

INDIA'S NO.1
TRAVEL MAGAZINE

www.outlooktraveller.com

Outlook

traveller

October 2017 • ₹100

THE WILDLIFE ISSUE

20

Offbeat Wildlife Experiences

+

KABINI
EAGLENEST
SRI LANKA



PHOTO ESSAYS
Amboli
Polar Bears
Wild Horses

A polar bear on drift ice in Svalbard

NICOLE KIDMAN • SONJA PRICE • CHANDIGARH • RISHIKESH



WILD TALES OF THE KURUBA

KABINI MAY BE A POPULAR SAFARI DESTINATION TODAY BUT NOBODY KNOWS IT BETTER THAN THE TRIBES THAT ONCE CALLED IT HOME. **ANURAG MALICK** AND **PRIYA GANAPATHY** EXPERIENCE THE SPIRIT OF KABINI WITH ITS ORIGINAL DWELLERS



ANURAG MALICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY

*The Evolve
Backjetty*



There is a single black panther at Kabini and people swear to have spotted him in adjoining Coorg as well

“I played with tiger cubs as a child,” recalled Puttamma. “I would string necklaces of *kaare kai* (berries) around their necks or limbs and cuddle them. They were our toys. I must have been six or seven then. Today, parents give their children tiger dolls!” There was mirth in her eyes. Enthralled, we sat in the small hut of this Kuruba tribal in Brahmagiri Haadi, a hamlet on the fringes of the Kabini reservoir. Thrumming her little leather drum, she sang about the rain, the animals and the forest. She was from one of the many tribal communities displaced from their forest habitat when a dam was built across the Kabini River for irrigation in 1974.

With a faraway gaze, Puttamma continued, “When a tigress killed a gaur, it would guard the carcass for three days and eat her fill. That was when my brothers would stealthily bring her tiger cubs home for me. We would play and pamper them before putting them back where we found them, in time for their mother’s return.” She spoke of a different reality, a different time; how life had been 60-odd years ago and for centuries before that.

The Kabini River forms a boundary between Nagarhole and Bandipur National Parks. When it was dammed, the huge reservoir created to the south of Nagarhole inundated many villages, ancient temples and tribal hamlets. The Kurubas were relocated to the edge of the forest. “They claimed that we lived in the forest and ate up all the animals. So they chased us out.

Neither we nor the animals are in the jungle any more. You don’t see half the numbers that we used to see. We coexisted in complete harmony. If a Kuruba woman died at childbirth, other mothers would breastfeed the infant like their own. If a child was orphaned, everyone would take turns to feed and look after it. We wore no clothes except the broad leaves of *sal* stitched with twigs. We lived like the animals and knew everything about them—their smells, behaviour and movements. In fact, we were just that, *pranigalu* (animals).”

In the dry summer months, when there was no *genasu* (yam and other tubers) in the ground to eat, they caught fish from the river and roasted it on the banks. They gathered in large groups with their drums and bamboo flutes, singing and dancing the whole night. “There’s a song from those nights to beseech the rain god to give us rain for our survival. When we spotted elephants, we would sing, ‘The elephants have come with their little babies; they see us but don’t do anything. Come, O moon in the sky, and watch over us. Flocks of peacocks have come to eat termites and insects on the anthills. Come, O moon in the sky, and watch with us.’” Puttamma seemed to have a song for every occasion.

We were on a Spirit of Kabini tour in a *haadi* (settlement) of the Betta Kuruba tribe, originally hunter-gatherers who hunted wild animals and collected honey. They also wove cane baskets. Our Kuruba Safari Lodge guide, Kishan, clarified that they were named after the *bett* (cane) and not because



Clockwise from top left: a tigress takes a dip; a leopard drags its kill; a lynx spider feeds on two striped jumpers; and an ornamental tree trunk spider



ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY

they stayed on *bettas* (mountain tops), as is popularly believed. Those who specialised in extracting honey (*jenu*) were called Jenu Kurubas. Kurubas survived on *genasu*, wild fruits, berries, *jenu*, *mamsa* (wild meat) and *meenu* (fish) from the *holay* (river), and *kaad koli motte* (jungle fowl’s eggs).

Puttamma explained how they would locate a fresh kill and wait for the tiger to have its fill. They would then take the meat, wash it well, smoke it over fire and cook it. A gaur can weigh up to 900kg and a tiger can only eat about 40kg of meat. Like the Masai tribe, the Kurubas learnt to coexist and live off the creatures of the forest. Kishan surmised that their knowledge of plants and their medicinal and nutritional benefits perhaps came from observing animal behaviour.

Being the youngest of her siblings, she was called Putti (small one) and, over time, Putti-amma became Puttamma. She was originally named Bommi, after the Kuruba deity Bomm *devaru*. “Wherever there’s a mound of mud or stones, we place a leaf or flower over it and that becomes our god.” However, these forests, the elephants and all other creatures are looked after by the twin deities Gundrumamma and Mastiamma, patron goddesses of the Bandipur and Nagarhole forests. Mastiamma’s original shrine at Mastigudi, like many other relics, has been submerged. We saw the relocated Chola temple of Koteswaralaya and the ancient Nooraalshawara shrine before returning to our wildlife resort at Beeramballi village.

