

ON SUNDAY Travel Mail



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Niraamaya Retreats has a set of seven cottages and is perched amidst acres of cardamom plantations



By Adila Matra

Kumily in Kerala offers a spicy mix of old-world charm along with idyllic landscapes

WHEN you pack your bags for a place you have only heard of, you build it up in your mind and sometimes end up returning disappointed. Kumily in the Idukki district of Kerala had started giving me reveries very early on. It is the spice capital, I read. The town wears the Periyar river like a bangle, I imagined. And as one hairpin after the other was scaled, I realised, Kumily would do anything but disappoint.

THE HOST

Niraamaya Retreats, perched amidst acres of cardamom plantations, was to be my host of the two days to come. 'Springvalley' read the board near the steep climb to the retreat. The place is a few kilometres away from central Kumily. Niraamaya has a set of seven cottages, all set in pure wilderness. The staff is extremely hospitable and the food is hearty. Named after spices — nutmeg, pepper, cardamom and so on — the cottages combine old-world charm with luxury. The outside world fades away and you feel as if you have found your hiding place. The workers will be more than happy to take you on a trek around the property. Rajesh, my guide, led me through slippery slopes that held cardamom that was yet to ripen, and bright red coffee seeds. Once atop, you can spot Palani and Madurai.

The whole of Springvalley sleeps after 8 pm. That's the time for you to come out of the cottage, wrapped in warm clothes (temperatures drop at night), and watch the moon through the leaves and branches. Listen to music and enjoy being cut off from the world.

ON THE PERIYAR

Kumily is not a place where you go to pack yourself with activities. Take it light and relax, that's what the town tells you. Of course, boating in Periyar is a must. The Periyar Tiger Reserve located high in the Cardamom Hills and Pandalam Ghats of the southern Western Ghats along the border with Tamil Nadu is lush green and home to teak, sandalwood, mangoes and tamarind as well as countless species of birds and animals. After a 10-minute walk in the reserve, the path clears and the Periyar Lake stretches in front of you.

The boats are spacious and house about a hundred people. I chose the upper deck for a better view, but the guides keep asking you to be seated due to safety concerns. Nevertheless, the ride is calming. You spot bisons, sambar deers and maybe even elephants walking to the lake for a sip of cold

water. There are kingfishers perched on the remnants of trees bang in the middle of the lake. Hornbills and thrushes whoosh by and sometimes ducks try to race with the boat.

The sun shines benevolently to make the water look surreal — I spotted diamonds in the lake. The breeze is right enough to send you into a siesta but just when you are about to doze off, the pitter-patter of raindrops wake you up. Rain is always unpredictable in Kerala, but when it does arrive, all you can do is stare at the beautiful landscape it has created. The lake, I concluded, looked prettier in the rain. The bisons and

the deers ran for cover, the alphas leading them. But the birds stayed right on the branches and got drenched, just like us on the boat.

Bamboo rafting and jungle safaris are also available in the reserve in case you want to check them out.

THE SPICE CAPITAL

There is an undeniable whiff of spices, once you reach Kumily. There are spice gardens everywhere. Kumily supplies spices to the rest of Kerala and outside. And so, a walk through one of the spice plantations was a given. As I walked through the

garden, trying to figure out what was what, sometimes dabbing my face free of sweat, my guide tells me this is the first time temperatures in Kumily have spiked above 30. It has affected the yield, he said. I cursed global warming but continued my walk.

The cardamom shrubs are thick, and everywhere. Kerala contributes about 70 per cent of the national production of cardamom with the major chunk coming from the plantations of Kumily. I ground the green seed and my hand smelled of cardamom the entire day. I saw huge cocoa seeds, some of them with gaping holes in them. "The squirrels got to them," said my

guide. Cinnamon, cloves, unnaturally big oranges — the plantation turned into a mini kitchen.

Side note: don't forget to get some green tea and homemade chocolates and other items from the small shops outside the plantations.

ROAD TO KODAI

The next day, I realised that Kodaikanal was a 147 km ride from Kumily. If you have a day to spare, do not miss out on this ride. Kumily lies near the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border and with the demarcation of a small check post, everything changes. From the name boards of road-

WAKE UP AND SMELL THE SPICE