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From Bean to Cup **CHIKKAMAGALURU**

How far will you go for coffee—out of your bed to the bubbling moka pot in the kitchen, to your favourite café for that morning kick? The search for a perfect and flavourful start to the day sends some on an all-India road trip across the country's top plantations.

Text by MUSKAAN GUPTA
Photographs by SIDDHARTH KEJRIWAL

An explosive lushness runs parallel to Karnataka's smooth roads that cut through hill stations which took decades to reach the bucket lists of obsessive coffee drinkers. When Baba Budan planted the country's first seven seeds in the 17th century, there was no knowing that centuries later, southern India would transform into a haven for a thriving beverage scene which would witness three distinct waves of coffee consumption.

Coffee-drinking has had a prolific history in the country. What started as colonial plantations, stirred up the interest of local communities who savoured strong concoctions with milk and sugar. Bolder, rougher and bitter coffees—mostly robusta—led the first wave of the consumption culture. As cafés started coming up in metropolises, roasters and pop culture pushed consumers to grumble about their morning brew. Demands for specific roasts, single-origin variants, particular flavour undertones and extraction processes kick-started the consumption of specialty coffee across India. But what is specialty coffee? How does one start to define it? How should you select a bean to your liking? India's first coffee hub, Chikkamagaluru, answers.

When a bubbling moka pot concentrates a thin microlayer of crema in my coffee, it is enough for me to deem that cup a winner. For Suhas Dwarakanath, a Bangalore-based coffee expert, an ideal cup is a melody of balanced aromas, acidity, roundness, depth and, of course, a caffeine kick. The joy of a simple Salawara-grown arabica which is buttery, chocolaty, rounded and incredibly bold might hold the same stature as





Chikkamagaluru’s flavours, as discovered, create a spectrum of their own while maintaining chocolatey, caramel notes

Ratnagiri’s finest arabica beans known for their sharp-tasting acidity, floral and fruity undertones and striking complexity. To uncover the bean-to-cup process for the perfect cup of coffee in the morning, Suhas, armed with years of experience crafting this brown nectar with every possible coffee equipment, buckles up in a Hyundai Tucson and embarks on an expansive 800-kilometre journey to uncover the nuances of the coffee county.

Dusty roads, trodden paths and sandy bits break the concrete highways into colourful segments. The post-monsoon foothills of the Western Ghats give way to tiny pockets of bliss dotted with paddy crops, fruit orchards, pepper trails and tall coniferous forests of peeping silver oak. The drive to the estates, however, remains seamless with Hyundai’s SmartSense ADAS, which has features such as Lane Keep Assist and Blind Spot Monitoring. Multi-terrain modes make it easy to cruise through challenging terrains.

Suhas’ enthusiasm for consuming the beverage in its finest form is ardent as he drives for four days, zipping from Bangalore to Salawara Estate in Belur, through Hulikere Estate in Muthodi forest, Ratnagiri and Halli Berri plantations in the Baba Budan Giri hills, concluding at Blue Mountain estate. What I learn later, is that plantations within the same district can often account for

stark flavour differences.

Ratnagiri Estate, one of the most well-known hubs for specialty coffee, is perched at a height of 1,450 metres. With reportedly over 200 centimetre of annual rainfall, the estate produces complex-tasting beans whose profile is the stark opposite of Salawara’s robusta; the latter quickly ripen with merely 60 centimetre of rainfall, in the low-altitude flatlands at 850 metres. “The higher the region, the more complex the cup,” Suhas shares, adding that higher growing altitudes slows down the ripening of the cherries, allowing them to gather more aromas and flavours from the coffee tree. At the agriculture-forward estates of Halli Berri, heavily manicured estates featuring non-native trees and imported seed varieties thrive under modern irrigation techniques. On the other hand, Hulikere boasts eco-friendly practices, taking pride in housing endemic flora and fauna and seasoning the final produce through the process of ‘monsooning.’

