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FARM OF HAPPINESS IN RATNAGIRI IS A
BUCOLIC WONDERLAND MARKED BY MANGOES,
BIRDCALLS AND WARM HOSPITALITY

BY RUMELA BASU

Summer mornings at Farm of Happiness (centre right), are usually spent plucking juicy alphonsoes (left); There are about 100 bird species (top right) that have been documented so far from the surrounding areas; The sweet smell of overripe cashew fruits (bottom right) fills the air at the farm.



You want to go to a farm in Ratnagiri in the middle of May?"
"Yes! And we can go mango picking."
"But in May?"
My reaction was not that unexpected. Temperatures often reach 40 degrees in Mumbai and parts of Maharashtra in the summer. It's hot, sticky and uncomfortable. There was no way a farm in Ratnagiri sounded like the best escape. But I'd already missed a few family holidays, so I went along with Ma's choice. Two weeks later, after a seven-hour drive on a sultry Friday morning, we arrived at Farm of Happiness in Ratnagiri's Phungus village.

As soon as we'd arrived, my apprehensions about the heat melted away. The air smelled intoxicatingly sweet. I could almost hear the glee in Ma's smile and saw Baba's wondrous one as he looked up at bunches of perfect, green-yellow mangoes on trees. "The scent is of the fruit. Mangoes, jackfruit and cashews." Rahul Kulkarni, the farm's 48-year-old owner, greeted us with a smile. Over the next three days,

Seasons in the Sun

I'd learn that this sustainable organic farm is Rahul and his 47-year-old actor-wife Sampada's paradise. On the 20-acre farm is a traditional Konkani style home, with a large porch with tables and benches, many reclining chairs and even a couple of hammocks. With the signal gone on our phones, and this setting, I knew that we were not spending a lot of time in our rooms.

That evening, after a meal of *taandalaachyaa paanagya* (rice and jaggery pancakes steamed in banana leaves) and tea, I was tuning in and out of the conversation around me, focused on my Kindle, until I was distracted by shrill birdcalls. I didn't know too many birds that called out after dusk—unless, like in this case, they lived in a phone. Our fellow guest was making his 12-year-old son hear the birdcalls he'd recorded. Focusing on the group gathered on the porch properly for the first time, I realised what a motley crew it was. My parents were enamoured with their game of carrom and with the other guest family's precocious little daughter who had joined their game. Her mother read on the bench nearby. Her father, brother and Rahul were discussing the different birds the man had spotted on his trips here.

Noticing my interest, Rahul explained to me that the family had been visiting his farm at least three times a year for the last three years. "While adults usually come here to unwind and relax, children have the most wonderful reactions to the farm," he said. "They are always curious and full of questions because the farm is like a science or geography lesson come to life. And there is the first-hand experience of meeting your

