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Be dazzled by India

Tuesday, 3 July 2012

In the south of India, the little-visited Karnataka has plenty of surprises, from the bright lights of Mysore Palace to rare wild life sightings, writes Harriet O'Brien



Mysore Palace, Karnataka, India

ENLARGE

Outside the Maharajah's palace a collective intake of breath was followed by an outburst of joyous applause from the large crowd. About 100,000 light bulbs had been switched on. They instantly transformed the royal complex into a host of linear illuminations, picking out silhouettes of the domes, pillars, arches and more. The net effect looked remarkably like Harrods lit up at night — only more even opulent, bigger and with the exotic distinction of including illuminated gateways and temples.

Mysore on Saturday and Sunday nights is uplifted by this light show. It is a major visitor attraction for the new breed of middle-class tourists who come here from across India. And their spirit of enthusiasm is intoxicating. On the day of my visit there were very few tourists from further afield.

The southern corner of the state of Karnataka is not much of a feature on the tourist map of the wider world. Which is odd because there is a fabulously rich mix here, from silk and sandalwood in Mysore (to say nothing of regal lightshows), to elephants and big cats in the jungle beyond. And should you need to catch your breath after that, there's a serene health retreat in the area, too.

I started my trip at Bangalore (officially now Bengaluru) — conveniently a non-stop flight from Heathrow. For all the hype about this being the IT capital and hip bar venue of India, I found it an unexpectedly laid back, leafy city, in parts almost quaintly old fashioned. Tree-lined avenues grace the old area of town while to the south is the expansive Lalbagh botanical garden, complete with a glasshouse built in 1889 and modelled on Crystal Palace.

I visited the engaging Nandi Temple, constructed in the 16th century by the city's founding father, Kempe Gowda, and containing a huge granite statue of a bull. It has been turned black from being rubbed with peanut oil in acts of reverence for the creature, said to be the vehicle of the Lord Shiva. I took in the old fort and the teak-carved palace of Tipu Sultan, Muslim ruler in the 18th century and ferocious enemy of the British. Then I retreated to the sleek surrounds of the Park Hotel where contemporary cool gets a twist of Indian panache with great splashes of colour. The vibrant i-Bar pulsed with music — which was, every so often, interrupted by highlights from an international cricket tournament.

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Moving on to Mysore the next day the effects of Road Safety Week enlivened the three-and-a half-hour drive: "Road safety is a mission, not an intermission," announced one of the notices dotted along the way. Arriving (safely) in this pretty city you can't but dither slightly over which site to explore first.

To the south, Chamundi Hill is one of the eight most sacred hills in southern India. Topped by the Sri Chamundeswari Temple and with the intriguing Godly Museum adjacent to the car park, it was drawing bright streams of pilgrims as I arrived. I moved on to the Maharajah's palace so as to see the place by daylight before returning for the evening illuminations.

Built by the English architect Henry Irwin in 1912 it is an almost bewildering confection of Mughal-style architecture with dashes of Scottish Baronialism.

Yet perhaps best of all are the retail outlets. The city is liberally endowed with handicraft shops selling silk and sandalwood goods, and it is also a key centre for "agarbathies", or incense sticks.

Meantime for an intense fix of colour, head for Devaraja market. Most Indian markets are absorbing, but this flower, fruit and veg centre is in a class of its own.

I wandered by wonderful stalls piled high with aubergines, tomatoes, squash and chillies; I paused to take in the aromas of spices; I marvelled at piles of bright powders for bindis (dots decorating the forehead); and I stood spellbound watching flower merchants weave intricate garlands of marigolds and jasmine.

From flora to fauna, I continued about three hours further west to Nagarhole National Park, once the hunting preserve of the rajahs of Mysore. Literally meaning "snake streams", Nagarhole backs on to three other wildlife reserves which together form a protected area totalling 2,000 sq km and harbouring elephants, gaur (an Indian type of bison), wild dogs, the odd tiger, leopard and much more.

The Bison camp on the surrounds of the Nagarhole Park is a swish, tented outfit on the banks of the scenic Kabini River. Here you enjoy creature comforts that evoke the lavish days of safaris in the 1920s.

In the large canvas villas there are huge open-air shower areas, dressing tables and full-length mirrors, while meals in the public areas are a delicious spread of subtly spicy mains and old-fashioned puddings.

But it is the camp's 4x4 safari drives that you're really here for. I went on three long ventures into the park where I was amazed by the beauty of the bamboo, rosewood and sandalwood forest and of course by the wildlife: exquisite roller birds with bright turquoise wings; trees teeming with langur monkeys; female elephants marshalling tiny young so tenderly yet firmly, it was tear-jerking. We even tracked a leopard, finally viewing it up a tree where it was draped across a fork in the branches looking as comfy as if in a familiar old armchair.

I was far less graceful than the tree leopard a day later. I ended my trip at the Shreyas Retreat near Bangalore. It is essentially an upmarket ashram offering just about every luxury (except alcohol and meat), but with an emphasis on spiritual calm and regeneration.

Yoga beginners are welcome, although as something of a novice my own first session was, frankly, unremitting torture.

Yet recuperating afterwards was a serene pleasure. I sat in shaded tranquillity in the vegetable garden, well kept by volunteer guests as well as the ever-kindly staff, while images of lounging leopards, flower weavers and palace illuminations washed through my mind — a parade of the remarkable kaleidoscope that is southern India

Travel essentials

Getting there: The writer travelled with Greaves Travel (020 7487-9111; greavesindia.co.uk). The company offers eight nights in Karnataka taking in Bangalore, Mysore, wildlife at Nagarhole and two nights at Shreyas Retreat from £2,199pp (based on two sharing). The price includes BA flights from Heathrow, private transport, breakfast at the hotels below, meals and two game viewings.

Staying there: The Park Bangalore (00 91 80 2559 4666; theparkhotels.com) doubles from R7,200 (£95).

Mysore Windflower Spa Resort, Nazarbad, Mysore (00 91 821 252 2500; thewindflower.com) doubles from R4,650 (£61).

The Bison, Nagarhole (00 91 80 41278708; thebison.in) from R5,250pp (£69). All meals.

Shreyas Retreat, Nelamangala, Bangalore (00 91 80 2773 2102; shreyasretreat.com) doubles from US\$370 (£240). Including all

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