The answer to what adds so much difference to a cup goes beyond the basic three flavour determiners—minerals of the soil, endemic species cohabiting the plantation space and seed varieties. The final magic in the cup is a romantic story of how a seed transforms into flushing red cherries and yields glossy beans that are the stuff that coffee connoisseurs’ dreams are made of. A beverage so pure and fulfilling brews out



of a process that took years to master. Plantation owners and farmers carefully select saplings that spend three to five years growing into bushes, fruiting cherries. After harvesting the fruit annually (usually between October and February), each plantation owner processes the golden-maroon drops differently. Natural processing includes sun-drying the cherries after cleaning them which yields the boldest body and aftertaste, while washed coffees that grant the high acidity and intense aroma, go through a pulper that removes the mucilage (skin and fruit) before a short period of drying. A blend of the

two outcomes is the semi-wash or honey processing where only the skin is removed before the drying stage. The stage after processing and drying is hulling, where green beans are sent to a dry mill where the parchment and defects are removed and then for roasting, to mark the final stage for a magnificent metamorphosis.

“I’ve been driving the Hyundai Tucson for four or five days and now I’m saving money to buy this car,” Suhas exclaims, while narrating his quest for a luscious cup of coffee. “But jokes aside, the vehicle performs way better than what I expected. Not all of the farms

I’m tapping have good access by roads. I was surprised to see what the car can do off the road or on tough terrain.”

Traversing routes and flipping maps has been just as demanding as identifying the most memorable brews across Chikkamagaluru. But armed with all-wheel drive and a 10-way power adjustable seat, Suhas continues on the road, parking at a specialty coffee house. On the final leg of his journey, he hails his best finds. These include a bold, high-intensity cuppa brewed through a Japanese cold drip method and two cups of brown elixir that were later prepped for a blind tasting. “Floral, mild,

super fruity with two kinds of coffee—washed and natural arabica,” he recalls the first cup. “The second one is packed with 30 percent robusta and 70 percent washed arabica, giving it an intense profile with a strong caffeine finish”.

Each sip reveals a long history and workmanship behind the beverage. Chikkamagaluru’s flavours, as discovered, create a spectrum of their own while maintaining chocolatey, caramel notes. But despite holding on to a bag of beans in his possession, the obsession to uncover more about the tiny bean keeps him determined to drive on.



The Chikkamagaluru Coffee Tour

Halli Berri plantation: Maintained as formal commercial estates in the Baba Budan Giri hills, catch a plantation tour of the manicured farms and end the day with a visit to the in-house coffee shop

Hulikere plantation: Located close to the Muthodi forest, arabica plantations here house endemic wildlife and native trees. Enjoy the vistas of the estates with a sojourn at Woodway home stay

World of Coffee Café: An experience centre in Chikkamagaluru housing tasting tours. Try different brewing methods and learn how roasting methods impact flavour

Jayanti Coffee Roastery: Set up in early 1900s, the roastery is best known for south Indian filter coffee. Catch a tasting session and gather in-depth knowledge of roasting processes

Chamundi Curing Works: Seek prior permission and visit one of the largest hulling facilities to witness the natural, wash and honey processing of cherries into green coffee beans



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Coorg.

Back in another timber den of Karnataka, native wildlife and humble stories surprise Suhas Dwarkanath as he sips on a bold cup of robusta.

Timber dens across the country's southern part are drenched in lush foliage—think verdant acres of coconut palms in Wayanad, silver oak holds in Karnataka or woody spice groves under the sprawling green. The abundant native flora of the Western Ghats, seemingly exotic to the bypassers, invites planters, farmers, caretakers and curious travellers into its den. Following through, Suhas Dwarkanath cruises along with the Hyundai TUCSON to his third destination—Coorg—to add a chapter to India Coffee Stories.

