache of four resorts you can travel to mindfully without scarring Mother Earth. Sustainability is deeply embedded in the DNA of these owner-run retreats that strive to nurture the cultural identity of their neighbourhood as well.

Rakkh Resort

Our day began with a rooster crowing lustily at dawn and ended with a salt-infused foot soak in a brass *urli* (urn) in our room at Rakkh Resort in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh.

Our vacation was a blur of trekking in a pine forest, exploring a serene village, savouring high tea on a terrace backdropped by the snow-tipped Dhauladhar range... Younger guests scaled the in-house rock-climbing wall, went sky cycling, and mountain biking... Families bonded around picturesque vantage points on the property – a Maggi Station to cook that ultimate Himalayan snack Maggi noodles,

and tried their hand at pottery and weaving with the help of local women.

The hill-top Dham restaurant served farm-to-table meals and in Himachali Rasoi, a re-created mud hut, we relished a traditional dinner cooked on a wood fire by local village women, incorporating secret family recipes. With 25 cottages climbing up a steep hill and kitted out in the local vernacular of slate tiles and an earthy palette, the rooms pull in enchanting mountain and forest vistas. (Psst: No TVs and room service here to encourage guests to engage with each other and nature.)

Indeed, Rakkh Resort, a four-and-a-half-acre property, even has a Himalayan mountain spring harnessed to meet most of its needs, fruits and vegetables grown on the site and also sourced from nearby villages. The resort is staffed by locals who exhibit an inner radiance and pride in their land.

Visit: <https://rakkh.com>



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Chandralok Villas

When we checked into Chandralok Villas, Chaaya, the female canine, gazed at us with gentle curiosity. Three more canines padded up to us – they had been either abused or abandoned and rescued by two young gutsy sisters, Heta and Siddhi Ganatra. The duo own and run Chandralok Villas in the leafy green hill resort of Lonavala, a two-hour drive from Mumbai. The compassion that they and their local staff show to creatures (big and small) spills over into their commitment to tread lightly on Mother Earth.

The pet-friendly four-villa property has lashings of luxury and an edgy decor with a retro touch – a rocking chair here, vintage side tables inlaid with recycled tiles there, a water filter covered with fabric from grandma's old saris (you will not see any plastic bottles in the plastic-free villas), attractive wall art... Each villa comes with four-and-a-half bedrooms, some with small balconies, a living room area, mini TV parlour room, a fecund garden and a swimming pool. In the living room of the villas lie a multiplicity of second-hand books that guests can buy or browse.

Inside the property is a space called Marketplace (which also serves as the reception) where locally sourced hand-



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made products are retailed in an effort to support women-run businesses, the Blind Home and Samvad Shala – a school for differently abled children in Lonavala.

As we sipped a cup of refreshing *kadha* (an Indian tea) on arrival, concocted with herbs from their own vegetable garden, fertilised with compost created from kitchen and garden waste, we realised that even a holiday can give one lessons in sustainability.

Visit: <https://villasbychandralok.com>

C) Air cycling over a forest canopy in the property; D) Try your hand at pottery at Rakkh Resort; E) Teanest Nightingale; F) Kotagiri Nightingale at sunset

Teanest Nightingale

During our stay in the four-room, 120-year-old cottage, with a pitched-tiled roof and an earthy-red façade, the real world seemed to exist in another



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dimension. Located in Kotagiri, in the secretive folds of the Nilgiris or Blue Mountains in Tamil Nadu, the intimate little guest house, is evocatively called Teanest Nightingale.

Aptly enough, its high-ceilinged rooms, draped in a vintage aura, are named after local birds that flit in the emerald-green tea plantations surrounding the resort.

A behind-the-scenes peek revealed that the largely local staff love the pristine corner of their country. They faith-

fully follow good waste management practices, minimise the use of plastic and purchase everything locally. Indeed, the kitchen and restaurant celebrate local cuisine.

This green haven is home to native species of trees and plants where multi-hued birds roost. We bird-watched while sipping fragrant Nilgiris tea on our private sit-out!

Visit: <https://natureresorts.in/teanest-nightingale>

Barefoot at Havelock

A holiday in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is akin to gate-crashing paradise. This archipelago of largely uninhabited 572 islands in the Bay of Bengal lies 1,250 km from Kolkata.

We stayed at Barefoot at Havelock, a back-to-nature retreat on the tourist-friendly island of Havelock. Barefoot is a two-hour catamaran ride plus a one-hour scenic drive away from the marine terminal at Port Blair. The resort sprawls over 9 acres (though the total area is 22 acres) but blends artfully with the land. Fringed by a rainforest and a mahua forest, it is fronted by unblemished Radhanagar beach.

The 31 renewable cane, thatch and wood villas and tents with timber floors and spacious patios have their roots in local architecture. Barefoot (shoes are not allowed in the public areas) is a place where you feel the good earth underfoot, feast on the fresh catch of the day, bird watch and live life in harmony with nature and the seasons. Our beachcomber pace meant that at night we would walk back to the resort across an unlit pathway, so owls could roost in the trees, un-disturbed!

Visit: <https://www.theserai.in/barefoot-at-havelock-andaman-resort>

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