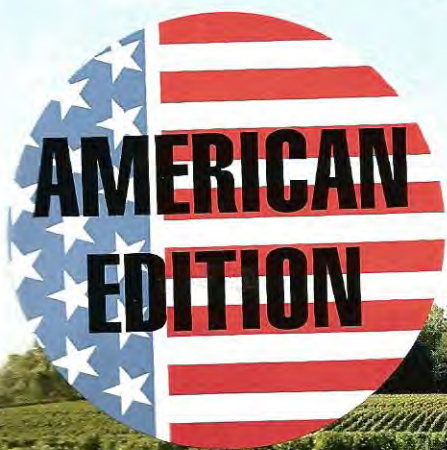


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TRUTH IN TRAVEL

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THE 2014 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS



The India That Time Forgot

Not too far from the high-tech campuses of Bangalore and the nightclubs of Goa sit two less-traveled parts of South India, places where the pace is slow, the landscape is lush, and modernity barely intrudes. By Maria Shollenbarger

Photographs by Chris Wray-McCann

I'M IN the passenger seat of a Toyota four-by-four on a pitted road in southern India, speeding toward the mighty Western Ghat Mountain Range. Kumar, my driver, hums along with the Hindi pop on the radio as he barrels on, dodging sacred cows and darting shoals of uniformed schoolchildren. I feel like I've been holding my breath for most of the three hours since we left Bangalore, but Kumar is the picture of equanimity. At a certain point he explains why: Ganesh,

he says—indicating the plastic avatar affixed to his dashboard, its pachyderm head bobbing agreeably—is his co-pilot. What could possibly go wrong? And besides, he adds, the places we are going are so beautiful that the sooner we get there, the happier we'll both be. Eventually I relax my white-knuckle grip on the door, because I know Kumar's right.

Those beautiful places are Coorg and Kasaragod. The first is a high-altitude corner of southern India's Karnataka State, one of the Subcontinent's fastest growing. The second, about 80 miles west, is a coastal stretch of northern Kerala, a state best known for its placid backwaters and superb seafood curries. Both are relatively unknown to the tourists who descend upon Rajasthan and Agra and rarely venture far from either. But although they're distinct in climate and topography—Coorg is temperate, thickly forested, and sometimes dizzyingly mountainous; Kasaragod is flat, agrarian, and equatorial—they share the very appealing quality of being among the least-trodden corners of India, and they exemplify everything that is wonderful about traveling the rural byways of the Subcontinent.

It was their relative anonymity that made me decide—somewhat counterintuitively, perhaps—to make these two spots the sites of my inaugural trip to India. Despite an adulthood of travels that have taken me from eastern Indonesia to northern Mozambique, I had somehow never made it there. “You'll want a soft landing,” advised my friend Tanya, whose mother is from Mumbai and who is more knowledgeable about the Subcontinent than almost anyone I know. “Start in the south.” The south, she said, is not only less touristed than many other parts of the country, it's serene, safe, and easy to navigate. And in Coorg and Kasaragod, she promised, I'd find two places that feel like an India removed from the jangle of the modern world—not to mention from conventional expectations. The fact that, from a practical standpoint, Coorg and Kasaragod work so well together added to their appeal. Relative to other Indian destinations that travelers conventionally combine, the two are close and the trip quite easy: Whereas a Rajasthan city circuit, for instance, usually requires at least one internal flight, Coorg and

Kasaragod are just three and a half hours apart by car, and the route is gratifyingly scenic.

My first stop, Coorg, is a 1,500-square-mile swath of primary native rain forest in the southern tip of a state better known for its tech capital of Bangalore and its yoga/enlightenment capital of Mysore. Coorg is right on the Kerala border, though like siblings who share parentage yet look nothing alike, it has none of the latter's palm-forested flats and backwaters. And while Kerala swelters much of the year, Coorg's altitude keeps it temperate (the average temperature is 59 degrees); its hill stations and peaks, some with altitudes of more than 5,500 feet, are often cloaked in veils of moisture that settle in cool droplets on the skin.

