

FROM FARM TO CUP



Pages from the diary of Tejas

Evolve Back Chikkana Halli Estate Coorg, June 2010

Tejas visits our resorts in Coorg and Kabini and shares with you some of his uplifting experiences. Join him as he immerses himself in the activities at our two resorts, and enjoy them with him, virtually!

Tejas Joseph resides in Auroville near Puducherry and is part of a consulting group engaged in creating viable models of decentralised lighting (using solar energy) for off-grid Indian villages. Tejas travels a lot in the course of his work and feels a deep connection with the history and ethos of the places he visits. He is a keen observer of the winds of change that are now blowing across the physical, cultural and social landscapes of India and seeks to capture its effects in his articles, ever believing that the journey is as important as the destination, the travel as rewarding as the arrival!

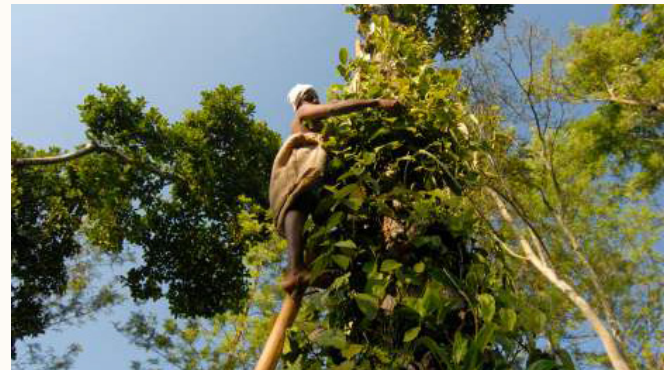
Feel free to write to him at ouseptejas@gmail.com if your interests or work coincide with his.

Activity Name	Guided Plantation Tour
Duration	2 Hours
Timing	4:00 PM to 6:00 PM
Guided	Yes
Transfer	Not required
Prior Booking Required	No

Learning about Coffee, Spice and other things nice

Later that afternoon, we assembled under a large plant that grew beside the main road of the resort. This was a larger group, comprising almost 15 of us with some eager children too.

Mahesh, our plantation tour guide, is a born showman. Short, slim and charismatic with a loud but pleasant voice, he knew just how to get our attention and keep it for the next hour and a half when he would regale us with anecdotes and enlightening tales from the pages of experience, history and folklore.



He also had a big fund of botanical knowledge and the Q&A format was his chosen vehicle of disbursing this information. Plucking a small handful of the leaves of the small tree under which we had gathered, he gently crushed them in his hands and offered it to us in turns to guess its name from the subtle aroma it gave off. He tempted (and taunted) us by adding that there would be a prize for the one who guessed right! This made our brain juices flow. Some came close with nutmeg and cardamom, while others were way off the mark with coffee and orange. In the end, with a wan smile on his lips, Mahesh disclosed that these leaves were those of the Allspice plant (*Pimenta dioica*); so named because its fragrance seemed to hint at the presence of numerous spices, notably cinnamon, cardamom and cloves. It was a native of southern Mexico and Central America but was later discovered in many other warm parts of the world as well including India. Both the berry and the leaves were used as class A spices in cooking, particularly by gastronomes. Allspice leaves (resembling bay leaves but with a stronger presence) was what made the difference between a 'good' biriyani and a 'bad' one, he knowingly shared with us.

Our next stop was under a big Jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), also called the Breadfruit tree (though this is actually a related species). According to a popular anecdote, it seems that the British named this tree and its fruit 'jack' in a corruption of its native name "chakka". We were surprised to learn that the Jackfruit was a delicacy greedily sought after by elephants as much as by birds, squirrels and, of course, man. The Jackfruit is indigenous to India though similar climatic conditions permit its flourishing in some parts of Africa and South America as well.

We entered a perimeter of the resort that was the coffee plantation sector and stopped before a coffee plant. Mahesh told us about the accidental discovery of coffee (like all good things in life!) by a shepherd more than five hundred years ago in the Ethiopian province of Kaffa in Africa, from where it spread to Egypt, Arabia and eventually to Europe. It was called Caffa first (after the area where it was discovered presumably) and became Coffee over time.

Learning about Coffee, Spice and other things nice

We were also told (and shown) the difference between the two principal types of coffee grown in Indian plantations: Arabica and Robusta.

The story of coffee is central to the Ramapuram family and Evolve Back Resorts.

The Chikkana Halli estate (of which the resort was a small part) is amongst the oldest in Coorg, having been developed by an Englishman in 1850 who then sold it to the family's forbears in 1926. Coorg was noted by the erstwhile East India company growers for having conditions – climate, soil, temperature and rainfall – that were ideal for growing coffee for connoisseurs around the world. To this day Coorg coffee holds a reputation unlike any other. And we were standing upon a plantation that is a part of this great tradition of coffee cultivation in India.



All around us in the plantation grew a great assortment of plants and trees in deference to diversity, unusual in conventional plantations where monoculture is the rule. The ground around a cluster of coffee plants was intercropped with ginger and turmeric, sometimes additionally with beans and a few other vegetables. This helped aerate the soil and keep the coffee free of weeds. Silver-oaks stood at intervals offering shade to the coffee and allowing pepper vines to climb and settle upon them. Here and there stood solitary Mandarin Orange trees, once the pride of Coorg (along with coffee), before they were decimated in a pestilence many years ago.

Mahesh showed us the composting pits containing biomass and other natural nutrients, which turned into manure over time. When ready, it would be applied to the coffee and other plants growing in its vicinity. Cultivation practices here followed the principles of organic and natural farming. On our return from the tour, we were shown the flatlands lying low off the coffee lounge in the center of the resort. In this small tract was grown sugarcane, bananas, vegetables and fine brown rice for the resort's kitchen, all organically cultivated. Though it met only some 10% of the kitchen's needs, this was more of a gesture by the resort as a continuing commitment to responsible tourism and ecological agriculture.

We headed back to the deck near the Peppercorn restaurant (overlooking the beautiful lake) where the tour ended. We were served a glass of fresh passion fruit juice, harvested from the resort's vast grounds and crushed in its kitchens just for us.

As we said our goodbyes and the group dispersed, I sat down looking out across the lake, reflecting upon how vacations like this had the power to instill respect for the land and for those whose lives were linked to it. It could teach us the connected and circular nature of things – how the coffee that we had each morning (and the fruits and vegetables, milk, eggs and a hundred other things) came from places far away; grown, processed and packed by people we do not see or know, but whose dedication made it possible that we could eat and drink as we chose. How much we took our food chains for granted!

