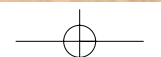


# Coracle Country

Dandeli in Karnataka combines the best of every outdoor experience — camping, white water rafting, backwater cruises and most importantly solitude. ANANDA BANERJEE travels to the latest eco-tourism hotspot



The bamboo has flowered after 40 years but this is not at all good news in this forest. For locals believe that the rare flower is a harbinger of drought and famine. Traditional knowledge carries some truth and the monsoon in these slopes of the Western Ghats indeed did not keep its date this year. Not because the Rain God was angry, turning away to drench other parts of the sub-continent, but because he wanted to give the foresters a miracle. To dispel myths, to prove that the rare flower might have seemed ominous at first but had indeed got in the showers, so what if a few weeks too late, so what if they had burst out of a cloudy womb whose time had come. I thank the Rain God for his change of mood. How else would I have found myself wrapped by the fresh green countryside, thickening with every turn of the road, just-born blooms stunning me with their colour, birds chirping in glee and streams gushing down to bathe the hills of summer?

I am on my way to Dandeli, a small town nestled in the backyard of the Western Ghats in north Karnataka. Not too far away from the bustle of Goa, yet a silent hermitage in Nature where every city slicker is guaranteed to find solace. Those looking for Nat Geo information, know this: The Sahyadri hills are one of the world's ten "hottest biodiversity hotspots" and has over 5,000 species of flowering plants, 139 types of mammals, 508 kinds of birds and 179 amphibians. You would find at least 325 globally threatened species here!

**DAY 1:** My journey begins from Goa's Dabolim Airport, where my host Sanjay picks me up. After negotiating the narrow Goan roads, passing through small dockyards and lush paddy fields, we

(Left to right) Jasmine and bamboo flowers. One of the many waterfalls in the Western Ghats



PHOTOS: ANANDA BANERJEE



pick up speed on open roads. Our myths say something about *pushpvarsha*, or the heavenly floral shower by angels. I am regaled with something similar on earth. At frequent intervals, women and children stand in groups, hand extended, with *gajras* of jasmine buds neatly wrapped in banana leaf and tied with banana fibre. At Rs 5 a package, you get three to five flower strings. I pick up one from three little kids, who were holding it out in front of their little bamboo hut with such open-hearted smiles that you could not help but give in to their honest pleas. They wish me well.

The jasmine smells good in the moist air. My ride is like a gentle rollercoaster, the road rising and dipping like a perfect sound wave plotted on a graph sheet. The rain continues as a leisurely drizzle as I reach Molem, a border checkpoint between Goa and Karnataka from where the climb begins. It is late afternoon and having skipped lunch hour to make good on speed, I decide to feast on some delicious *pao bhaji* at one of the *dhabas* catering to the hundreds of truck drivers doing endless rounds of the Goa docks.

We are skirted by the montane forests, full of broad-leafed trees, so typical of this moist region. All of them belong to the laurel family and, therefore, have a high content of ethereal oils. These are important sources of spices and perfumes, which once attracted the Portuguese to this belt and were the *raison d'etre* of the spice economy. This is the closest to an equatorial rainforest experience, where the foliage is so thick and knotted with each other that you can hardly guess what lurks behind the immediate plant or tree. I feel trapped as our vehicle enters a wall of fog, the croaking frog and the furiously buzzing cicada reminding me of the life around and guiding me through. Momentarily, you seem to be in a fairytale world of the tall, weathered and monstrous speaking tree, spreading its giant boughs over and around you, girding you in its embrace, its leaves the heart of darkness. Don't know how long I was on a winding forest road, crawling only as much as the headlight beam, but the trees decide not to breathe down so heavy and open up a clearing. From here, I get my first view of the blue rolling hills, puffs of clouds hanging in between, like dense cigar smoke. In the foothills, neatly cut terraced fields are soaking in the rain as the farmer takes care of his newly sown paddy.