Orange County Kabini, which opened a decade ago,

A gaur can weigh up to 900kg and a tiger can only eat about 40kg. The Kurubas would wash the leftover meat, smoke and cook it

has recently been rebranded as Evolve Back Kuruba Safari Lodge. Designed like a Kuruba settlement with thatched palm roofs and mud-plastered walls, it takes its inspiration seriously. There are Kuruba dances by a poolside campfire; naturalists share jungle tales on alternate days; a night trail is conducted to see the nocturnal world of insects; and the lodge’s eco-initiatives comprise a responsible tourism walk and an early morning nature trail for birds, butterflies and everything in between.

Our guide, Shanmugham, pointed out the entire politico-botanical spectrum, from Congress grass (*Parthenium*) to Gandhi *gida* or communist grass (*Eupatorium odoratum*), named so because it grows everywhere, though it might be a bit of a misnomer now. Shanmugham has been diligently documenting the monsoon flowers of Kabini and claims to be the first to have spotted its famous black panther here. His favourite wildlife moments sound like kung-fu chase flicks—tiger chasing leopard, leopard chasing deer, *dhol* chasing leopard...

Beyond the resort’s rustic exterior is every luxury imaginable—plush private pool villas and jacuzzis,

Mr Kabini is a star attraction here for his long tusks that touch the ground



PAVITHRA KUMAR



Top to bottom: the viceroy's bungalow; scaly-breasted munia; and Puttama thrumming a leather drum



PAVITHRA KUMAR



ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY

top-notch cuisine at the Honey Comb restaurant, kebabs and local fare at Kuruba Grill, cocktails like Wild Kabini River at The Waterhole bar, an Ayurvedic spa, the scenic Reading Room on the water's edge with sunset cruises, coracle rides and bullock-cart rides. As the only resort on the far side of the reservoir, it affords the most spectacular sunsets on the Kabini. Guests can take a boat across to Jungle Lodges & Resorts (JLR) near Karapura for safaris.

Kabini is a historic area that served as an exclusive hunting reserve for the maharajas of Mysore. It was the site of the legendary *khedda* operations, where elephants would be herded into stockaded ditches (*khedda*), and individual animals caught and trained for timber operations and the Mysore Dasara festival. The first attempt to capture elephants in this manner was made by Tipu Sultan's father, Hyder Ali, in the 18th century. Despite having the aid of his army, the sultan of Mysore failed to capture any wild elephants. A stone inscription records his disgust, along with a warning about the futility of the task and his curse upon anyone who tried it in future. Like many relics, this too has been lost in the murky waters of Kabini.

For nearly a century, no further attempts were made until the first British *khedda* operation by Colonel Pearson in 1867, also unsuccessful. When another British officer from the Canal and Irrigation

Kabini was the site of the legendary *khedda* operations, where elephants would be herded into stockaded ditches, and individual animals caught and trained for timber operations and the Mysore Dasara festival. These attempts failed for a century

Department, G.P. Sanderson, took a shot at it in 1873, he met the same fate. However, his second attempt in 1874 at Kardihalli in the Kakanakote forest on the banks of the Kabini River was successful. The unique feature of a Kakanakote *khedda* was the river drive, first conceptualised by Sanderson in 1891 in honour of the grand duke of Russia's visit to Mysore. It was a vast operation that involved thousands of people who beat drums and drove the elephants across the Kabini River into the stockade. Special visitors' galleries were set up for distinguished guests and royalty to witness the drama. Over the next century, 36 *khedda* operations were held until it was finally banned in 1971.

Khedda may be a thing of the past, but people still come in droves to watch a grand elephant spectacle. Post winter, the reservoir waters are released for irrigation. When the waters recede, dormant grass shoots begin to sprout, turning the tract into a giant grazing ground, attracting elephants and other herbivores in the hundreds. Nagarhole's forested Zone A is larger and covers part of the Antharasanthe wildlife range, while the lakeside Zone B covers the D.B. Kuppe range, the preferred option in summer.

Unlike most other parks, Kabini does not shut down during the monsoon, and the jeep and 16- and 20-seater safari vans and boats are equipped with a canopy for rain or shine.

All safaris in Kabini start from Golghar, the river-facing gazebo at JLR. The boat ride accesses parts of the lake not reachable by jeep for sighting elephants and crocodiles. Nearby, the viceroy's bungalow doubles up as a bar and conference hall where wildlife movies are screened. In the veranda decorated with black-and-white pictures of *kheddas* and hunts is the favourite chair of 'Papa' John Wakefield, long-time resident director and ambassador at JLR Kabini. A simple memorial was erected after he passed away seven years ago. Elsewhere, a tree marks the visit of Hollywood actress Goldie Hawn.

Kabini's other wildlife legends include Mr Kabini or the Bhogeswara tusker, with tusks so long they scrape the ground. The biggest leopard with the largest territory is the Water Tank Male or Torn Ear. We saw a tusker in mast, an ambitious jackal chasing a herd of deer, and the splendid tigress nicknamed Backwater Female grooming herself. Increased

Nature-inspired art by Somu at *Evolve Back*; and (right) a herd of Indian bison grazing at Kabini



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY



of East African wilderness camps with the romance of Raj-era hunting lodges, complete with bush-themed dinners. The wild tract abuts the lake on one side and the forest on the other, advantageous for elephant sightings right from the property.

