

# Orange County<sup>®</sup>

luxury resorts  
Kabini, India

## Pages from the diary of Tejas – Orange County, Kabini, 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 Pondicherry 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 [pjtejas@gmail.com](mailto:pjtejas@gmail.com) if your interests or work coincide with his.



On a Monday morning in the last week of June I drove along with my son Zubin to the resort in Kabini, where we set in a little after lunch time. After checking in, we came to the Honey Comb (the resort's multi-cuisine restaurant with a tribal theme) for a wonderful buffet lunch. We sat at a table facing the sublime Kabini and soon got hypnotized into tranquility by the sound of her waters gently lapping at the shores just a few metres away. This was another world from the one we had come from.

Over the next two days, we luxuriated in the ambience of the resort, its great service and wonderful food. We also immersed ourselves totally in the intense and adventurous activities and visits. They were imaginative, entertaining and educative.

Let me take you on a little virtual tour. Start up the windmills of your mind!

Activity Name	<b>Boat Safari</b>
Duration	3 Hours
Timing	6.30 AM to 09.30 AM & 03.30 PM to 06.30 PM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	Yes
Cost	Indian Nationals - Rs. 1000/- & Foreign Nationals - Rs. 2000/- per person per safari.

## Watching Wildlife from a Boat

There is palpable excitement at the lounge in the late afternoon where a group of 15 of us assemble for a short briefing (about the Nagarhole sanctuary, the Kabini basin and the flora and fauna they sustained) before setting off on a boat safari up the Kabini.

Going on a wildlife safari is a lot like buying a lottery. You may not always get the prize you wish for (like a tiger or otter sighting), but unlike a lottery, you will always get something good out of every safari. And they are not consolation prizes. They are rewards in themselves. They remind us that the edifice of nature consists of many bricks. Whether large or small, tiny or mighty, simple or complex, they all have their hallowed place in the web of life, none

being more important than any other. Understanding this is the key to appreciating wildlife in all its forms, for these are nothing but the different faces of nature in the end.

The first 'sighting' we make before boarding is a huge Dung Beetle that was slowly finding its way down the path to the jetty where our boat lay tethered. It was symbolic of the extensive fauna of this area, and a cue to us to 'not lose sight of the forest for the trees!'

We head upstream in a westerly direction. The boat kept gently bobbing on the wavy waters of the Kabini, (actually a reservoir as the Kabini River, further downstream, was dammed in 1974). The river had swelled on account of the monsoon and the strong winds from the mountains to the west caused it to be a little rough this afternoon. Chill, wet spray from the wake of the boat showered us from time to time. It soon strikes one that the journey can be as wonderful as the destination. Being on a boat is an experience unlike any other.



Looking out to land from water is the reverse of our normal everyday experience. It broadens our reference points and, having no obstructions like buildings or trees, brings in more to our field of vision. The senses are unusually

alert, not being swamped and dulled by the din of the city or those of human activity. One can drink in the beauty of the Kabini waterscape as the late afternoon sun mirrors off its surface in dancing ripples and spots. Dead trees and stumps stand out of the river at different points, adding a surrealistic touch to the scene. The sky above us is filled with big wooly tufts of clouds with a hint of dark monsoon grey. What amazing photographs this will make for!



The air around us is now filled with the shrieks and calls of different birds. Narendran, our guide on the safari, tells us that the Kabini (at this part where it borders the Bandipur and Nagarhole sanctuaries) is a bird lover's haven. On any given day, one can see the three common species of egrets found in Kabini. These include the Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*) and the Intermediate Egret (*Mesophoyx intermedia*). One can also see Herons, including the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) and the ubiquitous Cormorants. These include the Indian Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*), Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) and the Little Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*). Our eyes drifted landwards (on the

Bandipur side) and we saw some Elephants; first an adult with a male calf and then two young tuskers locked in playful combat.

A little further away, we saw a larger herd of about 13 elephants stroll out of the thick bamboo groves at the edge of the Bandipur Park. Spotted Deer (*Axis axis*) and Sambar Deer (*Rusa unicolor*) dotted the river banks on both the Bandipur and Nagarhole sides in large numbers feeding on the young grass just sprouted after the first rains of the season. We watched in fascination the awesome aerobatics (that would be the envy of any human paraglider) of the

Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*) as it floated, dived and swept past us in small circles looking for food in the river. Narendran pointed out a rather unusual bird sitting on the leafless branch of a dead tree in the river.

