

## Coffee Calling in Coorg

*(This article along with photographs was featured in 'Beyond Sindh' magazine (April 2007) published in Hongkong, having its niche clientele across the globe. The purpose of the article was to describe Coorg as a travel destination)*

Any better way to start the day?. Two flats on a fiat (the newer version). A hurried egg rushed on a frying pan diligently scraped out with its bottom charred. A travel overnighiter stuffed with more than it could accommodate, the zipper giving way to breathe in the travel air. This all seemed passé. Wait!. There was more..... After the harried drive to the Mumbai airport with packed breakfast in throwaway foil, we were informed that the flight was 'on schedule'. There was a weighty sigh of relief since we were informed vide sms's that Mangalore was inundated with heavy showers. Our flight 'Kingfisher IT 141 from Mumbai to Mangalore.... Tie your seat belts.... Fly the good times' landed 26 hours behind schedule. On its first attempt it hovered over Mangalore-'airport invisible' the captain roared over the in-flight audio communication, hopped over to Bangalore and put us on the tarmac with some cheese sandwiches. Second attempt- tried to reach within 100 kms of our destination, changed directions due to the cloud cover and landed back at Mumbai. No cheese sandwiches this time 'anything else?' 'no sir, stocks over'. 'Curse'.

Touch down finally. It drizzled lazily as we stepped on the open tarmac next day ushered into the terminus by the young ladies with unfazed smiles. The sharp wind playing truant, the pretty ladies, one hand gripped onto the overturned umbrellas and the other holding onto their skirts lest it too would overturn, felt welcome. Although delayed monsoons in the subcontinent is a common phenomenon charted in the annals of meteorological department, that year the Almighty chanced to shower his blessings well in advance of the forecast. He must have had a hearty laugh at reading the headlines next day 'Mangalore Flooded....', 'Monsoon Arrives' boldly splashed across the national dailies and smaller prints reading 'the southwest monsoon hits the coastal lines ten days before the due date.

Mildly saturated we made our way out of Mangalore in the reliable Qualis and an ever-reliable driver- the jesty Vincent. He tested our patience for a hot cup of chai and kept saying 'No sir-no have here. I will get greeeat tee, wait'. At a small village called Sullia we did get our greeeat tea- at the Keti stall, a three-layered decoction of tea, milk and tea that bowled out the chill. Two more hours uphill, and some more rib tickling jokes in Vincent's southernised Hinglish accent, we reached the land of the Kodavas- what the British call as 'the Scotland of India'. And its not just the topography, it's the way the Coorgis or the Kodavas wear their distinct costumes and enjoy their drink.

Coorg is all about coffee in its many variations. At the coffee bar at Club Mahindra resort where we had checked in, the menu read.. Monsoon malabar blend, anytime, kaveri, kapi along with the usual mochas and cappuccinos. After enthusiastically trying the listed options we settled for kapi for the rest of our stay. It was not only the taste but also the way the filtered coffee was served with a rich head of foam after tossing it between two

small steel tumblers like the way the Delhi dhabas do it with the lassi. Culinary ethics insist on coffee being served in ceramic cups, but this kapi tastes divine in the scalding steel tumbler. If the drive up from Mangalore whizzed past banana, areca nuts and cashew, then the vast landscapes of Coorg are carpeted with coffee and some cardamom & pepper. There is nothing much to do here except soak in the natural beauty and take little walks in the countryside. The romance of the mist with the mountain slopes, the flutter of the butterflies, the fall of dew from the serrations of leaves, charm the atmosphere with ecstasy. No sooner would the sun peep through the clouds, we would grab a little walk in the resort's coffee plantations and would take refuge under the giant palms when it drizzled. The Malabar hornbill and the thrushes had a field day with the sun and rain playing hide and seek.

Down south, Coorg, or Madikeri is perhaps the best way of unwinding your senses. Ooty and Munnars are over commercialized, passing on the advantage to this coffee land. Barely 260 kms from Bangalore it lies about half way between Mysore and Mangalore. The Coorgis are fair-skinned, tall and well built owing their ascendancy to Alexander the Great, when his troops invaded India around 327 BC. These men wear dapper knee-length coats called *kupyas*, bound at the waist with a cummerbund, and daggers with ivory handles. These traditional costumes are donned for all auspicious occasions. Women wear their saris pleated at the back unlike most who pleat at the front. Their diet is highly carnivorous, with pork as favorite meat dished out during festive occasions. They celebrate their festivals with pomp and gaiety, and venerate the river Cauvery whose origins are here.

The town itself doesn't have much. Small winding lanes lead to the main bazaar bustling with spice and coffee trade and dotted with red-tiled buildings. The aroma of robusta and arabica coffee emanating from the bazaars feels stimulating. A small distance from the bazaar to the west is the Raja's seat. Legend mentions of the kings coming here to watch the sun setting over the distant valleys. In monsoons the mist takes over the hollows of the valley intermittently dispersing to open up the vista of the mountains beyond. Sunset or no sunset- the view is worth the visit. The Omkareshwar Shiva temple, built in 1820, features an unusual combination of red-tiled roofs, Keralan architecture and Islamic influenced domes. One of the little excursions out of Madikeri is to Abbi falls, where milky white water cascades down on the rocks creating a misty spray. The suspended bridge across the channel is the ideal place to depollute with mist settling wantonly on the canopy. It's hardly a picnic spot as the brochures boast, but the walk along the narrow pathway striding over broken twigs and decaying leaves and the ears drummed with the great sound of the water fall is bliss to the auditory senses. Noisy collegians could be heard playing pranks screaming 'Snake.. snake' in the spirit of hoaxed adventure.

With the downpour unabated we missed our tour to Dubare Elephant reserve and Talacauvery, the source of the River Cauvery. But 22 km from Madikeri, on the Mysore highway we reached Bylakuppe, one of the largest settlements of Tibetans outside their homeland. Monasteries and maroon robed monks punctuate the landscape along with stalls fronting the main road serving the popular momos and thukpas. Nyingmapa monastery has peaceful grounds along with a colorful prayer hall housing three gilt Buddhas. Here little monks can be seen studying the Buddhist scriptures squatting on floor mats. The guttural chanting of the scriptures interspersed with the puffed blowing

into the long horn called *`Dung Chen`* created monastic music stilling the mind into tranquility. The Namdroling monastery, close to Nyingmapa is famous for its golden temple.

The bus ride back to the resort was through the rain-drenched greenery through winding hills and rivulets. Famished, we hit the restaurant at our resort where a buffet fit for the kings awaited us, all topped with the generous kapi sipped in with last temptations. The next morning our friend the Malabar hornbill sang his morning ode as we bid farewell to Coorg until next time.

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