

Outlook traveller

COFFEE-BREAK IN CHIKMAGALUR



Hotels

Halli Berri is a two-cottage homestay in the middle of Karnataka's Kambihalli Estate coffee plantation

Aarti Kapur Singh | February 6, 2015

John Denver's evergreen ode played on my iPod as I cruised down the road from Bengaluru towards Chikmagalur, flanked by lush green country views on

either side. Except that it was this easy-breezy highway and not a bumpy country road as I drifted in and out of sleep. Waking up well past Hassan, there was this heady aroma of rain and soil, and when that was swirled with the aroma of coffee, I knew I was approaching my destination. A riot of the fuchsia-mauve *Thunbergia coccinea* or *sera bel* or Mysore vine greeted me as the SUV entered the gates of Kambihalli Estate, where nestled amidst the lush greens was Halli Berri — a quaint homestay, comprising two cottages.

An amalgamation of halli, meaning ‘village’ in Kannada, and ‘berri’, a quirky twist on the coffee ‘berry’, Halli Berri is a piece of coffee heaven, also haven — an opportunity to live a planter’s life on a 180-acre coffee plantation. The place has another charm — it is an all-women estate, entirely managed by the ladies of the Karriappa family. The eldest daughter of Nalima Kariappa, Manavi, was in New York when she brainstormed the initial idea. Anusha’s engineer husband Belliappa KK worked on the packaging and colours, and Tejini manages the marketing and PR from Mumbai, where she owns a PR firm. So my three-day vacation here was all about the coffee lovers’ sisterhood. Since I arrived here after lunchtime, I was plied with a very welcome ‘welcome drink’ — the homegrown cuppa, naturally!

Kambihalli Estate has been growing coffee in the Bababudan mountains since 1948. The estate features a coffee plantation, the Halli Berri Cottages and the Coffee Barn café. Over the course of the late afternoon and evening, over coffee at the Barn, I get acquainted with Nalima Kariappa, the matriarch at Halli Berri, brimming with an enthusiasm for nature almost religious in fervour. She describes the various trails within the estate as though narrating a film plot. “When you reach the second spring, after that oak-trunk bridge, do keep your eyes and ears open for sambhar deer — they often come there for a drink. So tread softly or you will scare them.” Since I have been listening raptly, her daughters Tejini, the media consultant, and Anusha, the pilot, offer to take me for a walk the next morning.

But first there is dinner at the residence, where Mari, the cook, serves amazing akki rotis (made of rice flour) with a yummy kola urundai (meatball curry). Yes, I pigged out — speaking of which, lovers of pork will find it difficult to even leave the table. I shamelessly rounded off my meaty trough with the cheesecake, after loosening my belt a little.

It was after they dropped me back at my cottage — a good kilometre away from the main house — that the silence actually sank in. The crickets and the wind were doing a strange jugalbandi and I must admit I was nervous for a while.

The next morning, after plying me with dosas and egg bhurji (a very Coorgi thing) at the café, Anusha and Tejini, along with Jackie, their adorable boxer, took me for a walk. The whole estate was buzzing with activity — workers planting new coffee saplings, some lopping oak to shade the young plants, kingfishers darting across the many ponds, hornbills shouting introductions and ospreys swooping past flaming paniculata trees for a closer look. It was a welcome change from the solitude of the night before.

The Halli Berri cottages were built to give guests a coffee country experience close to nature. Tejini explained, “We want our guests to enjoy the serenity of the hills and cherish the oneness with their soul and that is the reason we have deliberately not kept television and an internet connection. Even the mobile connectivity is limited. We have people coming here who have never walked barefoot on grass. I consider this to be an achievement in itself to give this league an opportunity to experience nature so closely.”

In fact, Halli Berri is not a place where you come chasing starred luxury. The cottages are a perfect meeting point of rustic country life and classic modernist function, with stylish yet warm interiors. Colonial-style brickwork and vintage furniture, high-beamed ceiling, whitewashed brick walls, designer tile floors make for easy, photogenic charm. But wait — the highlight of the cottages lies in an outdoor shower area connected to the really mammoth bathroom. What’s more, the water in the shower faucet is heated in a copper cauldron — to make the bath ‘mineral rich’. A shower under the cerulean skies is an experience that is strongly recommended. Warm yourself after that at the traditional fireplace in the evening or in the sun shining into a private sitout facing the hills during the day. While the rest of the estate earn their keep.

You, meanwhile, are completely cut off from the cacophony of a busy world. The no TV, no music policy protects the quiet and frees you to commune only with nature and the odd neighbour. The only things you hear are the sounds of the chirping cricket and the gushing wind, for the most part. Silence and tranquillity are the mainstay of these estate dwellings. Let us also add romance, and sometimes, adventure. I came across a day-old tiger pugmark about three

kilometres from my cottage, though I didn't see the elusive visitor. We also visited a carefully nurtured nursery of plants and the estate cowshed. I learnt a lot about coffee as well. Unlike the ubiquitous robusta and chicory blends, Halli Berri prides itself on being a premium 100% arabica coffee. The package for this sun-dried and hand-picked coffee also carries a Rainforest Alliance seal, giving the green light to the environmentally minded. Halli Berri's coffee is grown under the shade of various jungle trees, in harmony with its natural surroundings. The iron-rich soil, high altitude and low temperature allow the coffee bean to mature slowly, incorporating subtle flavours and thus giving it a clean, fresh taste profile. The dark-leaved coffee shrubs growing between bars of silver oak, dense pepper vines and fertile orange trees were a welcome change from drab city views. Hedges demarcate fields, plantations and forests — greenery separating greenery from greenery.

Stay in silence as I did, sometimes bemoaning, sometimes revelling in it, it was a strange paradox I felt as I was dropped to the railway station in my choice of vehicle, a planter's truck. I realised Halli Berri's distance from civilisation was its best charm. I was complaining again. This time, about going back into the madding crowd. I have to come back to eavesdrop on the gossiping babblers, the gambolling doggies, the chattering cicadas and the uplifting caffeine!

The information

Where: Kambihalli Estate, Chikmagalur; 4.5hrs from Mangalore airport and 5 hours from Bengaluru airport; 3-hour train journey from Bengaluru to Birur railway station, which is 40 minutes from the estate

Accomodation: 2 cottages

Tariff: Rs 6,500, double occupancy, including breakfast

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