

## Family

## Sugar and spice

How do you keep two easily bored girls amused on a driving tour? Try breaking the journey with beaches, treehouses and meals you can eat with your fingers, says Caroline Phillips

**W**e were sleeping 40ft off the ground, atop red flame trees, in a magical treehouse

reached by a gangway. It had stupendous views over coffee plantations and a tree growing through our bedroom. At night, fireflies sparkled like fairy dust and we nodded off to the sound of cicadas. "Beware! With the coffee ripening, monkeys are on the prowl," read a bedside notice. "Don't be alarmed if you hear strange noises on your roof."

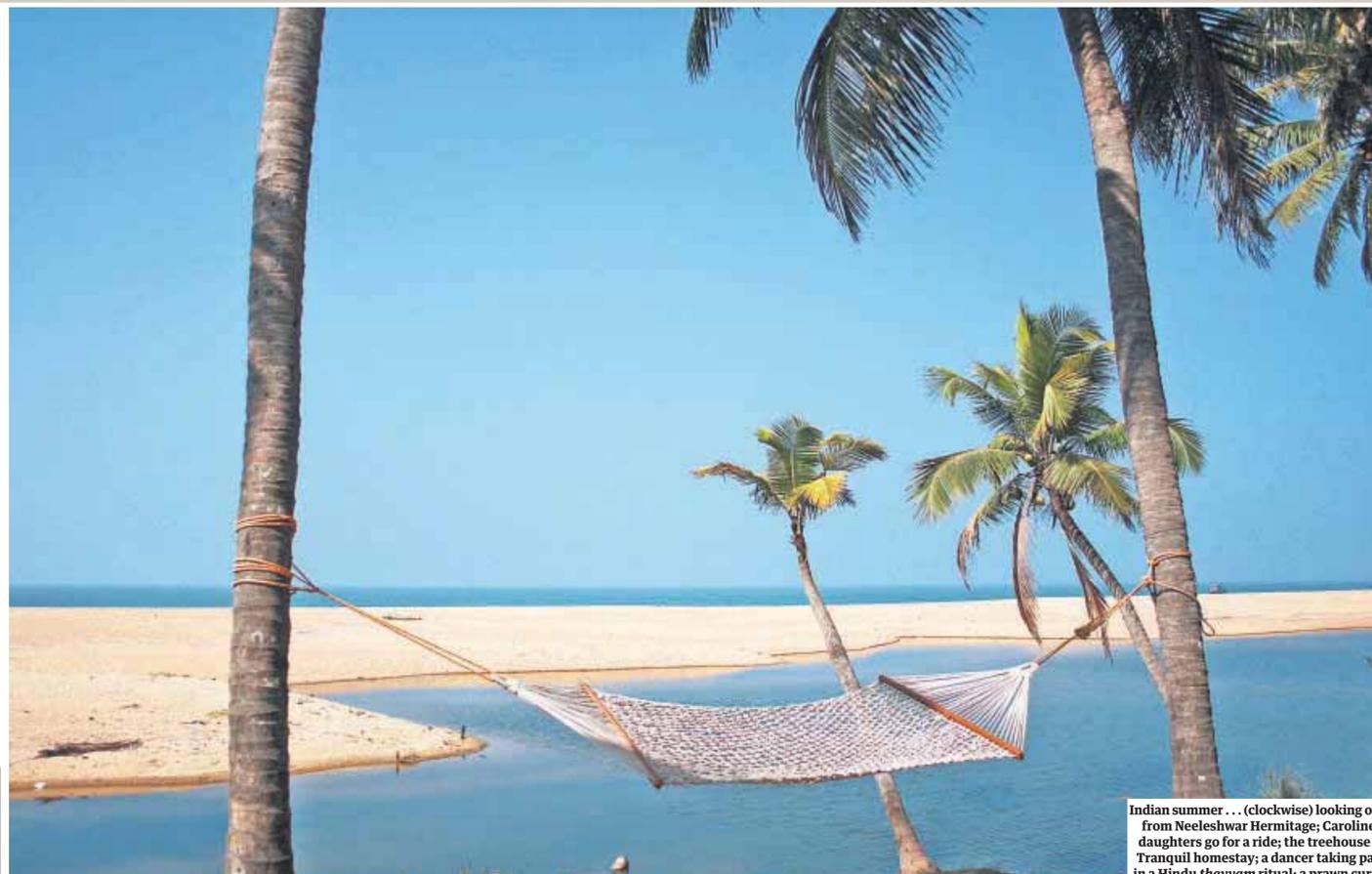
Next morning, 25 monkeys played on our arboreal terrace, swinging off its gnarled coffee-branch balustrade. They switched our outside lights on and off, peered greedily through the windows at our possessions, and one licked our window before wiping it with his paw. I'd happily be reincarnated as a monkey if it meant living here.