With its forests and melancholy mists, Coorg is often referred to as the Scotland of India, and the area has in fact long been a favorite of old India hands, whose ancestors administered it and places like it across the Subcontinent in the heyday of the empire, when Coorg—known for its coffee plantations—was bustling and prosperous. Today, these plantations, now owned and run by Indians, have seen a boom in coffee production and popularity. As we chug up the two-lane roads that crisscross the mountains, we pass neat rows of lush, rounded arabica and tall robusta plants studded with crimson beans, and the cosses of slender silver oaks around which black-pepper vines are trained to grow (spices are Coorg's other major agrarian industry).

Aside from the faded charm of its landscape, its plantation houses (a number of which now offer homestays), and the relative tranquillity (the population in 2011 was a little more than half a million), Coorg has recently emerged as a high-altitude redoubt for India's new elite, who come here from the searing urban ovens of Bangalore and Chennai to hike, mountain bike, inhale the oxygen-rich air, and teach their children about the beauty and value of India's increasingly embattled wilderness. Coorg sits squarely in the Western Ghats, a 1,000-mile-long mountain range stretching from Gujarat in the north down to the very tip of the country, and parts of it are designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its forests and skies are home to arkloads of endemic (and endangered) animals, birds, and insects.

Happily, India's privileged new environmentalists don't forgo creature comforts in their pursuit of altruism. Six hours after I begin my hair-raising communion with Kumar, Ganesh, and India's roads, we arrive at the 63-room Vivanta by Taj Madikeri, which opened in 2012 a few miles outside the hill station of Madikeri, Coorg's capital. The sleek porte cochere—a dislocating (though not unpleasant) surprise after hours of sugarcane fields and dusty plains alternating with crumbling villages and listing coconut stands—is crowded with

Previous page, from left: A still life of tropical hibiscus at the Neeleshwar Hermitage spa; a serene Kerala backwater. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** A view from one of Coorg's winding roads; *The Lotus*, a luxury two-suite houseboat, plies the northern Kerala waters; in Kasaragod, there's none of the hustle and bustle (or tourist throngs) that you'd find in southern Kerala; a sleek daybed in the open-air lounge at the Vivanta by Taj Madikeri, in Coorg.



a caravan of identical Mercedes SUVs, all owned by a single family from Chennai and recently relieved of its prodigious quantities of luggage.

As I soon learn, the surprises come fast here, starting with the panorama that greets you when you enter the open-air lobby—a vast, monochrome space with an infinity pool offering a panoramic view of the surrounding wilderness, 180 acres of which belong to the hotel. The vista is astonishing: mountain after lushly forested mountain as far as the eye can see, their slopes and ridges painted the deep primary green of native tree canopy. Raptors of various species—compact falcons, the occasional eagle—ride the thermals at eye level.

The next morning, I hike into the misty wilderness to do some exploring. With me is 28-year-old Abhishek Jain, one of the hotel's chief naturalists. He joined the Vivanta before construction even began; his assignment from the hotel's managing director, the prominent Indian businessman/environmentalist Pramod Ranjan, was to map a trail system that would inflict minimal damage on the surrounding forest. Slight and soft-spoken, Jain spins entrancing stories from subtle details: A trace of moss on a stone, for example, summons its own narrative, as do the sides of tree trunks, buffed stone-smooth by seasonal wind patterns. There are hundreds of species unique to the area: 350 types of birds, reptiles, insects, and amphibians alone; cobras and vipers of varying colors and fearsomeness; vivid turquoise butterflies; exquisite crimson snails as long as your palm, carrying pearlescent black shells on their backs. There are larger attractions, too: elephants (the bane of Coorg's coffee farmers, whose plants they pillage for food), bison, barking deer, wild boar, and the (very) occasional tiger.

As we walk, we discuss the Indian middle class's shift in perspective—and priorities. "People are more careful and aware of this now," Jain says, casting his arm in an arc to indicate the seemingly endless forest rolling away from us. "It used to be that as a Kodava"—what the 1,200 or so Coorg clans call themselves—"you could hunt and shoot without license. Now, permissions are very strict."