Coorg's plantations are different from Chikkamagaluru's, even though both are just over 140 kilometres apart in Karnataka. An amateur coffee drinker's belief, such as mine, would be that this geographical difference would only bring in differences in production techniques, which, in turn, would lend the beans unique flavours. However, the contrast, as Dr Sujata Goel—a botanist and self-proclaimed farmer, also the mind behind Mojo Organic Plantations—discloses, is the soil. Neighbouring plants that share nutrients, species small and big, from cats and ducks to microbes feasting on roots, determine the transfer of flavour-altering molecules to give every plantation produce its own character.

Coorg's plantations tend to be smaller in size as forests were converted into farms. Chikkamagaluru, on the other hand, witnessed the development of barren lands into farms. The former naturally packs a rich variety of native species onto farms that magically enhance the final brew.

Located 10 kilometres from Madikeri, Mojo Farms is the perfect example of sustainable agriculture. Twenty-five acres of slopes are distributed across four divisions, vividly demarcated by sparkling streams and Kaveri tributaries that nurture the soil bed for bananas, nutmeg, cardamom, pepper, citrus fruit, vanilla, and, of course, coffee. While coffee is intercropped, the plantations sprawl across three to four acres of sloped land where a magnificent range of native dragonfly, cicada, cricket, civet cat, snake, duck, cow and deer roam freely. As Suhas zips down from Wayanad to Coorg, navigating the muddy terrain with ease, Hyundai's smart voice feature—on command “open sunroof”—reveals an endless view of a tall silver oak canopy with the blue sky peeping through in bits, while the chirping of crickets and birds alert him of the tropics.

Coorg receives an average rainfall of 200 centimetres each year. “This year, we've crossed five metres already,” Dr Sujata explains, while noting that erratic rainfall is why commercial large plantations aren't suited to the region. In the dense rainforest jungle, the

A WILD ROAST

Text by Muskaan Gupta
Photographs by Siddarth Kejriwal

crops thrive alongside untouched wildlife to yield small batches of delicious produce. “But how does wildlife affect the crop?” Suhas wonders. Circular agriculture is the answer.

Each organic farmer swears by the idea of a cyclic food chain, but it’s not often we see how it plays out and flavours the produce. “The weeding out concept is extremely destructive because weeds actually are native flora populations that create the primary habitat for a lot of wildlife,” Dr Sujata explains. When plants are untouched by pesticides or chemical fungicides, the balance and the health of the soil is maintained as the natural diversity below the surface is untouched. The small section of predatory populations of insects are food for the wasps, dragonflies, birds, little rodents and frogs of the fields. “If there is no provocation in terms of losses due to death and disease, no pathogens come. The need for disease control does not come into the picture. And if you don’t bring in agrichemicals to control the so-called pathogens, then the crop stays extremely good, extremely rich in flavour.”

On the farm, plantations occupy horizontal, vertical and oblique spaces to form a self-sustaining ecosystem. However, the trick lies in distributing the crops efficiently. Here, coffee grows on slopes, intercropped with citrus and some woody spices such as cinnamon. Cardamom and banana are planted at the base of the valley on well-drained soil of the rainforest belt, while the drenched slopes foster cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, avocado and passionfruit vines. Creepers such as vanilla go horizontally, while black pepper runs vertically. When a lot of volatile organic compounds are synthesised, crops such as coffee undergo a metabolic reaction, picking up flavour notes of other plants.

Two varieties of robusta on the farm, the region’s main coffee produce, are Old Peridenia from Sri Lanka, and CxR, Suhas explains. However, they aren’t the only coffee bushes, robustas are intercropped with arabica varieties too. But the latter is a fragile crop, much more susceptible to the stemborers due to the low or almost no presence of an African compound called chlorogenic acid, which makes robusta a strong crop. Yet, the pest does not cause destruction, as the soil is native to a fungus (Bavaria bassiana) that infects the stemborers, leaving the crop undamaged. “Listen to the land,” Dr Goel’s simple sounding sentence rings with heavy weight after this explanation.