By nightfall we reach Dandeli and I check into the sprawling adventure camp on the banks of the river Kali, so called because its bed is of dark manganese. By now, my jasmine has bloomed and serves as an excellent room freshener in my cosy little tent. Dandeli may not figure higher than a blip in



**GETTING THERE**

**By Air:** Closest airport Belgaum (95 km) Hubli (75km) Goa (125 km)

**Air India has daily flights to Goa from Delhi, Mumbai and frequent flights from Chennai.**

**By Train:** Closest railhead Alnavar (32 km) Londa (48 km) Dharwad (57 km)

**By Road:** Dandeli is well connected from Bangalore, Mumbai, Goa, Belgaum, Karwar and Dharwad.

To plan a trip log on to [www.dandeli.com](http://www.dandeli.com)



our mainstream consciousness but not far away from the jungle camp is a cosmopolitan town where people from all over the country come to work at the West Coast Paper Mill. Language is no barrier here and everybody seems to be familiar with a smattering of Hindi, Marathi, Kannnda, Konkani, Telugu, Tamil and Nepalese. It was an industrial hub in British India and it once had their oldest Railway facility, now virtually non-existent. The city is believed to have been named after Dandelappa, a loyal servant of the Mirashi landlords. Even today, people worship him in a temple. Another legend goes that the city was named after King Dandakanayaka, who passed through the beautiful forests around here and named them Dandakaranya.

**DAY 2:** I wake up to the clatter of Hornbills and Jungle Babblers, a welcome break from my shrill alarm clock, and the deep plops of leftover rainwater trickling down the leaves. The sun's barely able to peep through the clouds and the denizens of the forest are reluctant risers today. Still, I am able to do some armchair birding, spotting the Malabar Grey and Malabar Pied Hornbill, the common and the black-rumped Flame Backs, Common Lora, Gold-fronted Chloropsis, Great Tit and Racket-tailed Drongos. Little dots of flaming colour streaking across branches.

At the breakfast table I meet Pramod, the chief naturalist of the camp, and exchange notes on activities that can be done outdoors. You can choose from river rafting, rappelling, kayaking, angling, jungle safaris and nature walks to name a few. In fact, whitewater rafting, which had thus far been patented by Rishikesh and the Ganga up north, is now a big draw of the Kali river, which has a series of negotiable rapids. Dandeli, therefore, is fast emerging as an adventure and eco-tourism destination for weary corporate traffic out of Bengaluru and Mumbai.

I choose to try out the local *dinghy* or coracle ride on the Kali with Laxman as my guide and paddler. Coracles are circular, lightweight boats made out of bamboo, looking like floating saucers, their bottoms lined with hides or plastic sheets to make them waterproof. Although these boats were designed for general transport since the beginning of time, nowadays they are a rage among tourists. Not just because of the novelty of the experience but because it takes us to our primitive roots. The coracle is a part and parcel of every household here; locals use it for small-time fishing and even for vending daily necessities. These boats, built in much the same way as you would weave a cane basket, takes about a day to build and are entirely eco-friendly.

I slip into the coracle and let it bob along the turbulent waters of the rain-fed Kali, now an opaque chocolate brown, having eroded the hills high

The Ramanguli riverside resort, a baby crocodile on the Kali river, Little Blue Kingfisher and Little Heron



John Pollard, who started rafting here, is seen negotiating a rapid on the Kali with his team

above. I try steering my course but in vain; I plunge my oar to the left, the coracle turns 360 degrees. Then attempt to steady it from the right but the eddies push me back towards the bank. After spinning around a while, I realise it's unwise to tame the Kali and entrust my fate to Laxman. He paddles with expertise and keeps the coracle near the banks, avoiding the strong currents which could dangerously set us off course and leave us as powerless as a twig in the flood. It's when we have steadied our ride that Laxman tells me that the river has quite a few crocodiles. However, they don't attack you so long as there are enough prey around for them to feast on and enough water and bank for them to laze around. Still, the thought of them swirling around you can be a bit unnerving, much like testing your fear factor. A pair of Brahminy Kites hovers above and keeps us company. Laxman points to a nest made by Asian Weaver Ants in one of the trees. Weaver Ants are tree dwellers and are known for their unique nest-building behaviour where worker ants bind leaves together with larval silk. Laxman explains the intricacies of nest building, a fascinating tale of craftsmanship and skill management. Each

nest is headed by the queen who lays the eggs. A colony may have up to half a million workers. The major workers are approximately eight to ten millimetres in length and the minors approximately half the length of the majors. There is smart division of labour: The major workers forage, defend, maintain and expand the colony whereas minor workers tend to stay within the nests where they care for the brood and trap scale insects for food. This explains why farmers want them around their fields to get rid of pests.

These workers bring the leaves together with their mandibles and then hold and manipulate the larvae in such a way that causes them to excrete silk. The workers then maneuver between the leaves in a highly coordinated fashion to bind them together. The self-organising properties and emergent behaviour of ants have inspired new approaches in scientific fields such as robotics, engineering and computer science. Laxman also introduces me to another species, the Jordan's Jumping Ant. Paddling up and down the Kali, I am amazed by my oarsman's acquired skills of a keen naturalist. May be, he's taken lessons from the multi-tasking ants.

