

Better than B&B, Homestays offer local flavour

Homestays is the hottest trend in the hospitality sector that is embracing tourists like never before. ANUSHYA MAMTORA visits one such home in Wayanad, Kerala that has been roped in by the Mahindra Group and comes back with memories of 'laundry fresh' surroundings and family bonding



How does one plan for a holiday? Zero in on a destination, fix the dates, book a hotel, buy a handy guide, hire a cab, see all the tourist destinations, strike out the place in your list of dream destinations and return with that vacation smug. Perfect? Almost. Well, why don't you consider this.

Replace the 'sherwani' clad, long moustached guard at the hotel entrance with a warm family waiting to embrace you into their homes and hearts. Delete the hotel food and add a wholesome home cooked meal that is typical of the cuisine of the place you are visiting. You can also learn to make some delicacies if you want to! Instead of that clock work precision sight-seeing with a tourist guide book, what if you could interact with the locals, feel the culture and learn about the nuances of your favourite holiday spot?

The idea is appealing no doubt. Perhaps that is why Mahindra Holidays & Resorts India Ltd has ventured into the 'Homestay' holidaying concept, where individuals with large homes let out their spare rooms for tourists to stay in, cook them a homely meal and guide them about the place.

I jumped at the idea of visiting one such Mahindra Homestay property in Wayanad, Kerala, excited about

getting away from the maddening crowds of the city into a serene dwelling in the lap of nature. Yet, I was slightly apprehensive about the 'home' I was going to stay in. Being a lone female traveller, living in a stranger's house does leave one wondering about issues of safety. Dismissing all doubts I was ready to go backpacking across the scenic district.

Wayanad calling

Situated in North Kerala, Wayanad is 94 kms from Calicut, 140 kms from Mysore and 270 kms from Bengaluru. I chose to take the Mysore route, hanging my head out of the car window, trying to breathe in as much fresh air as possible as the Bandipur forests and Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary whizzed by.

After traversing through winding roads I finally arrived at Glenora Homestay at Vaduvanchal where K Rajagopal, his wife Jayarani and daughter Swetha were waiting for

me. After exchanging pleasantries I was soon shown my room, a luxury cottage slightly away from their home, with a beautiful sit out and a splendid view of my host's 90 acre vast coffee, pepper and betel nut plantation.

Done up in authentic Kerala style, the cottage had sloping roofs, bamboo décor and red brick work. Similar to that of a hotel, the towels and soaps were neatly arranged, a fridge with beverages was kept ready and there was a coffee maker with some pure Wayanad coffee powder to savour.

So far so good, I thought, till my eyes scrolled through the list of do's and don'ts. Well, that is something about homestays. You have to follow the tradition of the home and abide by the food timings, liqueur and non vegetarian food restrictions if any and don't have the leisure of calling in for a waiter at 2 am for a hot cuppa coffee. Still, it's worth it.

'Stay' and beyond

Homestay is no new concept in Kerala. From big bungalows to little rooms, everybody with a room to spare lets them out to tourists. However, for those who wish to blend the comfort of a hotel with the bonding of a traditional family, then opting for a luxury home will be a better idea. Steering clear from just lodging facilities, these homes give personal attention to the guests, have breakfast included as part of the tariff where one eats with the family, activities are conducted to get one acquainted with the local culture, cabs and guides are arranged or the host might show you around and help you with getting the best shopping deals. The tariffs vary from Rs 500 to Rs 12,000, depending on the rooms, ambience and facilities, but in the Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000 range one can holiday like a king. For foreign tourists, the cost as well as understanding local culture serves as the major pluses in Homestays. Nevertheless, tourists have an option of choosing when to interact with their hosts and how much to take advantage of their homestay.

Mahindra has replicated the same model in other cities of Kerala, Rajasthan, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh too in the categories of plantation, heritage, modern and rural homes. Thus activities are unique to each place. Horse riding, mehendi designing, learning to make 'daal, baati, churma' and 'gatte ki subzi', folk dance sessions and fort visits are part of the activities in Rajasthan Homestays. Coastal Kerala homes offer boat rides and fishing. Since I was living in a plantation home, I had a whole host of activities to choose from. Trekking, plantation tour, ayurvedic massage, bird watching and jeep safaris. I latched on to the plantation tour idea and walked through coffee, betel nut, pepper and cardamom plants in the morning mist.