My two daughters (aged 11 and

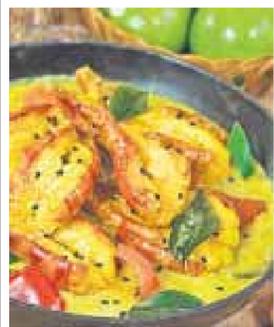
13) and I were being driven around northern Kerala, India - a place only now opening itself to tourists. Instead of flying direct to Kerala, we started in Bengalooru (previously Bangalore) and drove south slowly, the better to savour the contrasts. India is a difficult place to travel. I'd been 10 times before, and wanted to do it very differently this time. Travelling alone with children, I didn't want a holiday of missed train connections and pitching up in places that, despite research, turned out to be horrible. Pre-booking a trip with an excellent driver meant everything ran as smoothly as ghee, and allowed us to see things we'd have missed from trains.

Kerala's scenery is the lush, verdant stuff of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, with plentiful food (paddy fields, spice plantations, coconut groves) and rain. It's also relatively wealthy, with many Keralans working in the Persian Gulf. I hadn't been here for 30 years - and then not to the north, which "feels like a region apart" according to the Rough Guide.

The north is dominated by the



Indian summer... (clockwise) looking out from Neelshwar Hermitage; Caroline's daughters go for a ride; the treehouse at Tranquil homestay; a dancer taking part in a Hindu theyyam ritual; a prawn curry



Western Ghats (and boasts mostly tea and coffee plantations), and is much hillier than the south (where they grow spices, rubber and bananas). It's also less densely populated and developed, primarily due to lack of infrastructure. There are no trains through the hills, just long journeys on winding roads. For 20 years, the south has been swamped by tourist groups heading to the backwaters (just one hour from Kochi, formerly Cochin) and then to Kovalam's beachside properties. By contrast, there are no group tours to north Kerala, which offers untouched beaches, better wildlife parks, more authentic accommodation - and is now developing nature, wilderness, eco,

spice, jungle and beach tourism.

On our first day in Kerala, we broke for lunch in nondescript Kannur, waiting gormlessly to be seated among throngs of lunggi-clad men eating with their right hands in sauna-heat underneath clacking fans. People spoke only Malayalam, the palindrome language of Kerala. Eventually we twiggled the system. Would-be diners bought meal tickets then crowded around anyone close to finishing, pouncing on the seats in a version of musical chairs. Soon we were eating delicious coconut curries from stainless steel thalis, 45 rupees (around 60p) for three of us.

After passing turmeric, indigo- and lime-coloured villages, piles of finger-sized bananas, geriatric Ambassador

cars and sickle-and-scythe posters of the still-influential communist party (north Kerala is the India of yesterday), we reached the Kasaragod district: a land new to tourism. We arrived at the fishermen's-style thatched cottages of the Ayurvedic hotel and retreat, Neelshwar Hermitage, to the thunderous applause of a tropical storm. "You bring us luck," said a local, welcoming us with *kumkam*-powder bhindis and jasmine garlands. "The gods and the monsoon have come with you."