The Snakebird, also known as the Darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*), gets its name because of the way it holds its head on its long neck, like that of the raised hood of a striking snake! Even as we watched, it spread its wings and flew off, displaying very attractive plumage. Turning our eyes landward again (it looked as if all three elements – water, air and earth – took turns to display their secrets to us), we saw a fairly large Wild Pig (*Sus scrofa*) rooting quietly in the grass unmindful of either the deer or the elephants around it. Soon this motley group was joined by a lively band of monkeys – the Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*). On the opposite (Nagarhole) side, we spotted (through binoculars) an adult Stripe-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*) scrambling back up from the water's edge. He is considered to be the largest of his kind, and keeps a rather low profile. This was a rather rare sighting, according to our guide. Today was turning out to be a good day after all for us wildlife gazers!



Our boat driver, Sivaraj, (whose vision sans binoculars is phenomenal), cut the engine and pointed out to what seemed like logs from the distance. We came upon five large Marsh Crocodiles (*Crocodylus palustris*), three of which

were on the shore (looking rested after a meal presumably), while two others were in the water partly submerged but identifiable by their long snouts visible above the waterline. We approached closer, feeling a sense of mild dread and awe at these perfectly still forms.



Crocodiles are amongst the oldest evolutionary survivors who once shared terrain and competed for food with dinosaurs. They have not changed much from that time. However, unlike other reptiles, they have an efficient four-chambered heart (like birds and mammals) that probably accounts for their relatively long life spans. It is also believed that their long life (unless hunted) is also due to their

life styles and low metabolic rhythms, which conserve vital energy, probably extending this into a long life. Is there a lesson here for us activity and exercise obsessed humans?

From contemplating the crocodile, one of nature's oldest products, our feelings give way to euphoria at the symmetry, ease and control of an Osprey's (*Pandion haliaetus*) flight as it winged its way eastwards across from us.

Back on the water, Narendran points to the Lesser Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*), a resident bird.

We subsequently reached the western tip of the reservoir and the boat swung around in an arc to head back to the resort. On the way back, we stopped for a while at “Mastigudi”, a sacred site where a temple once stood, before the rising waters of the dam and reservoir submerged it. This temple has an old history and is believed to have been built by the tribes who once lived in these forests long before it became a protected sanctuary. The presiding deity here is our very own elephant god, Ganesh, and Mastiamma, a forest goddess revered by the natives. They stand in mute witness to a happier time when man seemingly knew his place in the ecosystem, mindful of its fragility and respectful of its needs.



We cast one last look upon the Bandipur shore before we turned the last bend in the river. The animals we had seen were all there, only joined by more of their groups. As we watched, a lone Gaur, also called the Indian Bison (*Bos gaurus*), wandered in from the forest and began to nibble upon the grass - looking majestic and standing out (if a bit lost) in the presence of numerous deer, elephants and monkeys.

The Kabini is a magical mistress. She can reward you with breathtaking wildlife sightings, if this is all that you seek. However, she can open a third eye in you if you are ready to be awakened to the mysteries and marvels of the natural world and the infinite maze of life it conceals and nurtures.

### Safari on 4 wheels

Activity Name	Vehicle Safari
Duration	4 Hours
Timing	05.30 AM to 09.30 AM & 03.00 PM to 07.00 PM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	Yes
Cost	Indian Nationals - Rs. 1000/- & Foreign Nationals - Rs. 2000/- per person per safari.

A wildlife safari is not quite complete until you have taken one by land (a proper jungle safari!) as well. Though they are two sides of the same coin, they have their own peculiarities and character as evinced in their flora and fauna.

We set off early (6 am!) the second morning to the Rajiv Gandhi national wildlife park that lay about 3 km from the resort. The first leg of it had to be done by boat to get across the Kabini to its northern side where our 16 seater safari vehicle waited.



It was cool and clear but we saw dark rain clouds in the distance over the Wynad hills of Kerala to the west and silently prayed that they would not catch up with us, at least not until our safari was done!

We drove through a couple of villages and the numerous small farms that surrounded them upon which grew simple grains, vegetables and fruits. These villages evolved from simple settlements started by those who were given land by the Government in compensation for what they had lost through subsidence when the Kabini was dammed in the mid seventies. These settlements were almost at the doorstep of the national park.

They were part of the Nagarhole forest at one time. The hand of man was clearly visible in the cultivated landscape of the villages. Extensive plowing was causing erosion of the land and silting up the reservoir. The cattle of the villagers foraged upon the grass that grew on the banks of the reservoir, cutting the food chain of the wild animals that also depended upon it, particularly the deer and elephants. Many farms were girded with electrified fences to keep off deer, boar and elephant. It was obvious that man and beast were locked in competition; one trying to keep, and the other trying to take!



