HAMPI & KARNATAKA

(13 nights / 14 days)

ITINERARY:

Meet at Bangalore (Now Bengaluru) Airport.

Karnataka is immediately north of Kerala, on India's south western coast. This wonderful trip encompasses the Western Ghats and India's Deccan Plateau, one of Earth's oldest geological formations, with rocks two billion years old. With its southerly latitude and average height of 1,000m above sea level the Deccan has relatively temperate seasons. Karnataka's state capital Bangalore is known globally as India's foremost IT hub, but in fact the State is surprisingly rural, with vast tracts of wilderness and agricultural land where cultivation has been unchanged for centuries. Plentiful Monsoon rains, trapped by the Western Ghats' forests and its rich Black Cotton Soils mean 3 crops a year are the norm.

Due to these geographical attributes Karnataka has been the seat of many of India's foremost ruling dynasties, and none more successful that the late Medieval Vijaynagar.

Their abandoned capital, on the Tungabhadra river, is nowadays known as Hampi but was known as Vijaynagara - 'City of Victory'-. From the 14th to the mid 16th centuries it was the seat of South India's largest, wealthiest and most powerful kingdom. Contemporary European, Arab, and Chinese travellers described it as the richest and most beautiful city on Earth, where precious goods, including pearls and gems, were traded in large quantity in purpose built bazaars. Nowadays the magnificent ruins (UNESCO WHS) are strewn over hundreds of hectares of remarkable rural landscape dominated by ancient grey, ochre, and pink granite boulders.

We also visit Coorg, in the Western Ghats, where the British introduced coffee cultivation; Nagarhole, Southern India's best National Park; and colourful Mysore with its amazing palace and bustling markets.

Day 1
Arrive Bangalore, transfer to The Taj West End, our lovely heritage hotel set in huge, mature gardens (1 night) in time for lunch. Afternoon visit of Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens, first laid out over 200 years ago during the reign of Haider Ali, Tipu Sultan's father.

Day 2
We depart for Mysore, Karnataka's royal capital for the last 7 centuries (3h drive in total). Here we stay at The Royal Orchid Metropole (2 nights), a former royal guest house with a garden courtyard in the heart of town. On the way we stop for a guided visit of Srirangapatnam, Karnataka's extensively fortified island fortress on the sacred Kaveri river. In the 18th century the French helped Haider Ali to further fortify it as a stronghold against the East India Company's expansionism during the Anglo-Mysore Wars. The first 2 wars were won by him but the last 2 lost by his son. They ended in 1799 with a British surprise attack, when Colonel Wellesley's sharp shooters killed Tipu Sultan. The site's highlight is Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace, a beautifully frescoed teak & brick structure at the centre of a garden.

Day 3
This morning we visit Mysore's Deva Raja flower, fruit and vegetable market. One of the largest flower markets in the country, it is a hive of activity and riot of colour, and is peopled by friendly stall holders. It is a photographer's dream and the range and quality of produce on offer has to be seen. We also sample some renowned Mysore milk-based confectionery made by generations of the same family. Back to the hotel for lunch. Later in the afternoon we visit Amba Vilas Palace, one of the largest royal residences in the country, a unique and eclectic blend of architectural styles and materials. The iron and glass work in the Durbar Hall is simply stunning and the golden elephant howdah, complete with port & starboard signalling lights, unique.

Day 4
A 2.5h rural drive takes us to Nagarhole National Park (Southern India's best) and to Kabini River Lodge (2 nights). Here we occupy the Heritage Wing, where foreign guests of the Mysore Maharajas were housed when hunting. This sprawling lodge, located on the shores of the Kabini River, is owned and run by the State government and coordinates all access and safaris into the park

After lunch we have our first safari. The park has great habitat variety: grassland; riverine forest; both moist and dry deciduous forest; bamboo stands; and a large lake. It is home to the country's largest population of wild elephant, but also to Indian bison, Indian wild dog, sloth bear, various antelope and deer, and has a healthy population of both tiger and leopard. The afternoon safari is the first of a total of 3 safaris (2 vehicle and 1 boat) we do while in Nagarhole.

Day 5
We continue exploring wonderful Nagarahole (Also known as the Rajiv Gandhi National Park), which together with bordering parks in Tamil Nadu and Kerala form the largest and richest protected biosphere in Southern India. The park's extensive lake is the result of damming the Nagarhole river. In winter, when we run this trip, as the season becomes drier and the water is released for irrigation, the banks of the lake become exposed and the new grass that grows there is an irresistible draw to both prey animals and predators.

Day 6
After breakfast we depart to Coorg, now Madikeri, (3h drive). This hill station, 1,200m up in the forested Western Ghats, is where the British first introduced coffee cultivation in India. It now produces 40% of the country's output, mostly the premium Malabar variety. Arrive at Evolve Back, Coorg, (3 nights) for lunch. This luxury resort is set in 300 acres of coffee plantation and accommodation is in lovely bungalows with private pools. Later in the afternoon a Plantation Walk escorted by local naturalists will allow us to better understand coffee cultivation.

Days 7 & 8
We spend the day exploring our resort's lovely surroundings. There are lots of activities on offer, of course none compulsory, but should you wish we can do: an early morning Birding Walk in the property; after breakfast an Eco Walk including a visit to Evolve Back's model Primary School, open to both staff and local tribal children. After lunch we can sample the Coffeeology Experience learning more about coffee and tasting how it is drunk around the world.

Day 9
A very scenic morning drive (3.5hr) along the forests and tribal areas of the Western Ghats takes us to Hoysala Village Resort, Hassan (1 night). After lunch we shall visit Halebid's Shiva Temples site (Lovely garden setting & clean toilets). Built between the 11th & 13th Centuries by the Hoysala Dynasty they are the most intricately carved in the whole of India. A soft and easily worked soapstone was employed, which over time hardened and became polished. The intricacy of the carvings is truly stunning. and in 2023 they were made a UNESCO WHS.

Day 10
After an excellent local breakfast served on banana leaf (The resort owner supplies all ingredients from his organic farm) we depart at 09:00h for Hampi. Today is the trip's longest and most rural drive (6h). We shall stop on the way for a light lunch. Our destination is Evolve Back Kamalapura Palace, Hampi (3 nights), a newly built palace-like resort and the best in the area.

Day 11
Morning & afternoon exploration of some of Hampi's best known archeological sites (In particular the Temples Complex and Royal Complex) strewn across wondrous rural landscapes. Every generation of Vijaynagar rulers built their own temples, palaces, and civic buildings, hence Hampi's spread-out nature. Local granite was the building material, used for temples and civic buildings, which have survived intact, while palaces had rock foundations and platforms but timber structures, and the latter are lost. Everything was embellished with complex carvings and colourful stucco works. Back to hotel for lunch.

Day 12
Morning visit of Hampi's Zenana - Queens' Palace complex - and Elephant Stables before starting a lovely cross-country walk to the Tungabhadra river, by way of further ruins and a temple complex. We cross the calm waters in coracles (large, seat 7), there is a chance of spotting otters. We continue on foot through farmland to a private farmstead for lunch. After lunch we drive 30 minutes through lush paddy farmland and have the option to either call it a day or walk to the famous Stone Chariot and Musical Columns temple before returning to hotel.

Day 13
Leisurely morning and early lunch then head for Vidyanagar airport (45 mins) for our flight back to Bangalore. On arrival we transfer to the Taj Bangalore Airport (International flights leave the new, out of town Bangalore Airport early in the morning). Dinner at the hotel.

Day 14
Homeward flights.

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