When a cup of Coorgi coffee is placed in front of a drinker, a complex boldness ensures the finish of the cup. Locally consumed with a dash of milk and black jaggery, a simple tasting opens up a connoisseur’s palate to the role of wildlife in every sip.

Ducks roam freely across the fields, diving in for insects, much like chickens. Their eggs attract snakes



who further filter out the smaller predators. The droppings of the birds restores nitrogen to the soil, while the cow shed generates enough biogas and compost to sustain the needs of the plantation. Each layer of this ecosystem eventually finds its way to the consumer’s tongue as flavours battle to transform into their unique versions when left untouched.

Apart from native residents such as deer, rodents, caecilians, reptiles and amphibians, wild palm civet cats make their way inside the periphery around November, once the coffee berries start ripening to a bright red. Although majorly carnivorous, they consume the mucilage of the arabica berries but are unable to digest the coffee bean, which changes character in their gut and is filtered out in their scat. Unappetising to many, upon filtering their waste, the coffee beans are rinsed and cleaned thoroughly and processed. “The flavours are incredibly mild and very unique. The coffee is very light and is only available in the smallest batches.”

Inside India’s largest coffee-producing region, hundreds of production stories sit at the base of cups, dust the morning coffee grinders and richly fill up a room with the aroma of the craft. As Suhas unwinds at Rainforest Retreat with Dr Sujata, sipping on a bold filter coffee, shared anecdotes of farm work, love for the beverage and a curiosity to uncover the wildlife-centric brew, seals the day. Hopping back onto the steep hill roads, the Hyundai SmartSense ADAS feature, Smart Cruise Control with Stop and Go is an enormous help and Suhas retires to the SUV’s comfort to take on the rocky terrain for his next exciting coffee discovery.

Brewing on an Ancient Land: Wayanad



A coffee connoisseur's road trip across Kerala's Wayanad reveals the storied history of the beverage, rooted in spice trade and accidental discoveries.

Text by MUSKAAN GUPTA | Photographs by SIDDHARTH KEJRIWAL

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Hyundai TUCSON's latest India Coffee Series campaign merges comfort with luxury as one of India's leading coffee connoisseurs, Suhas Dwarakanath breaks down the complexity of the beverage through its history, the craft of production, drinking culture, and anecdotes from its producers across India's coffee-growing regions. In the second leg, falling back to the comfort of

his personal drive, he journeys through spice-laden plantations to one of the oldest coffee destinations of India, Wayanad.

Kerala's GI-Joe

Out of the many colonial chapters in the history of food, the tale of 'monsooning' is rather unique. After the boom of plantation culture in the subcontinent, processed and dried green coffee would travel from the western coast of India to the U.K., skirting

the Cape of Good Hope. Coffee would be plucked by February and processed and packaged only by May before it was globally shipped. The nature of the beautiful accident that gave monsooning an origin lies in the primitive packaging of the green beans into wooden crates and boxes. On one fine journey, when Indian coffee reached the homeland's shores, the green beans had gone pale with a golden tinge, and swollen considerably in size. The



bleached harvest being a bulk shipping, couldn't be discarded and so, was sent for roasting. What resulted was a full-bodied cup rich in umami, low-acidity, and bursting with mellow flavours of chocolate, unlike any other coffee consumed. Upon reverse investigation, it was found that the lack of thermatic packaging allowed processed beans to soak in the moisture of the salty sea breeze, which dramatically altered their structure.

To discover how the accidental find has given rise to an industry that produces high-quality, GI-tagged coffee, Suhas drives to Allana's monsooning facility in Mangalore. "They call it Monsoon Malabar, giving the impression that it only grows in the Malabar region, but that's not the case. "Any coffee that has grown can be converted into a monsoon coffee but naturally processed arabicas and robustas are preferred for their richer body and aftertaste, as monsooning is a process," explains Suhas, specifying that the GI-tagged coffee is cultivated and picked in plantations across Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and processed on the Malabar coast.

