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A Nature-Focused Escape in Southern India

A solo traveler forgoes India's mobbed bucket-list attractions in favor of secluded resorts and nature treks in the country's sleepy south

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MOST FIRST-TIMERS to India make a beeline for the Taj Mahal and Delhi's Red Fort, both beautiful and historic—and invariably mobbed with tourists. I prefer to consume exoticism in smaller, less predictable doses, which is how, one fine October day, I wound up in a thatch-roof cottage fronting the Arabian Sea along a 14-mile stretch of unspoiled beach in the country's far south. The cottage was one of 18 scattered around the gardens at the Neeleshwar Hermitage resort in Kerala, among the country's most scenic states.

A biologist by training, I had decided to spend my two-week solo trip to India getting up close with the flora and fauna, starting at northern Kerala's seaside and ending in the highland forests of Coorg in the neighboring state of Karnataka. As allergic to rigid tours as I am to crowds, I based myself at two high-end resorts, both of which offer guided nature excursions, leaving plenty of downtime to wander—or lounge about—as I wished.



RARE BIRD A buff-breasted sandpiper in Kerala. Photo: Jayan Thomas

On my first outing, a walk through two Kerala wetlands with a local [bird-watching](#) guide, Rajeevan, we spotted 41 different bird species, not enough, apparently for Rajeevan. "I am not satisfied today. We have not seen enough birds," he said halfway through our three-hour expedition. My trip happened to coincide with the start of bird migration season (October through March) when dozens of species from the Northern Hemisphere journey thousands of miles to India. Northern Kerala sits on a major flyway, which makes it a birding bonanza. At the wetland in Ezhome, on a slim path winding through brilliant-green rice paddies, we heard a chorus of squat stonechats, blue-tailed bee-eaters and ashy wren-warblers, all chirping seemingly at once. While we were eyeing a purple heron perched on a coconut palm, an asparagus-green, red-ringed parakeet swept over the waters, gathering rice grains.

In Kokkara Vayal, another nearby wetland, we walked along muddy paths and watched water buffalo wade into paddies speckled with water lilies. In the distance, a massive cluster of what appeared to be more white blossoms carpeted the watery expanse. "Those are not flowers, they're cattle egrets," said Rajeevan, clearly excited by the sighting. He estimated more than 1,000 birds in the flock and steered me in their direction, determined to get up close. And we would have, had I not been hobbled by my mud-soaked socks and shoes.



CHIC SHACK A few of the cottages at Neeleshwar Hermitage. Photo: Neeleshwar Hermitage

Back at the resort, I went for a dip in the beachfront pool, then had a consultation with the staff [Ayurvedic physician](#) (free to all guests) to determine my dosha, or biological energy. She diagnosed me as "Vata," which is characterized by, among other things, an inability to sit still, and prescribed a massage with essential oils. I opted for a four-hand massage at the property's spa and a daily Hatha yoga class (complimentary) in the open-air pavilion.

Another day, after an al fresco breakfast of freshly rolled rice noodles with a coconut milk veggie stew, I took one of the Hermitage's bicycles, pedaling barely 2 miles to the NAITHEL Turtle Hatchery, which the resort supports. If guests spot eggs laid on the beach, they're told to report the location so the local nonprofit running the hatchery can collect them. I veered off a ribbon of a road paralleling the beach, and met Praveen Kumar, who works with the nonprofit that has released 23,000 endangered Olive Ridley sea turtles over the last 13 years. We walked over to a pen adjacent to the beach where two weeks earlier, 131 eggs from one turtle were buried by a NAITHEL staffer. After 40 to 60 days, the hatchlings were to be released to crawl across the sands for their new life at sea.

