



Kabini Jazzing the Jungle

By Devanshi Mody

Set on the Kabini river by the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, the award-winning eco property, Orange County, distinguishes itself. If South African lodges I recently visited jealously absorb the guest in a swaddling, suffocating superfluity of finery, Orange County generously directs the gaze outwards. It is minimalist, with mud cottages replicating thatch-roofed Kadu Kuruba tribal huts (albeit rather fancy ones with private pools or jacuzzis). Unlike what is found in

South Africa, 1,000 chandeliers don't burn irresponsibly in your villa day-long. Amidst this unabrasively-lit, unobtrusive, indigenous set-up, the one jazzy concession is a cutting-edge river-front infinity pool, but that too accentuates the great spectacle of Nature.

Moreover, the Ayurveda vaidyashala proves how spectacularly therapeutically effective Nature can be. I arrive violently stricken with food poisoning, un-alleviated by the

dozen antibiotics doctors had inflicted on me. Orange County's wonderful young GM Joydeep swiftly dispatches me to his Ayurveda spa for Shirodhara head and shoulder massage to unwind contused muscles, followed by the Chakradhara stomach cleansing ritual. I am, I must confess, skeptical. However, after Lavanya and Soumya's adept fingers have pressed and punctured my tummy in strategic places and piled on it an oil tank into which hot oil enough to fill an ocean

is poured, I emerge all but divested of the illness.

My recovery delights Chef Sanjay Bhowmik, who proceeds to exhibit culinary art in picturesque private dining locations — like an over-water intimate gazebo or a romantic culinary river cruise. A butler attends and a private chef customises meals on-site. My fancy is local cuisine. Various and wondrous creations on the raw banana theme (banana stem, flower,



spread like a lover over the receptive water as you relish regional specialties that include crisp, crafted raagi dosas (millet pancakes) and fresh sugarcane juice. On request, sous-chef Shaik Subhan from Andhra can do green gram pesareto dosas served with lentil sambhar quirked with raw mango. A dash of spice comes when an Omani sheikh's chopper lands, amidst flurried activity, the sole disruption to the serenity of the surroundings.

Of course, the resort's naturalists can enliven the environs, where flowers swirl in dancing halos of golden butterflies. Again, unlike the often glib and not always brilliant Afrikaans guides I've encountered, these boys are specialists. Kishan's focus, for instance, is early-morning nature walks. We explore a termite hill, which he eloquently calls "technically advanced, high-speed real estate."

As birds zigzag our line of vision, Kishan expounds on their habits and habitats. "But do you know," he asks, "who understands animal behaviour and the jungle best? Poachers!" Happily, there has been no poaching in the past 15 years. Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, which falls under India's prestigious "Project Tiger" has been fiercely guarded. The forest has long been protected, Kishan says



fruit) especially fascinate. Private dining experiences are fantasy feasts, but I find myself sneaking to the organic counter at the Honeycomb restaurant, which will soon serve cuisine and produce from a 30-kilometer radius, committed as the resort is to supporting local communities (most staff is sourced from neighbouring villages).

But it's home-roasted coffee from their own estates that beckon at riverside breakfasts. Watch the sun





with irony, for the British, during the Raj, discovered teak in Nagarhole and declared it government protected land. This would seem admirable, but it was only legalised larceny, as the Brits then vandalised the forest for lucrative teak. I'm intrigued by what look like mammoth mushrooms. They are traditional thatch coracle boats, sunbathing with their bottoms up. When I'm invited on a mid-morning coracle boat ride, I wonder how these little circular "boats" will accommodate three people: spunky naturalist Shanmugam, the boatman and me. Then we spot 30 villagers packed onto a furiously paddled coracle. An English tourist quips: "Hope they aren't immigrants..." Sanjeeve, who specialises in amphibians, shows me the bullfrog pond with its sole survivor, an enormous female who could mate with five males, but sadly is consigned to celibacy, as all her lovers have been consumed by snakes. So she pines alone in a palatial pond whose vegetation is violated by pestiferous snails, migrated all the way from Europe. I suggest the resort invites French

tourists to eat the snails and Chinese tourists to eat the snakes, although they might both finish off the last surviving frog.

The afternoon boat safari ventures into waters flowing between two tiger reserves, Nagarhole and Bandipur. Lush green landscapes embroider the river's hems, as fish tack in and out of the water like large silver needles. Birds with slender necks and dainty feet pose on stumps and stones. A pink-tailed stalk, with its flush of pink feathers, stands supremely elegant as a string of birds takes off, beheld by nesting cormorants on the stark trunks of submerged trees.

Suddenly, our guide Narendra spots elephants drinking at the water's edge. I think: "How fantastic it would be if a tiger came out to drink." But this seems a tad greedy; the secretive cat just wouldn't. Next, Narendra exclaims, "Tiger!" Indeed. The striped creature in all its majesty makes a dramatic appearance as spotted deer elongate in flight, looking like a flight of arrows. The gold and black stripes

weave in and out of the woods and then shimmer away.

If at dawn the sun seemed a gold coin tossed out of misty gauze, then the setting sun like molten gold thickly daubs the skies. On the horizon, as twilight approaches, ancient trees seem stacked like books covered in a dazed dust of a thousand years.

Next day, on an afternoon vehicle safari, we penetrate deep into tiger territory. This wildlife circuit in the Nilgiris Biosphere, amongst the few knots of forests left in India, once so expansively jungled, boasts the largest Asiatic elephant population (troops of 200 elephants together aren't unusual) and Asia's highest density of prey. Here's where tigers, leopards and wild dogs co-exist. Burrowing into the forest, where bright yellow flowers fall from trees like golden ringlets and oriel flash up like sprays of gold, we observe, in addition to the natural strew of trees, neatly packed files of teak the British cultivated to fell. Our naturalist Somashekar points us to a peacock and announces, "We've

started our safari with the national bird of India. Hopefully we shall end with the national animal."

We see samba deer poised regally; monkeys misbehave and elephants threaten to. The tiger eludes. They were once so rampant in this jungle that maharajas would sit around shooting tigers from their lodge verandas. Our safari is failing. Then, just before the park's stringently-regulated closing time, we hear an alarm call. Our guides with great guile, track, uncover the tiger. Unlike in South Africa where animals are "on display," here you experience the romance and thrill of the safari, which is the art of tracking animals. The light fades, the tiger darkens. We mightn't have seen the rare "black leopard" spotted in these parts, but we've seen a "black" tiger! The moment is sublime. Then, the little children that the resort has strenuously attempted to discourage on safari begin to howl-bawl-bellow and terrify the animals. Someone says: "The only excuse for permitting children on safari is to throw them to the tigers." But park rules strictly say: "Don't feed the animals!"