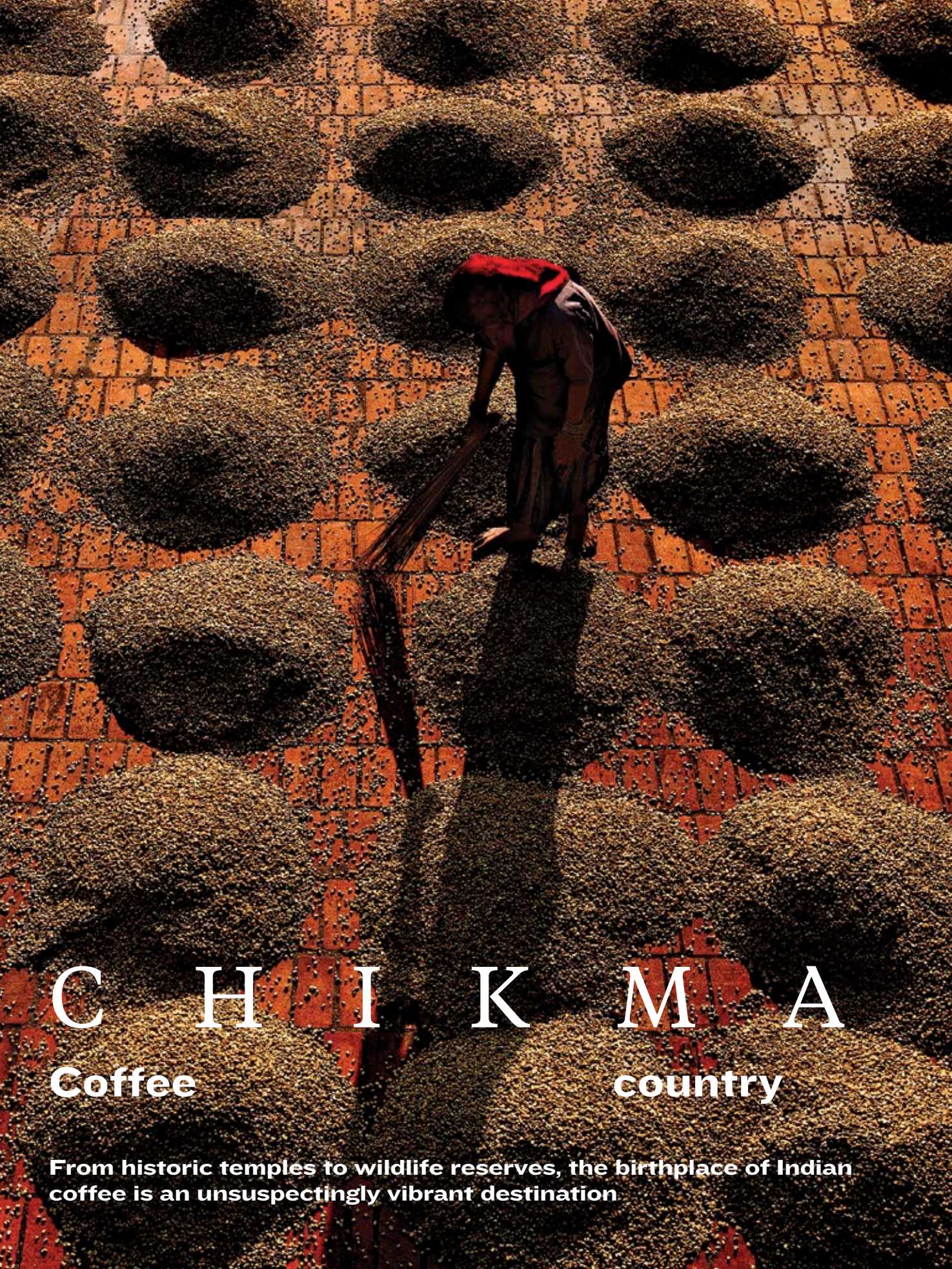




C H I K M A

Coffee

country

From historic temples to wildlife reserves, the birthplace of Indian coffee is an unsuspectingly vibrant destination

A full-page photograph of a dense tropical forest. The scene is filled with tall, slender trees, likely palm trees, with their trunks creating a vertical rhythm. The canopy is thick with various green leaves, including large, heart-shaped leaves in the foreground and palm fronds higher up. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day, with some light filtering through the leaves.

