

# GARDEN STATE

Farm tourism in Kerala is the state's hot new travel experience on offer. From clipping off tight ripe red grapes straight off the vines to magical spice gardens and coffee plantations—it's a dream holiday for gourmet travellers. **By Aditi Datta**

If we were to ever find ourselves in the eternally hypothetical situation of being stranded in one location, we reckon Kerala would be a pretty great option. With indigenous growth of tea, coffee, herbs and spices, we think we'd be entirely happy staying right here since it sincerely satisfies our favourite virtues and vices. Not that it's an island, but with its unique topography of seaside and mountain air and a whole load of character, this tiny state is a land unto itself.

In recent times, focus has spilled over from Kerala's backwaters further inland, and for good reason. We belong to a curious generation that increasingly seeks information about what we put in our bodies and where it comes from. At this time, Kerala has opened up its plantations and farms to be explored and experienced. In fact, India's first planned eco-tourism village is in Thenmala, about 72 kms from Trivandrum, while the model fishing village of Kumbalangi is on the outskirts of Cochin. If you fancy being a farm hand for a day, here's where you can give it a go in Kerala.

## VANILLA COUNTY | RUBBER TREES & SPICE GARDENS & HOMESTAY

*Teekoy Village, close to Vagamon*

Situated at the source of the Meenachil river, Vanilla County is set amidst 150 acres of green. While the rubber plantations make for a lush view, it's the sense of smell that's happiest with whiffs of cardamom, pepper and of course, vanilla. With six rooms and four tents for those who choose it, Mr and Mrs Matthew will not just show you the Less Intensive Farming Environment approach, but will also whip up home-cooked meals made from local produce and take you around town.

## TRANQUIL RESORT | COFFEE & SPICE PLANTATION & HOMESTAY

*Kuppamudi Coffee Estate, Wayanad*

If you'd like to wake up and smell the coffee, few places are as ideal as this regularly acclaimed homestay. Wayanad falls right in the middle of the Malabar rainforest, offering ideal soil and climate conditions for coffee plantations. Started in the 1800s under British planters, aromatic Robusta and Arabica coffee beans sit beside a hint of nutmeg crop inter-planting. Whether you're in one of its seven rooms or two treehouses, Victor and family insist you join the others for mealtimes that bring fresh baked bread, home-made preserves, garden grown vegetables and Grandmother's 'secret recipe' cooking.