Another eminent Kabini personality is tiger conservationist T.G.R. 'Tiger' Ramesh, whose resort Cicada Kabini was acquired by Coffee Day. Now run as The Serai, it offers waterfront villas and residences. Away from the lake and facing the jungle is Tiger's secret lair, his old home in Kabini, which was sold and renovated into Kaav. Literally 'sacred grove', the really private six-room property has four rooms in a complex with a common living area and an upper deck facing the forest, and two really plush tents on stilts nearby. Overlooking the old, disused Forest Department road, you can spot bison and big cats right in your backyard.

Manager Pavithra Kumar or P.K. is as excited at the sight of an ornamental tree trunk spider as he is of leopards mating or a black panther draped on a tree. He has documented these chance wildlife encounters in Kabini and over 40 species of spiders on the Kaav property alone. A brief walk around the house with pocket torches yielded the jumping spider, two-tailed spider, giant cross spider, giant wood spider and tent spider in minutes. From peering at them through a magnifying glass to training a high-powered telescope towards Saturn, P.K. literally opened our eyes to new worlds. If the days are dramatic in Kabini's forests and skies, the nights are spectacular. Kabini at any time is nature untamed.



PAVITHRA KUMAR

Clockwise from top: viceroy's bungalow; Evolve Back with its rustic setting; and a jewel bug

protection has led to a spurt in tiger numbers, with 221 in the Bandipur-Nagarhole tract alone. Since Kabini is wedged between the two parks, the intersecting tiger territories result in great sightings. The all-star gallery includes packs of *dhol*, gaur, over 300 species of birds and the sole elusive black panther that has been spotted only in the last few years. Rumours about its relocation by the forest department abound, but people swear by sightings in adjoining Coorg.

The resorts in Kabini are all distinctive. Adjacent to JLR is Water Woods, a small yet lovely waterfront property right on the riverbank. Luxuriant massages, swinging hammocks, home-cooked food sourced from their vegetable garden and fresh fish made into succulent tikkas by their poolside restaurant overlooking the waters make it a popular escape.

A little ahead, wildlife enthusiast Nawabzada Saad Bin Jung's The Bison Resort has exquisite waterfront luxury tents and bush tents that blend the sensibilities

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Kabini is **224km** (4.5hrs) from **Bengaluru** and **88km** (2hrs) from **Mysuru**. Take the **Outer Ring Road** at the Columbia Asia Hospital Junction to bypass Mysuru city and drive towards H.D. Kote on the Mysuru-Mananthavady Road from Handpost towards Kabini. If coming from Calicut, the road between Mananthavady and Kabini via Bawali is closed from 6pm to 6am every day.

SAFARIS

Wildlife safaris can be done by **boat** on the **reservoir** or by **jeep** in the tourism zone of Antharasanthe (Zone A) and D.B. Kuppe (Zone B) ranges of **Nagarhole National Park**. There are two drives of 3hrs each, at 6:30am and 3:30pm. While the cost of the safari is billed into the JLR per-person tariff, most other resorts have an all-meals package and charge

for the boat or jeep safari separately (₹1,650/person, including a transfer to/from JLR).

WHERE TO STAY

- >**Evolve Back Kuruba Safari Lodge**, Bheeramballi Village and Post, H.D. Kote Taluk (₹39,000/jacuzzi hut, ₹47,000/pool hut; 08228-269100, evolveback.com).
- >**Kabini River Lodge**, Nissana Beltur Post, H.D. Kote Taluk, Karapura (₹10,000-15,000 per person; 08228-264402/03/05, 9449599754, junglodge.com).
- >**Water Woods**, 19 Karapura, N. Belathur P.O., H.D. Kote Taluk, Nagarhole National Park, (₹17,500-25,000; 080-46732010, waterwoods.in).
- >**Kaav Safari Lodge**, Malalli Cross, N. Belathur P.O., H.D. Kote Taluk (₹16,500/superior room, ₹18,000/luxury tent; 9995803861, kaav.com).
- >**The Serai Kabini**, No. 60/1, Nishana,

Karapura Village, Antharasanthe Hobli, H.D. Kote Taluk (₹23,000/veranda, ₹24,960/villa, ₹32,640/residence; 08228-264444, 9945602305, theserai.in).

- >**The Bison Resort**, Gundathur, N. Belathur P.O. Kabini, H.D. Kote Taluk (₹7,800-8,900 per person; 080-41278708, 7022155961, thebisonresort.com).
- >**Red Earth Kabini**, Badane Kuppe (near Hosamalla), via Antharasanthe, H.D. Kote Taluk (from ₹10,999 plus tax; 8884733188, redearthkabini.in).

WHEN TO GO

The forest and weather are at their best between October and March, with good animal sightings from February to May. The Gundre *jatre* takes place during Ugadi.

ANURAG MALLICK & PRIYA GANAPATHY