With their own curing factory, Allana naturally processes robusta and arabica beans and uses their Mangalore warehouse to monsoon the beans naturally. These coffees are repeatedly checked for a stable moisture content between 16 to 18 per cent.

India arguably has the potential to produce high-grade coffees in the world, neck and neck with Colombian, Ethiopian, Vietnamese and Kenyan produce. Spruced with geographic diversity, high-altitude zones with tropical temperatures and moderate rainfall, it is easy to spot beans from India with a grade over 80. However, the country's produce, despite being one of the largest in the world, doesn't make it to the cups of most international single-origin drinkers. But when Monsoon Malabar from the coasts of Kerala and Karnataka got a GI tag, it possibly meant a mark on the map for India's coffee.

Of Flavours and Frenzy

"Unlike Karnataka farms where it is the core plantation, coffee is multi-cropped on spice-growing farms, across Kerala," shares Suhas. "Which is why the coffee is bolder and spicier—rich with undertones of clove, cinnamon, black pepper, white pepper, cardamom and other aromatics."

Suhas is headed for two coffee cooperatives, namely Brahmagiri and Villoth, in Wayanad to discover the hold of these initiatives over the coffee distribution process in India. Both cooperatives overlook an average annual production of 60-65 metric tonnes of coffee that comes out of the district. Working with farmers holding five to seven acres of land, the manufacturers aid the coffee farmers with the goal to increase their income. The Brahmagiri Development Society assists farmers in growing fine-quality beans, processing and roasting them carefully, to extract rich perfection in each cup.

Spread across the rolling vistas of the Sahyadri range, these coffee plantations stand at a height of 700-2,100 metres, receiving heavy rainfall between 3,000-4,000 millimetres. Intensive landscaping with heavy shade and forest cover add to the richness of arabica beans from the region, which are peculiar for a smoother and sweeter, berry-tasting notes. Mixed with high-quality, full-bodied robusta, the Kerala espresso blends pack an instant kick and flavourful punch.

Powering through the rough trails of Wayanad with the futuristic technology of the Hyundai TUCSON. Suhas's coffee exploration takes him to lush plantations established on ancient lands. Panoramic views and dense jungles surround the cardamom and coffee farms of Kottamala. The journey to the vintage estate draws the coffee expert in flavours of Kerala's hearty cuisine.

Overwhelmed by the aura of the hills, the mystical charm reminds Suhas of a piece of oral history that sits as the origin story for Kerala's coffee roots. "The British soldiers who were stationed in Kerala were hooked onto the beverage." In a new land, when they discovered that the climate and soil conditions favouring spice cultivation are similar to that for coffee, they suggested growing the two crops alongside. What resulted was an interesting spice-heavy yield that locals and exporters both came to like.

Coffee traditions too have slightly varied across southern India. *Chukku* coffee is unique to Kerala. "Nobody in the country makes it the same way. One way is to add dry ginger powder to the filter coffee brew, while another method is to boil coffee and ginger powder with water together. But when you go across



Kerala, you will see hundreds of variations with *tulsi* (basil leaves) and even *jeera* (cumin)." Much like nuances of food preparation, coffee preparation styles varied as per the strength of the coffee grown. "If you go to a traditional household in Coorg they will not serve you coffee with milk like they do in Chikmagalur. Instead, here you'll encounter coffee with black jaggery," Suhas points out.

Back in Time

As sprawling vistas of lofty waterfalls and thick canopies accompany your drive, a road trip through this coffee country will present jaw-dropping landscapes at each curve. Smooth roads are enjoyable with Hyundai Smart Sense ADAS' features like Smart Cruise Control and Driver Attention Warning during this long yet serene journey, suggesting short breaks on the way. The

comfort of a high-tech SUV is unmatched when on the road.

