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NATURAL WONDERS



PLUS
5 EASY
WEEKEND TRIPS
KOTTAYAM
NAINITAL
HYDERABAD
MUMBAI
SANGAMESHWAR



5

Farm of Happiness, Sangameshwar, Maharashtra

READY, SET, SOW!

You sink your fingers into the soil, moist and fresh with emanating petrichor, a heady scent to your nostrils. Your fingers curl around a hard tuber and something else – roots. You tug gently, until you're holding a brilliantly purple yam in your palm, dirt crammed in your fingernails.

Once you've lived a farmer's life in the Konkan region, chances are you'll come back wondering why you ever contented yourself playing FarmVille. Farm of Happiness, or Aanandache Shet, is a rustic homestay embedded deep in the Ratnagiri District. A drive along winding roads and a walk down a well-worn path over a plateau surrounded

by eye-searing shades of green will lead you to this humble abode, which has been built in the traditional Konkani style.

Started by husband-wife duo Rahul and Sampada Kulkarni in January 2014, the property aims to be more than just a getaway for seekers of solitude. Here, you will know what it's like to live with farmers (and get to play farmer yourself) on the 20-acre plot around the house, patches of which are used to grow veggies and fruits, all indigenous and grown seasonally.

Wake up to the carefree song of the Malabar whistling thrush, the perfect wake-up call for a spot of birding (₹ 500/group). If you're lucky, you'll spot

Above: Befriend the happy chicks that come out to play every morning

an oriental dwarf kingfisher and even the Malabar pied hornbill.

After breakfast, go on a farm tour (*free*) with Rahul to check out natural farming at its finest. You will be invited to dig out some turmeric, and you will discover warty yet delicious air potatoes (no, that's not a made-up name). En route, you'll even end up befriending the bees in the bee box. Later, savour the fresh produce you helped pick from the farm as you are regaled with the story of how Kalu, the resident stray, once hunted down a capricious porcupine.

Spend your evenings playing a game of carrom or darts, or just catching up on some reading as you lounge in one of the four hammocks in the *mandap*



1



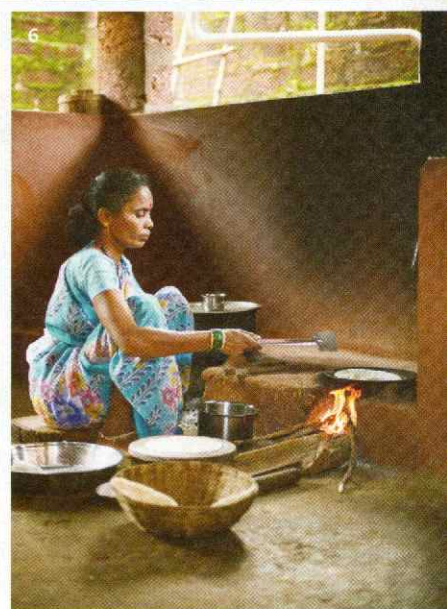
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3



5



6

GREAT FROM
Mumbai, Goa, Pune

GREAT FOR
Experiencing life on a farm

GO NOW
While it's rice harvest season!

(shaded porch). The child in you can get on one of the swings fashioned out of tyres, or under the mini waterfall. There's also a chicken coop and cattle shed here. You could feed the majestic bullocks Raja and Baja, or go looking for a fluffed-up mother hen sitting patiently on her eggs.

Once you've explored the house and its immediate surroundings, go on a nature trail (₹ 500/ group) down the meandering paths outside the farm, and into the valley below. On the way, you might just spot a scampering hare or two. In the village below, you can go meet some friendly villagers, who will happily welcome you into their homes.

Just before sunset, take the hour-long boat ride over the calm, clear waters of the Bav River (₹ 300/ three people, ₹ 100/ additional person). Watch the sun paint the skies orange, see a shoal of silver snappers splashing in and out of the water, and catch egrets flying back to their nests after a tiring day.

1. The rooms at Farm of Happiness are rustic, complete with clay beds

2. The freshly-picked produce will make its way into your next meal

3 & 6. Everything you eat here is traditional Konkani fare, cooked on a chulha

4. Rahul explains how a pheromone trap keeps pests at bay

5. These purple yams can be fried and eaten as chips

The clear, inky blue nights are perfect for stargazing. Take the telescope out and watch the studded sky come alive as you keep warm with a piping hot cuppa. On the other hand, if nighttime adventure is what you seek, try your hand at fishing in the dark, local style (₹ 1,000/ group). The tide and weather need to be just right as you wade into the creek, using Petromax lamps to dazzle fish as you quickly capture them in your net.

You will leave the Farm of Happiness with sun-kissed skin and dirt-filled fingernails. And you will be glad for it.

