

Garden of Delight



— Marari Beach Resort is a place where **MONISHA RAJESH** can wander barefoot and pick organically grown chilis.

Photography HARALD HAUGAN

I spent the first few months of this year travelling India's railways, gazing out on paddy fields and orchards littered with chai cups, foil biriyani packets, plastic water bottles and other debris. I was living off fast food and had developed a fume-induced cough. *India* and *eco-friendly* were seeming like two very dissimilar concepts. Then I went to the Marari Beach Resort in Kerala.

I first heard about the place from a retired lawyer on a train from Trivandrum to Mangalore. He told me about a gated hideaway in Kerala, his home state. I knew about Kerala's "new Goa" label and I wasn't convinced, but the Marari Beach Resort sounded different. It was about an hour away from Kottayam station, my lawyer friend confided, and I should be careful not to miss the turnoff.

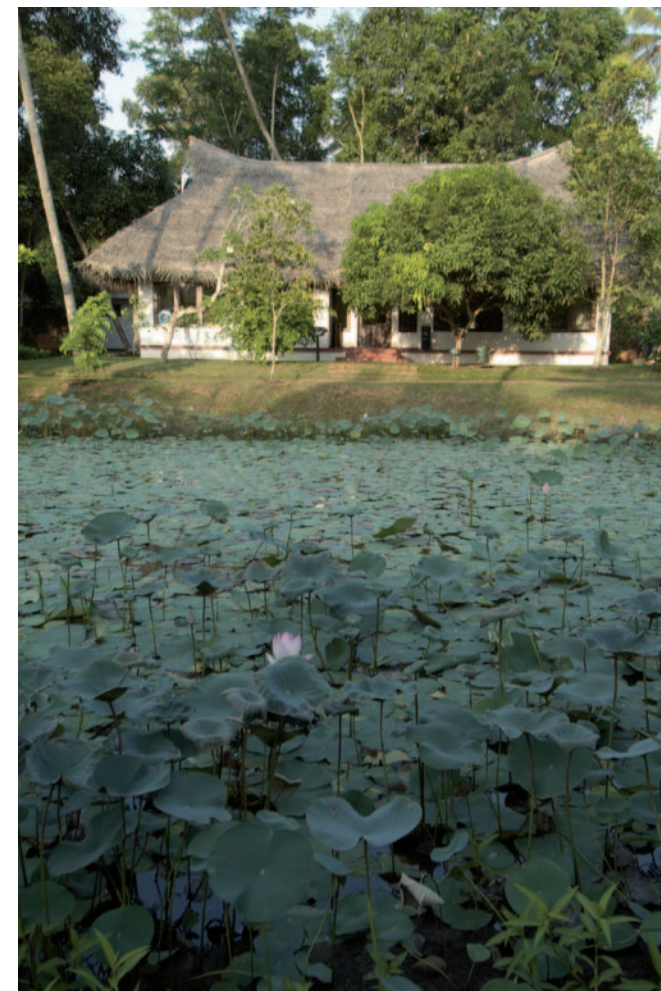
Marari Beach Resort sits behind a stretch of spotless creamy yellow sand shaded by coconut palms. Within 10 minutes of arrival I was drinking fresh coconut juice and preparing for my first non-deep-fried lunch in four months. This is a place where you wander barefoot, grill fish on the beach, and spend

hours on the sands with no one else in sight, all of which I was eagerly intended to do.

Despite their steadfast dedication to sustainability, the owners are reluctant to market Marari Beach as an eco-friendly resort. The Dominic family, who started the CGH Earth group of sustainable properties in the early 1980s, before the environment was the hot topic it is today, prefer to pitch their luxury hotels as "experiential" rather than opulent. "We owe it to nature to do everything in a sustainable manner and it's with ultimate conviction that we do it," Michael Dominic told me. "It's just a part of our culture."

However you slice it, I've never been anywhere eco-friendlier than the Marari Beach Resort. Village fishermen haul in their sustainable catch daily. Spinach and mangoes are handpicked from the organic garden. Only natural oils and local remedies are used for pest control. Groundwater quality is carefully monitored. Earthworms break down kitchen waste into compost, and a "biodigester" uses bacteria to biodegrade the rest of it. Whatever waste can be recycled is reused locally: paper is taken off for local shopkeepers to make bags; plastic is melted down and mixed with bitumen to resurface the roads.

The Dominics stumbled upon Marari Beach in 1997. The local economy was in tatters and there was a clear opportunity to create employment and breathe a bit of life into the community. Today most of the



resort's 150 staff is local. "Because they come from the area it makes them feel like they are welcoming [hotel guests] into their own home," Michael says. "The warmth is not artificial and that's why it's so important to have local people employed on site." And he's right. There's a tangible warmth from the staff and an unmistakably fierce sense of pride.

Each of the 60 cottages on the 12-hectare resort is designed to resemble a thatched fishing hut, but unlike the actual huts in the nearby village, a white concrete ceiling keeps out the rain and bugs. The rooms themselves are large and cool, accented with fresh red hibiscus. Bathrooms are open to the sky and filled with sunshine. The pièce de résistance is a thumping power shower with pebbles underfoot and tiny bulbuls chirping in the rafters. Even the bath products – a natural loofah made from soft bark, bars of sweet-basil soap – are entirely homemade.

Ayurvedic treatments, specific to Kerala, are a must at Marari. Hundreds of herbs and spices are used to detox, rejuvenate or just relax you. And you won't find many therapists as capable of kneading out knots and smoothing out tired muscles as they are here.

Cuisine in luxury Indian hotels often leans towards a disappointing array of pastas, roast chicken and ratatouille, indulgences favoured by many wealthy Indians. Fortunately, local cuisine takes precedence at Marari. The main restaurant is named Chakara,

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a Keralan term that describes the jubilation of local fishermen after they've brought in a good catch. Then there's the new outdoor restaurant that sends guests out to the organic garden to forage for their supper with Jishu and Nithin, the restaurant's two chefs.

Depending on the menu, you might end up snipping mint and curry leaves, collecting red chillies, hacking down gourd and papaya, or lugging giant aubergines. A Portuguese couple in matching shirts and linen trousers chose to spend their last night enjoying steamed mackerel wrapped in mint and palm leaves, papaya soup, and green beans in coconut and mustard. At the end of the meal, Jishu and Nithin haul out a large book with suggestions for the restaurant's name: "Roots and Shoots," "Garden of Eden" and "Spice Garden" are bandied about, although rumour has it they've settled on "Farm Kitchen" – a succinct and simple name that nicely sums up this cosy spot. ○

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