On the last leg of the Wayanad chapter, Suhas stumbles upon an 8,000-year-old marvel—one of the oldest human settlements—that has lured many travellers. An hour-long hike of the historical Ambukuthi Mala from the Edakkal Caves offers a sensory delight. At the base, Neolithic-era carvings on boulders narrate legendary stories from mythology and fiction, and at the top, a warm fragrance of coffee follows you to the scenic view point. Whether taking in the grandeur of an ancient land or introspecting about the history of the spice trade, at the end of the coffee exploration, a glance over the hill feels just as soul-stirring as a brew from the region.



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ARAKU VALLEY:

AN INDIGENOUS BLEND

Text by Muskaan Gupta
Photographs by Arun Beeman

Nestled in Andhra Pradesh, ethnic micro-lots of Araku coffee ring bells of praise across the globe.





The pursuit of the best-tasting coffee has taken Suhas Dwarkanath to some of the most unique landscapes across South India. His dynamic SUV, the all-new Hyundai TUCSON, has been a splendid companion for India Coffee Stories. Having traversed the Western Ghats first, the coffee connoisseur now makes his way to the Eastern Ghats, whose splendid red soil and muddy terrain proves to be a stark contrast to the terroir of Karnataka and Kerala’s lush forest landscapes. Navigating over 100 kilometres from Visakhapatnam, Suhas relies on the Downhill Brake Control of the Mud Terrain Mode to pilot smoothly to Andhra Pradesh’s Araku Valley and uncover a fine example of a proficient social model.

A quick aerial pan reveals oddly cut patchy farms in shades of lime-green and brown. Water dams and short overbridges add to the panoramic scenery of the land, which is drenched in rusty red soil. Even though waterfalls cut through the terrain, sharp turns of drab stretches announce the entry into a dry wasteland. In 2000, the Naandi Foundation took over the highlands of Andhra’s Eastern Ghats, replenishing the arid soil into a cultivable bed through years of soil prepping and regenerative farming. Everything from milk and yogurt to organic compost bulked and softened the ground. Today, all of the hard work reflects through an excellent soil carbon percentage and a high water retention capacity of the soil. Endless beds of coffee thrive alongside almonds, jackfruits, citrus, tropical fruits and warm vanilla whose flavours slowly seep into the ripening cherries.

Suhas prepares a fresh pour-over in the back of his TUCSON boot, parked along the scenic highway. The aromatic indulgence is a fresh jump into the world of the award-winning coffee that is renowned by Parisians for its unique aroma, complex body and long finish. Back in the homeland where they’re grown, this product comes with the backstory of empowering indigenous communities. Naandi Foundation’s philosophy of the ‘Araku Way’ strives for a two-fold social benefit: to rework the landscape for the environment’s betterment and uplift the lives of local ethnic communities through employment on sustainable farms. In fact, the method left ripples as the beans, once planted, led to the creation of ‘Arakunomics,’ the valley’s unique economic model. Over two decades, 700 plots on an acre or two have been turned into coffee plantations. The expertise of a Paris-based agronomist, Hippolyte Courty, inculcated the knowledge of how to treat the land well and grow the beans, harnessing the chemistry of agriculture. Across all of Araku’s villages, each plot is looked after by individual families that have long resisted selling their property off into collated land holdings. The results are small batches of single-origin coffee, each with a unique flavour profile and body. Araku is a non-traditional coffee-growing region, which makes the yield a marvellous product. The valley’s climate and red soil were never favourable for this crop ever since the British planters first set foot in it. The added challenge that coffee plantations required thorough year-long care made cultivation far-fetched. Teaching farmers how to tend to the plants was also a challenge. But while all logistical troubles

found an end with a creative solution, Naandi Foundation had to work with changing mindsets before the yield was standardised. The tribal society has a strong kinship rooted in equality, where everyone demanded the same price for their produce. “It amazed me how the majority of the native youth were not enticed by the capitalist way of life. Money is not really the motivator for most of the people in these villages,” Suhas writes over an email exchange. The small families would deny enterprising of their land holdings; all offers to merge estates coupled with the economic benefits never moved the community. The idea was staunchly rooted in tending to personal land holdings without hiring extra labour. Suhas adds how it would take a lot of trust-building for the farmers to sell their produce as part of any outside agglomerations. Nonetheless, the success of the crop lies in a new model of coffee plantations—small holdings where each plot is self-sufficient. Today, Naandi Foundation has managed to eliminate the middlemen from the region’s coffee business, helping farmers gain a better price directly from the global market. Reduced poverty, increased access to education, healthcare, electricity, and better housing, can all be traced to the small-batch business model.