WORDS SHRADDHA UCHIL
PHOTOGRAPHS SAMEER MANGTANI

TURN OVER FOR ALL YOU NEED TO GET THERE



FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: Mumbai (320km) is seven hours away.

Closest airport: The closest airports are **Mumbai International Airport** (326km) and **Goa International Airport** (274km), both of which are well connected to most major Indian cities.

Closest railhead: Ratnagiri (RN; 33km).

Take the daily **12051 Jan Shatabdi Express** (leaves Dadar [DDR] 5.25am, arrives RN 10.40am; ₹ 635 AC Chair Car) and return by the daily **12052**

Jan Shatabdi Express (leaves RN 5.50pm, arrives Dadar [DDR] 11.05pm; ₹ 635 AC Chair Car).

GETTING AROUND

It's best to hire a car for the duration of your trip. We used and liked the services of **Anfa Travels** (Laeq: 00-91-9821352189; ₹ 2,500/ day for 250km, ₹ 10/ extra km, plus ₹ 300/ day driver allowance for an AC sedan, for a trip starting from Mumbai). If you're travelling by train, the property can arrange a car for you from Ratnagiri (₹ 2,000/ one-way).

WHERE TO STAY

Farm of Happiness: The house has been built in the traditional Konkani style, complete with a *mandap* (outdoor porch), a *padavi* (indoor porch) with a swing, and an *oti* (living room). There are three rooms, none of which come with air-conditioning or televisions (trust us, that's a good thing here). The *mandap* has hammocks and easy chairs to loll in while some brilliant classical music floats through the speakers (00-91-9820002863; www.farmofhappiness.com, info@farmofhappiness.com; near Katal Wadi, PO Phungus, Chandika Mandir Rd, Sangameshwar, Ratnagiri District; ₹ 4,600/ night with all meals).

WHERE TO EAT

You don't need to worry about food while on the property – rest assured that you'll be well-fed through the day. Expect authentic Konkani dishes cooked

on a *chulha*, like *bharli vangi* (stuffed brinjal), *zunka-bhakri* (a spiced mix eaten with a rice roti) and *sol kadhi* (coconut milk with *kokum*). Non-vegetarian meals cost extra (₹ 80 to ₹ 400), but the *kombdi vade* (chicken curry with mixed-flour *puris*) and chicken *kumya* – an original recipe – are totally worth it. For good Malvan food, stop at the legendary **Hotel Abhishek** in Chiplun. Try the fried *surmai* or *bombil* or the *kombdi vade* (00-91-9422053481; Sai Krupa, Markandi, Chiplun; 11am – 3pm, 7.30pm – 11pm; fried fish from ₹ 100, *kombdi vade*: ₹ 190).

SHOPPING

Farm of Happiness packages and sells a lot of its organic produce. You can buy various flours, fresh fruits, *aamras* and *kokum* juice (see *Where*

Below: Meals at Farm of Happiness are simple yet fulfilling, just the kind of food you would expect in a farmer's home



to Stay; flours from ₹ 80/ pack, fruits from ₹ 200/ kg but prices vary according to the season and produce, *aamras*: ₹ 250, *kokum* syrup: ₹ 160/ litre).

WHAT TO PACK

Comfortable clothing, walking shoes, sandals or flip-flops, a flashlight, insect repellent, sunblock

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

Hotel Abhishek, which you'll hit en route from Mumbai, has a clean loo (see *Where to Eat*).

SAFETY

There is nothing for miles around the farmstay, so it's best not to venture out unsupervised after nightfall. There have been a few snake sightings in the area, but no incidents have been reported so far. Either way, there is a venom suction pump at the farmstay, and the nearby hospital stocks antivenom for snakebites.

MEDICAL AID

The civil hospital is 12km away, but Farm of Happiness has a doctor on call. There is also a well-stocked first-aid kit at the homestay. However, make sure you carry your prescription meds.

CHILD FRIENDLINESS

Farm of Happiness seems to have been designed keeping families in mind. Kids will love the experience of going out into the farm and helping with the sowing or harvesting process. They can even feed the cattle and learn to milk a cow. The games as well as the waterfall in the backyard will keep them entertained at other times.

GOOD TO KNOW

- ★ Many of the activities are subject to weather conditions. Check with Rahul before venturing out.
- ★ Farm of Happiness does not serve or allow alcohol on its premises, so leave the celebratory spirits at home.
- ★ Be prepared to deal with a few creepy-crawlies – this is a working farm, after all, and not a resort.
- ★ Carry enough cash with you to pay for the extra activities, as there is no ATM for miles around.
- ★ Most mobile network operators don't manage reception here, so you might be cut off from the world for the duration of your stay.