We spot a large number of Kingfishers — white-throated, stork-billed and the little blue ones — all cocking their proud head at others. Then there's the dark knight, the Grey-headed Fishing eagle, standing atop a dead tree trunk in his brown coat, his hunter eyes intent on the water, his plume still as still can be, his claws taut and ready to swoop down the moment unsuspecting fish surface for a random feed. We circumvent a baby crocodile lying on a large rock in the middle of the river, desperately wishing the sun would come out. The seasoned adults know better, they have already gone under. Laxman tells me that the baby can grow up to 12 ft long!



A Siddi mushroom seller

Just in case the croc changes his food preference, I ask Laxman to head back. After lunch, I head out again, this time with Pramod, to the Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary, now newly christened as Dandeli – Anshi Tiger Reserve. On the way, I stop by to meet people from the Medar community who have made a virtue of living close to bamboo groves. Apart from making coracles, they earn their living out of household products like beach and roof mats as well as baskets.

I get a short demonstration from Yasuraj Medar on the craft and get a tiny bamboo basket to carry home as memento. There is no wastage as all leftover materials are used by women to make the base of incense sticks. A day spent with these communities is a lesson in sustainable practices.

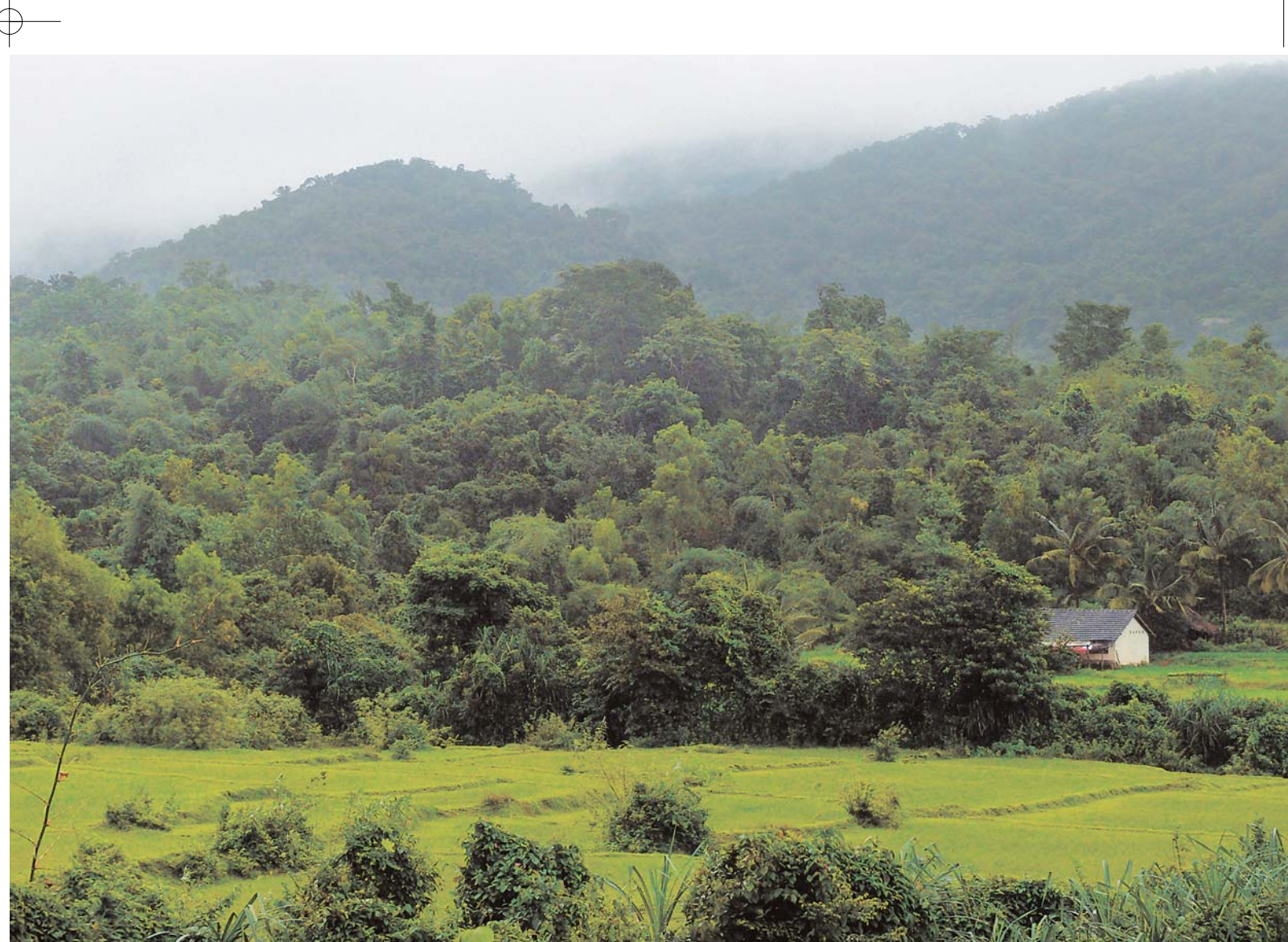
No wonder then that the forest is teeming rich with wildlife. Though this is classic tiger country, it is also the home of King Cobra, elephants and the famed Black Panther. Pramod tells me that this is one of the best places to catch a glimpse of this elusive cat and he has been lucky more than once. Not I though, despite a good two hours of patient and silent behaviour, despite keeping my eyes peeled on every thicket, despite looking for tracks on the wet forest floor. But the almost Amazonian forest refuses to be your ally; it smothers your vision and squelches every mark of the big cat. The rain is a willing accomplice, washing any remnants of prey. However, I get a distinct feeling of being observed. In this dark, leafy wilderness, where you can't trust an innocent tendril, he could be anywhere, our Black Panther. Is he lurking in the shadows of the undergrowth, stalking us? Is he atop the branches, hidden in the canopy, waiting to pounce on us? Has he dissolved in the distant darkness?