G A L U R

and beyond

WORDS: AKANKSHA SINGH



The smell of damp earth is the first thing you notice about Chikmagalur. After driving for four-and-a-half-hours along a palm-lined road from Bengaluru, India's Silicon Valley, the smell and narrowing roads are welcome changes. The noise of city life is replaced by birdsong, the rustling of elephant herds in the forests, and – depending on when you visit – the sound of rain bouncing off of tin roofs.

Malenadu, the region in which Chikmagalur is located, means 'land of rain' in Kannada, the state's national language. At 1066 metres, the town is perched amongst the clouds in southern India's Western Ghats in the state of Karnataka, with velvet greenery blanketing the area in all directions. Seamlessly patched within this vegetation are swathes of coffee estates, where cherry red arabica and robusta beans grow in abundance.

As the landscape unfurls, with ever-green rolling hills morphing into idyllic valleys, so does the history of Chikmagalur coffee. If legend is to be believed, the coffee in this area can be sourced back to the 17th Century, when Sufi saint Baba Budan returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca. After stopping in Mocha, Yemen, on his way back to India, he discovered the hot, dark beverage and smuggled back seven raw arabica beans to plant in the hills of Karnataka. The hills would later come to be known as the Baba Budangiri hills.

Intertwined with the ancient origins of coffee in the area is its colonial past: it was, arguably, due to colonial influence that plantations here initially thrived, when India was still under British rule. In those days much of the coffee that came from Chikmagalur was largely chicory-based, especially during the World Wars, when this would have been both cost-effective and convenient.

Since then, however, coffee has grown into a million-dollar industry in India, with the country being the world's sixth largest coffee producer and a blossoming coffee culture of its own. As café chains spring up alongside tradition-

al tea houses in the rest of the country, smaller, more homely 'coffee stalls' are the norm in these parts and have been for a few hundred years. Traditional 'South Indian filter coffee,' as it's called, is always served milky and sweet, with a frothy crown. It is brewed in a metal canister, which is somewhat similar to a 'drip' coffee, to derive a concentrate. The concentrate is then dissolved in hot milk and sugar before being served in a steel glass and bowl which are used to cool and froth the coffee.

Still, there is something special about the coffee from these parts specifically – perhaps it is their connection to an old world, or that they are still largely removed from the spoils of modernisation. Set against a backdrop

Workers carry bags of ripe arabica coffee berries on their heads at a plantation in Madapura, Karnataka



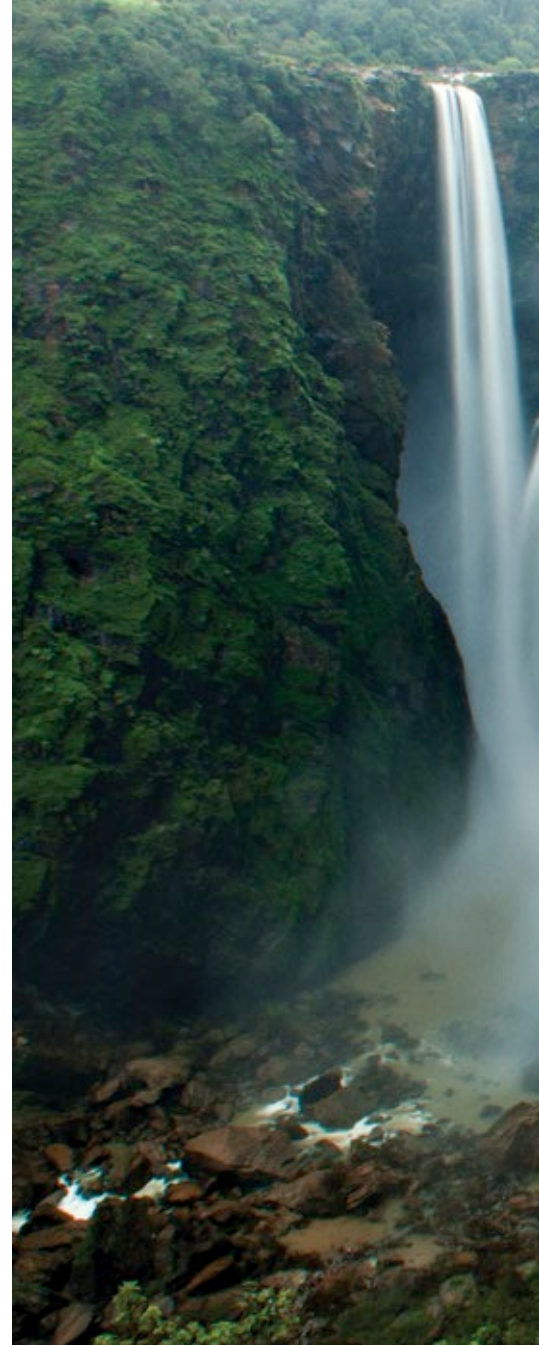
of dreamlike, mist-covered hills and the shrill whistle of the kingfisher making its way to a treetop, teal wings and red beak gleaming, there is a sense of magic that permeates the place. People like homestay and fourth-generation plantation owner Reshma Shariff know this allure well – it was, perhaps, the emerald hills of Chikmagalur that first attracted her great-grandfather to the coffee country in 1925.