## THE HILLS OF KOLLUKUMALAI | TEA PLANTATION

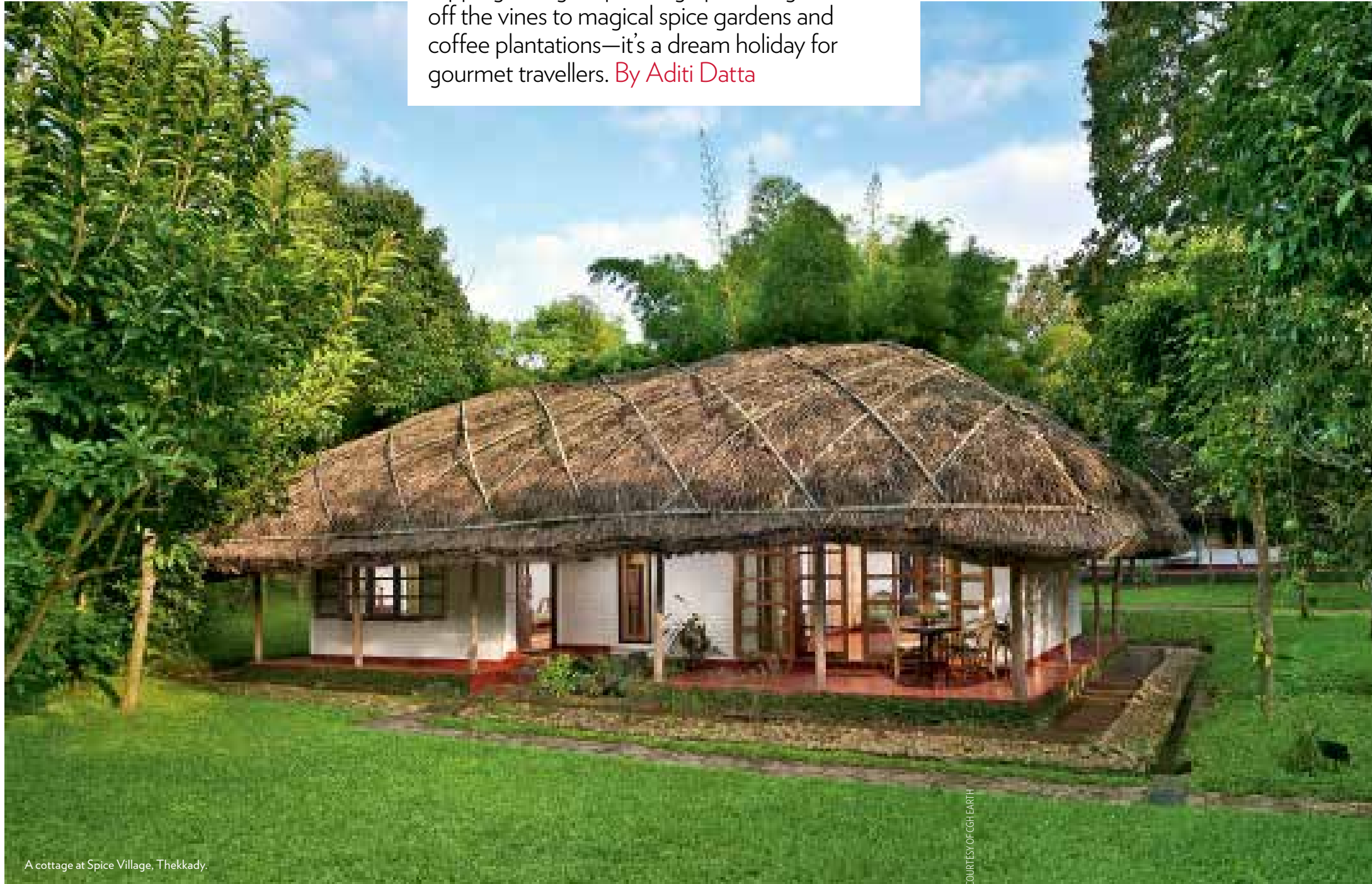
*Close to Munnar (38 kilometres away)*

For those who get their high from *chai*, the hills of Kollukkumalai at 7,900 feet above sea level are a special treat. The intricacies of the Broken Orange Pekoe and the Flowery Orange Pekoe are explained on a guided tour, which includes a wander through the two-storied wooden tea factory, built in the 1930s. In tradition matching that era, tea is not processed by the popular crush-tear-curl method but it still processed the old-school way. The bold difference is in the cup, offered for tasting to visitors.

## HARVEST FRESH FARMS | COCONUT & POMEGRANATE FARM & HOMESTAY

*Cumbum Valley at Melagudalur, Idukki District*

Probably the best culinary representative of Kerala, the



A cottage at Spice Village, Thekkady.

COURTESY OF CGH EARTH

coconut tree is considered the 'tree of life' and diligent farming ensures that every part of it—coir, leaves, and fruit—is put to good use. Harvest Fresh go a step further with their organic coconuts; their INDOCERT certification means that all their produce including pomegranate, papaya, grapes, and passion fruit have extra goodness. The

rooms for guests are simple but somewhat sophisticated, and visitors can help in working the fruit garden or taking care of the ducks, turkeys and geese whose contribution to the working of the farm is never overlooked.

#### NAVARA ECO FARM | RICE PLANTATION

*On the banks of Chittur River, Palakkad*

Navara Eco Farm is certified organic for its production of not just rice but also fruits, medicinal herbs and bamboo. Much of the focus remains of harvesting the perfect grain of Navara, a rice variety that is used not only in the healthy diet of Kerala but also in Ayurveda for its medicinal properties, especially in the treatment of arthritic and neurological disorders as well as Panchkarma (detoxification.) Never allowing the quality of the grain to be compromised, the farm allows a maximum of eight visitors at a time who are welcome to stay over and help in sowing, weeding or harvesting, depending on time of the year.

#### THE INDO-SWISS PROJECT AT MATTUPETTY DAM | DAIRY AND FLOWER FARMING

*In and around Munnar, Idukki District*

If you were thinking that these rolling hills of green were a tad incomplete without a spotted cow or two, you're in luck. Spread over 191 hectares of grassy hillside is the Indo-Swiss Project, a highly specialised cattle development and research centre launched in collaboration between the Government of India and the Swiss confederation towards

Clockwise from top left: The pool at Tranquil Resort, Wayanad; cycling in the farms; the hills of Kollukumalai; extracting rubber from a tree; the landscape of Munnar; a board at Harvest Fresh Farms.



improvement in livestock farming. New breeds of cattle like the Swiss Brown have made Idukki the cream of the crop when it comes to dairy production. Visitors to Mattupetty Dam, located three kilometres away and in itself a scenic spot, can stop by for a stroll on the farm or the adjoining garden that grows rare species of dahlias, senias, and roses.

#### SPICE VILLAGE | SPICE GARDENS

*Thekkady, Idukki District*

The plantations of Thekkady tells visitors everything they need to know about variety and the spice of life,

producing some of the finest ginger, cinnamon, pepper, vanilla, clove, and nutmeg that have historically attracted traders from the world over and are now amongst the proudest exports from the region. Spice Village offers the best of Thekkady living in 35 acres, with elephants bathing in a stream by the resort, clean and simple rooms, grounds that are entirely chemical free and the opportunity to pick peppercorn at a neighbouring farm when the time is ripe. An evening master class of cooking shows visitors just how little can go a long, long way when it comes to flavour. ✦



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DREAMSTIME; COURTESY OF HARVEST FRESH FARMS; COURTESY OF KOLLIKUMALAI; SHUTTERSTOCK; KARAN TAKOLIA; COURTESY OF HARVEST FRESH FARMS