Built following the architectural principles of Kerala *vastu*, a kind of Hindu feng shui, it's a place of palm-fringed peace set on miles of "undiscovered" beach. This is a location for sublime Ayurvedic treatments

(whose efficacy is allegedly enhanced during monsoon season), even the names of which soothe the spirits: *sajoyya, sandwana, swastha, sradha*.

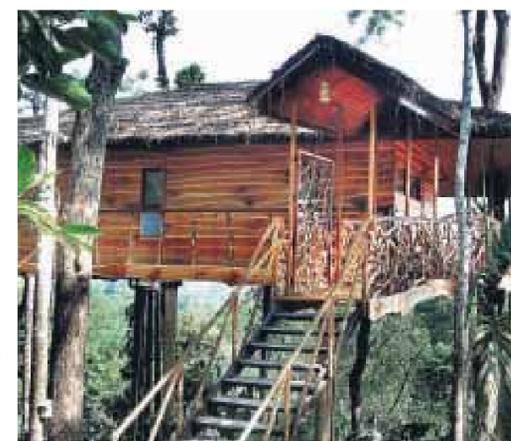
We were asked to be sensitive to traditional customs by wearing tops and long sarongs on the beach. "Your good name, madam? Which grade are your children?" six boys independently enquired of us on the beach, before whipping out mobile phones. "Your photo, please." Neelshwar's sand is pristine, thanks to two full-time beachcombers, though venture further afield and you'll face the plastic detritus that the tide brings in.

With few nearby attractions, we spent the next two days relaxing, practising yoga and eating fresh fish in the beachside restaurant, and lying in hammocks or swimming in the infinity pool, the nearby waves lapping gently.

Our next stop was Tellicherry, a former colonial trading port. The three-hour drive took us past waterways of *kettuvallam* (traditional rowing barges), and extraordinary trees seemingly sprouting loofahs and cotton-wool buds, on to dusty roads where stallholders touted palm-sugar juice while myna birds, vultures, kites and bee-eaters circled. Six khaki-clad officers stood by a rickshaw driver, pouring his brandy on to the road. "The first day of every month is dry," explained our driver, Pramod. "You can be put in jail for selling alcohol."

We were staying in Ayesha Manzil homestay with its owners: Mr CP Moosa (he likes to be called "Moosa") and his wife, Faiza. Author and Indophile William Dalrymple maintains that Faiza, a cookery teacher, makes the best food in Kerala. Moosa, a descendant of gold traders, is a Moppila Muslim - one of India's oldest Muslim communities - and theirs is a cuisine of the Malabar coast fused with that of their Arab forefathers.

The Moosas' 1862 colonial home, built by one Murdoch Brown of the East India company, has six somewhat tired bedrooms, family antiques and four-poster beds, plus nutmeg, jackfruit and papaya in the garden. As



we sat on the verandah, overlooking the ocean and the coastal road below, we were served subtle, delicate dishes: seafood simmered in coconut, bitter gourd with alchemical mixtures of spices, yam, chickpeas. "Cricket was first played in Tellicherry and so, too, the first teacake baked," explained Moosa, proudly. "We also made the first tapioca crisps here."

That afternoon by its pool, something suddenly thudded on to my head. A coconut? My daughters cracked up giggling. It turned out to be a dive-bombing eagle, possibly having spied its reflection in the sunglasses perched on my head, and swooped for the "prey". Its attack happened too quickly to be scary and, afterwards, its claw marks hurt less than our laughter. "That's very rare," smiled Faiza later, standing breaking cinnamon bark, squeezing tamarinds and giving my children *jaggery* (lumps of unrefined sugar). A gentle woman with a PhD in English literature, she was cooking tantalising combinations of seafood and spices in a wok-like *kadai* pan. Sandalwood incense burned, a lizard crawled up the wall.