While we may be tempted into thinking that this was inevitable and no more than a simple problem of supply and demand gone wrong, there is a bigger issue here with rather grave underpinnings. Increasing human intrusions and natural disasters are causing forested areas to thin each year. This takes away the food security of many animals causing them to move closer to human

settlements, triggering an expected conflict of interests and survival.

An idea that is being thought up to partially contain this growing problem is the corridor concept\*. The involve linking fragmented forests so that animals can move freely.

\* Conceived by forest authorities and concerned conservationists, it was originally aimed at elephants, though it has the potential to include other animals as well. Essentially a benign corridor is a planned intervention. It is assumed that this stratagem would benefit both man and animal. However, for such an idea to be successful, it will have to have the enlightened and voluntary participation of many forest officials, wildlife enthusiasts and environmentalists along with homesteaders, entrepreneurs and plantation owners who are located close to forests and wildlife; undoubtedly a daunting task of no small magnitude! But failure to address the problem in one way or another could lead to the sad decimation of many vulnerable animal species.



Designated a wildlife sanctuary in 1974, Nagarhole occupies an area of 644 sq km. It is home to an exceptionally large and diverse wildlife population that is part of a complex and delicate ecosystem. The forests of Nagarhole are deciduous, both dry and wet in parts, which allow for the flourishing of a great variety of flora and fauna. They were lush and green now, revived after a long summer by the monsoon that had just arrived. On entering the forest, we were at once immersed in the sound-scape of the jungle characterized by the loud and constant droning of cicadas. It was the pulse to which all forest life and activities took place. It would temporarily cease when a vehicle passed by or when the jungle was in commotion over an approaching predator, to start up soon after.

To our left was a resplendent Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) sitting atop a fallen tree. It looked as if it was sunning itself. It took off from its perch, flew over our vehicle to land on the road behind us with its splendid plumage partly displayed

– an extremely graceful maneuver that took less than half a minute at best. As we drove on (casting furtive glances at shrubs and treetops for an elusive tiger or leopard), we came upon two elephants – a mother with her young calf feeding behind a bush. She snorted warningly when she saw us and moved over in front of her calf protectively. Venkat, our jocular but well-informed guide, showed us a sand pit not far from where these animals stood. Elephants came here to trample upon the loose moist mud (made by forest authorities) and eat it. Mud apparently had salt and calcium, which they needed as most of their plant-based diet had little of this. It also seemed to be a cure for indigestion. These mud pits were dug all over



the sanctuary at different points to facilitate this need of the big animal.

Up ahead on a branch was seated a Crested Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*) watching us nonchalantly. It was a big and beautiful bird visibly exuding grace and power. We emerged on to the southern shore of the Kabini and parked for a while amongst some bamboos hoping to make some 'prize' sightings. Some Spotted Deer were grazing some distance away to our right, while a Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) was pecking for food on the waterline.

We watched the river for a while upon which we had taken a boat cruise the day before. How different things looked - depending from where one was viewing it! We turned around to head back and took another route, noting many fallen trees, either from age or thunder storms. Long lines of teak trees stood on either side of the forest path. These were now integrated into the rest of the jungle flora. They were planted in the early years by the



Forest Department as commercial plantations. Again, we started to scan the undergrowth where, Venkat told us, a tigress was seen resting just a few days ago. On a couple of occasions, this great beast was also spotted lying in the middle of the road.

We were in tiger country after all! Nagarhole has a resident population of 76 members of this illustrious family, *Panthera tigris*. It is amongst the largest in the world. But large as its numbers may be, it was anything but ubiquitous and you needed more than patience or determination to spot it. You needed to be lucky!

Speaking of numbers, Nagarhole is also home to about 300 species of birds and hosts the largest concentration of the Asiatic Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) along with Bandipur and Mudumalai, all of them contiguous wildlife sanctuaries stretching across two states of India.



As we continued we saw (or thought we saw) seductive animal shapes in shrubs and bushes. Once it was an Elephant and another time it was a solitary Gaur. Our guide, with a touch of theater, waved us into silence and told us to listen to a new sound, like a gruff bark. What was it, we wondered? A Barking Deer he told us, also called the Indian Muntjac (*Muntiacus muntjak*). After waiting for about ten minutes, it decided to give us a brief audience before disappearing into the bushes. It was a deer like any other except that it had this very different call. A few yards ahead, we stumbled upon a group of Black faced Langurs (also called the Hanuman Langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*) reveling in their treetop antics. They were the 'alarm systems' of the

jungle, giving off early warning signals to other animals of approaching (or scented) predators, particularly the big cats.