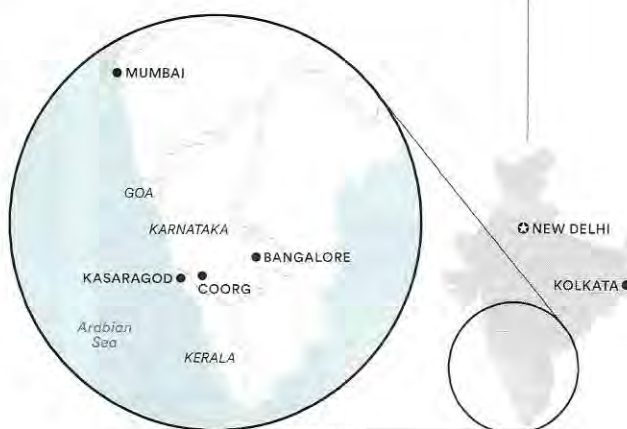
AFTER A few days of feeling my breath and pulse slow, Kumar and I are on the road again—to Kasaragod. It's a half-day's drive west to the coast on a dizzyingly spectacular road built right into the side of a steep valley that was carved over millennia by the Kaveri River, one of India's holiest. This is monumentally beautiful territory: Here, the Deccan Plateau dissolves in deep faulted furrows into a fertile plain that runs all the way to the Arabian Sea. Waterfalls cascade down near-vertical grades, splashing the car as we pass; brightly painted temples flash out from forests of blackwood and kino trees.

Eventually, the topography mellows and we descend into the lowlands, a typical Kerala landscape of palm-fringed beaches and serene backwaters. The far southern part of the state, below Cochi, is the most popular territory in the country for backwater cruising; charters and tourists clutter the waterways in December and January. But Kasaragod, in the far north, is different. It has the palms and the wide beaches and the languid pace of life, yet it's comparatively quiet and, Tanya told me, has been left much more to the Keralites.

Neeleshwar Hermitage opened here on a splendid six-mile stretch of wheat-colored beach about four years ago. It's a hybrid of a boutique hotel and an Ayurvedic wellness center, with some castaway-in-a-shack fantasy layered in for good measure. Its 18 palm frond-roofed villas are scattered across the sand, their porches cooled by spinning ceiling fans, and at the rear of each is a large outdoor bathroom with a tub set in a small walled garden. At the seafood restaurant, tables spill out onto the beach, freshly draped in new combinations of linens for each meal: turquoise and pink, or deep orange and violet. Adjacent to the hotel's tiny, pretty boutique is an in-house tailor; bolts of vivid cottons and linens line the walls behind his work table, and a shirt you are measured for at 9 A.M. will be ready by dinnertime.

I am tempted not to ever leave the property, but I do, encouraged by the fact that Kasaragod, in addition to being eminently photogenic, is very safe. Relative to much of the rest of India, it is prosperous and therefore happy (throughout Kerala, many families have at least one member employed in the U.A.E. who sends money home, creating an economic bubble known in India as the Gulf Remittance effect). A four-and-a-half-mile trail leads south from the hotel, through villages and past temples and mosques (Hindus and Muslims coexist in relative peace here), occasionally skirting the green, still backwater. At sunset, locals flock to the beach in front of the hotel, splashing in the shallow Arabian Sea; Hindi Bhajans, the sung

A woman balances a stack of coco palm fronds at a coir factory. A natural fiber derived from coconuts and used to make everything from brushes to doormats, coir (along with rice) is among Kerala's major exports.







Left: The tawny beach outside the Neeleshwar Hermitage hotel, in Kasaragod. **Right:** The top deck of *The Lotus* houseboat in Kasaragod is the perfect place for dinner . . . or early-morning yoga.

devotionals broadcast on loudspeakers from the villages, are underscored by the thunk of low surf hitting against sand. The thick hot atmosphere, the rich colors, the thin plaintive songs from the villages hidden in the palms: Now *this*, my bearings tell me, is India.