Anyway, he proves a point. In the jungle, he calls the shots and won't show up at your whim. Not for trophy value. And there were two of us, not ideal for a kill. I settle for other sights, like the unending green expanse from the Shirol peak, the melodious whistling of the Malabar Whistling Thrush and the startling designs on the Blue Mormon.

**Day 3:** My co-host Ramnath and Sanjay take me along the long road to Ramanguli via Yellapur to experience the Kannada backwaters. You've probably seen and heard about the Kerala backwaters but I recommend you try a ride on one of the serpentine rivers, surrounded by cashew plantations, skirting past pretty gardens and hamlets, curling around little blue hills. It's an awesome experience, floating alongside logs that have drifted loose from the banks.

We reach the camp on the scenic banks of the river Gangavali, sitting right in the middle of nut country. Around us grow betel, areca and cashew nuts that are as much a part of the local cuisine as they are part of the welcome platter. Camp manager Udayakumar starts a bonfire by the river to help us dry off along with generous swigs of local wine.

**Day 4:** We set out on a spirited journey to Ganesh Gudi for our encounter with the unique tribes of the region. Along the way, we meet a few Siddis selling wild mushrooms. These are people of African descent, whose ancestors arrived in India between the 11th and 19th centuries as slave labour. Known to be fiercely loyal, they were in the service of many princely states in western India as mercenaries. But somehow they never quite blended locally and



A view of the Western Ghats and (below) a display of the Syntheri Rocks at Ganesh Gudi

herded together. Since they were strong fighters, some Siddis even escaped to set up their independent territories. Today, they may be a handful, reduced to living a pastoral life but they are fiercely protective about their identity. They shun the mainstream, get annoyed and retreat when I try to photograph them. Owing their origins to exploitation, it's understandable why they can be resentful. But when you hear their distant drumbeats and chants, you could hardly believe that you are out of Africa. At our next stop, a Gouda settlement, I am amazed by unique thatch houses without doors. These tribals live with goats and sheep under one roof and sell their milk for a livelihood.

We move further up to the banks of the Bison river, on way to the gigantic Supa Dam on the Kalindi river, which supplies power to the state of Karnataka.



Dams may seem like huge infrastructure feats but post monsoon and in September, the reservoirs are full to the brim and make for excellent lakeside retreats. There are the crumbly Syntheri Rocks which gather around the 300-ft granite monolith, remnant of a pre-historic volcanic eruption. It glistens as the water rushes into a deep ravine and sprays up a super white foam. Life still finds refuge amid the turbulence of raging torrents and the tumbling stones. Pigeons nest in the nooks and crannies while rock bees have perched their hives in such well-protected corners that they are unaffected by the elements of nature.

The might of the Kalindi overwhelms me. It gurgles and swirls, in terrible turmoil, holding more than it can keep. It tears down everything in its swathe, tossing and turning anything in its course. Everything else stills around it. □