As we turned off the forest onto the main road to head back to the vehicle camp, a Cicada flew in and settled upon the shoulder of one of us. *There are more than a thousand species of Cicada and Nagarhole has a variety of species native to it.*

Venkat picked it up and let us have a close look at this drone of the forest. God, we wondered, how could such a shrill and loud sound emanate from something this small?

Apparently it had a membrane (tymbal) beneath its abdomen against which it rubs intensely. The abdomen is a hollow chamber and acts as an amplifier causing this earnest rubbing to emit piercing sounds that can reach up to 120 decibels – louder than your average rock band or discotheque!

Another naturalist (Vineith, who you will meet soon on the night trail story) put it rather tellingly when he remarked that if you could take two Cicadas into your car, roll up the windows and ‘turn them on’ - chances are that you may not hear them after a while as you could have become hearing impaired by then!

This forest (like any true forest) is a mixed bag of sights, surprises and lessons.

To understand the forest fully it is not enough to use just your eyes. You have to smell it and listen to it as well to let it impact you thoroughly. A forest shows us the pristine hand of creation and helps to remind us that we are all one, sharing a common evolutionary heritage and ancestry that makes us no less or more significant than the animals we come out to see. Their futures and ours are connected. And their survival depends a lot on our intercessions and ingenuity as much as on our understanding and empathy.



## An Elephant Tale

Activity Name	Elephant Interaction
Duration	1 ½ Hours
Timing: Interaction	9.00 AM to 11.00 AM
Ride	9.00 AM to 11 AM & 4.00 PM to 6.00 PM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	No

Meenakshi is the resident Pachyderm at the Orange County resort in Kabini. She is gentle and compliant, making her



a big hit with both children and adults. You can see her strolling with her mahout on Kabini's shore close to the resort with gleeful children atop her in the mornings and afternoons on most days. She is 47 years old, weighs roughly 3.5 tons and stands 8.5 ft. tall.

Taking a ride on Meenakshi will give you a hint of the enormous power concealed in this creature, while her gentleness will become evident when frolicking with her in the waters taking part in washing and bathing her with her mahout.

Meenakshi and her mahout, Sashi, have been in the resort at Kabini for about 2 years now.

Sashi thinks she was born in captivity though her mother was wild before being captured. Elephants in captivity tend to have a longer life span as they are fed regularly and taken care of, unlike the ones in the wild that have to face constant challenges to their food supplies and habitats every day.

We forget that elephants were so much a part of the Indian social landscape not very long ago. They graced palace and temple festivities and lent their might to kings and emperors in their wars and battles. And, long before the power saw and four-wheel drive trucks were invented, elephants were used to transporting the felled tropical hardwood trees from the Malabar forests that were used to build mansions and ships at home and railway tracks in faraway England.

Meenakshi is at the resort in Kabini to provide more than just joy rides and pose for exotic pictures. She is here to remind us of the wonders evolution has worked upon this singular creature symbolized by its phenomenal size, strength, memory and other impressive attributes that





includes swimming in oceans. The Kabini backwaters are where we can find the largest concentration of the Asiatic Elephant in the dry season. Hence it is only fitting that this animal has a worthy representative in Meenakshi for contemplation, kinship and bonding.

## Once upon a coracle

Activity Name	<b>Coracle Ride</b>
Duration	10-15 minutes
Timing	9.00 AM to 11 AM & 5.00 PM to 6.00 PM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	No

On any given evening after sunset, you can see local fishermen out on the waters of the Kabini with their nets and lines in their coracles. These were originally made from dried reeds and skin tied together with rope or hemp. Today, PVC, tar sheets and plastic substitute for wickerwork and other natural materials, which are now harder to obtain and need much maintenance.

Riding in a coracle is not like riding in a long boat. The coracle, being small and round, can disorient you while at the same time giving you a 360\* view of the waterscape. It requires great tact to handle and to be seated stably in one. Balance is the key!

Wearing our life jackets, my son and

I decided to sample a coracle ride on the last day of our stay at the resort. Manju, our pilot, elegantly pushed off from shore and paddled upstream for a few hundred meters before demonstrating how different paddling techniques –



whether up-down or side-to-side – animated the coracle in different ways- from moving ahead, bobbing in place or spinning around. One can be fooled by its seeming simplicity (like I was), but you will soon see that it takes considerable skill (and practice) to get the “coracle rhythm”.

So those of you who are endowed with adventurous spirits and feel the need to subdue physical challenges, keeping a coracle on course without spilling its contents – you and your co-passengers - into the Kabini is a good place to start.

Good luck, and happy coracle riding!