My host also added that since he is a Farm Tourism Provider, he has guests from Europe who visit his home from the harvesting time of December to April to take part in coffee berry picking and farming activities of pepper and vanilla. The best part about this concept is the food.



Photos: Anushya Mamtara

There's nothing like experiencing authentic cuisine, served in traditional style, that is if you have the 'I want to experiment' antennas up. However, if you want to stick to 'sambar rice' or 'roti subzi', you can request for that too. Since I was in the experimentation mode, my host was more than happy to set out a spread of 'aapam', vegetable stew, 'puttu', 'kadalai', 'payasam' and other Kerala delicacies. Remotely mention your favourite veggie or dish and it was ready on the table for your next meal.

Off on a jeep ride

There are many places to explore in Wayanad. For the

trekking enthusiast there is the Chembra peak, Neelimala, Edakkal caves and others. The wildlife lover has Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary at Muthanga and Tholpetty to discover and those who love heritage and folklore can visit the Jain temple ruins, museums, Uravu, or the Chain tree. Want to just relax, sit back and enjoy nature? Wayanad has a solution for that too with its Pookote lake, Sunrise Valley and Kuruva Island.

My trip ended with some more lip smacking Kerala food, a few slips (literally! Blame the moss layered rocks), leech bites and a new leaflet to add on to my book of good memories.

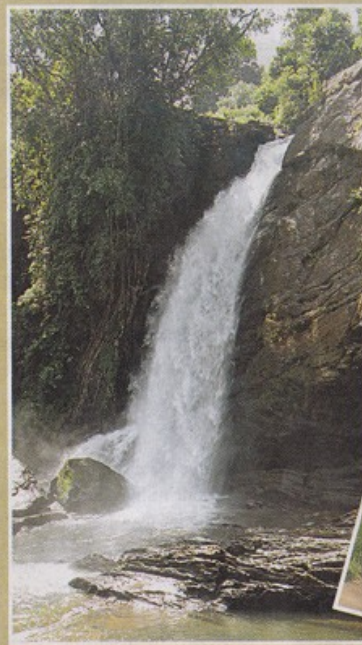
Heading to a Homestay

Where - Mahindra Homestays has properties in Wayanad, Allepey, Kochi, Kottayam, Munnar and Thekkady in Kerala, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur in Rajasthan, Spiti in Himachal Pradesh and New Delhi.

How - Log on to www.mahindrahomestays.com and check out the 'refine your search' option where you can choose your dates, location, building style (heritage, modern, plantation, rural) or activity and price range. You can also explore the map given in the website to know exactly where you are headed to. Photographs and description of each Homestay along with profile and pictures of the hosts are also given.

When - The holiday season varies for different locations. While the September to March period is ideal for Kerala and Rajasthan, the Himachal Pradesh Homestay is not accessible due to heavy snowing.

Why - To get a feel of Indian culture and tradition at its chaste best, tuck into some scrumptious homemade authentic delicacies as well as get lessons to make them, watch and learn some traditional art, dance moves and yoga, and indulge in some exotic ayurvedic massages.



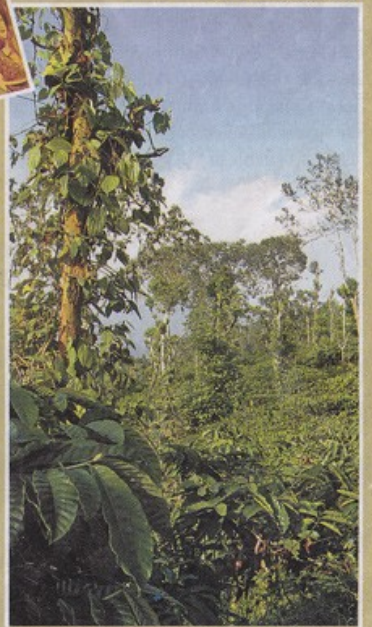
Trekking down to the Soochipara Waterfalls



Seeing bamboo come alive at Uravu



Jungle safari at Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary



On a plantation walk