

HERITAGE BY THE SEA

ON THE KOVALAM COAST, LUXURY AND RELAXATION IN A THARAWAD HOUSE | BY LALITA IYER



HERITAGE



RELAXATION



Niraamaya Retreats Surya Samudra stands atop a cliff, overlooking two mosques—one shiny green, the other mellower—and the gentle Kovalam beach. Now a Relais & Châteaux property, the retreat is a 32-acre expanse dotted with coconut and jackfruit groves, and old-style Kerala homes, or *tharawads*. A huge stone Ganesha reclines on the lawn, setting the mood.

It would be unfair to call the accommodations “rooms”—each tharawad was once a house, and has travelled miles to be restored. In the 1970s and ’80s Keralites were demolishing and selling pieces of these houses as decorative items to antique shops, as timber, even as scrap. Few people wanted traditional homes. Klaus Schleusener, the brains behind the resort, was teaching at IIT Madras at the time. He bought several old tharawads from around Kerala and gave them a new lease of life. Some are sea-facing, the rest, like mine, have partial ocean views. My room was Cinnamon, with ornate doors, carved pillars and sculptures, and planters’ chairs on the porch—it could well have belonged to my great-grandfather, except that it has Wi-Fi. The furniture is colonial, the interiors distinctly modern.

The outdoor bathroom with stone tub took a little getting used to. A small note by the washbasin tells guests to put toiletries in the cupboards provided because “the squirrels can be rather playful.”

Tharawads have countless windows, and each

one opens to a different view. Once I had settled in, I enjoyed window-hopping in my cottage—which had one large living room, lounge area and a bath garden—catching slivers of the sea, ripe jackfruit, herb and vegetable patches, and other pretty sights. Since I was up early, I had a pre-dawn cup of tea by the sea, watching fisherfolk at work. Though the resort offers it, I wasn’t in the mood for yoga by the beach, what with so many distracting hammocks.

There’s not a buffet in sight at Niraamaya, as the hotel believes in a cooked-to-order system. Even jams and preserves are homemade, and the beetroot chutney, which I had with my breakfast of *idippams*, deserves special mention. Ask the chef for the recipe, and he will happily write it out for you.

After staring long and hard at the reclining Ganesha from the vantage point of my hammock, post breakfast, I headed to the spa. The *abhyangasana* sent me into another deep reverie, from which I eventually surfaced to enjoy a boat ride through the backwaters of the Poovar River to Golden Beach, 17 kilometres from the resort. I was lucky enough to witness the formation of an estuary where the Neyyar River, Poovar Lake, and Arabian Sea converge. On the return, I spotted an elephant named Gopi indulging in his own spa treatment with a mudpack in the backwaters. I figured he too must be revelling in Niraamaya, which, as it turns out, means a sense of well-being in Sanskrit. ●

THE VITALS

Accommodation

Niraamaya Retreats Surya Samudra has 31 rooms and suites, in three categories. Rock Garden rooms are spacious, and ideal for families, offering a mix of the traditional with modern amenities. Heritage Classic cottages have large rooms, verdant garden views, and breezy sit-outs. Heritage Premium rooms, along the stone-edged cliff overlook the Arabian Sea and are independent twin cottages (www.niraamaya.in; rooms from ₹7,000).

Getting there Niraamaya is in Kovalam, a 25 km/45-min drive from Trivandrum airport, which is connected to major Indian cities by daily flights.