

Pics courtesy: Niraamaya Retreats Cardamom Club, Thekkady

**OF SPICES AND MORE...**

Located at the foot of the hill, atop which the resort is perched, is the wonderful arboreal Green Land Spice Garden, where, for as little as ₹100 per person, you can partake in an hour-long guided spice lesson. So, that was where I found myself the next afternoon — after a late sleep-in and a hearty brunch at Niraamaya — being educated in all things 'spicy' by Tigin, a very knowledgeable local chap who took me through

everything that is grown in the spice garden. From the more common and expected cardamom and clove trees to the more exotic passion fruit and avocado, I was given a crash course on how they are grown, harvested and then packaged. Speaking of which, at the attached spice shop, I tanked up on all my favourites to take back home. These included mace, cinnamon quills and the fragrant allspice.

Having been booked in for a double performance of Kathakali and Kalaripayattu (₹200 each, per person) in the early evening, I made my way to the super clean and neat little town of Kumily, which is where both the arenas are located, in the same compound. The Navarasa Kathakali Centre for a Kathakali performance was first on the list. A mere shed of a place, the centre encourages guests to come in a little before the scheduled performance so that they catch the performers applying their very elaborate make-up and dressing in their costumes before the show commences, and also learn a bit about this ancient art form.

Now, for the uninitiated like myself, Kathakali is a combination of two Malayalam words, "katha", which means story, and "kali", which means play. It is a derivative of one of the oldest classical dance forms of Kerala known as Ramanattam, which was earlier only conducted in royal palaces. And as I was to see, the performance was a story (taken mainly from Hindu mythology and puranas) acted out with the aid of mime, hand and eye gestures, drama and music by two men, one of whom was dressed as a woman. Women performers are generally not part of the repertoire.

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE...

Kerala may be well-known for its stunning coastline and placid backwaters, but its hill stations show us a different side. **Raul Dias** recently checked in at the **Niraamaya Retreats Cardamom Club, Thekkady**, for a weekend of pure, unadulterated bliss

Did you know that nutmeg and mace are actually part of the same spice fruit, where the former is a seed wrapped by the latter, which is a fragrant reddish pink membrane-like web? Or that, what we in India call 'cinnamon' is in reality cassia bark — a species of tree similar to yet very different from the actual cinnamon tree? Well, I for one didn't. Nuggets of information like this — pertaining mainly to the world of spice — peppered (pun intended!) my journey as I was being driven by Tommy, my very well-informed driver from Madurai airport to the lush, fecund hill station of Thekkady that's located slap bang in the middle of Kerala's spice country, very close to the Tamil Nadu border in Kumily.

PLUSH DIGS

My destination was the newly refurbished resort, the Niraamaya Retreats Cardamom Club, Thekkady, which gets its name from the multitude of cardamom trees that surround this very well-appointed 12-cottage haven. Complementing the existing plantation-style cottages, the newly added wooden cabin-like rooms are built on stilts to maximise the majestic mountain views. The rooms have cleverly positioned floor-to-ceiling windows, so guests can wake up to stunning views of nature. The interiors, a play of muted tones with pops of colour, feature minimal decoration and vibrant art. All rooms have air-conditioning, a feature exclusive to only few properties in the region, as I was soon to learn from the very affable Sreejith, the resort's manager, as well as amenities such as a minibar, Wi-Fi and luxurious bath amenities.

Set amidst verdant forest canopy, the resort's new 15-metre infinity pool overlooks the valley and the misty mountains beyond. The terraced decks leading to the pool from the all-day dining restaurant, Café Samsara, offer the perfect perch for an early morning yoga session or from which to enjoy the expansive views of the forest. In the evening, the deck elegantly transforms into an outdoor space that draws pre- and post-dinner guests to savour the pure mountain air.

RELAXATION GUARANTEED

The new Niraamaya Spa, built on stilts and made from Bangkirai wood from sustainable plantations in Indonesia,

is the perfect combination of functionality and elegance. The design is simple and minimalistic, pavilion-style, with a sense of openness to highlight the stunning tropical landscape. Spread across 1,200 square feet, the spa features a lobby and fully-equipped Ayurveda and international therapy rooms with private outdoor sit-outs. The interiors follow a warm palette complementing the green backdrop.

But what my body needed most of all that evening after a three-hour drive was a spot of pampering. And that was taken care of by Matthew, the spa's Ayurvedic massage therapist, with a superb hour-long traditional abhyanga massage, which put me in a deep sleep.

Awake, but still in relaxation mode, and suddenly ravenous, a comforting plate of Kerala-style lamb stew, made with coconut milk and accompanied by fluffy bowl-shaped appams with crispy edges, was what I wolfed down at the very elegantly appointed Café Samsara. A traditional coconut and jaggery payasam for afters and I was done. Ready to hit the soft pillows and ready to take on what the next day had in store for me.



>> Escape to Thekkady in Kerala for a little spa pampering



>> Food is prepared with fresh spices from the spice gardens

An hour later, it was time to walk a mere 10 feet up to the Kalaripayattu performance staging area of the Kadathanadan Kalari Centre, which was a dug-out space much like a swimming pool, with spectator seats on all four sides of the upper floor. Seemingly dance-like in the performers' movements, Kalaripayattu is one of India's oldest martial arts at over 3,000-years-old and can be traced back to the sage Parasurama, who, it is believed, is the father of this martial art. Ending in a spectacular fire-hoop-jumping display, the performance had me spell bound. But then, so had almost everything I had seen, heard, eaten, smelled and experienced in this alternate dimension of God's Own Country!

FACT FILE**GETTING THERE**

The idyllic hill station of Thekkady where Niraamaya Retreats Cardamom Club is situated, is a scenic three-hour drive from Madurai and a five-hour drive from Kochi, which many avoid due to the long, winding and nausea-inducing ride up the mountainous roads. Both Madurai and Kochi have daily direct flights to and from Mumbai and most other major Indian cities.

CONTACT

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