Bidding adieu to the Araku’s farms, Suhas heads along safely with the Hyundai TUCSON. The Forward Collision Avoidance Assist alerts him of moving vehicles approaching at a blind junction, applying automatic

breaks, while the Safe Exit Warning feature ensures all roads are clear, offering him a green signal. The next coffee destination on the map is Araku’s Coffee Café in Bengaluru. A concept space to narrate the valley’s social enterprise, while displaying the best processing picks—natural, washed and honey—where incredible flavours of caramel and fruits shine through every jar. Araku’s specialty coffee employs 19 ethnic groups, that tend to the sustainable arabica cherries. The commercial victory to the coffee training lies in a production of different lots, all graded over 90. The world-famous coffee gained popularity among the French markets and received the prestigious Prix Epicures in 2018; following the high praise, Suhas sets up for a cupping session at the café. The two micro-lots from the villages of Doravasala and Dihugasarapalli unsurprisingly meet the high ranking in all 10 characteristics of aroma, body, acidity, flavour and aftertaste, completing a wholesome journey to the valley. David Hogg, Naandi’s Chief Agriculture Advisor, describes each cup of Araku coffee as “an alchemy of people coming together.” The sentiment whistles much like a memoir to Suhas’ travel journey with Hyundai TUCSON, where the premium SUV zipped smoothly to multiple terrains across South India, leading him to passion projects around the beverage. Toggling the Multi Air Mode and sinking into the comfort of his 10-way Power Adjustable Driver Seat, he embarks on the final leg of his adventure to discover unique coffee stories across India.





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Kohima Coffee Culture **UNCOVERING NAGALAND'S FRUITY AROMAS**

*Training a new generation of baristas and revolutionising
coffee at a café level, Nagaland's coffee scene is a story of well-
roasted passion*

Text by Muskaan Gupta

His quest to source unique brews has taken Suhas Dwarkanath across four South Indian destinations, cruising the premium Hyundai TUCSON to Chikkamagaluru, the home of Indian coffee, Wayanad for spice-rich notes, into Coorg's wild forests, and to Araku Valley to sample a genius product of social entrepreneurship. On the final leg of India Coffee Stories, Suhas relaxed in the comfort of his cooling seat and set his destination to the rugged landscape of Nagaland to scoot closer to another story of passion.

The three-point road trip—from Dimapur, Nagaland's largest city, to Khonoma, a verdant village home to new-age coffee farmers, and Kohima, a cultural centre with a cluster of cafés—endured a steep 4,000-foot climb. Having switched to the mud terrain mode by the Hyundai SmartSense ADAS, Suhas recalls a pleasant drive dotted with vistas of steep cliffs, ringing greenery, and a curiosity to discover how a non-traditional region has become an upcoming pioneer of coffee.

The headquarters of Été Specialty Coffee Roasters, Kohima, are located 6,500 foot above sea level, in the Temperate Belt over the Tropic of Cancer. And that's no mean feat,





for the specialty coffee roaster sources the vast majority of its beans locally, from a region outside the ‘bean belt’ or Torrid Belt, traditionally-recognised as the ideal area to grow coffee; despite existing in the exterior of this delineation, the Naga coffee domain, which holds a similar agricultural slope and a temperature range as the exemplary coffee country of Karnataka’s hills, has become a destination for local production and roasting. In a region where the nuances of coffee culture are still relatively nascent, a healthy handful of homegrown aficionados like Lichan Humtsoe, the founder and owner of Été Coffee, are forging a new frontier of top-notch cafés that run on a strict know-how of coffee science.

