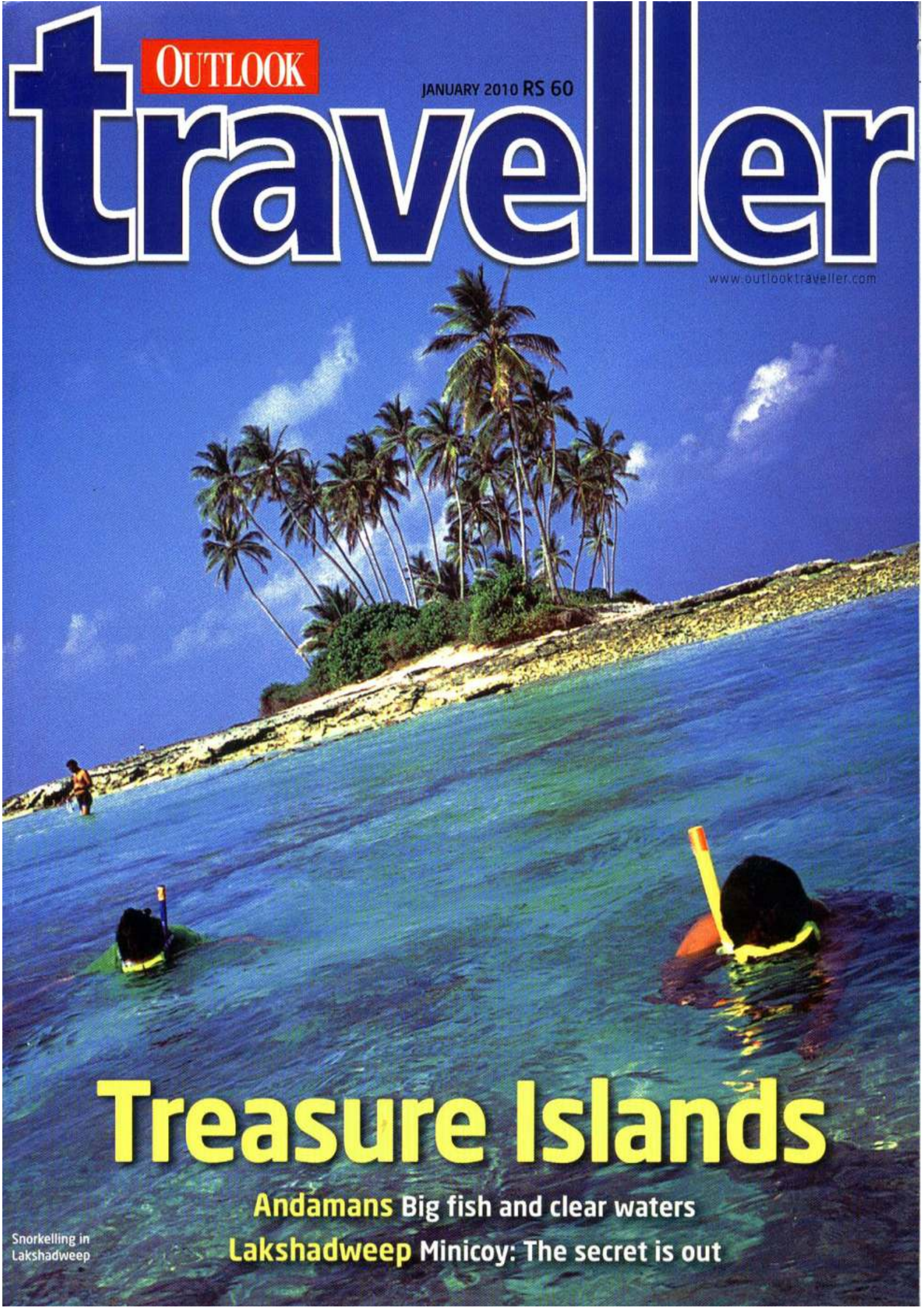


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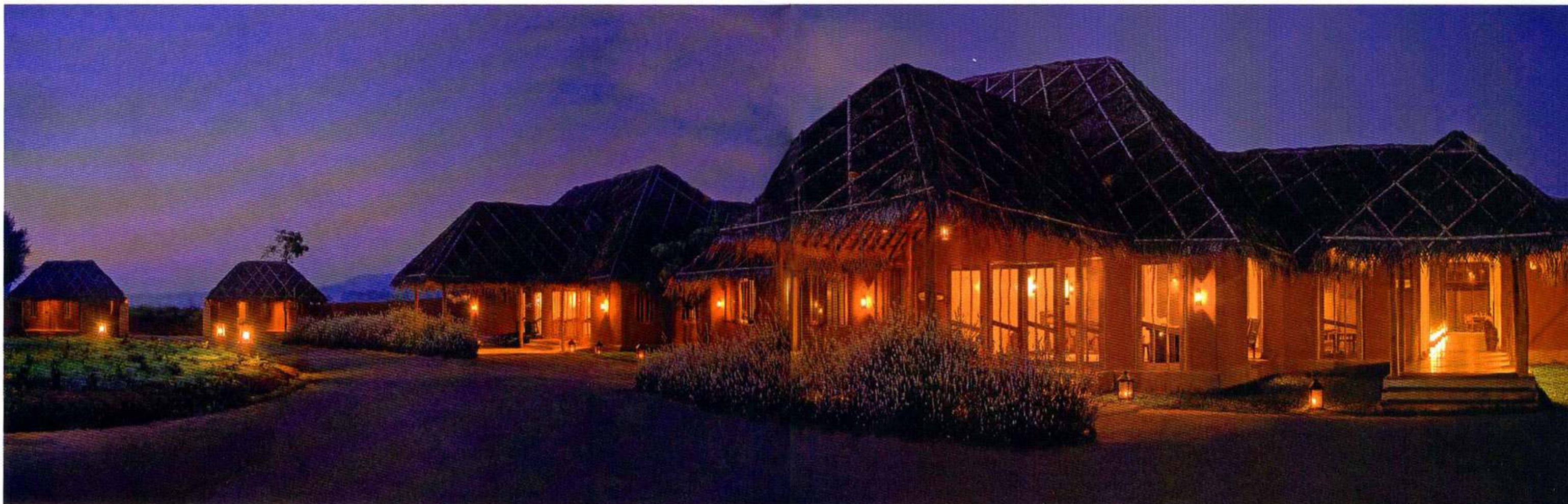


Treasure Islands

Andamans Big fish and clear waters

Lakshadweep Minicoy: The secret is out

Snorkelling in
Lakshadweep



Clockwise from above: the thatch-roofed reception area; inside one of the luxurious 'huts'; and the airy open-plan lobby with spectacular views of the Kabini river

CHECK OUT BAREFOOT LUXURY

Our motto is 'Experience Wildlife the Tribal Way,'" explains deputy general manager Thomas Cherian, as he eagerly rattles off the extensive itinerary that awaits me at **Orange County Kabini**, an upscale back-to-nature resort set on the banks of the Kabini river. My city-girl heart sinks at

the prospect of being cast out into the wilds of rural Karnataka, as I do my best to feign enthusiasm at the prospect of birdwatching walks at the crack of dawn. Communing with nature sounds like hard work.

