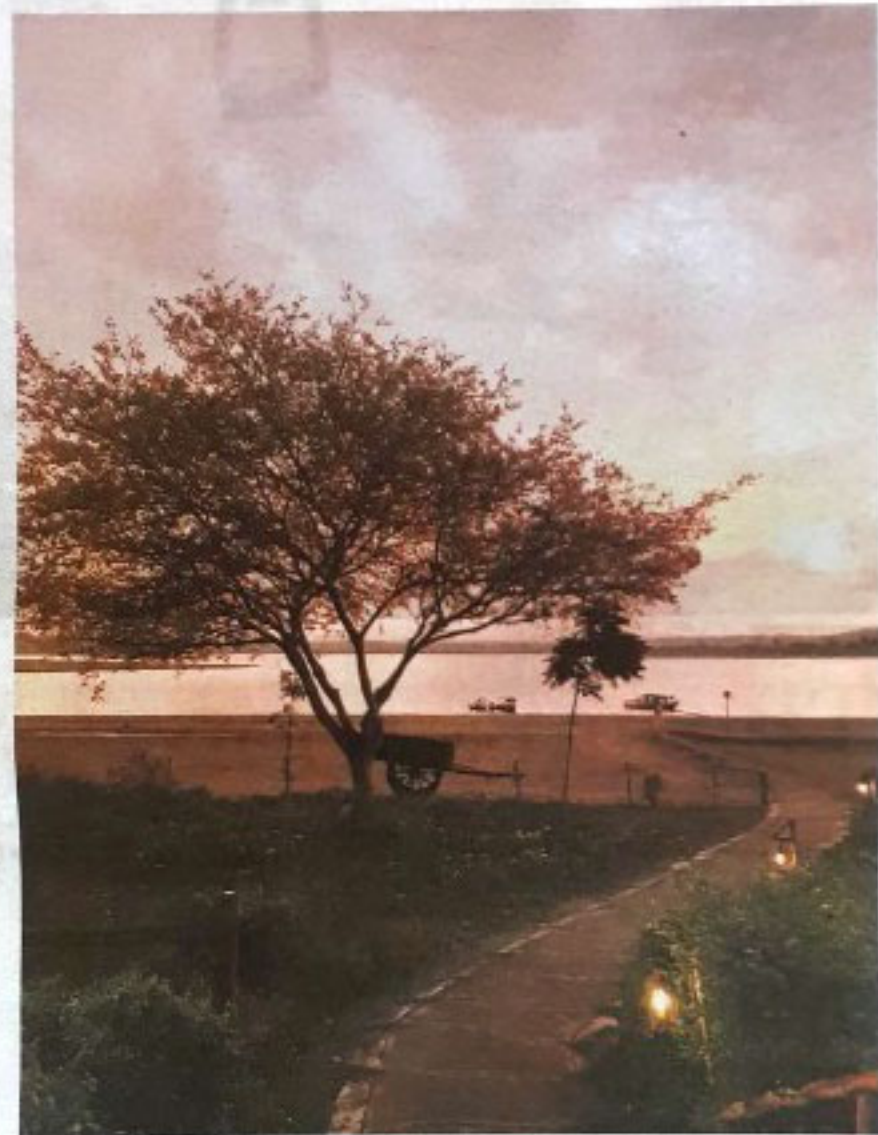


Quiet flows the Kabini

The untiring selflessness of a river accentuates its slow, addictive beauty



Purple prose The dramatic colour palette of a Kabini sunset owes much to the unseasonable rain this year
KALYANI PRASHER

Unlike the sea, the river does not make much noise. It does not swoosh and splash, does not angle for your attention constantly, and in this lies its beauty — this quiet, calming quality is its biggest strength.

The Kabini river is not formidable or endless, the forests of Bandipur and Nagarhole clearly visible on its left and right respectively, nor does it sing and laugh with the wind. It just stays there, tranquil, placid, silently observing the life it sustains. It offers beauty of a kind that I've seldom witnessed.

The beauty of glorious sunsets, for instance. Before I visited Kuruba Safari Lodge, located on the edge of Kabini, I had no clue that sunsets could be purple — as starkly purple as I am trying not to be in describing them. Orange, red, pink, gold, yellow, yes — but I had not seen a purple sunset till that first evening at the lodge, when I walked to the water's edge and looked up. The sky was a deep purple, rain clouds swirling across it like a particularly gifted artist had wielded her brushstrokes.

The endless sky, as far as the eye could see, was a giant splash of colour, the sun sinking in the most dramatic way you can imagine. "We've had unseasonable rain," informed

Vishnu, the resort's naturalist, "and hence these unbelievable sunsets." Oh well, at least climate change has one small benefit down here in Kabini.

The river provides for much more than just visual drama. The local tribal population depends on it for everything from transport to food — the fish is plentiful and they have the government's go-ahead to cast their nets. The round coracle boats typical of this region, fashioned out of bamboo, is their mode of transport from village to village, cutting a transit of 50-60 km by land into 10 minutes by water.

I saw several villagers crossing the river on a coracle boat with their motorbikes! Who could have thought the coracle can double as a bike ferry? It looks tiny when, in reality, its curved body can hold a lot (even a person of my generous proportions) — you can test this yourself by taking a free 15-minute coracle ride every morning from the lodge.

The river also provides for the flora and fauna of the surrounding forests. On a boat safari organised by the hotel, Vishnu points out

Travel log



Getting there

Kabini is five hours by road from Bengaluru airport. Make sure you hire a comfortable SUV as the road is quite bumpy for the last 15 km or so.



Stay

Evolve Back's Kuruba Safari Lodge is the old Orange County property with a new name, but the same old great location. www.evolveback.com/kabini/



Safaris

There are two types of safaris available at the hotel, two hours by boat and about three hours by jeep. For those who cannot do a bumpy ride on jungle roads, the boat safari is a relaxing, easy option and you get to see birds and animals from up close.

Blink Tip

If you are looking for a romantic escapade, the hotel can arrange for a candlelit dinner cruise on the Kabini on request — a fantastic experience with a four-course meal in the middle of the river.

the abundant birdlife — kingfishers, snakebirds, ospreys — entirely dependent on the Kabini's waters. Wild elephants arrive, after traversing several kilometres, for a much-needed drink on a long summer day, and to munch on the grass growing on its banks. I spotted a family of three ambling languidly to the water, and drinking by the gallons before returning to their 24-hour eating routine.

Over three days of staying by the water, I fell a little bit in love with Kabini. How unassuming it looks, how unaware of the crucial role it plays in the lives of others. The lodges by the river depend on it for great views for their guests. The tribals for their livelihood, the animals and birds for sustenance, the river has so much to give and so endlessly.

Over the days, I enjoyed its company in various ways. From the main lobby of the hotel, Kabini is in constant view and, while I had a book in front of me, my eyes were always on the river. I sat at Kuruba's riverside restaurant with filter coffee, or walked down to the ferry point,

photographing astonishing sunsets. Rain clouds came rolling in every evening, adding drama to the landscape.

Turning in at night, my soul was comforted by the fact that the river was there, the river will provide again on the morrow; sunsets and safaris for a traveller like me, but life itself for those who choose to live by its side.

Who could have thought the coracle can double as a bike ferry