### A morning's adventure: discovering nature around the resort in Kabini

Activity Name	<b>Guided Nature Walk</b>
Duration	2 Hours 30 Minutes
Timing	6.30 AM to 09.00 AM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	Yes
Cost	Nil

Starting your day at dawn brings a lot of blessings. Watching the sun come up to dance and shimmer off the placid waters of the sleeping Kabini, or going on a safari into the Nagarhole sanctuary a few kilometers upstream to see some spectacular wildlife are two of them.

A third can be joining one of the Naturalists on a short walk of the perimeters surrounding the resort to discover natural wonders that we take for granted simply because they are all around us all the time.

The nature trail starts at 6 am from the shores of the Kabini where you are likely to spot more than a few interesting species of birds on any given day, depending on their seasonality. This morning as we set out we were greeted by the call of the Western Reef Egret looking for his breakfast presumably, while a little off the path ahead of us, we spotted the Eurasian Collared Dove, also going about the important business of finding breakfast before starting



her day. Other birds that one could see at this time of the day and year will be the Asian Koel, the Cormorant and the Grey Heron, to name a few of the tens of species both rare and common that live here or visit these parts. Avid bird watchers on these nature walks will be amply rewarded with a great variety of avian sightings that will make their day.



As we kept walking along the shoreline to the south, we caught a glimpse of a few fishermen casting their lines and village cattle being herded out to feed upon the sparse grass that grew on the banks. It was dry and the land looked like it could do with some showers. The previous evening, we had spotted some dark clouds that rolled out of the Vyanad hills to the west, where the Kabini originates. While they inspired hope in all of us, it failed to rain. Rain was what



the land, its people and animals needed. It brought life along with it. At this time of the year when most of the water holes in the reserves had dried up or were drying up, the Kabini was the last hope of the region, particularly for its animal life.

As we walked away from the shore we encountered small agricultural plots that grew a variety of food and cash crops. These included corn, sugarcane, groundnut, millets, ginger and a few vegetables. Cotton was the chief cash crop because the region had black soil, ideal for its cultivation. Farming practices of this region are still artisanal and have not been mechanized yet. It could

seem like one were in a time capsule when observing farmers plowing their fields with bullocks and using heavy stone rollers for threshing and milling their grain like they have been doing for a few hundred years. Most of the work on small farms in this region is still executed by human hands and animal power but for the occasional intervention of a tractor or a thresher.

The flora of this area was diverse and mixed. Shrubs and thorny bushes grew alongside giant banyans, pipal and tamarind trees. You will encounter an old pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) as you skirt the little track leading away from the small farm towards the main road. Ancient pipals and banyans are more than just floral specimens of the region. They symbolize its essence. They are veritable eco - systems in themselves, sheltering a great variety of insect and bird life on their branches, leaves and trunk. We are told by the locals that some of them are at least 100 -150 years old and sanctify the area with their august and serene presence. We pass the first temple, which we are told was rebuilt upon the site of an older one.

Farmlands stretched on either side of us. They had been tilled and were waiting for rains before sowing. The agriculture in this area was mostly rain-fed. Up in the distance we spot the tantalizing flowers of the Plumeria, also called the temple tree. Its big boughs seemed to bend in homage to the gods of the temple outside which it stood. It was in full bloom and its hauntingly



fragrant-white and yellow flowers lay scattered around it like a necklace upon the dry ground and leaves. As we

entered the last leg of the walk and vended our way back we chanced upon an ancient hero stone that chronicled the valor of someone who had expressed an act of courage and heroism a long time ago. The stone, though hard to date precisely, was believed to be a few centuries old.

This land pulsed with antiquity. We could sense it all around. Soon we found ourselves under the big Pipal that stands by the roadside a few hundred meters from the resort's gates, a lone sentinel bearing witness to the passage of time. You cannot miss it. We were embraced by the mesmeric murmur of its whispering leaves and shaded by its generous canopy. So big was its girth that we assumed it would need 2-3 full grown adults holding hands to cover its girth. We were stilled into rapture beneath it. What was it about this tree under which one man had sat a few thousand years ago and touched the very essence of life?

This tree was the epitome of symbiosis. We saw many types of ants clambering up and down its branches and spiders that had spread their gossamer network across its leaves. They shared mutual space with beetles, bugs and butterflies of many types. Nested in a crevice on one of the branches above us were a family of three spotted owls. If we could have stayed a whole day and night, we sensed that we could have catalogued a great many species of insects and birds that had their habitat in this one tree. So bountiful was its generosity, so magnificent its capacity to sustain so many forms of life other than its own. It was these qualities of giving and nurturing that stayed with us as we left its gentle presence and returned to the resort for a warm breakfast. Even trees can teach we realised.