The taxi heads out of Bangalore on an early Sunday morning, driving into Mysore and past the Kabini Dam and, finally, winding our way through a maze of goats, cows, chickens and other agricultural fauna. The last six kilometres is less a road than a thinly disguised minefield for unwary tyres. Five hours later, we trundle into the driveway at snail's pace to the usual tikka/garland reception at the door.

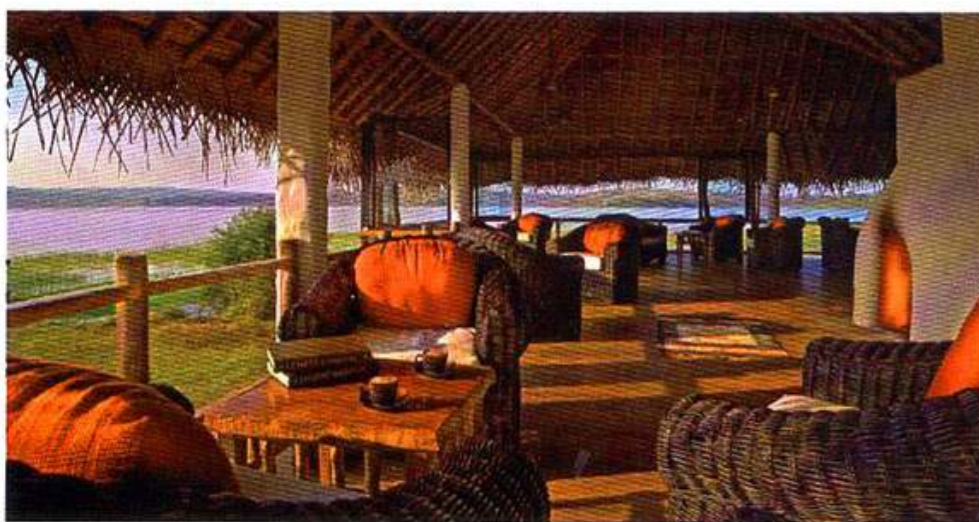
At first glance, Orange County seems no more than a nondescript assembly of thatched buildings. The first step into the hotel is therefore a revelation. I barely register the check-in, distracted by the breathtaking views of the river framed to stunning effect by the open-plan lobby. The soaring ceilings and the near-absence of walls create an instant effect of dislocation, giving a

weary traveller what she needs most: the sense of arrival and anticipation. I am felled in an instant, yet another easy conquest of Mother Nature.