In the morning, Moosa walked us through the fish market minutes from his home, near groups of itinerant building labourers waiting for work, past stalls selling banana blossom, drumsticks and tapioca root, and down

## We drove past lime-coloured villages and geriatric cars - this is the India of yesteryear



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### Way to go

#### Getting there

A seven night trip to Kerala with Scott Dunn (020-8682 5075, scottdunn.com) starts at £1,695 per person, including full-board accommodation (except Neelshwar which is on a B&B basis) international flights with Kingfisher Airlines and a driver and car. Direct flights from London with Kingfisher Airlines (0800 047 0810, flyingkingfisher.com) cost from £389.60 rtn inc tax to Bengalooru, £471.90 to Kochi or £461 to Calicut (with an overnight stopover in Bengalooru).



a busy lane with baskets of stingray, shark and catfish, where men sat on their haunches cleaning gleaming iridescent green-lipped mussels. Crabs were escaping, scuttling across the road. Lunggi-wearing men stood in groups on the beach, haggling and auctioning fish, as old boats brought in their catches.

Moosa directed us later to the local weavers' co-operative where, in a sweltering, corrugated hangar, sariclad women sat for nine-hour shifts on thin wooden benches, making five metres of cotton for 120 rupees a day; and, afterwards, to a *bidi* factory, where women wearing gold "marriage" necklaces were hand-cutting leaves, filling them with tobacco before stitching them.

It was keen to catch a *theyyam*, the sacred Hindu ritual in which the dancer transmogrifies into a god and invokes magical powers. It's practised throughout the night in the furthest northern reaches of Kerala.

In Neelshwar, the girls had emailed their father "Mum's nuts, she's making us get up at 4am to see spirits." We had arrived at a clearing in a small village to find that the god incarnation - wild-eyed and possessed, wearing a gigantic peacock-style headdress and contorting in a trance - was just finishing. This time we reached a private shrine, 10 minutes from Moosa's at midnight, in time for firecrackers and frenzied drum playing. The *theyyam*, with calf-length hair, a painted face and fire torch in his hand, was dancing like a whirling dervish. Perhaps 90 people, mostly extended family, sat watching. "Beans and plantain for you," said someone, handing us banana-leaf plates. "They've been blessed." The *theyyam* stopped to drink coconut alcohol.

Next day we retreated to the cool of the hills and Tranquil homestay in Sultan's Battery. As the car climbed to 2,800 feet, we wound past verdant rubber plantations. An elephant was being transported on a yellow open-topped truck, ears flapping in the wind. Our hosts, former planters Victor and Jini Dey, live in a renovated 30s planter's bungalow with their four dogs and family, aged four to 84. Jini didn't join us at the communal table for lunch. "She is fasting at the suggestion of our local *pojari* [head priest]," said Victor, who is Jesuit-educated and has 1940s BBC education. "He says this will speed up construction works on our new homestay."

They grow coffee and a few bananas, pepper, cardamom and beetle nut on this remote 400-acre estate, and it offers plantation walks: a spice odyssey through lush vegetation, past families of monkeys eating jackfruit. It's at Tranquil that we sleep in the treehouse with its stylish, flattened bamboo walls and woven ceilings - along with television and air-conditioning. It was difficult to leave, but one day I climbed a zillion steps and rocks to see the local (disappointing) prehistoric rock carvings at the Edakkal Cave.

Staying at Tranquil was like being at a particularly interesting planters' house party, with Victor treating us like close friends. Over yet another meal of excellent old family recipes, he enthused about the world's best coffee. "It's made from beans from monkey poo," he explains. "The bean combines deliciously with their enzymes." Their friend Sundar talked about his tea plantation; how global warming is scorching his plants, about different hybrids of tea and the need for drought-resistant ones. "Would you like to come for a tasting?" he asked. "We're only three hours away."

My daughters awarded the holiday 10 out of 10. Said the bright colours made them feel happy. Adored sleeping up a tree and being sprayed by an elephant. Loved being told they should eat with their fingers. Marvelled at the sight of entire (helmet-free) families riding one motorcycle and, nearby, monkeys playing. Delighted in synchronised massages, henna-painted hands, silver anklets, poppadas and prawn curries. And, on the driving, there was no dissension between their them, despite barely managing their short school run without a fight. Usually hard to please, they're already begging to go back.

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