Today, on the eighty-acre plantation, Shariff devotes most of the plantation's attention to the local specialty, the arabica bean. Grown in the shade of trees like silver oak and jackfruit, she half-jokes her coffee crop truly needs

From left: Seasonal workers are paid by the quality and quantity of coffee cherries that they gather and sort; Jog waterfalls

the care one would give to a baby: "It actually takes nine months for the arabica cherries to mature, before we pluck them in December."

Having grown up on the plantation, Shariff can't help but love everything about coffee – from the picking of ripe red cherries to their sorting, drying,



husking and roasting. To her, coffee is more than a livelihood – it is a lifestyle. Shariff believes in the power of the rich brown liquid, having seen her mother, uncles and aunts consume cup after cup, their home filled with warmth.

Like recipes for food, family recipes for coffee are clutched close to the hearts of people in Chikmagalur, being passed down generationally, with the tiniest of tweaks between one generation and the next – a pinch of chicory, a splash of scalding water before the whole lot is poured in. It's for this reason that people here believe that there is no substitute for the taste of hospitality one gets in a cup of coffee brewed in a family kitchen.



KARNATKA BEYOND COFFEE: THREE THINGS TO SEE AND DO

Hebbe Falls

Cascading off a steep rock face from a height of 165 metres, these mesmerising falls stream in narrow jets of refreshing, cold water. To reach the falls you'll need to hire a Jeep provided by the authorities which drops you to a point just short of the falls (you'll need to walk the remaining distance). Arrive and cool off in the waist-deep water where the falls pool.

Trek to the apex of Karnataka

Perched above the mist of the mountains are two of Karnataka's most prominent peaks - the Baba Budangiri peak and the Mullayangiri peak, the highest mountain in the state at 1925 metres. The trail connecting the two peaks is a simple but scenic one, typically lasting two nights.

The temples of Belur and Halebid

Made entirely out of rock, the temples in the historic sister towns of Belur and Halebid are 10th-century architectural marvels. A word to the wise – be sure to wear full-length trousers or skirts, and cover your shoulders during the temple visits. Also bear in mind that since these temples are Hindu religious sites, you'll have to remove your footwear before entering, so keep a pair of socks handy.

Each estate has its own flavour too; from the earth in which the coffee grows to the amount of shade even the tiniest factor, Shariff says, makes a difference to the taste. It's that irresistible *je ne sais quois* that inspires loyalty to a roast, a brand, or an estate. The arabica, for one thing, has floral notes – fruity and mild – that dance on your tongue with the first sip. But it's the smell of the beans that will tempt you first: a nutty, butter-scotch scent.

Despite Karnataka growing three-quarters of India's coffee for export, there is much to do in the area beyond the bean. Just hours away from Chikmagalur are the ancient cities of

Belur and Halebid, architectural marvels from the 10th Century which are hand-carved into rock, while further still is the region's largest tiger reserve.

With the area gaining more prominence as a getaway spot from Bengaluru, a handful of boutique hotels in the area have sprung up, their glass-walled villas looking into the valley – and that warm, butterscotch smell of the Arabica bean omniscient.



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