A couple years ago, Neeleshwar's owner, Altaf Chapri, launched *The Lotus*, a traditional rice barge upcycled into a charter boat with just two large suites (and a captain, cook, and housekeeper). Known as *kettuvallam*, the barges are usually fabricated from wooden planks yoked together with coir and sealed with resin from boiled cashew fruit. *The Lotus* plies the waters of the Ozhinhalappu Estuary, a half mile or so inland from Neeleshwar. This entire five-mile stretch is sea-fed and thus clean, clear, and, in places, ideal for swimming—not something that can be said about many of the crowded backwater stretches to the south. The Ozhinhalappu is also almost entirely devoid of tourist boats; on my days on board, I see only one other.

The Lotus moves at the molasses pace of agrarian Indian life, drifting so slowly on the tides that men trotting along the paths on the nearby shore can keep pace with us. In the late afternoon on the first day of my two-day float, we pitch up at a place called Monkey Island, where troops of little macaques caper and snatch at mangoes and bananas offered to them by local children, and giggling teenage girls in glittering hijabs take selfies. We moor at twilight at a village upstream to admire the preparations for the upcoming Theyyam festival,

a ritual worship native to northern Kerala. Black smoke eddies from braziers, whirling up past the pale-pink buildings of the temple complex and into the faded sky. A pyre of branches and coal is set ablaze, and later a local worshipper in the throes of ecstasy walks over it barefoot.

That night, I sit on the boat's flat roof and dine on grilled prawns and a tart green fish curry, heavy on mint, cilantro, and green chilies, prepared by Deepak, *The Lotus's* brilliant Himalayan chef. Sonorous prayer calls roll out over the water, reverberating off the groves of palm on either shore. Every so often the power cuts out on land, the sudden and total darkness revealing a sky extravagantly painted with stars. At dawn I awake to find the yoga mat I requested rolled neatly outside my door; I take it upstairs to the roof deck and stretch in the silence, the morning air heavy with moisture and the pinks and oranges of sunrise. It is a perfect distillation of solitude.

Later that week I head north again, up the coast through Goa—built-up, world-weary Goa, which feels like the anti-Kasaragod—and from there to Mumbai. But the stillness of that morning stays with me, muting the blaring traffic on the expressway and dimming the glitter of the Bandra district's seaside high-rises and even the thrill of arriving in one of the world's most dynamic cities.

I am surprised by this. After all, I've been longing to see Mumbai for years. But something inside me still lingers in the quietude of the last few days, in those places where, it turns out, a totally unexpected India was waiting. ♦

STAY

The Lotus Houseboat
thelotuskerala.com;
 suites from \$280 per night.

Neeleshwar Hermitage
 KASARAGOD, KERALA; 91-467-228-7510; neeleshwarhermitage.com;
 doubles from \$165.

Vivanta by Taj Madikeri
 1ST MONANGEERI, GALIBEDU, COORG, KARNATAKA; 91-827-266-5800; vivantabytaj.com;
 doubles from \$185.



Rocky Mountain Highs

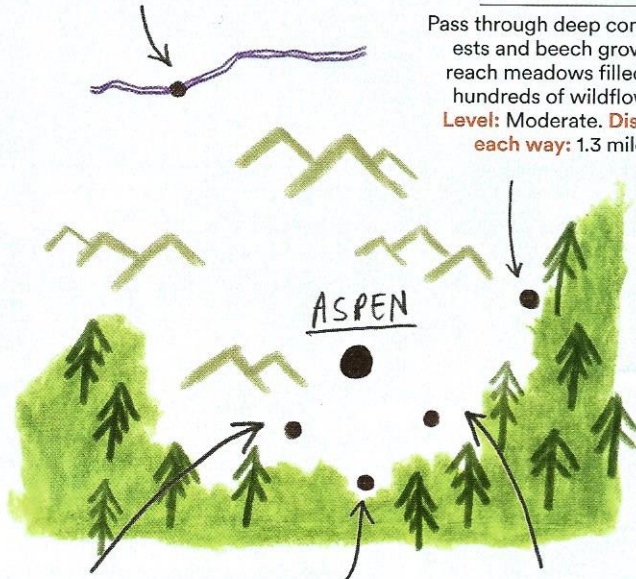
Aspen's Roaring Fork Valley is famous for its hiking. But visitors who have less time to spend (and aren't acclimated to the altitude) might find many of the trails—some of which can take several days to cover—too challenging. Our favorites provide an intense workout and awe-inspiring scenery—in just a few hours.

