



Tranquil Resorts in Wayanad

# Home away from home

GABIMA

A new breed of Indian travellers is looking for offbeat experiences. The concept of 'home stay', an alternative to an impersonal hotel room, is a trend on the upswing

**W**hat do you do when you want to veer off the beaten path? When all hotel rooms seem impersonal and identical? When sightseeing is not just the only goal but also a search for a 'different' experience? For some travellers, the journey and the people they meet are as important as the places they visit. Slowly, this band of travellers is broadening the scope of alternate travel accommodations available in India. As trekking, camping and general 'roughing it' seems to be on the rise, so does the exploration of 'home stay' options.

And what exactly is a home stay? When a family decides to open up their house for guests — who would be paying for their stay — it could

be classed as a home stay. Instead of a hotel staff, guests interact with family members and, in fact, share their living space. The experience is significantly different from that of a hotel. We talk to some of the early pioneers in the home stay business.

## Kaapi and peace in Wayanad

Victor Dey and his wife, Ranjini, opened up their bungalow for guests in 2000-01. Used to entertaining friends at their coffee and vanilla plantation, they were inspired to try their hands at hospitality. And thus was born Tranquil Resorts in Wayanad, Kerala. Such has been their success that they were given the 'The Best Home Stay in Kerala' award by the Kerala State Tourism Department in 2003-04. As Victor Dey reminisces, "We were one of the first people in the region to open up the plantation

as a home stay accommodation and we have been singularly lucky with the guests we have received. Now, faced with falling market rates of coffee and tea, many plantation owners are looking for an alternate source of income. And indeed, these plantations are located in lovely areas, with bungalows situated at vantage points with beautiful views."

Talking about the early days, Dey recalls, "I had just recently renovated our bungalow. It had an annexe with six rooms which we decided to convert to guest accommodation. Our first visitors were a lovely senior couple. The experience encouraged us to take the enterprise further and now we have 12 rooms with guests the year-round." In his opinion, home stay is a highly personalised experience. A family member is always at hand to assist



(Above) Guests are a part of the family at Snehdeep Tourist Guest House, Jaipur. (Below) One of the traditionally decorated rooms at Snehdeep

guests and meals are a family affair. However, he cautions prospective visitors, "Guests who expect 24-hour room service and a staff at their beck and call will be disappointed."

Word-of-mouth seems to play a big role in publicity and now Tranquil Resorts also receives guests from nearby metros like Bangalore and Mumbai, apart from the many foreigners who visit. Talking about the changing trend in the hospitality trade, Dey says, "At the beginning, almost 90 per cent of our guests were from outside India. Over time, Indians are embracing the concept. Most of them are people who have widely travelled, both in India and abroad, and are familiar with the concept of a home stay or a bed and breakfast."

**Address:** Tranquil Resort, Aswati Plantations Ltd, Kuppamudi Coffee Estate, Kolagapara P O 673591, Sultan Battery, Wayanad, Kerala. Ph: 04936 220244.

### Authentic hospitality in Jaipur

"We received only four guests in our first year of operation," recalls Manoj Kulshreshtha, owner and proprietor of Snehdeep Tourist Guest House, Jaipur. From a modest beginning with only three rooms in 1994, the guest house is now listed in most international travel guides. How to publicise their home stay was one

of the first problems they faced. "Somebody suggested we talk to auto-wallahs in front of Hawa Mahal but they all wanted a commission. We were completely opposed to this. We wanted to offer our guests an authentic Indian experience, without the touts and the guides," says Kulshreshtha. Eventually word-of-mouth earned them a place in travel guides to India popular among Japanese and Italian tourists. Snehdeep has gained a reputation for being reasonably priced, safe for women and a genuine cultural exchange with a welcoming Indian family – all these factors added to the home stay's reputation in the international backpacker community.

A budget accommodation, Snehdeep promises home-cooked meals, a rooftop dining area, authentic advice, wilderness trips near Jaipur and a cross-cultural dialogue – all managed by family members. It is the last quality that, as we have said before, sets apart the home stay experience. Snehdeep receives international guests who sometimes stay with the family for months. Since the establishment is family-run, visitors are welcome to help with the household chores and in the kitchen.

Talking about the changing travel scene in India, Kulshreshtha says, "It is only in the last few years that we have seen a rise in the number of



Since Snehdeep is a family-run establishment, guests are welcome to help with the household chores and in the kitchen



Clockwise from bottom left: Tea-picking in progress, Way to the Makaibari tea estate, A tea tasting session at Makaibari

The Makaibari tea estate invites visitors and volunteers to experience the authentic estate life by staying with the employees of the garden

Indian guests. Quite a few of them are software professionals and young couples who have found us on the Internet. They are adventurous tourists who want to move away from the synthetic atmosphere of the hotels. However, guests also need to realise that since this is not a hotel and we do not offer room service, they need to co-operate with us on meal times and closing of the gates."

**Address:** Snehdeep Tourist Guest House, B-33, Sethi Colony, Near Transport Nagar, Jaipur. Ph: 0141 2604570

### A Kurseong cuppa

The home stay programme at the Makaibari Tea Estate, Kurseong, puts its own unique spin on the plantation resort idea. Famous for its organic tea, the estate invites visitors and volunteers to experience the authentic estate life by staying in the houses of the estate employees. As the proprietor of the tea estate, S K Bannerjee, puts it, "The idea came from the forest rangers. They helped organise the families who wanted to host the many international students that come to Makaibari and formed a group called 'Hum Tera'."

Nayan Lama, who manages the 'Hum Tera' programme, recalls, "Even in 1992, we had made an attempt but that was a failure. Finally, we received our first visitors in 2000. Now 26 families have opened up their houses as home stays. We receive many guests from different

parts of the world, who come to the estate to study, buy or visit. They want to see the local culture. 'Voluntary Makaibari' ensures that they get a taste of estate life by staying in the houses of local tea garden employees."

Most families in the 'Hum Tera' group have set aside a separate room for guests. Arrangements have been made for hot water, clean accommodations and hygienically prepared local food – a sure way of forgetting the hotel life. Most guests lend a hand in the tea gardens – tea mulching, cleaning, extracting honey and even looking after the cows. They become a part of the family. On the subject of demographics Lama remarks, "Our international guests tend to stay for longer periods. Indian couples usually visit for the weekend."

Yet the journey has not always been smooth. Since the local people had never been involved in the hospitality business, 'Hum Tera' facilitators had to organise training sessions. The estate employees were instructed on how to welcome the guests, talk with them, prepare food and the room and, most importantly, to overcome the language barrier. Lama says, "Initially, the people were very shy. But now they invite guests to have meals, let them help in the kitchen and teach them how to prepare local dishes. Children, especially, form a great bond between the guests and locals. They have learnt English at school and are eager to practice it with foreign guests." 🍵