The hotel staff – warm and wonderfully efficient – usher me out the door and down a meandering stone-paved pathway to my 'jacuzzi hut.' Orange County offers its guests a selection of 30 spacious cottage-suites with a private courtyard that houses either a full-sized jacuzzi or a private pool. The pool huts face the river and offer the best views. I enter the palm-thatched hut inspired by mud-walled 'hadis' of the Kadu Kurubas: bamboo-mat ceilings lashed together by eucalyptus poles; country-style furniture; distressed cement floors and walls; hand-crafted beds, ashtrays and dustbins; tribal print curtains, linens and paintings. Tribal chic is a hazardous design choice. Err too far in either direction – tribal or chic – and the results can be unintended kitsch. Orange County gets it just right.

The blue-tiled jacuzzi looks inviting but I

leave instead to check out the restaurant, and fortify myself for the looming encounters with the wild kind. The curse of a resort located in the back of beyond is that its one restaurant has to cater to the whims of all. What if some snotty brat just can't do without his pasta? The Orange County solu-





tion: a gargantuan buffet that serves seven salads, eight to ten desserts, and virtually every cuisine known to man, be it sambhar, bhelpuri, roganjosh, lasagna, chicken chettinad or tandoori prawns. Such a vast menu is bound to suffer from a couple of weak spots, but there is plenty to relish, particularly the local dishes like sautekai kootu, handi mamsa hurididu, parappu usuli and koli saaru.

Just when I'm ready to fall into a well-earned food coma, it's time for my first wildlife adventure: the boat safari. We putter down the river, stopping often to admire the sights: a herd of elephants chewing bamboo, the painted stork preening on a tree stump, a marsh alligator imitating a log. The skies ring with the chorus of birdsong

as the sun sets orange on the clear water. The innumerable shades of forest green meld together in the evening light, bearing testimony to nature's indecipherable beauty that leaves mere writers groping for clichés. Perched on the cusp of the Bandipur and Nagarhole wildlife preserves, and flanked by the Kabini river on both sides, Orange County offers a sweeping vista of all that we are lucky enough to possess, but also all that may soon be lost, if we don't pay sufficient and urgent attention.

The good news is that the comforts of Orange County are virtually guilt-free. Unlike many upscale properties that create luxury at the expense of nature, the resort prides itself on its commitment to both the local environment and its people. The hotel

recycles its waste and water, and keeps air and sound pollution to a minimum. Energy conservation is a priority, and all building materials are local, as are the many trees that dot the property. And where other hotels do their best to keep the less fortunate out of sight and mind, Orange County showcases Kuruba traditions, investing in their culture and community. This is luxury with a heart. The management's efforts received due recognition in 2009, winning them three prestigious World Travel Awards: Asia's Responsible Tourism, Asia's Leading Themed Resort (for their property in Coorg), India's Leading Wildlife Resort (for Kabini).

The next few days pass in a blur of activity. I take an early morning vehicle safari to spot some wild boar, black-faced langur, leopard or spotted deer; enjoy a post-lunch Ayurvedic massage; spend a wet afternoon bathing Meenakshi the resident elephant in the river; and take yet another languid ride down the river, this time on a round-bottomed coracle. I end the night watching the Kuruba men dance in the flickering firelight. Yet my happiest moments are the quiet ones, spent lying on a deck chair by the infinity pool, looking out on the river, the hills of Bandipur silhouetted in the distance, and the great green expanse beyond. On a clear day, you can see all the way to Kerala.

Lakshmi Chaudhry

The infinity pool, which looks out on to the Kabini river (above); and a boat safari



THE INFORMATION

LOCATION Bheeramballi Village, H.D. Kote Taluk, Mysore Dist., Karnataka/245km from Bangalore

ACCOMMODATION 22 Jacuzzi Huts, 8 Pool Huts

TARIFF Rs 17,000/Rs 20,000

CONTACT 08228-269100,

www.orangecounty.in