

'God's Own Country' - experience to savour...

In the second of a two-part series, **PATRIC BAIRD** visits India - and becomes completely absorbed into the country's unique way of life...

I HAD spent a week in India, mostly based in Kerala, or, as it is widely known, 'God's Own Country'. Seven days may be a long time in politics, but it amounts to considerably more in India. In many ways, I felt that I had already been completely absorbed into the country's unique way of life. I had been repeatedly overwhelmed by almost every new experience, ranging from experiencing the stunning natural beauty of my surroundings, right down to the simple act of eating a freshly-prepared local dish, bursting with the flavour of unfamiliar spices.

My next destination was the Vythiri Resort, located 2800 feet above sea level, atop the Western Ghats mountain range. It's in Northern Kerala, and reached by flying into Calicut airport, followed by a 45 mile drive which includes an exhilarating ascent of the mountain's nine hairpin bends.

Given the altitude, it's a lot cooler up in Vythiri.



A spectacular treehouse at the Vythiri Resort



A view over the beach at Niraamaya Retreats at Kovalam on the Arabian Sea - the writer particularly enjoyed watching the sun set over the ocean

Established in 1999, the resort's main ethos is that guests are at one with the peace and quiet of the surrounding rainforest. While the emphasis is on luxury accommodation, ideal for honeymooners - there are 36 beautifully-designed rooms, some of which feature their own private swimming pool - none of them have a television and if you need to connect to the outside world, wifi is only available in one location and at certain times of the day. Guests can enjoy daily yoga and Ayurveda massage sessions, or take a tour of a nearby tribal village.

For those who feel that they're still not quite close enough to nature, there are also five treehouses to choose from. The most luxurious, situated 75 feet above the forest floor, on top of a reassuringly sturdy 250-year-old Banyan tree, comes complete with its own Jacuzzi bath, bathroom and double bed, everything you might expect to find in a hotel, except there are also two thick tree branches rising up from the floor through the roof.

At Vythiri, something as mundane as going for dinner becomes an adventure in itself. Walking along the narrow paths as dusk descends, accompanied by the soothing music which is piped throughout the resort, you might encounter some of the local, harmless, wildlife, such as giant yellow snails, bats, monkeys or brightly-coloured birds. Crossing the rope bridge over the river below, the air is thick with the smells of nearby plantations which grow tea, coffee, pepper, cardamom and other exotic spices, most of which feature in the impressive array of dishes at the evening buffet.

All too soon, it was time to head back down the mountain, and into the much warmer air, for my next destination. Niraamaya Retreats, at Kovalam, has the same emphasis on well-being and relaxation as Vythiri, but delivers a very different package altogether. The luxury spa is amongst the best in the country, and the



Vythiri Resort Honeymoon Pool Villa with glass floor restaurant delivers a superb range of Kerala specialities.

Located in Southern Kerala, close to the border with Tamil Nadu, Niraamaya overlooks the Arabian Sea. One of the standout experiences of my trip was watching the sun set over the tranquil ocean while sipping a tropical cocktail and seeing the lights of numerous small boats starting to appear as they set off for a night's fishing.

Guest accommodation consists of individual traditional Indian wooden cottages, some with an ocean view, but all of which have a verandah and every modern comfort. There is also a private beach which guests can access via a staircase down the side of a cliff, while morning yoga sessions are held on a platform overlooking the sea.

I admit that I skipped yoga in favour of breakfast and, although my criteria for judging a hotel breakfast is by the quality of its sausages, I probably had one of the best breakfasts here than I have eaten anywhere in the world. Sausages weren't even on the menu, instead I had masala dosa, a crisp rice and lentil pancake, stuffed with mildly-spiced potatoes and served with an array of chutneys.

The final stop on my Indian odyssey was the multi-award winning Carnoustie Ayurveda and Wellness Resort, a relatively short drive to the north, located just to the south of Kochi. As one might expect, given its title, this very upmarket resort takes the wellbeing of its guests very seriously indeed. They offer packages of a week, a fortnight or even 21 days, during which time the in-house Ayurveda doctor will draw up a health plan, tailor-made to the individual.

If you want to lose weight, stop smoking, or just simply unwind and detox, your mind, body and soul will be transformed through a variety of treatments

including massage, diet, exercise and relaxation techniques. Past guests getting away from it all have included Gulf royalty, French fashion designers, film stars and a variety of stressed professionals

And of course, if you just want to flop around your very well-appointed private villa, many of which feature their own pool, complete with sun loungers, or stroll down to the nearby pristine beach just beyond the resort's gardens before a sumptuous dinner at the roundhouse restaurant, that's up to you.

Sadly, I didn't stay long enough to notice any physical difference to my body, now exhausted by the rigours of travelling and an excess of spicy food, but I think my mind was in a much better place - although I suspect that my overall experience of Kerala might have contributed in no small way to that.

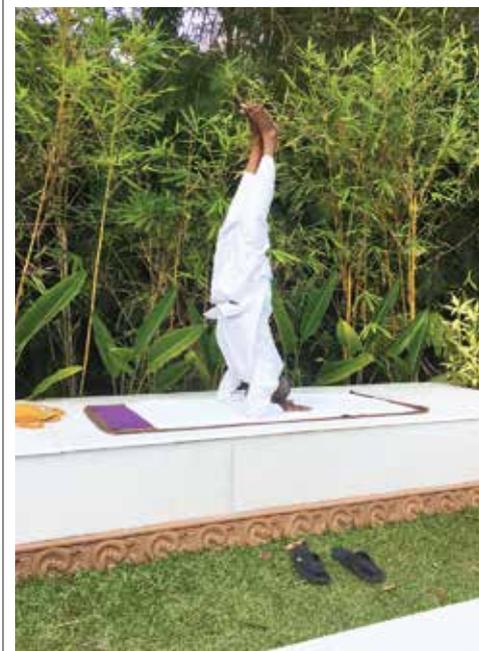
My only regret about my trip to India was that it had taken me so long to make my first visit. There's just so much more of this amazing country which I feel I must experience, and I'm worried that there's not enough time to do it. Still, my next trip, scheduled for later this year, should go some way in addressing that particular worry!

FACT BOX

Kerala Tourism: keralatourism.org
Vythiri Resort, Wayanad, Kerala - vythiresort.com
Niraamaya Retreats, Kovalam, Kerala - niraamaya.in/kovalam
Carnoustie Ayurveda & Wellbeing Resort, Allappuzha, Kerala - carnoustieresorts.com
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One of the luxurious private villas in the Carnoustie Ayurveda and Wellness Resort with private pool



Guest can enjoy relaxing yoga at the Carnoustie Ayurveda and Wellness Resort