The next day, with one of the hotel's drivers at the wheel, I braved the serpentine roads that led high into the mountains to Thonikadavu, a family-owned farm that's open to the public for guided hikes. One of the owner's sons, Rathnakaran, led me around the 32-acre property, with terraced hillsides cut by the Payaswini River, and planted with various trees, including coconut, rubber, pepper, cashew and banana. Everything else grows wild. We walked down steps cut into the creeper-cloaked hillside to a small cascading waterfall, and then across a sliver of a footbridge above a stream's tumbling waters. Rathnakaran broke leaves of lemon, African coriander and wild lemon grass plants for me to sniff as we walked along.



Villas at Orange County, Coorg. Photo: Orange County

After checking out of the Hermitage, I headed to my next destination, Orange County resort, a four-hour drive east, once again on a series of wiggly, narrow roads ascending and dipping through forests thick with bamboo and jackfruit trees. By the time the driver dropped me off at the hotel, I was sorely tempted to spend the remainder of my trip parked at the adults-only infinity pool. A stylish resort set some 2,900 feet above sea level among acres of organic coffee and spice plantations, Orange County is bigger than the Hermitage, with 63 rooms, two main pools and a handful of private pools in some of the villas. Much of the décor revolves around found or repurposed objects, like the felled rosewood tree

that now serves as the base of the breakfast buffet table. Even the garbage bins scattered around the grounds are formed from hollowed out crepe myrtle tree trunks.

Sufficiently recovered from the drive the day before, I scheduled a guided trek in the adjacent 50,000-acre Dubare Reserve Forest, hoping to catch sight of some of the elephants and tigers that live in the forest. As we set out on our way to the reserve through Orange County's coffee plantation, the trees heavy with berries, my thoughts turned to nature's benevolence—right up until my guide, Vishwanath, told me to securely fasten gaiters over my socks. "It's so the leeches on the forest floor don't get on your legs," he cautioned.



An Asian elephant in Coorg. Photo: Shutterstock

On my first outing, I spotted 41 different bird species.

We hadn't yet even entered the forest when we spotted the deep oval footprints of an Asian elephant (slightly smaller than its African counterpart), who had wandered onto Orange County's property to forage for vegetation. Later, in the reserve, Vishwanath pointed out caked dirt clinging to a branch above our heads, indicating where an elephant rubbed mud, used to reduce body temperature, off its skin.

On the banks of the Cauvery River, a worn track indicated elephants and bison had come to drink and bathe. Whitewater tumbled over rocks as we rested on a large outcrop beside a placid watering hole where we spied more elephant footprints and those of a lone tiger on the muddy shore. The elephants and tigers themselves never materialized—they both prefer to move about at night. But I didn't mind in the end. The pool was waiting.

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Getting There From Mumbai or New Delhi fly to Mangalore or Bangalore airports. The Neeleshwar Hermitage hotel is 60 miles (a three-hour drive) from Mangalore and 260 miles from Bangalore. Orange County, Coorg is 120 miles or 170 miles from Mangalore or Bangalore, respectively. Both resorts can arrange private transfers from either airport or from another property.



The property at Neeleshwar Hermitage. Photo: Neeleshwar Hermitage

Staying There The 18 chic-rustic cottages at Neeleshwar Hermitage overlook the Arabian sea, expanses of lawns or the swimming pool. Bearing the name of a different yogic virtue, each features local art and partially al fresco bathrooms. The main restaurant, the open-air Annapurna, serves a seasonal menu with freshly caught seafood and traditional village dishes such as beetroot *tikki* (fried patties) and shallot curry (*from \$180 a night in low season, neeleshwarhermitage.com*).

Built in the style of old-world plantation houses or inspired by ethnic Kodava architecture, many of the 63 villas at Orange County, Coorg include private pools. Start your morning relaxing in the resort's airy Reading Lounge that's set on stilts above rice paddies and organic vegetable gardens. Of Orange County's three main restaurants, the most formal is Peppercorn, a candlelit, lakefront space serving six-course meals. At the all-vegetarian Plantain Leaf, order a mixed thali of North and South Indian fare that may include delectable rice and coconut pancakes (*from \$390 a night in low season, orangecounty.in/coorg-resorts*).