

One journey, many dreams

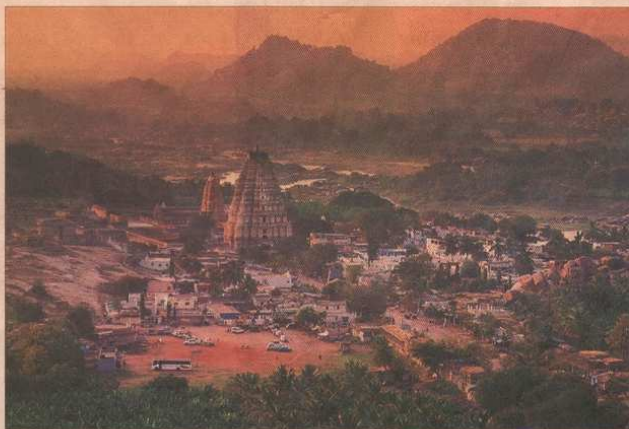
A luxurious train takes Sophie Campbell on a tour of the wonderful temples of Karnataka

Coorg, or Kodagu, is a tiny area of the coastal mountain range known as the Western Ghats, tucked into the south-west corner of Karnataka in southern India. It was my first stop on a week-long jaunt through the state, travelling 380km by car and train from Nagarhole national park in the south to the ruined city of Hampi further north, shunning the booming metropolises in favour of rural life.

I had been warned not to expect sophistication here. Karnataka attracts birdwatchers and backpackers and is just on the cusp of mainstream tourism. Still, I was impressed with Orange County Coorg, one of a small chain of Indian resort hotels, with a 50-acre working plantation.

Ganesh, the senior naturalist here, spent his days ushering groups (mostly urban Indian) through his twittering, fertile domain, instructing them about the biodiversity of the forest. I loved the pepper plants clasped around tree trunks, the scents of curry leaves and cinnamon, the glint of atom-bomb chillies.

We marvelled at the southern Hoysala temples, with their star-shaped bases, flat roofs and layered stone friezes



hurts – could be fought, I found, by focusing on one or two of these delights.

At Sravanabelagola, for instance, where an 18-metre-tall statue of King Bahubali is reached by climbing 630 blistering steps, it was the animal bas-reliefs dotted around the outer walls that charmed. Two hundred kilometres north, at Hampi (capital of the Vijayanagar empire, destroyed by the Muslim sultans in the 16th century), I was struck by the Queen's Bath, a stone temple once used exclusively by women, with its colonnades, octagonal pool and pierced plaster-work: a place of water and light.

Hampi sprawls across a 2,600-hectare site beside the Tungabhadra River, with functioning and ruined temples, a two-storey marketplace, now home to the modern bazaar, palaces, shrines, elephant stables and the King's Balance – used by the king to weigh himself and give the equivalent weight in precious stones to his priests.

We returned to the train for lunch and, halfway back to Hampi, two of us jumped ship, lured away when we saw a village gearing up for a celebration. A Golden Chariot employee, deputised to keep an eye on us, gave a running commentary ("he is drunk, madam") as a temple chariot shuddered out in splendour, looped with so many swinging ropes of tinsel and marigolds that you could barely see the deity inside. It was like being at a dazzling, super-friendly village fete.

But we were due to meet our bus at Hampi and go on to the Vittihala Temple, famous for its musical pillars and stone temple chariot. The temple was to be lit up just for us – a rare treat.

Leaping into an auto-rickshaw, we zipped along in the moonlight at a warp-speed of 20mph – and, to our dismay, we saw our bus coming the other way. We had missed our tour but we went on, to find the guards had kept Vittihala's lights on. We were left to wander by ourselves through the wonderful halls.

The secretive courtyard houses, echoed by the hotel villas, had dark rosewood detailing and forbidding brass door locks designed to look like the god Shiva's trident.

Seventy-five kilometres to the south-east of Coorg, Orange County has another hotel by the lake at Kabini Dam, a vast reservoir on high ground sandwiched between Nagarhole and Bandipur national parks. We bounced there on red roads fringed with blankets of forest, dumped our stuff in thatched terracotta villas and, within an hour, were on an evening boat safari.

Meenakshi, the resort's resident elephant, was bathing at the lake edge, attended by adoring guests carrying scrubbing brushes and cameras. The dam was at low ebb, revealing banks alive with Himalayan barn swallows, spot-billed duck, cormorants, painted storks and terns.

The terns nest on the islets and if the elephants go too near they dive-bomb them," said the resort's naturalist. He did the last tiger census in the park and reckons there are 60 left, none of which made an appearance. It didn't matter, the experi-

ence of being afloat in the yellow evening light, on water busy with birds, with a backdrop of bamboo groves and grazing elephants, was enough.

Karnataka is right on the tip of the Deccan Plateau and, aside from its lush south-west, it is dry and rocky, with summer temperatures of 45°C or more. Its most famous southern and northern temple clusters are now linked by a luxury train, the Golden Chariot; a welcome alternative to travelling huge distances on rough roads. I boarded for the three-night journey up to Hampi (the whole route to Goa takes seven nights).

The Golden Chariot, with its ornate chairs, wood panelling and country-house upholstery, may be central to rural Karnataka's ambitions to inch upmarket. "Many journeys... one dream" was painted on its side but this seemed the opposite of my experience: one journey and I couldn't stop dreaming; nights were filled with writhing soapstone figures and looming temple chariots. On at least one morning I woke to the patter of tiny feet – langur monkeys – on the roof.



Craftsmanship Virupaksha Temple in Hampi (above); musicians welcome passengers aboard the Golden Chariot. Getty, Eyewire

The routine was simple: the train would stop and we would sightsee by coach in the morning and afternoon, returning for dinner and a night of trundling through the countryside.

We marvelled at the southern Hoysala temples, with their star-shaped, cake-stand bases, flat roofs and layered stone friezes exploding with figures fighting, dancing and making love.

The inevitable temple fatigue – when dynasties wash over you, superlative craftsmanship looks normal, and your back



Details

Sophie Campbell was a guest of Ampersand Travel, tel: +44 (0)20 7289 6100; www.ampersandtravel.com. The tour she took lasts one week and costs from £2,595 a person including flights, transfers, hotels and three nights on the Golden Chariot. www.karnatakaturism.org www.incredibleindia.org