HANGING LAKE TRAIL

Ten miles outside Glenwood Springs on I-70, a short, steep path among Glenwood Canyon's dramatic cliffs leads to a hidden emerald lake. **Level:** Strenuous. **Distance each way:** 1.2 miles.

LYLE LAKE TRAIL

Pass through deep conifer forests and beech groves to reach meadows filled with hundreds of wildflowers. **Level:** Moderate. **Distance each way:** 1.3 miles.



MAROON LAKE SCENIC TRAIL/CRATER LAKE TRAIL

Take the easy path around to the right of Maroon Lake and continue to the spur trail (staircase-steep in places) that leads to icy Crater Lake. **Level:** Moderate. **Distance each way:** 1.5 miles (1.8 miles to Crater Lake).

CATHEDRAL LAKE TRAIL/AMERICAN LAKE TRAIL

You'll find a little of everything: alpine meadows, glacial scree fields, waterfalls, and crystalline lakes. Explore the ghost town of Ashcroft afterward. **Level:** Moderate to strenuous. **Distance each way:** 3.2 miles.

GROTTO TRAIL

A short loop leads to a series of caves that have been naturally smoothed into undulating shapes by the nearby river. Steeper trails lead to waterfalls upriver. **Level:** Easy. **Distance:** 0.8-mile loop (but with longer options).

What to Pack for a 105-Mile Trek in Cornwall...

... and where to stay, when to go, and which pros to enlist when planning a self-guided walk along the South West Coast Path.

- ▶ **Gear:** Gore-Tex or other waterproof hiking boots (broken in, not new) are better than trail shoes for dealing with the varied terrain; quick-dry, breathable clothing (not cotton) that you can layer; a comfortable day-pack with sufficient room to carry lightweight rain gear; plenty of water (a CamelBak pack holds at least 1.5 liters; camelbak.com); hiking poles; snacks; and a small first-aid kit.
- ▶ **Hotels:** The historic 1271 **Tinners Arms**, in Zennor (tinnersarms.com), and the perfectly central **Gold Martin B&B**, in Mawnan Smith (goldmartin.co.uk).
- ▶ **Optimal walking months:** May, June, and September. The weather in Cornwall is unpredictable but should be fair then, and the trails and inns are less crowded than in high summer.
- ▶ **Experts:** **Encounter Walking Holidays** can book lodgings and transfer your luggage between inns (encounterwalkingholidays.com).

Don't Even Think of Driving Yourself in India

It sounds like a major indulgence, but you'll need an on-call car and driver. It's the best way to travel on roads crowded with livestock, streamer-festooned trucks, and entire families piled onto single scooters. Three of our top India specialists, who can arrange full-time drivers for between \$80 and \$200 a day, weigh in with counsel.

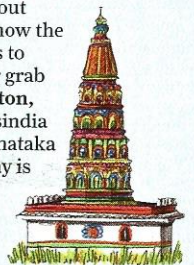


DON'T BE IN A RUSH

"Traffic only moves as fast as the slowest thing on the road, which is often a camel, a cow, or a rickshaw," says Bertie Dyer of India Beat (indiabeat.co.uk). And roads are often in dire shape; promised post-monsoon repairs rarely happen. So Pallavi Shah (ourpersonalguest.com) always quotes driving itineraries in terms of hours, not miles, logged.

STOP ALONG THE WAY

A good driver will point out temples and sites, and know the best (and cleanest) places to make a bathroom stop or grab a snack, says Mehra Dalton, of Greaves India (greavesindia.com). Shah says the Karnataka café chain Cafe Coffee Day is always a good bet: It's clean and has Western-style service.



SMALL TALK IS (FOR THE MOST PART) ACCEPTABLE

Hew to basic dinner-party etiquette when engaging your driver: no religion, sex, or politics. Ask him about his family and children instead. Your driver won't think you're rude if you don't make any chitchat at all, so you can talk with fellow passengers—or just plug in the headphones and gaze at the scenery. At the end of your trip, it's appropriate to tip your driver the equivalent of \$10 per day in rupees.