“No amount of the hard work that you have put into the chain (farming, producing coffee) makes sense if they spoil it at a café level, so we decided to train the baristas first,” Lichan tells Suhas. This approach highlights the role of roasters, for even tailoring the terroir to be suitable for coffee cannot prevent the perfect bean from deteriorating if not metamorphosed



from green to brown correctly. From the time a bag of green-coloured beans enters the roastery, till a dark concoction reaches your table, serving is a three-step process: studying the bean before roasting, optimising flavours of the coffee in the roasting chamber, and brewing to extract a good cup. Été’s aim is to make their baristas masters of the beverage.

As per the Specialty Coffee Association guidebook, Lichan informs, countless chemical reactions take place within 8 to 13 minutes inside the roasting chamber, between the dehydration of the cherries and the colouration of the beans. “The presence of citric acid will mean that your coffee contains notes of citrus fruit. If it’s malic acid, that coffee could taste like an apple. Likewise, if it’s ascorbic acid, then it will taste like a gooseberry.” Undoubtedly, precise knowledge of the roasting process takes a good bean to greatness.

Once the coffee beans are in the roasting chamber, arresting the heat at the correct time, for the perfect mild, medium, or dark roast, changes the characters. “The first crack is the time when, generally, most of the acids develop and peak,” explains Lichan. To optimise floral and fruity notes, the roasting process is stopped here. But for more complex, bold, nutty, or chocolatey flavours, something with a fuller mouthfeel, roasters will go for a darker roast. “That’s when more oil development happens. With extremely dark roasts, there comes a bigger bitterness as it allows the rapid extraction of caffeine. The byproduct of the processes of caramelisation and the Maillard reaction (the chemical reaction among amino acids and reducing sugars) is something brown and sugary,” he adds about the flavour profile.

The final step to a memorable cup of coffee is how it is brewed, processes which play to distinct profiles from the same bean. A French press appears to have a filtration process, but it only holds a mesh device that pushes down the residual grounds, allowing the oils from the coffee to freely get into your cup. What makes the French press an appealing choice for

many home-brewers is that the final cup has a bold body, with buttery and heavy characters that enhance its viscosity. An AeroPress pushes hot water through the coffee ground, filtering the concoction through a compact paper filter which removes all oils and residual grounds, lending a clear and clean brew. So, two immersion techniques brew entirely different cups. Typically, the most common way for a barista to extract coffee is with an espresso machine, which pulls a well-balanced liquid with a harmonious intensity, making it perfect for mixing with other components like water, milk, or ice cubes because of its density.

Harvesting the right aromas or offering a wide selection of flavours from the same bean is where Été Coffee hopes to secure a foundation. “If you make Indian coffee the brand, any foreigner can make use of this coffee bill. But when you make Indians or our professionals the brand, that is something hardly anyone will exploit,” Lichan declares. “That’s when our people will enjoy financial freedom and economic growth. India could possibly become one of the powerhouse centres for research and innovations. That is the vision, and that’s where we’re headed.”

After driving to the estates of new age farmers, Suhas relishes a cup of Naga coffee harvested at the height of 6,500 feet. Overlooking vast expanses of cliff-ridden forests, Suhas recollects the seamless drive with the TUCSON across Nagaland’s rugged terrains. Beyond the major features of the car, like the High Beam Assist and the Collision Avoidance Assist that accompanied a safe journey, simple boosts like constant seat cooling and auto glass wipers offered a huge relief across the long topsy turvs in the Himalayas. His drive to the top, smoothened by the fine engineering of Hyundai TUCSON, was a reminder of the coffee in his hand—a simple pour-over finessed by roasters and brewers whose craft is like that of alchemists in a lab or witches with a cauldron—always a perfect concoction.